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SKUMAR MAHAJAN

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FOREWORD BY
KULDIP NAYAR

SERBJEET SINGH 1972

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A 25th Anniversary Present to the Indian Nation

DEBACLE IN BALTISTAN

BY

SKUMAR MAHAJAN

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Mr. Amar Nath, Wazir-e-Wazarat, Ladakh and Skardu
Martyred at Skardu

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DEDICATION

This book has been dedicated.....

To all the refugees in the world—after all it were they who helped make most of the history of this century ; And.....

To those brave soldiers, civilian or military, famous or unsung, who willingly sacrificed all they had, including their lives, to preserve the integrity of the Indian sub-continent; And.....

To those soldiers of fortune who deliberately, by means fair or foul, let this sub-continent be balkanized—because otherwise their leadership would have remained unrecognized and their deeds, which have been preserved in golden letters in the history books of their followers, would have invited penal action; And, finally.....

To those honest, sincere and God-fearing individuals, who saw through the game, but kept quiet for one reason or another, so much so that they even let the outspoken and courageous people of their tribe fend for themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My sincere thanks are due to all the civil and military officers of the Defence Ministry, especially Lt-Col. G.S. Pablay of photo wing, who went out of their way to help write this book.

Mr. Serbjeet Singh deserves a special "thank you" for permitting his map to be used on the cover.

I am also grateful to Mr. Emmanuel Sukhlal, Daftary of The Statesman newspaper, but for whose deft handling of the musty and dusty files of the paper, my research work would have been incomplete.

FOREWORD

India's first intimation about Pakistan's decision to send into Kashmir tribesmen followed by regular and irregular forces was from Mr. Shiv Saran Lal, who was Deputy Commissioner, Dera Ismail Khan, NWFP, in September-October, 1947, and who was then on leave in New Delhi. He had reported to Indian leaders that Pakistan had sent "armed tribal people (half a million) to the Pakistan-Kashmir border and the Pakistan Government provided transport in civilian and military lorries." India's information from its Intelligence sources in September, 1947, was that "Muslim League units in Punjab and the NWFP are making preparations to enter Kashmir in considerable numbers" and "to take some big action as soon as Kashmir is more or less isolated because of the coming winter."

Subsequently, the Kashmir Government provided New Delhi with more evidence—plans bearing proper seals and names—to prove that "a conspiracy for the establishment of a new Muslim State by the Muslim League in Jammu and Kashmir" was hatched as early as 1945.

General Lockhart, then India's C-in-C, who had acted as the NWFP Governor earlier, got confirmation of Pakistan's

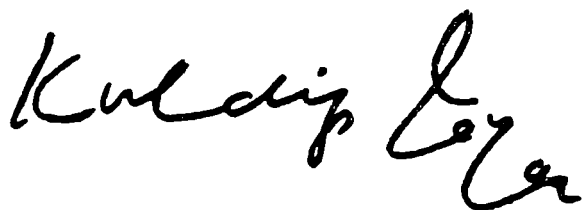
plan in 1947 from his successor there, George Cunningham, who reported : "Some people up here have been acting very foolishly. You will know what I mean by the time this letter reaches you." General Rees, Commander of the Boundary Force, also reported to Mountbatten that he feared trouble.

In a letter dated October 25, 1947, Mountbatten wrote to Patel quoting Rees as his source that tribesmen were advancing towards Uri. Mountbatten informed him later that ex-INA officers were involved in it.

It was on October 24, 1947, evening that India received definite confirmation about the tribesmen entering Kashmir. Nehru was at that time hosting a dinner in New Delhi in honour of Thailand's Foreign Minister.

And then began the Kashmir war, which in one form or the other has continued for the last 25 years. Mr. Skumar Mahajan has picked up the battle of Skardu and after for his study. Even though several persons have written about this episode, Mr. Mahajan has presented the facts in his endearing style, to bring before the public many things which are quite new.

The heroism of our people who saved Kashmir first in 1947 and then in 1965 when Pakistanis were within a few yards of Srinagar airport will also be remembered—in 1947 it were Pakistani raiders and in 1965 Pakistani infiltrators. Mr. Mahajan has consecrated the deeds of those who fought at Skardu through his writing. His analysis is that there was a "debacle in Baltistan", and he supports his case with weighty data. Whether it really was, only time will tell because we, even after 25 years, are still too near the events.



(KULDIP NAYAR)
Editor, The Statesman,
NEW DELHI-110001.

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PREFACE

Any rational being would ask : what was the necessity to resurrect the 24-year-old happenings now ? Our answer would be : it is news. Secondly, the battle of Skardu, or Baltistan, had been a glorious chapter in the annals of our defence forces. And very few people know about it.

There we see our brave soldiers smoking dried up tea leaves and rice husk instead of tobacco in the battle field, eating a few dry chapaties and fighting almost without ammunition, and here we witness politicians fraternizing with the arch enemy and misguiding the public.

What did they exactly wish to accomplish by hiding the bare facts from the masses ? Their personal failures or secrets of the Government ? Unfortunately, their secrecy phobia went to such a ridiculous limits that the enemy took full advantage of it—even to the extent of eliminating civilians in cold blood without compunction and fear of international repercussion.

But, perhaps, our worthy leaders would like to place their failures at the door of civil servants or generals, upon whose advice they acted ? If that were so, why not take action against the culprits ? Catch them and hang them—after all they are responsible for the loss of innumerable precious lives,

property worth millions and a sizable chunk of priceless Indian territory to the enemy.

In this volume we have tried to recapture some of the historic moments concerning the fall of Baltistan to Pakistan. As too much time has elapsed—all this happened in 1948—we may have missed certain details. We are sure, however, of the authenticity of the material used. We could have got this book published earlier; but we did not do so in the public interest.

New Delhi, August, 1973

SKUMAR MAHAJAN

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INTRODUCTION

In 1947, the area north of Zojila and Burzil range of mountains was known as the frontier of Jammu and Kashmir which extended right up to Gilgit on one end and Ladakh on the other. On the other side of the border, we had Afghanistan, Chinese Turkistan, Russian Turkistan, Tibet and North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan.

Realizing the key position of Gilgit, the British took over its administration from the J & K's Maharaja in mid-30s on one pretext or the other. Consequently, J & K's forces were withdrawn to Bunji, 35 miles short of Gilgit and river Indus served as the boundary between the British domain and J & K territory.

However, with the Independence in 1947, the British handed back Gilgit Agency to the Maharaja with great pomp. Brigadier Ghansara Singh was appointed the Governor. But nobody thought of retiring the British officers of Gilgit Scouts, the local militia. At the officers' behest, the Gilgit Scouts arrested the Governor, a few Hindu and Sikh soldiers and raised Pak flag.

After the walkover in Gilgit, the enemy eyes riveted upon Skardu, the capital of Baltistan. (Ladakh and Skardu were one district in the erstwhile State of J & K.) But here the

Pakistanis met more than their match in the person of Mr. Amar Nath, Wazir-e-Wazarat (District Magistrate), Ladakh and Skardu. But being one man against many he fought a losing battle from the very beginning.

After the fall of Gilgit, the Sikh trading community in Skardu panicked and arranged for their families to be shifted to Kargil for safety. But the Wazir, Mr. Amar Nath, stopped them, fearing that it would spread the scare and crumble the administrative apparatus manned by Kashmiri Pandits, who were also worried about the welfare of their families. The Wazir wanted the Army to take over. For this, he selected sites for airstrips at Kargil, Ladakh and Skardu for speedily landing the Army when needed. Perhaps he was the first man to think of having airstrips in that region.

Lt-Col. (now retired as Brigadier) Sher Jang Thapa, garrison commander of Ladakh and Skardu, selected Tsari, about 20 miles North-West of Skardu, as the best bottleneck to contain the enemy. Actually, Mr. Thapa's plan, after the fall of Bunji to Pakistan, was to withdraw to Kargil, along with the civil administration, and establish a firm base there. His superiors endorsed his plan, but the Wazir's bosses did not agree. However, communications between Tsari and Skardu were maintained through local couriers or Army patrolling.

The intelligence reports, which were passed on to Srinagar as speedily as they arrived in Skardu, suggested that the enemy was building up a massive strike force in Gilgit. And although the airstrip at Skardu was ready, nobody in Srinagar even bothered to have an aerial look at it what to talk of landing troops.

The Pakistanis were quick to realize that they were dealing with impotents and hence they openly started preaching the gospel of Jihad to Baltis. Thus trouble was brewing in Baltistan in December, 1947.

The enemy propaganda started taking roots about the end of January, 1948. The Balti teachers shunned school premises; absenteeism was the order of the day in Government offices; Balti shopkeepers refused to serve Hindu-Sikh families; and above all they were learning new interpretations of their



Brigadier Usman—"lived and died" for his country



Brigadier S. J. Thapa—Hero of Skardu

religion. In panic, the Hindu-Sikh community in Skardu flooded Srinagar with telegrams for rescue or assistance. But either nobody answered them, or gave vague assurances.

Then Pakistanis undertook the next phase of their plan : sabotage. The brooks supplying drinking water were cut and so were telegraphic poles and wires. In the meantime a cheering news reached Skardu : the few Army batches that had crossed Zojila were proceeding towards Skardu.

On the night of February 8-9, 1948, Pakistanis attacked our troops at Tsari and all the Sikh soldiers were either killed in action or murdered in cold blood after being captured. The next supply of rations, etc., from Skardu was due to Tsari on February 11.

In the afternoon of February 10, the first batch of reinforcements arrived in Skardu—they numbered 90. Early next morning 600 Pakistanis attacked Skardu cantonment, our number being 130. The brainwashed 6th Infantry Muslim soldiers deserted en masse. This was also a day of looting, rape and murder. The Wazir, Mr. Amar Nath, was shot dead by a 6th Infantry soldier. Other people were pole-axed. However, the Jawans successfully repulsed the attack. By midnight almost every living Hindu-Sikh in Skardu had taken shelter inside the cantonment.

On February 13, the second batch of reinforcements, comprising 70 Jawans reached Skardu; and the third (again numbering 70) arrived on February 15. But, meanwhile, after running away initially, the enemy had taken up strong offensive positions around the cantonment. One was atop a hill overlooking the Skardu valley.

Mr. Thapa deployed our troops in a defensive fashion, which was not appreciated by the offensive doctrine people. Considering the precarious rations and ammunition position and long lines of communications, he knew what he was doing. Srinagar, by and large, continued sleeping and instead of landing troops and supplies did not even send an aircraft to show its colours.

