



India's Special Frontier Force

OE Watch Commentary: The ongoing conflict between Indian and Chinese forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) since early May of this year has resulted a couple dozen casualties, particularly on the Indian side. The accompanying excerpted article reports on one of the latest casualties and it sheds some light on how the Indian government might deploy forces to continue to deal with the situation on the LAC.

The article from the news website *The Print* reports on the casualty from an incident in late August on the LAC and how he “was a member of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), an Indian security unit that is primarily drawn from the thousands of Tibetan refugees who now call India home.” The article includes some history of the unit and mentions how it “formed in the immediate aftermath of the 1962 war with China” and “has played an important role in multiple military operations—from the 1971 India-Pakistan war to the 1999 Kargil battle—but has largely functioned under the shadows.” As the Indian government has utilized various units in the situation at the LAC, the article points out how “China has not been too pleased about the reports, wary as it has been about the Tibetan government-in-exile.”

While it has not been widely reported how the Chinese government has reacted to any news of the SFF's recent involvement on the LAC, the article goes on to discuss how the unit is best suited to the region. The article quotes the former head of the Integrated Defence Staff, who states that soldiers in the SFF “know the terrain well” in Ladakh. This is worth noting alongside reports from Indian officials about the logistical difficulties of bringing in additional units up to the LAC, particularly needing better transportation infrastructure and having adequate time for soldiers from other regions to acclimate to higher altitudes. As the Indian governments continues to work out logistics issues, units like the SFF appear to be providing one option for the armed forces. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**

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SFF badge.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SFF_badge.jpg CC BY YA 4.0



Continued: India's Special Frontier Force

Source: Amrita Nayak Dutta, "All about Special Frontier Force, the secretive Indian unit in news after Ladakh clash," *The Print*, 6 September 2020. <https://theprint.in/defence/all-about-special-frontier-force-the-secretive-indian-unit-in-news-after-ladakh-clash/496660/>

News from the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh this week included reports of a Tibetan trooper's death in a blast at Pangong Tso, one of the sites of tensions between India and China.

...images showing his body wrapped in the Indian and Tibetan flags, brought focus on an extremely secretive security force comprising trained mountain warriors.

Nyima was a member of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), an Indian security unit that is primarily drawn from the thousands of Tibetan refugees who now call India home. It was formed in the immediate aftermath of the 1962 war with China, which resulted in a defeat for India.

The SFF has played an important role in multiple military operations — from the 1971 India-Pakistan war to the 1999 Kargil battle — but has largely functioned under the shadows....

SFF troopers, it is learnt, are among the additional personnel rushed to the border as tensions with China fester for five months and counting. China has not been too pleased about the reports, wary as it has been about the Tibetan government-in-exile...

Not much is known about the force, but military experts say it comprises men as well as women, and receive the same training offered to elite commandos.

Initially known as Establishment 22, the SFF was raised by an Army officer named Major General Sujan Singh Uban...With the wound of occupation still fresh, many Tibetans volunteered for the force when approached by India, and the SFF soon had 6,000 members...

SFF units, also known as Vikas battalions, come under the direct purview of the Cabinet Secretariat, and is operationally involved with the Army. The force is headed by a Major General rank Army officer, who serves as Inspector General of the SFF. The SFF is based in Chakrata, Uttarakhand, and its insignia is a snow lion. The exact strength of the force right now could not be determined...

Lt Gen. Satish Dua (Retd), former head of the Integrated Defence Staff, said the Indian Army follows a concept of deploying scouts regiments comprising local residents for mountainous and border areas.

"This is because local residents are most suited to work and operate in high altitude and rugged terrain with harsh climate," he added.

"They also have knowledge of ground and customs and language. We have Arunachal scouts, Dogra scouts, among others. Similarly, in the Ladakh region, because they know the terrain well. The SFF also has a substantial percentage of Tibetan refugees who want to serve voluntarily and are gainfully employed in the terrain that they are suited for," he said...

Asked about the dual control of the SFF, he said, "We have different forces under different verticals. The central armed police forces involved in border-guarding duties don't come under the Ministry of Defence (MoD) but under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)..."

The notable operations in which the SFF has participated include the 1971 war between India and Pakistan for the liberation East Pakistan or present-day Bangladesh...They were tasked with attacking enemy positions to aid the Indian Army's operations...they infiltrated into Bangladesh for guerrilla campaigns to attack enemy soldiers, military infrastructure, communication lines, logistics and weapons supplies.

They also prevented Pakistani troops from escaping into Myanmar, according to a piece on the website of the Delhi-based think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF),

"Their entire involvement, under the cover of plausible deniability with the R&AW's blessings, was to train Bengali freedom fighters and conduct special operations against Mizo and Naga insurgents," states the article.

The Vikas battalions also played a critical role in the 1984 Operation Blue Star — when Indian forces laid siege to the Golden Temple in Amritsar to counter Sikh militants — and the capture of Siachen Glacier in 1984, besides the Kargil battle of 1999...