

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

SECRET

May 27, 1988
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Subject: **Shia-Sunni clashes in Gilgit district**

After giving a briefing, on the evening of Monday 16 May, to the Ambassador of UK, Mr. Nicholas Barrington, I took the May 17 first flight for Islamabad to celebrate Eid with the family. On Friday 20 May when we had boarded the Fokker bound for Gilgit, the pilot announced that there was trouble in Gilgit and if the passengers, so wishes, the flight would be cancelled. Out of the full load, four passengers got down and the rest remained seated. One passenger commented that flights to Karachi are not cancelled when there is trouble there!

On arrival at Gilgit, we were informed that a Lashkar (Tribal army) has descended on Gilgit, from Kohistan and Chilas to avenge the death of a Sunni, at the hands of Shias. Zahir, Sultan, Karim and Amin (an AKES intern) had moved over to Serena alongwith Nizar Mecklais. All local staff had already removed their families to safe places. Fortunately due to Eid, most of the down country staff were not due back till May 22. Around 8 p.m., HWK rang me up at Chinar Inn about the onslaught of the Lashkar on Sakwar village, on the outskirts of Gilgit and the panic it had created amongst the population and requested for immediate deployment of the army. I rang up the Administrator and apprised him of the situation. He assured me that every possible step is being taken including deployment of the army I conveyed this reassuring message to HWK. Next morning the Administrator informed of the willingness of the Lashkar to withdraw. Syed Qasim Shah also arrived from Islamabad. Four C-130 sorties brought reinforcements for the army. Everything seemed to be coming back to normal, after the tragic events of the previous night, which had resulted in deaths and burning of houses of the villages of Sakwar. The Deputy Commissioner Gilgit had already declared May 21 a local holiday and I advised HWK to keep the offices closed. Monou Assadi of UNICEF and Jim Wolf of IMMI were already in town. I had a brief meeting with Jim Wolf and made arrangements for him and Mrs. Wolf's return to Islamabad by PIA. Monou and I were scheduled to go on a field visit the following day. In the evening I informed HF at Karachi about the prevailing situation.

May 22 turned out to be the Black Sunday. HWK informed me that while returning, the Lashkar crossed the river and razed to the ground the Shia village of Batkore up in the hills, which had recently built a link road with the AKRSP assistance and were now advancing on Jalalabad, one of our model villages. I rang up the Administrator, he confirmed the news and thought it prudent for me to take Assadi

(an Iranian national) on the field tour to Gojal. I also asked my staff staying at Serena to accompany me on the tour including Mrs. Mecklai. Everyone was in panic and wanted to get out of Gilgit. All the vehicles were commandeered to take the staff to different destinations of safety. My Secretary Abdul Rauf with eight family members, was in real panic. I asked him to come to Hunza at company expense but he preferred to try his luck on the flight next morning. Fortunately the six C-130 sorties on May 23 made the evacuation of his family possible along with himself. Ali Maujood and Asadullah chowkidars undertook to guard the offices. Nothing untoward happened except someone took a potshot at one of the back room office windows with a .22 bullet making a hole through the glass and embedding the bullet in the wall. This happened around 5 p.m. on May 24.

Our journey to Gulmit was uneventful except that there were caravans of women and children on foot and in vehicles getting out of Gilgit. It reminded one of the scenes from Viet Nam war documentaries. As we entered Nagar Area, there were barriers set up at every village, manned by locals, a few of them armed. I drove myself and kept the vehicles in the front. The barriers were opened one after the other as they recognized me without asking any questions. The whole atmosphere appeared charged with tension and acrimony.

After the field visit we returned to Gilgit on May 26. At Sust representatives of about 200 Sunni (Pathan) traders stranded at Sust, on way back from Kashghar, requested for help as they dare not pass through the Nagar area barriers. On return I conveyed their plight to the Administrator, who promised to do something. I also met him in the evening and paid a courtesy call on Syed Qasim Shah, who was staying in the Commissioner's house.

Analysis of Events

Shia-Sunni tension, especially in Gilgit town, has its genesis in the dispute about the route of the Muharram procession and events came to such a head that in 1983 the President of Pakistan personally intervened in the matter. In recent days the tension was fanned by the candidates to the Northern Areas Council, culminating in a clash, on Al-Quds Day procession, taken out by Shias on May 17. The Shias retaliated by attacking Sunnis of Kashrot Mohallah in Gilgit town resulting in the death of a Sunni. Slogans against the Khulfa-e-Rashdeen (the first three caliphs) were also written on the walls, allegedly by the Imamia Student Organization (ISO – a Shia militant youth group) countered by slogans against Imam Khomeni by Al-Farooqia (a Sunni militant youth group). The news of the death of a Sunni and the slogans against the caliphs were exploited to exhort the Chilasis and Kohistanis to join the 'jihad' against the Shias.

Beginning with a small armed group of 500, the Lalshkar swelled to anywhere from 10,000 to 40,000 people armed with Klashinkovs, mortars, grenades etc.,

burning and looting the villages of Minawar, Sikwar, Jakalabad, Batkore, Shutay and Shahtot. Another smaller group descended from Darel on to Singal and attacked the villages of Sharoot and Shakyot. It is said that at one time a truckload of armed persons came to reinforce the Lashkar via KKH almost every ten minutes. In their wake, according to official figures, the Lashkar left 30 dead, 25 injured, 600 houses burnt and uncounted number of animals dead and fruit trees cut.

The only redeeming feature was that in the face of this invasion, the members of different local communities did not attack each other, instead provided protection, where possible. The 200 Sunnis at Sust were under the care of the locals. The members of one community leaving an area, predominantly inhabited by another sect, were helped to do so. The Ismailis remained totally neutral and uninvolved, despite attempts by some of the recently defeated Ismaili candidates in the elections to get them involved. The Lashkar, even while passing through Ismaili villages, left them unmolested.

The questions agitating the local population especially Shias and Ismailis and Sunnis too, as to why the invaders were not stopped and once they had arrived, why the Administrator proved so helpless, including the army, in throwing them back, need convincing explanation.

The Future

- i) There is need for an immediate massive rehabilitation programme, in the affected area, to provide the affectees much needed help and to restore their confidence in the government and
- ii) The sinking of differences between Shia and Sunni leadership in Gilgit town, to prevent recurrence of outside intervention.

AKRSP would endeavour to promote achievement of the two objectives through advocacy with local administration and negotiation and dialogue with the local leadership.