The first skirmish between two platoons of the enemy and one of ours occurred on February 24 in which two Jawans were critically wounded. Thereafter, it was a downhill

journey for our garrison. Regarding air support, Srinagar had one answer : it entirely depended on weather.

In March, the enemy started a war of attrition and moved towards Kargil after encircling the Skardu garrison and localizing its striking ability. Pakistanis ambushed our reinforcements at Thurgaon-Ipri, 10 miles from Skardu towards Kargil and historically notorious for ambushes. The reinforcements did not carry even a wireless set to keep Skardu informed of their whereabouts. Had they known each other's positions, the Skardu garrison and the reinforcements would simply have sandwiched the Pakistanis.

After defeating the reinforcements at Thurgaon-Ipri, the Pakistanis advanced further and cut off all the other Army batches on Kargil-Skardu route from one another and their base in Kargil.

By April, the Skardu garrison was but a minor thorn in the enemy's side—painful, yes; dangerous, no. Although fortification of the cantonment kept casualty low, many wounded Jawans and civilians died untimely death. Some lost their limbs owing to gangrene. A soldier died of lead poisoning even when his middle finger was wounded.

The enemy pressure on the garrison continued increasing. Though various methods of psychological warfare were employed the enemy could not subdue the Jawans, who were till then hopeful of rescue by Srinagar, which had done nothing tangible, apart from making vague promises and saying bravo.

In May Kargil fell to the enemy and by the end of that month the Pakistanis had assumed complete control on the line of communications from Zojila to Skardu. The enemy was equally determined to overwhelm Skardu garrison and kept attacking the cantonment pickets with a view to over-running them. That he did not succeed despite superiority in arms and numbers was entirely due to the Jawans' determination.

The cantonment was frequently subjected to heavy shelling and the meagre ammunition with our Jawans prevented them from firing even a single shell in return. By occupying the empty houses around the cantonment, the enemy was at places even 50 yards or less from our positions. Our garrison

was not permitted to demolish civilian property even then.

With the Jawans living on a starvation diet, casualties and sickness began increasing. Although the cantonment was lucky to have four doctors, the supply of medicines and medical equipment were inadequate. But the Jawans, even when sick and wounded, bravely manned the defences.

Only now Srinagar was kind enough to disclose: "Existing aircraft not fitted with necessary equipment to clear height over 15,000 ft. and drop supplies over Skardu." So Srinagar had another brainwave and ordered withdrawal from Skardu with women and children. Mr. Thapa said it was impossible in the territory swarming with the enemy; hence the order was countermanded.

By June Skardu garrison had lost hope of any rescue either by land or air. Mr. Thapa warned Srinagar that Jawans might desert, if their morale was not rehabilitated. The enemy also played its trump card then and sent a brainwashed Hindu prisoner of war to plead the enemy's case and ask for surrender of Skardu garrison. It added to the demoralization trend already set in at the cantonment.

This information shook Srinagar into sending two aircraft which indulged in aerobatics and some fancy shooting. Next day one aircraft attacked enemy position effectively. Later on some supplies were dropped, but the pilot's erratic aim resulted in 50% of the goods falling in enemy hands. The frequency of drops was also not adequate to meet the garrison requirements.

July brought malaria, diarrhoea and dysentery for the cantonment inmates. The Jawans' vitality had been reduced to zero. Serious operations and amputations were performed without anaesthesia. Once one explosion gave 17 casualties and many died of wounds which could not be properly treated.

After repeated requests, some penicillin and anti-tetanus drugs were airdropped. But an unscrupulous storekeeper, or some other personality, sent ineffective and old stock of medicine to Skardu—the medicines' potency date had expired. The chiseller was only concerned about the lining of his own pocket. He cared very little if the garrison lived or died, or, if, by implication, his country breathed in freedom or

slavery.

The enemy brought 3.7" Howitzers in August and it proved the proverbial last straw for the Skardu garrison. Mr. Thapa informed Srinagar that he and his troops had decided to withdraw, leaving the civilians at the mercy of the enemy in the cantonment. Srinagar quickly promised that they would send a specially-fitted Dakota to drop supplies to the garrison; but the aircraft never came. Srinagar evidently attached too much importance to the U.N. Commission on Kashmir, which could neither cure wounded at Skardu nor supply rations and ammunition to Jawans.

On the historical morning of August 14, 1948, exactly six months and three days after Skardu was attacked, Lt-Col. S.J. Thapa surrendered to the enemy. He had no choice. Thus India presented Baltistan and its adjoining areas to Pakistan in a platter.

The new rulers, after a bout of murder and rape, did everything with Skardu, which India had failed to do. They landed aircraft, troops and light to medium artillery and converted Baltistan into a modern cantonment.

PRELUDE

Our story begins in 1947.

The area north of Zojila and Burzil range of mountains was known as the frontier of Jammu and Kashmir State. The frontier extended right up to Gilgit and Ladakh. It had, on the other side of the border, such strategically valuable areas as Afghanistan, North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, Chinese Turkistan, Russian Turkistan and Tibet.

Although this frontier is wholly mountainous, its mountain peaks varying in height from 12,000 ft. to 22,000 ft. above sea level, the British were quick to realize its key position. They engineered an incident in mid-30s and took over control of the entire Gilgit Agency, which included Chilas, Babusar and Hunzanagar. Consequently, J & K forces were withdrawn to Bunji, 35 miles short of Gilgit, which had an almost all-weather airstrip. And river Indus served as the boundary between the State and British-held territory.

Upon the advent of Independence in 1947, the British paramountcy in Gilgit lapsed and they handed over the Agency to Jammu and Kashmir State with great pomp. But, evidently, all the time they were laughing in their sleeves.

J & K's Brigadier Ghansara Singh was appointed Governor of Gilgit. Three British officers whose pro-Pakistan leanings and trouble-making potential were quite well-known, were

retained to lead the Gilgit Scouts under the J & K forces' banner. It was done on the plea that the Scouts were used to being commanded by the British officers. Therefore, when time came to switch loyalties from the State of Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan all the Gilgit Scouts had to do was to arrest the Governor, a few Hindu and Sikh soldiers and raise Pakistani flag—which was exactly what they did.

After the walk-over in Gilgit, the enemy eyes riveted upon Skardu, which was the next important town in their overall plan to capture Kashmir. But here they met more than their match in the person of Mr. Amar Nath, Wazir-e-Wazarat (District Magistrate), Ladakh and Skardu. But, alas, being one man against many, he fought a losing battle from the very beginning. He paid a heavy price by sacrificing not only his own life, but by indirectly compelling others to die, too.

Unfortunately, this price was paid in vain. The country still lost Skardu and all the chunk of territory right up to Kargil just because somebody somewhere in authority did not appreciate the reading of Mr. Amar Nath, the man on the scene, and was reluctant to speedily follow his advice word by word. However, more about it later. Suffice it to say that whenever we fought with Pakistan, the enemy always aimed at breaking our communication link with Ladakh on Kargil-Leh road. Had Skardu been under our control, the enemy would have been sitting twiddling his thumbs in this sector. The price to retain Skardu was negligible when compared with the price we have paid regularly in clearing Kargil-Leh link.

Let us topographically examine Skardu before proceeding further with our story. This area is also called Baltistan. Baltistan bounds Ladakh on the west and extends for 150 miles on either side of river Indus. It is a wild district with lofty mountains and deep valleys which drain into Indus. Most of these valleys and mountains remained unexplored for mineral wealth. Majority of the villages are situated either on the Dras river, or the lower part of river Shayok, or the river Shigar or the Indus itself. The chief town is Skardu.

Shigar is another popular place in the district. It is about six miles from Skardu and comprises a group of villages. Its climate is cooler than Skardu and its fruits are famous for

their richness. Khaplu is the capital of lower Shayok. On the north, Baltistan is completely shut off from all communications by the mighty Mustagh range of mountains.

Skardu itself is a narrow valley, 7,500 ft. above sea level and about 200 miles North-North East of Srinagar. It can be reached through two routes from Srinagar. One way is over Zojila pass to Dras via Kargil to Skardu and the second is via Gurais across Burzil pass over to Deosai Plains to Skardu.

The Zojila-Dras-Kargil-Skardu route was mostly used in those days, although it was believed that Gurais-Burzil-Deosai-Skardu route was shorter by 30 miles.

The Kargil-Skardu path was hewn out of rocks and travelled 100 miles right along the left bank of Indus. This was the only way available to Skardu on this route. The river bank is precipitous and in some places one has the feeling of walking over the edge of a knife. River Indus runs at a break-neck speed and at some places its banks are very close, at others they are even 100 yards apart.

Although the mountains on its banks are mostly rocky and bare, there are certain villages on way to Skardu—like Kharmang, Tolty, Parkutta, and Gol which are thickly populated and have fertile land. The villagers used rope bridges to cross Indus. From Kargil to reach Skardu it took six days. All equipment and stores had to be carried by porters and hill ponies. The going was indeed tough.

Politically, Baltistan was divided among five Jaghirdars, locally called Rajas, who exercised a considerable influence in their respective regions. Their influence can be best judged by the fact that only recently President Bhutto of Pakistan tried to abolish the feudal system. As a result he was gheraoed when he visited Baltistan lately. Anyway, no other Pakistani ruler had guts enough to touch them.

The Rajas were known as Raja of Rondu, Raja of Khaplu, Raja of Shigar, Raja of Skardu and Raja of Kharmang. When the Sikhs under Zorawar Singh captured Baltistan in the latest phase of history, it was being ruled by a Muslim Raja, whose descendants the above Rajas were.

At one time the Skardu Raja ruled a large territory and had even conquered territory up to Chitral.

By the way, the Rajas of Khaplu, Rondu, Shigar, Khar-mang, Skardu, Astor, Hunza and Nagar are all descendants of an early Raja of Hunza. These families intermarry; but this did not prevent constant family vendettas and internecine warfares until the Sikh conquest. These Raja family feuds continued even up to the time of Skardu's fall to Pakistan, although the weapons used were nothing more harmful than litigation.

Majority of the inhabitants of Skardu are believed to be of Tibetan origin—but they resemble the Aryan races—and speak the language not much different from the Bhots of Ladakh—the difference is mainly of Urdu and Persian vocabulary imbibed in the language by Muslim invaders from Afghanistan and Iran. The Baltis are rather taller than Bhots but even here their marriage with Brokpas or Highlanders has modified them physically. The Brokpas are their neighbours, who are known as Dards and who populate higher areas around Dras. The Dards have also played a leading part in the earlier history Kashmir. The Baltis are polygamists.

Baltistan suffers from lack of irrigation and until partition thousands of Baltis migrated up to Simla in summer in search of work. They are sturdy, pleasant and independent minded.

In dress they do not differ much from Kashmiris. They wear woollen skull-caps, coat and pyjamas. Although most of the 60,000 population of Baltistan belonged to the Shia sect of Muslims, in Shigar and Khaplu many embraced Nur Bux way of worship.

But many of their customs reminded one of orthodox Brahmins, including the wearing of turbans. The upper classes of Baltis are distinctly Aryan and even the commoner, until the advent of modernization, shaved his head, leaving the hair on the side and back intact. If you have seen a South Indian orthodox Brahmin, you would understand what we mean. It could have been the Aryan fashion of wearing tufts. Perhaps somewhere in the turbulent course of Jammu and Kashmir's history they were converted en masse.

There were also about 250 Sikh and Kashmiri Pandits and their families in Skardu. The Sikhs were there as traders

and Kashmiris had gone as Government employees.

After the fall of Gilgit, some of the trading community in Skardu panicked. They arranged for their families to be shifted to Kargil for safety. But Mr. Amar Nath, the Wazir, stopped them, even when they were on their way on horseback. It made him unpopular, but the Wazir had very little choice. Either he could have allowed them to go and thus helped in the spread of scare, which would have resulted in more migration. This would eventually have led to another easy victory in Skardu for the enemy, because Kashmiri Pandits were also worried about themselves and their families and in their absence the administrative apparatus would simply have crumbled.

Or the Wazir could have forcibly stopped their departure, asked for the Army to take over and thus confirm the people's faith in the administration. This he tried to do, albeit with negligible success.

But even prior to this he had been quite active in assessing the mood of the local population. Ever since his appointment as Wazir during those chaotic days of Independence, Mr. Amar Nath was looking for the weakest link in the chain of Ladakh and Skardu—the district he had to administer—which link could possibly be severed by the enemy. He personally visited Ladakh and found that although Pakistani agents were active inciting the Buddhists there, they were meeting little or no success. Kargil, the key to Ladakh and Skardu was also more under the Buddhist influence than Pakistani. It only left Skardu, which due to its mostly illiterate Muslim population, was an easy prey for the enemy agents and their propaganda of jihad.

Thus having correctly assessed the situation, he proceeded further to save it. First, he selected sites for airports at Ladakh Kargil and Skardu for speedily landing Army when needed. Perhaps he was the first man to think of having airstrips in that region. Having both judicial and executive authority, being the head of the administration of a sensitive border district, he ordered that his administrative headquarters be shifted to Skardu. Skardu was also winter capital of the district.

First of all he called a meeting of leading citizens and local Rajas to understand their political leanings and to remind them of their oath of allegiance to the Kashmir Maharaja, thereby Government of India. He also wanted to ascertain to what extent they will stand by him in emergency and what help they could give him by providing rations, etc., if and when the Army took over.

Mr. Amar Nath was not surprised when Raja of Rondu did not attend the conference. He had already seen intelligence reports saying that the Raja was in constant touch with Pakistan and the Gilgit Scouts and was urging them to attack Skardu at once. Actually, the Raja was the man responsible for attracting the enemy's attention to Skardu so soon.

Only one of the Rajas, Raja of Khaplu, was loyal to the Government. Rest of all were opportunists. They would support only the winner. Meanwhile, they were neutral.

The Wazir, therefore, began a campaign to strengthen the weakened and demoralized administration. As Gilgit had already fallen, the enemy was expected any moment to strike Skardu territory. To stall the local Rajas from actively participating in the revolt, Mr. Amar Nath ordered confiscation of all the guns and ammunition lying with them. The arsenal with the Rajas was formidable. From ancient muzzle-loaders to the latest model in shot-guns and rifles lay with them. They also had guns which their ancestors had acquired from Greek and Afghan invaders either in battle field or as souvenirs of loyalty. The Wazir also stopped the plying of ferry to and from Skardu over Indus, as that was the expected route of the attack, and tried his best to awaken the sleepy Srinagar to the gravity of the situation.

The garrison commander of Ladakh and Skardu, Lt.-Col. (now retired as Brigadier) Sher Jang Thapa, was ordered to shift his headquarters from Leh, the capital of Ladakh tehsil, to Skardu, capital of Baltistan. He arrived in Skardu on December 3, 1947, with two Junior Commissioned Officers (J.C.Os) and 75 Others Ranks (O.R.), which included three Muslim wireless operators. The 6th Kashmir Infantry which was guarding this frontier, had a majority of Muslims,

though.

(Even while Lt.-Col. Thapa was on his way to Skardu, the enemy was not sitting idle. Lt.-Col. Thapa's column came under observation by a Pakistani Harvard reconnaissance aircraft, which later flew off towards Gilgit, between Parkutta and Gol.)

Even prior to Lt.-Col. Thapa's arrival at Skardu, Lt.-Col. Abdul Majid Khan, Bunji Commander of J & K forces, had fallen a prey to a vile plot of Gilgit Scouts. On November 1, 1947, he received a message from Gilgit, asking him to report to the Governor immediately. Half way to Gilgit, he was way-laid and arrested by the rebels. Evidently, he did not enroll in their ranks willingly. On the night of November 1-2, 1947, Bunji garrison was attacked.

As the garrison was unable to contain the enemy pressure, they tried to retreat towards Srinagar. But even their escape routes were blocked. After suffering heavy casualties from the well-entrenched enemy, they decided to make a last-ditch stand from atop a hill. They fought bravely for a few days, but soon starvation led them to surrender. Thus the enemy had cleared another hurdle on way to Skardu.

Captain Nek Alam was the post commander at Skardu before Lt.-Col. Thapa arrived to take over the command. Captain Nek Alam had intercepted two messages from one Captain Hussan Khan, perhaps of Gilgit Scouts, addressed to a J.C.O. of the J & K forces at Skardu. The messages entreated the J.C.O. to foment communal trouble among the garrison staff, revolt and take over the Skardu administration until Pakistani masters arrived.

It was again Captain Nek Alam who went to Stak, a border village of Skardu, to rescue and bring back four Sikh survivors of Bunji garrison. He handed them over to Lt.-Col. Thapa on December 4, 1947.

The Wazir Mr. Amar Nath and Lt.-Col. Thapa apparently did not see eye to eye on the mode of defence of Skardu. The Wazir wanted the fight to be taken right up to the enemy; hence he wished the Army to guard Skardu frontier with Gilgit. Lt.-Col. Thapa, the soldier that he was, was more worried about his lines of communications with his headquarters

at Srinagar. It was his plan to establish his base in Kargil, patrol up to Skardu, and, if and when reinforcements arrived, re-establish his base at Skardu. So much so that once he complained to his headquarters that the Wazir was ordering him about instead of consulting him.

However, upon arrival in Skardu, Mr. Thapa went to Rondu, which bordered Gilgit, to survey the area for possible enemy approaches. He surmised that the enemy would either attack from Deosai Plains side in the south-west, or along Bunji-Astor-Bunakala route, a mountainous track over 16,000 ft. high, or from Gilgit along with the river Indus through Rondu area to Skardu.

Only Gilgit-Rondu-Skardu route afforded the enemy all the facilities for a speedy advance, so Mr. Thapa went on to lay defence pickets as best as he could.

It must be recorded, even at the cost of repetition, that Lt.-Col. Thapa wanted that both civil administration and troops in Skardu should withdraw to Kargil. This would have strengthened the garrison at Kargil and ensured a more secure defence base. Mr. Thapa's superiors possibly endorsed his plan but the Wazir's superiors hesitated, probably thinking that it would create panic, demoralization in the local population and would harm the prestige of the Government. However, the plan was dropped.

Mr. Thapa was also worried at the limited number of troops at his disposal. There were about 60 troops, all Muslims, apart from the 75 he had brought with him. He repeatedly asked for reinforcements from his headquarters in Srinagar.

Meanwhile, he selected Tsari, about 20 miles north-west of Skardu, as the best place for fighting the future attackers in the winter. The place had steep hills on either side and river Indus in between, which made it a beautiful bottleneck to check the enemy advance. He deputed two platoons to guard this bottleneck. Captain Nek Alam guarded the far bank with his Muslim subordinates and Captain Krishan Singh with Sikh soldiers was in charge of the near bank. The communication between Skardu and Tsari were either through local couriers or occasional Army patrolling.

The Wazir was equally uneasy over the delicate security

problem of Skardu. Ever since Mr. Thapa's arrival, he used the Army wireless facilities to transmit messages to Srinagar. Mr. Thapa himself was an able wireless operator, and, therefore, there was no chance of the sensitive messages being leaked to the civilian population, which would have created panic only.

One of the messages was :

“Report of civil authority Balakhama who left Gilgit about 20 days ago. About three days before he left Gilgit he saw about 20 aeroplanes land in Gilgit—all local officials were present at landing ground. On his way home he saw about 30 armed Scouts in village Haramosh and about 10 in Rondu. After crossing Shangas Pir he saw about 18 Sikh soldiers being taken by about six Scouts towards Haramosh. He also saw four armed Scouts near village Shangas. He also stated that many British officers were in those planes and accompanied other officers towards Gilgit from landing ground.” (14-12-47)

In this message although only British officers have been mentioned, they could have been other countries' nationals as well. As later evidence showed, many mercenaries fought on behalf of Pakistan then in Kashmir. However, on the one side we observe massive defence build-up and on the other—Indian and Skardu side—things were moving if they could be called moving, at snail's pace.

Two days after the above message was sent the following was transmitted :

“Report from civil authority from Rondu begins. Six days ago one Ahmed Khan of Bunji area came to Yalbo and said one hundred Scouts from Bunji will reach Yalbo in two weeks and attack Skardu—they will come along river (Indus). Thirty to forty Scouts from Haramosh will reach Stak and attack Skardu. Fifteen thousand Pathans from Swttbuner (a euphemism for Swat and Bannu, perhaps) and Astor have reached Gilgit—aeroplanes have also reached there.

“Six hundred Scouts have been recruited from Gilgit,

Bunji, Agdesmor. More recruitment going on. Captured Sikh soldiers have been sent to Chilas prison. People of Yalbo, Gangi Talobarq have communications with Scouts. Some people of Bunji represent in Yalbo and Gangi. Ends.”

Mr. Thapa added :

“Request if possible at least one company be landed before other reinforcements arrive. Air recce up to Haramosh is very essential—strongly recommended. Important features once taken by enemy will be hard to recapture.” (16-12-47)

Yet another wireless communication was dispatched to Srinagar :

“Report from civil authority begins. Some movements of Scouts in large batches observed by certain villagers from Haramosh towards Shingosh and Stak. Village Haramosh is in Gilgit about 24 miles from Shingosh last village in Skardu tehsil.” (21-12-47)

But the ear-plugs work by Srinagar were made of sterner stuff and, therefore, they did not budge even a fraction of a millimeter. The things stood where they were is Skardu; but Pakistan’s build-up was continuing unabated.

In sheer exasperation, Mr. Thapa addressed his Chief of Staff thus :

“With present strength after finishing local duties only two weak platoons can be spared for defence purposes. We have temporarily made our defensive line along Tsari 25 miles from Skardu towards Rondu. I have today returned from recce of area and find it the only favourable ground near Skardu where we can stop enemy force.

“Wazir pressing hard to go as far as Stak, about 70 miles from here. With small number of troops at my disposal such a long line of communication on a very difficult route entirely dependent on coolies is very hard to maintain and protect and also it means sending troops in blue and asking for trouble.

“I do not consider it advisable to push beyond Tsari till reinforcements arrive. Wazir should be asked to

cooperate with us whole-heartedly and not to interfere. Wazir should be made to realize that he is not to issue orders to me on military matters. He should rather consult and discuss with me the military problems.” (22-12-47)

But the Wazir had his own problems. By now it was very much evident that not only the Wazir, but every Hindu and Sikh in Skardu was sitting on an unpredictable volcano. Mr. Thapa's outburst was but one example of short tempers due to enormous problem of governing a visibly hostile area and having no ready solution to do so. Srinagar had also adopted a kind of couldn't-care-less attitude.

Within a few days the worst fears of the Skardu administration were confirmed and this message went to Srinagar :

“Report show that enemy busy poisoning against State. Enemy activity at present is confined to the villages near Gilgit-Skardu boundary. It is heard reinforcements crossing Zojila in batches of 50 and would leave Dras when a company is complete and further they would halt at Kargil till whole reinforcement is collected. If it is so it will cause much delay, giving time to enemy for propaganda. Suggest order be issued to them to proceed to Skardu in batches as they cross Zojila to enable me (Mr. Thapa) to push them forward as they arrive.” (25-12-47)

Thus trouble was brewing in Skardu in December, 1947.

JANUARY, 1948

In Delhi

India's Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, surprised the world by declaring in a Press conference that India would be within her rights to attack bases in Pakistan, where hostiles attacking Kashmir were being trained, but "there is no immediate intention to do so. They have forayed from Pakistan and returned, but we have avoided going into Pakistan territory." He estimated the raiders' number at about 100,000. He also announced the stoppage of the transfer of cash balances of Rs. 55 crores to Pakistan, as it might be used "to finance a war against us." For the same reason, he said, he would not release any military stores to Pakistan.

This was the strongest threat made by the Indian Premier against a neighbour ever since he assumed office. But he had reasons to be veracious. Intelligence reports had suggested involvement of foreigners also in the raiders' attacks on Indian territory in Kashmir.

One American, a former army sergeant, Russell Haight, had admitted in a Press statement that he led "Azad Kashmir" forces against Indian Army and he might have continued his sport had not the U.S. Administration threatened to cancel his passport. He said he was made a Brigadier-General in Pak Army in Kashmir after capturing Kotli with a commando

group. Probably, it so happened that India was able to procure his name through intelligence channels and forward it to the Administration.

However, even the "Azad Kashmir" president was quoted as saying that "an international brigade", comprising the nationals of U.S.A., Finland and Afghanistan, was fighting for them.

The raiders were also becoming daring day by day. Naushera was attacked in daylight and when the Royal Indian Air Force (R.I.A.F.) went into action they escaped through another route to Pakistan. Indian armour penetrated Bhimber and took the raiders unawares.

Rondu area, 20 miles from Skardu was penetrated by the raiders and many telegrams requesting evacuation and military protection were received by Mr. Nehru, Sheikh Abdullah and the Kashmir Maharaja. But the Indian officials said Zojila pass was heavily barricaded by snow and only airlift of troops was possible.

The raiders were also showing a remarkable military efficiency now. They kept R.I.A.F. and Indian forces fully engaged in Naushera, Rajouri, Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber sectors.

Meanwhile, Mahatma Gandhi decided to undertake a fast unto death for Hindu-Muslim unity. A very noble sentiment, which he expressed thus : "Death for me would be a glorious deliverance rather than that I should be a helpless witness of the destruction of India, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. That destruction is certain if Pakistan ensures no equality of status and security of life and property for all professing the various faiths of the world, and if India copies her."

Although the Mahatma had sound basis for undertaking his fast to bring calm in Delhi—Hindu refugees had clashed with the police, while trying to occupy Muslim houses in Khari Baoli and Phatak Habash Khan areas, which action was described by the Mahatma as "crooked and ungentlemanly squeezing out of Muslims"—his timing of the fast was very unfortunate on an international scale. People thought that he had undertaken the fast to pressurize the Government to release the cash balances and military stores to Pakistan, which

would endanger the lives of Hindus living in Pakistan or in Kashmir area bordering Pakistan.

After Mr. Nehru's Press statement withholding the release of cash balances to Pakistan, that country applied to the Reserve Bank of India, which used to handle the finances of both the Dominions, for a loan of Rs. 10 crores. She alleged India was interfering with the normal working of the Reserve Bank of India, when it refused the loan. Pakistan called it aggression and claimed Rs. 125 crores as assets—apart from the cash balances of Rs. 55 crores—from India.

While this financial muddle of the two Dominions was being sorted out, Nizam of Hyderabad, a sovereign monarch of an independent State, advanced Rs. 20 crores as loan to Pakistan ("as a token of goodwill") and also promulgated a Currency Ordinance—presumably to help Pakistan tie over its financial difficulties.

Then the Mahatma undertook his fast. Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister, released a detailed statement on cash balances. He said Rs. 20 crores were transferred to Pakistan right in the beginning and the Reserve Bank was right in refusing Pakistan's loan application for Rs. 10 crores.

A Hyderabad spokesman said that the loan of Rs. 20 crores to Pakistan was actually a conversion of Government of India securities into Pakistani securities. He added the Indian Government securities had accumulated to over Rs. 70 crores in Hyderabad.

Firoz Khan Noon of Pakistan told Indians to take Mahatma's advice (to fete Pakistan?) and save his life, but he said a Pakistan without Kashmir was inconceivable. Pakistan officially kept insisting for the release of cash balances and its nationals clashed with the Indian Army, which was escorting non-Muslim refugees to India, in Lahore. Pakistan made one concession however : its hordes attacked Jammu and Kashmir State during night only.

Although Peace Brigades, presumably organized by Congress Party, paraded the streets shouting "Hindu-Muslim unity zindabad", Delhi generally remained unmoved by Mahatma's fast and a Muslim refugees' lorry was attacked by "Gandhi murdabad" shouting Hindu refugees. A typical

comment of a refugee was : "Anyone who wishes to die for Muslims does not deserve to live." Refugees wanted houses and not fasts. They even shouted "Let Gandhi die" at Mr. Nehru, when the latter visited the fasting leader.

Lord Mountbatten predicted in a statement that the fast will achieve its objective. It did.

Late on January 15, three days after the Mahatma commenced his fast, Indian Government announced the release of cash balances to Pakistan for "peace and goodwill". Mr. Nehru hoped this gesture will induce the Mahatma to break his fast. The Premier went out of his way to deny that Mr. Gandhi's fast had influenced the release of cash balances, but he admitted that the decision was taken "after consultations with Gandhiji". It was widely believed that Mr. Gandhi will end his fast now.

Financiers estimated that Pakistan would get about Rs. 30 to 35 crores after cost and advance deductions since August 15, 1947.

Mr. Nehru, however, continued appealing to people to save the Mahatma's life by forging Hindu-Muslim unity; but he promised that he will fight Pakistan in Kashmir. Sardar Patel said that it was a shame that Mr. Gandhi had to fast for Hindu-Muslim unity in an independent India. Sir Zafarullah Khan, Pakistan's representative at U.N., on the other hand, denied that Pakistan was abetting raiders in Kashmir; his Government asked Aligarh Muslim University to transfer Rs. 50 lakhs collected for a medical college to Pakistan.

In Pakistan, its Prime Minister, Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan, organized a well-rehearsed stage show. He was on a tour of North-West Frontier Province, which was having a dry spell for the past three years continuously. Pathans, who were massed south of Jammu and Kashmir, "protested" to Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan against Pakistani intervention in their movement to Kashmir. They said with or without Pakistani help, they would conquer Kashmir. They acknowledged that they were infiltrating Kashmir territory through Swat.

The Pathans feared that by occupying Kashmir, Hindus will be at their door-steps, which was dangerous for their existence. Maliks, the tribal heads, of the frontier demanded

a free passage to Kashmir and were angered that a Lashkar of 40,000 from Afghanistan was turned back by Political Regent. So Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan concluded his tour of the frontier and obviously prepared the frontiersmen to attack Kashmir through Swat. Due to drought, abject poverty and slogan of 'jihad', they were clay in his hands. Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan was also quoted as saying that Pakistan's cup of patience was full in relation to Kashmir.

Whereas Sir Zafarullah Khan charged India with ill-treatment and genocide of Muslims, Hindus did not feel safe in Pakistan—they were trying to leave it en masse.

The Mahatma said Hindus were attacked cowardly in Karachi and a refugee's train was attacked in Gujarat. "How long can I bank upon Hindus' patience" if Pakistan does not put a stop to this. They should purify themselves. If India purified itself Pakistan will become "pak". It will be a State in which past wrongs will be forgotten and everyone will be as safe as Quaide Azam. It is a shame that we have copied Pakistan's bad manners.

Apparently, Mr. Gandhi's thinking was clouded by sentiments and emotions. Hard realities were absolutely different.

In Teheran, capital of Iran, Indian embassy said that religious freedom was granted to Muslims in India and that Persian newspapers were publishing false reports "to prejudice public opinion against India".

German foreign office records of German-Russian relations (1931-41) revealed that Russian territorial aspirations lay "south of the Soviet Union in the direction of Indian ocean." That meant Indian sub-continent.

However, India's Setalvad alleged at U.N. that Pakistan was conniving and cooperating with the tribesmen infiltrating Kashmir. He said 60,000 hordes had already infiltrated Kashmir and many more were awaiting orders at Lahore. Pakistan denied the use of its troops in Kashmir and released 57 Spitfire and 32 Tempest aircraft belonging to India. Although the invaders fled at the sight of Indian Army, hostilities continued in Kashmir.

The communal tension was easing in Delhi, but Mahatma Gandhi was determined to continue his fast until Muslims

could walk on the streets without even attracting an unfriendly gaze.

The Mahatma praised Government's gesture in releasing the cash balances and asked : "What will be the Pakistan's counter gesture ?"

Within a week, Pakistan's counter-gesture was evident. She showed her teeth. Jammu and Kashmir territory from Ramgarh to Bishna was attacked by regular troops carrying modern weapons and flame-throwers. They looted, burned and pillaged dozens of villages. Their aim was to disrupt Jammu-Pathankot road, the only artery linking Indian body mass with Jammu and Kashmir State. Indian Army was still engaged in Naushera, Uri and Poonch sectors.

An apologist for Pakistan, a misnomer for an Indian spokesman, said that the raider's attacks on Samba-Kathua and Ramgarh-Bishna area were hit and run forays and not a threat to Jammu-Pathankot road. Muslim villagers, he said, who had gone over to Pakistan, were returning to collect their crops and they were burning and plundering the villages on the way.

It was a very sober and wise Mahatma who broke his fast on January 18. He expressed his desire to go to Pakistan, which wish was never fulfilled, as he himself said : "I cannot go to Pakistan without its Government's permission."

Quaide Azam Jinnah addressed Pakistan Navy—after the settlement of financial deal with India—thus : "The weak and defenceless in this imperfect world invite aggression. If we make ourselves strong, nobody dare entertain any aggressive designs against us."

Perhaps no man achieved so much notoriety as Quaide Azam Jinnah did in this sub-continent in impairing Hindu-Muslim relations. He did his level best to rouse Muslim hatred against Hindus by branding the latter as kafirs and idolaters. He blamed Hindus for all the ills of Muslims. His Firmans, or orders, travelled by word of mouth to his Muslim League cadre (which party he revived) who executed them immediately under the aegis of Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan. Jinnah-Liaquat team was one of those rare combinations that occur once in ages either to benefit humanity or curse it. This

century they joined hands to vilify mankind.

One of the Firmans was believed to have read, "Kill all Hindu and Sikh males or forcibly convert them to Islam. Convert their children to Islam and 'assimilate' their widows and daughters in your homes. Pakistan is a land of holies. There is no room for kafirs and idolaters. May Allah bless you with all the boons of heaven for raising the flag of jihad."

Quaide Azam was quoted as saying that Pakistani Constitution should be based on Shariat laws and "we should serve, sacrifice and die" for Pakistan.

Indian Army continued to be engaged in Jammu and Kashmir State in Uri and Poonch sectors and air strikes were undertaken on Mirpur-Kotli track. Riasi was subjected to loot and Pakistani raiders attacked Jaisalmer. But Mr. Nehru started discouraging war fears between India and Pakistan. He said he did not expect any war between the two countries and warned communal organizations to desist from opposing the Government.

In Skardu

My name is Suraj and I am son of Wazir-e-Wazarat Ladakh and Skardu, Mr. Amar Nath. In my brief life, I have encountered many hardships, which have not left my memory intact. Therefore, I cannot recount verbatim in 1972 all that happened in Skardu in that fateful year of 1948. Anyway I shall try my best to recapture the scene as accurately as possible.

My father had ordered the closure of the Government school in Skardu, even beyond the usual winter holidays, as a very few local children were coming to it now. And Hindu Sikh children could be counted on finger tips. Moreover, he was already beset with many major problems to take chances of squandering scarce Government resources, if some child was kidnapped. Even the Balti teachers were becoming shy of the school premises: They wanted to dissociate themselves from anything even remotely connected with the Government. Such was the power of unseen terror, held out by an enemy whose preparation to strike Skardu area was almost complete.

This terror had seeped in the Government Offices as well. Absenteeism was the order of the day. Indiscipline and open hostility were replacing humility and obedience. The Balti shopkeepers were reluctant to supply the needs of Hindu-Sikh families—even the administrators' households were not spared. Once a shopkeeper was called by my father to explain why he refused to repair a watch. Instead of giving any rational explanation, he insulted father. The Wazarat peons were showing disloyalty, too.

Slowly but definitely, the administrative wheel was grinding to a halt. The township was rippling with rumours. More often than not the locals kept their shops shuttered and their families in the countryside.

Only last month two R.I.A.F. aircraft had overflowed Baltistan. Probably as they were on a reconnaissance mission, they flew low. This action had terrorized the Baltis so much that they rushed to the Wazarat in Ranbirgarh with their families for protection. Their attitudes also softened for a while. When they were reassured by the Pakistani agents that this display of force by India was only temporary, they turned hostile again.

To show them that the Government meant business, Mr. Thapa requested Srinagar for another air reconnaissance. His message read :

“Weather clear. Brilliant sunshine. Kindly arrange air recce. Air recce considered essential to gain information to raise morale of civil officials and public who feel panic and to demoralize enemy elements said to be moving in Rondu area. Also request recce plane should land here and approve landing ground which may have to be used in case of grave emergency.
(3-1-1948)

The panic and helplessness felt by civilian officials and public cannot be expressed by a third party adequately. For that reason, the telegrams sent by Hindus and Sikhs stranded at Skardu have been reproduced in the following paragraphs. But before taking up the telegrams, we should look at Mr. Thapa's messages, sent presumably at father's instance.

“Report from informer begins. About five hundred Scouts from Bunji have been ordered to advance to Skardu. Route they will follow not known. Ends.”

He added :

“There are many approaches to Skardu though some difficult for our troops but all possible locals even over snow-clad mountains. With present strength at my disposal impracticable to guard all these routes. Am guarding main route leaving small strength for local protection and duties in Skardu. Feel necessity of immediate reinforcements to protect this frontier which may be arranged before it is too late. Absence of 3" mortars M.M.Gs (medium machine-guns) and hand grenades badly felt.” (5-1-48)

Second message said :

“Ten residents of Khaplu who have returned from Punjab via Peshawar-Chitral-Silgtto-Skardu spent one day in Gilgit. Gilgit to Skardu they took about 17 days. In Gilgit they heard that Hindu-Sikh civil officials and public who refused conversion are in prison and those who embraced Islam are set free. Governor and Tehsildar have preferred death to conversion. They are in custody. They heard 45 Pak officers including one high official had come to Gilgit in plane. They heard about 400 Punjabi Muslim soldiers were there and saw a few Punjabi officers on parade. One Scout told them they had established Pakistan in Gilgit and they must do same in Baltistan; otherwise they would attack and torture Baltis in three months. They saw 45 Baltis going towards Gilgit.” (6-1-48)

Let us examine the telegrams.

Telegram from Government employees, Skardu, to the Head of Administration, Jammu, dated 5-1-48.

“Pray refer our telegram of January 3 no reply. Since yesterday mails crossing Zojila both sides also private persons crossing. Weather quite sunny and favourable for landing troops at Skardu. Might not get this opportunity hence so anxious. You are saviour of

Kashmir kindly save us too. Again request landing of troops immediately or moving of administration (to a safe place).”

Telegram dated 7-1-48 from Government employees, Skardu, to Deputy Head of Administration, Jammu.

“Rundu illaqa under enemy influence. Attack on Skardu imminent. Government informed and ill-equipped for defence. No protection afforded so far by military reinforcements by land or air. Controlled transport affected and Government’s prestige waning. Evacuation impossible due extreme cold. All these facts conspire foreboding encirclement entire tehsil and consequent slaughter. Pray arrange land sufficient troops and evacuation by air immediately. Landing ground absolutely fit. Kindly wire action taken.”

Before proceeding further I would like to make it clear what was controlled transport. It was a system by which the Government controlled the tariff, cut-throat competition and traffic movement of porters and horse-team owners. Through this system the Government also controlled vital communications link with Srinagar. Nobody had the right to ply his caravan without the Government’s permission. The permission was granted without ado, but the Government also utilized the caravan’s service for transporting mail or whatever else it might have wished. The system also helped the Government to keep track of traffic movement and keep it in balance.

Every day Ranbirgarh’s courtyard (where Government offices and quarters were situated) used to be full of these caravans before Pakistan started creating trouble; hence the controlled transport was affected and the courtyard was deserted. It was really hard to believe that so many caravans could disappear so soon.

Telegram from Wazir Skardu, to the Head of Administration, Jammu. (10-1-48)

“Wazir Hassan Girdawar posted Rundu side reports that 500 Gilgit Scouts have been permitted by the Gilgit Government to attack Skardu and might reach Rundu side in a day or two and requests his recall to headquarters being in grave danger.

“Situation deteriorated more so due to return of troops meant for Skardu from Sonamarg and Baltal to Srinagar. Danger imminent request immediate action and landing of sufficient troops by air immediately. No time to be lost. Government employees panicky with their families feeling themselves unprotected.”

Telegram dated January 7, 1948, from Hindu-Sikh women of Skardu to her Highness Maharani Sahiba, Jammu :

“We Hindu-Sikh women approach you for granting life to us, our innocent children and husbands. Skardu imminent danger and slaughter our destiny. Pray arrange our evacuation by air saving 600 Hindu Sikh families. Solicite telegraphic reply.”

Telegram from Wazir Skardu to the Head of Administration Jammu. (10-1-48)

“Wazir Hassan Girdawar, Rondu, in his report from Desu says that he is definite that the Gilgit Scouts will attack Skardu within ten days and feeling himself in danger he has left Rondu and has returned.”

Another telegram from the Wazir the same day :

“Special Kotwal reports from Bagicha, about three stages from Skardu towards Rondu side, that about 800 Gilgit Scouts have reached Shingosh last village of Skardu tehsil. About 50 Scouts are to reach Stak (next village on Rondu side) to arrange for transport, rations, etc. Confidential orders from Captain Mirza Hassan Khan, now of Gilgit Scouts, have reached Rondu illaqa to arrest all Government employees there and keep them in custody till their arrival and that in every Scout camp they would require 50 goats, 100 maunds atta, 10 maunds ghee, 50 dozen eggs, and six maunds onions and four bullocks.

“He further reports about 50 Rondu men with rifles are to occupy Bagicha hills today. Kotwal has been robbed of his box containing important papers and his other belongings. He has been turned out of village Stak forcibly.

“He also reports that Government granary at Desu is sure to fall in hands of enemy and whole Rondu illaqa has turned into rebels—they are internally with the Scouts.

“Position of Skardu is quite hepeless due to absence of (air) protection and military. As already requested so many times and since long if you want to save Skardu and its people and Government employees no day to be lost now and if help and troops are to land by air please do it today otherwise it would be futile and too late.

“Landing grounds as surveyed by Subroads (Civil Engineer) quite fit for landing and ready since long. Kindly wire action taken.”

Telegram dated 12-1-48 from Hindu-Muslim Government employees, Skardu, to the Head of Administration, Jammu.

“Humbly submit military at Baltal and Sonamarg meant for protection Skardu returned back without attempting cross Zojila in spite last three consequent sunny days and continuing showing great cowardic thus seriously affected and disturbed already worse atmosphere here. Could have easily crossed had they waited two more days. Attitude local people changed. Situation Rondu illaqa grave, going bad to worse under the enemy’s influence.

“Information coming here from different sources reveal imminent danger of attack at Skardu by Gilgit Scouts who are freely roaming about in Rondu illaqa and making necessary preparations. People Rondu illaqa have already contacted them. Troops stationed here only handful.

“Due extremely grave situation cannot attend Government work. Our lives, families, children, property clearly unsafe. Due adverse season shall not even be able to run away in event of actual attack which is expected in couple of days. Pray graciously order move of entire administration from Skardu to safe place immediately. Otherwise wire what protection afforded to us here.”

Telegram of Wazir Skardu to the Head of Administration, Jammu. (12-1-48)

“Signaller Sonamarg telegram begins : Both side mails crossing Zojila since yesterday. One Abdulsattar of Dras crossed Zojila today and is proceeding onwards Ends. Also signaller Dras telegram begins : Private persons crossed Zojila yesterday from Baltal side, but not this side. Also mails crossing both sides. Ends. Zojila crossable. Bright days since last five days.”

As is clear from the above telegrams, Zojila pass was being made a scapegoat for the failure of authorities to send adequate reinforcements to Skardu.

Lt.-Col. Thapa's advance picket at Tsari was attacked, meanwhile. He sent a message to his headquarters.

“Our outpost patrol at Tsari on north bank of river Indus contacted about 15 enemy about 200 yards ahead of position. Enemy reported to have fired three shots on our patrol who replied. Enemy retired. No casualties on both sides.”

Telegram dated January 12, 1948, from Wazir Skardu to the Head of Administration, Jammu.

“Grateful for Your Honour's telegram of date and endless efforts made. Present garrison here too small to be sent to Rondu illaqa hence they have not attempted to penetrate Rondu illaqa.

“For last three months I incessantly requested authorities to land troops but up to this time it proved a voice in desert with the result that enemy's fifth column succeeded in snatching Rondu illaqa from us. All of them have practically joined Pakistan and are ready to welcome enemy.

“Sent my Tehsildar to tour the illaqa. He reported today he could not go beyond two stages from Skardu as local men with help of certain discharged Scouts have taken position at the ascent of the third stage namely Bagicha.

“At my request Captain with small detachment sent on spot. Awaiting results.

“Weather unusually clear and bright since last ten

days. Again request sending help by air within a day as most urgently required to keep up morale of Government employees and public. Latter now think whether they should be loyal to Government or join Pakistan.

“Any further delay might prove fatal and Skardu people might also join Rondu people when impossible to carry on administration or help military and Government employees here.

“It is useless sending troops via Zojila as that will take 15 to 20 days in reaching here. Kindly send at least 600 combatants by air to meet immediate emergency. Without these situation cannot be controlled and again beg to press this necessity.

“Also suggest reces to fly tomorrow positively over Skardu and Rondu side to keep informed of enemy’s true number and their activities at Rondu side. They can also examine landing ground here.

But all these entreaties went in vain. What to talk of landing troops by air, not even a single reconnaissance plane made an appearance in Skardu skies. Situation continued deteriorating. The local population was being brain-washed constantly. They were learning new interpretations of their religion and apparently, they were being promised a heaven on this earth as compared to the prosaic life they had led thus far under Hindu rulers and their henchmen. And all the while Hindu-Sikh community was trying to appeal Jammu and Kashmir Government in one way or another to do something. The evidence of this effort is listed below.

Telegram from Hindu-Sikh ladies to Begum Sheikh Abdullah, Jammu. (14-1-48)

“Pray mother are we not your daughters and are not our your children. Pray all of us what have you done to (protect) our honour and lives or have you left us to our fate? So far we have been thinking that our lives and honour is safe in your say. Pray send us help by air immediately otherwise our ruin certain. Troops by land will reach here in at least 20 days, which is too late and till then we will be finished off.”

Telegram from Government employees, Skardu, to the

Head of Administration, Jammu. (14-1-48)

“All our telegrams unheard. Reply would cheer us up. Vacillation between life and death tortuous. Your loyal subjects pray for plain statement of facts. Immediate aerial reinforcements and evacuation alone will save us.”

When they did not receive any answer within a few hours they sent another telegram.

“Repeatedly solicited evacuation by air. Kindly wire today if and when aerial evacuation and reinforcements contemplated. Suspense demoralizing.”

Telegram of Skardu Sikhs to the Head of Administration Jammu. (13-1-48)

“Our previous telegrams. Anxiously awaiting aerial evacuation. Pray come to our rescue else doomed. Landing ground. Telegraphic reply solicited.”

Same day Skardu women addressed Begum Sheikh Abdullah as follows.

“Our previous telegrams. Anxiously awaiting aerial evacuation. Pray come to our rescue else doomed. Landing ground ready. Telegraphic reply solicited.”

To Her Highness, Jammu, the Hindu-Sikhs of Skardu complained the same day.

“Our previous telegrams repeatedly beseeched evacuation reinforcements by air. Situation growing hopeless. Enemy action drawing nearer Skardu every day. Every minute lost is Skardu lost. Butchering of Muzaffarabad Hindus Sikhs our inevitable doom. If aerial evacuation reinforcements not accomplished in a day or so things would be irremediably lost. Pray tell us plainly if our sacrifice with children and ladies at the alter of Skardu is predestined.”

Even words failed them owing to fear. They repeated the same telegram to the Head of Administration the next day.

Another telegram from Hindu women of Skardu to her Highness, Jammu.

“Rundu illaqa Skardu tehsil under enemy influence. Atmosphere surcharged. Attack imminent. Wholesale slaughter our fate. Government ill-equipped for

defence also ill-informed. Government controlled transport undermined and its power waning. Due to extreme cold impossible Himalaya (crossing). Efforts for evacuation frustrated. Broadcast that Kashmir abducted women sold for rupees four each in barbarous Pakistan.

“All these facts conspire foreboding. Save reputation and consequent slaughter of our innocent children. Despite repeated requests Government quiet and poor defence arrangements. We therefore approach Your Highness not only as our beloved Maharani but also our saviour to vouchsafe our safety and chastity by arranging immediate evacuation and military reinforcements by air. Pray take mercy and strike while iron is hot. Solicited telegraphic reply.”

Through Shamboonath Skardu public telegraphically addressed the Head of Administration, Jammu, on 15-1-48, with following words :

“Pray immediate evacuation Skardu (to) Kargil. Helpless employees otherwise in danger like Gilgit.”

On 17-1-48 Government employees, Skardu, telegraphed Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed, Deputy Head of Administration, Jammu.

“Advised our courage decisive factor in defence Skardu, quite so. But pray tell us what administration contemplates for saving us from immediate slaughter? Troops sent by land would entail three weeks at least. Fear by then our cold ashes scattered all over Skardu. Pray send two reconnaissance planes daily to keep our morale up and watch enemy action if nothing else possible. No use sending bombers etc., when we are no more. Apathy to our prayers enigmatic. Entreat telegraphic reply.”

Lt.-Col. Thapa informed his headquarters on 31-1-48 that there was no further information about the enemy.

But enemy sabotage had begun in the latter half of January. The brook which provided drinking water to our household and others' in Ranbirgarh was cut many a time. Telegraphic poles and wires were rendered out of action a few times. Apart

from these major incidents, there were innumerable other irritants.

A silver lining to the gloomy cloud was the news that the few Army batches who had crossed Zojila were proceeding towards Skardu.

“Would they reach in time?” was the question all of us asked one another.

FEBRUARY, 1948

In Delhi

Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan said future of Muslims in this sub-continent depended upon the safety and integrity of Pakistan, which was dependent for its existence on the strength of its army.

Only one and a half months after partition India took up positions to guard its new north-west frontier with Pakistan, i.e., Punjab. During this period, who entered or left India could be anybody's guess.

Indian Government banned R.S.S. (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) and the Defence Ministry said three battalions of raiders attacked Naushera with mortars and machineguns and withdrew.

Mr. Nehru told Parliament that Pak forces had occupied Pathari reserve forest area in Assam. "The Government will take other action if they do not withdraw."

Brigadier Usman was conducting defence operations for India in Naushera and it was claimed that 2,000 raiders were killed and many more wounded. Two dead bodies wepring Major's uniforms were identified as foreigners.

Pak fighters flew over the border on their own side, probably to boost the morale of their personnel attacking Indian territory in Kashmir.

The Government of India banned Muslim League guards and Khaksar organizations and provided armed protection to its Ministers.

R.I.A.F. reportedly strafed and bombed Rondu.

A spying net-work was reported to be operating in Delhi. When rounding up the League guards and Khaksars arms were seized from them. One armed loiterer was arrested outside Sardar Patel's house.

Sixteen-year-old Prince Karan Singh, who was being treated at New York for a hip injury, told a Herald Tribune reporter that the hospital swimming pool was a "wonderful place" as many people of different nationalities utilized it and "everybody is just like everybody else."

The Prince said : "I think you have a very good form of Government. Everybody seems to have a chance. I wish everybody had a chance in India too. In India a person seldom gets out of his caste, but here everybody seems prosperous."

Hostiles were reportedly routed in Ranbirsinghpura but Indian casualties were put at 950 in the whole of Kashmir operations. Indian patrols reported contact with raiders in Uri-Poonch sector. R.I.A.F. Tempest dropped a 1,000-lb. bomb on Jhangar-Mirpur road, damaging supply lines of raiders. Some raiders' vehicles were also destroyed by aerial bombing on Uri-Domel road.

The General Secretary of National Conference was wounded when he led Home Guards and Indian troops against raiders in Handwara, 55 miles from Srinagar.

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan said in Peshawar Kashmir would have come to Pakistan without any bloodshed if he had been given a hearing by proper quarters (meaning Liaquat-Jinnah clique).

The Frontier Gandhi said : "If my demand (N.W.F.P. and Bluchistan for Pathans) had been conceded in principle, I would have gone to Sheikh Abdullah with the assurance that Kashmir would be for Kashmiris and I am certain that he would have gladly chosen to join Pakistan."

He deplored violence for settling the Kashmir's question of accession to either Dominion and said he would not predict

the attitude of Kashmiris now that much of innocent blood had been spilled through excesses from both sides.

Press reports suggested that Afghanistan supported the idea of a Pathanistan.

Quaide Azam Jinnah, who was on a tour of Baluchistan, announced the formation of a Governor-Generals' Advisory Council for the province at a Shahi Darbar in Sibi, where 300 sardars and maliks, wearing their good-conduct badges and medals awarded by the British, heard him.

The Quaid was reportedly having secret meetings at Sibi with the Khan of Kalat, who not only demanded independence but also return of Quetta, taken by the British, from Pakistan to his domain. The former appealed for loyalty to Pakistan in a public statement.

The Khan then was unable to meet the Quaid as arranged due to fever. Mr. Jinnah declared he was against dictatorship but would rule Baluchistan through the council. He later left for Karachi without meeting the Khan.

Mr. Nehru expressed his disappointment and surprise at a public meeting in Jammu at U.N. handling of Kashmir issue. Strangely enough, India had not filed any genocide charge against Pakistan in U.N. till then.

Russian silence at U.N. over Kashmir "intrigued" British sources, but they presumed that "Russia cannot antagonize Pakistan" due to its own large Muslim population.

R.I.A.F. continued bombing and Indian Army fought hand to hand with raiders in Poonch sector.

Sheikh Abdullah, Head of Emergency Administration, Jammu and Kashmir, addressing a reception organized by prominent Muslims of Delhi in his honour, said: "I am not ready to recognize Pakistan as a party to the Kashmir dispute since they have disowned any responsibility for the invasion of Kashmir. It is fantastic that while the Pakistan delegation to the U.N. Security Council has refused the charges saying that the trouble originated from within Kashmir, they are ready to stake anything to get Kashmir.

"It is naturally difficult for the Council to take a decision 10,000 miles away from the spot. The proceedings of the Council have not yet been able to achieve the objective, namely

to stop the war of rape, loot and murder of the people of Kashmir. The issue which is simple has been made complex by introduction of extraneous matters by the Pakistan delegation such as the history of Kashmir since 1846.”

If Indian troops were withdrawn as demanded by Pakistan, the Sheikh asked, “Who was going to protect the people of Kashmir? I am not going to leave my people at the hands of the marauders. Indian troops are there to protect my people and they will be there till normal conditions are restored..... there is no need for a separate party of Muslims in India..... It is no use living in India while having sympathies for Pakistan.

“Muslims with that trend will be regarded as saboteurs. Such Muslims will not only prove harmful to themselves but to the entire Muslim population of India. So as far Kashmiri, Muslims are concerned, by virtue of the State’s accession to India, they have equal rights as citizens of India and should avail themselves of these.”

Two sections of East Pakistan police still occupied Pathari reserve forest area in Assam despite Pakistan Government’s professed withdrawal.

India denied “Azad Kashmir” claim of capturing 100 lorries with ammunition and other equipment and said through a spokesman: “Obviously the raiders are trying to cover up their heavy losses at Naushera by baseless propaganda which is aimed to bolster up their cracking morale. The claim of desertion from the ranks is equally untrue.”

Sheikh Abdullah said there was no cause of disappointment over Security Council discussion on Kashmir. “Reference to the Council was only a means to an end for the attainment of our objective; what will matter in the ultimate analysis, is our own strength and not the U.N. award,” he said. “In 1944, Mr. Jinnah tried to persuade us to join hands with him and support his two nation theory, but he failed. He has definite reason for wanting to annexe Kashmir..... He tried to get at the point of sword what he had failed to attain by persuasion.”

Said a communique of Defence Ministry, issued around February 20: “Parties of raiders who came over from Gilgit in an endeavour to reach the Srinagar valley were intercepted

by one of our columns at Skardu, over 200 miles north-east of Srinagar. Our column inflicted casualties on the raiders.

“During the past few days, under blinding snow, Indian troops at Uri and Skardu, on the road to Gilgit, have been fighting hostiles and inflicting casualties. Groups of hostiles have during the past few days, been sniping our positions at Skardu with machineguns and rifles. Most of these have been silenced.”

Recruitment to the Royal Pakistan Air Force was reported to be in full swing. Observers doubted if Pakistan had that sort of personnel within the country. Who were the people she recruited then?

Pakistan-U.K. agreement on the release of sterling balances due to Pakistan was signed, as Pakistan was reported to be concerned with the speed with which the balances could be released than with the amount that could be made available immediately.

The Quaid said: “We have won the battle for Pakistan’s freedom but the grimmer battle for the preservation of that freedom and building it on a firmer and sounder basis is still in progress, and that battle has yet to be fought to a successful conclusion.” He called on his soldiers to defend Islamic democracy.

Mr. Nehru said in Jullundur: “People in Punjab have been talking in excitement of attacking Pakistan. Such talk is childish. Some prominent persons have been talking of war against Pakistan.

“If such speeches are reported, it will be the duty of the administration to prevent such wild talk.

“We are not afraid of anyone however big he may be. It is childish to say that we have to conquer Lahore and attack Pakistan. At the same time, I say that we are not afraid of any aggression. We are not afraid of war.”

Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan described reservation of seats in Pak Parliament for minorities as a “pernicious principle.”

A number of Hurs from Sind were reported among the raiders around Uri. Raiders’ morale was reported to be low, but this demoralization had not percolated to the bases from where they attacked. It was supposed that their exaggerated

claims of victory against India led many tribals to join them, thereby swelling their ranks.

India imposed duty on trade with Pakistan.

A J & K patrol engaged a raiders' party carrying looted property and cattle in Ratanpur, west of Suchetgarh, and killed 20 hostiles.

In Skardu, hostiles had been sniping Indian positions with machineguns and rifles.

A report received at Jammu stated that the District Magistrate (Wazir) of Skardu was killed by hostiles when they first appeared in that area.

Sardar Mohammed Ibrahim Khan, president of "Azad Kashmir" said: "Kashmir issue will have to be settled on the soil of Kashmir. We must be prepared for a hard struggle and there is no room for complacency."

In Skardu

My father (the Wazir) was growing security conscious in the face of impending enemy attack and Srinagar's slow reaction to Skardu residents' entreaties. He ordered two Ladakhi Alsatians to be brought to our residence at Ranbirgarh and himself slept with a loaded rifle at his beside and a loaded Beretta automatic under his pillow.

Once a prowler entered our house in the dead of night and the dogs chased him. Father fired a shot in the air to scare him. Neither the dogs could catch him, nor father was able to see him. The dogs had a bad habit of barking all through the night which not only disclosed their own position, but also prevented them from biting any intruder.

On the night of February 8-9, our outposts at Tsari were attacked. It appeared from the later evidence that the Muslim platoon commanded by Captain Nek Alam had joined hands with the enemy willy-nilly. The Sikh platoon under Captain Krishan Singh were either killed in action or murdered in cold blood after being captured. The last message received by Lt.-Col. Thapa on February 8 from Tsari said all was well.

As stated earlier, communications between Tsari and Skardu depended on local couriers and occasional patrolling by the Army. The next supply of rations, etc., was due to

Tsari on February 11.

Then the first batch of reinforcements numbering 90 arrived under Captain Parbhat Singh on February 10. There was great jubilation and excitement in Skardu on that night. At last their efforts bore fruit and the Skardu Hindu-Sikh community were saved from massacre. Early next morning at 6-30, Skardu cantonment was encircled and attacked by about 600 men. Our troops were about 130.

As soon as the first mortar burst, father jumped out of his bed. I tried to pacify him by telling him that the Army was merely indulging in target practice. But he knew better than his son, a simple child.

Immediately he went to the study and burnt all the secret files in the stove, which were provided in every room to stave off cold, and wore his business dress. He took his limited armament—the rifle and the Beretta automatic—and after trying to survey the cantonment side with binoculars from the rooftop, he left the house, presumably to look after the treasury, which was situated in the centre of Ranbirgarh and was being guarded by a Muslim unit of the 6th Infantry of J & K forces. That was the last time I saw my father.

The treasury itself was built like a minor fort. It was a circular building, having in the outer circle covered corridor with observation points and loopholes. There was one steel-grill door and inner sanctum had an equally formidable steel door, whose keys—it required three or four keys to open it in peace time—were father's responsibility, which he shared with other officials. Nobody could open it alone—and that was the idea behind distributing the keys to different persons. Apart from cash, whatever else it might have contained was a closely guarded secret. Father was able to tranship a major portion of its contents either to Srinagar or Ladakh, however, before the Pakistani hordes attacked.

As I was not a witness to father's death, I have tried to reconstruct the incidents and circumstances that led to it through bits of information that came to me from different sources—including the confession of the murderer himself.

Directly from the residence father proceeded towards the treasury. He collected the Hindu police Sub-Inspector and a

Sikh constable on the way and joined the Muslim guards at the treasury. The firing on the cantonment side still continued.

As has been observed before in this book, the Baltis are an easily excitable race. The firing, we presumed, had instilled fear in them, and, therefore, they were crowding Ranbirgarh. They had different ideas that day.

The Wazir, my father, had a cup of tea with the guards. Then, some witnesses said, a summary court was held and father was sentenced to death, tortured and shot along with the Sub-Inspector and the Sikh constable.

But Sarfraz Khan of the 6th J. & K. Infantry, the cold-blooded killer of my father, said he treacherously shot him with a burst of Stengun fire from behind a treasury loophole. It was a case of hedge consuming the field, whichever way you look at it.

However, I heard from our residence the Sub-Inspector's shout after the first burst : "Brute, you have killed an innocent person unnecessarily." That shout sealed his fate as well. There was more firing. It was also a signal for the carnage that followed.

The spiritual guru father had taken with him on his posting was told by the mob of Baltis to vacate our residence. He herded us, the family, together in father's study instead. We watched the developments that followed from glass-paned windows.

First of all, the Baltis, armed with pole-axes, tried to encircle our residence. Perhaps they wanted to kill us and formed the circle so that nobody could escape. But no sooner did they enter the empty rooms full of a variety of goods, the greed over-came their blood-thirst.

They ripped covers and clothes off sofas and using these as containers for the loot, they emptied our trunks on them and carried them away. We saw many Wazarat peons and personnel involved in the looting. They had started early in the morning and even at 5 P.M. they were still unfinished. But their number had considerably diminished. Intermittent firing could be heard from the cantonment side even now.

The guru then ordered the Hindu male servants with us to

carry staffs and venture out. Until now we were watching fascinatingly the outlawry but suddenly we started shouting and crying for help which scared the plunderers and they ran away. I am still not sure what had prompted us to do as we did. Neither can I give any rational explanation as to why the Baltis did not force open the fragile windows and door of the study to attack us.

Upon leaving the study, we were all anxious to find father. Naturally, mother was more troubled than rest of us. She was surprised that people could dare loot the Wazir's property and wanted to complain to her husband about it. At her instance, we went to the residence of the Tehsildar, whose wife was a close friend of the mother. (The Tehsildar's name was Wilayat Ali Khan.)

Although we heard indistinct noises from inside the Tehsildar's residence, its outer door was secured by a heavy padlock. Just to be sure, we banged the door and called out the names of all the members of the Tehsildar's family one by one, but nobody answered.

From there we proceeded toward Control Clerk's (the Wazir's Private Secretary) quarters. I saw a pool of blood, which I thought belonged to some animal, outside the house and drew the guru's attention to it. He told us to wait outside and himself went inside the house to investigate.

Up to this juncture, apart from the guru, who was a close confidant of father, and even until much later, none of us understood what was happening.

Presently the guru returned and asked us to move to the treasury, as the Control Clerk's house was empty. From the Control Clerk's quarters to the treasury we had to traverse only a couple of hundred yards. Even now, when I remember that walk, the hair on my nape stand up. A deathly hush had surrounded the bustling Ranbirgarh and one had the eerie feeling of walking among the tortured souls.

Suddenly I trembled with an undefined fear and wanted everybody to return. But the guru took us to the treasury, whose open gates and deserted look told their own story. I think the gates had been shot open and the treasury looted.

Having found no living being in Ranbirgarh, we decided

to continue our search for father towards cantonment side. As soon as we stepped out of Ranbirgarh, two peons of the Wazarat crossed our path. First they ignored our query about father's whereabouts and then they took the guru aside, saying "Come, we'll take you to the Wazir." They might have murdered him there and then had not the guru called out for the staff carrying servants. From there to the dak bungalow where Captain Parbhat Singh was bivouaced we met with no mentionable incident.

I forgot to tell you that Mrs. B.L. Gupta, wife of the Civil Engineer, had come crying to our residence early in the morning. She came after father had left and before our property was looted. She said Mr. Gupta had been assassinated by two Baltis on way to Ranbirgarh. She thought we had hidden away father and wanted us to produce him so that necessary action could be taken against the culprits. She was also with us when we reached the dak bungalow.

A Jawan was guarding the bungalow. He said the Captain had gone to the cantonment to conduct the operations against the enemy. Probably Wazir Saheb would have also gone there. He was not sure. But we were welcome to sit inside the bungalow and await developments.

That was the first cheering news we heard about father. While leaving the residence, mother had taken father's overcoat thinking that it would be cold and father might need it. We could still hear stray shots being fired from the cantonment side. The Jawans were reluctant to light the stove for fear of attracting the enemy fire and I was cold. Mother covered me with the overcoat and I fell asleep.

A military command and its counter answer awoke me. A platoon had come from cantonment to collect the Captain's orderlies in the bungalow and his luggage. We also accompanied them. In the cantonment, normally we would have been disappointed on not meeting father and would have tried to continue our search, had not Lt.-Col. Thapa assured us that he would send patrols to search the Wazir. Even if Wazir Saheb were in the enemy hands by ill-luck, Mr. Thapa emphasized, there was no cause for alarm, as prisoners of officer ranks were looked after decently and released unharmed on

ransom.

Mother was in tears due to the sympathy shown by Mr. Thapa. She said she was a pauper then and how could she pay any ransom when there was not even another pair of clothes left to change into. Mr. Thapa said it was the Government's liability and she should not worry about it. He had a room vacated for us in the cantonment and upon knowing that none of us had eaten anything since morning he ordered food be served to us from the Army mess as soon as it was ready.

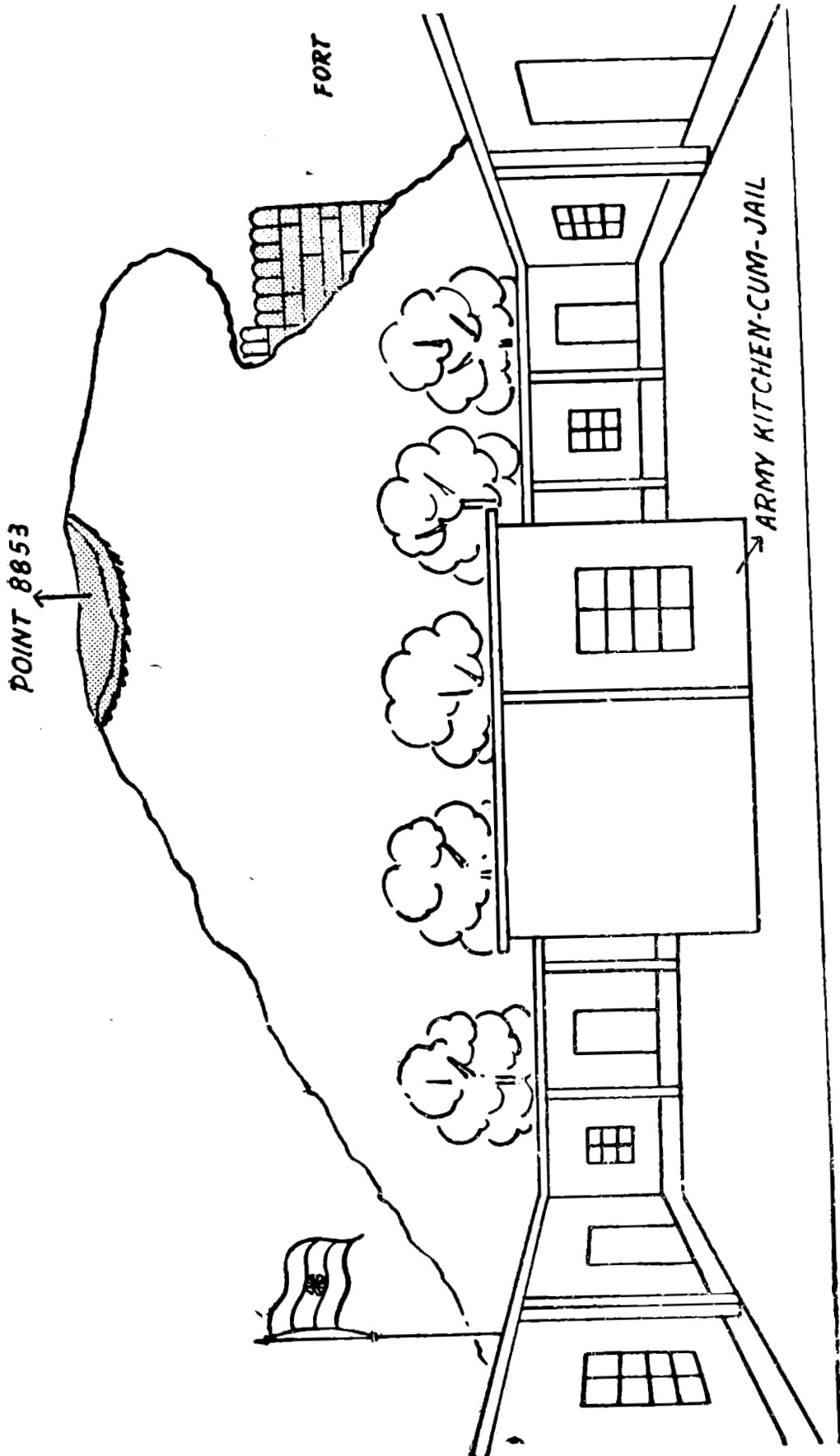
We were not the only ones who had remained hungry that day. The Army also had not eaten anything as they were busy from dawn till evening fighting an unscrupulous enemy.

Their Muslim comrades had deserted the previous night and joined the enemy. As an added treachery, the Jawans' rooms were bolted from outside so that they should not reach the armoury and fight back. Lt.-Col Thapa had wisely posted a heavy guard at the armoury and therefore, it escaped sabotage.

When the enemy attacked, naturally the Jawans for a moment did not know what to do. They were unarmed and prisoners in their own rooms. But they were Dogras—made of sterner stuff and led by brilliant officers. They broke holes into the connecting walls of their rooms and thus reached the armoury by jumping from one room into the other and fought and routed the enemy heroically. The cantonment's square structure helped them.

I met Bansi Lal, a friend of mine and the son of Wazarat's Head Clerk. Only father and son were in Skardu, the rest of the family being in Jammu. He and his father were about to leave their quarters in Ranbirgarh, when the Baltis attacked. His father ordered him to run away to the cantonment and himself stayed back to tackle the rebels. Bansi Lal had seen him falling under the pressure of many opponents before he dashed to the safety of cantonment. It was six furlongs from Ranbirgarh to the cantonment by regular road but Bansi Lal ran along the river bank for safety. He was admitted in the cantonment amidst the fighting through a gap in the wall made by the defenders to fight off the invaders.

The Control Clerk and the Head Clerk were neighbours.



Author's impression of Skardu cantonment and Point 8853.

Bansi Lal said the Baltis attacked Control Clerk's household first. He was not sure what happened to the Control Clerk's family.

Only late in the evening, when a patrol returned after burying Mr. B.L. Gupta and unsuccessfully searching my father, the Wazir, did we hear the gory happenings at the Control Clerk's house.

The Baltis attacked the Clerk and his family with pole-axes. They neither spared children nor females. Wife of the Clerk was pregnant. They threw her on the ground when she tried to save her husband and jumped and danced on her stomach, which resulted in a miscarriage. Both the newborn and the mother died instantly. The Clerk was already murdered by other people in the crowd. Thinking that the whole family was dead, the Baltis left the Clerk's quarters. But one witness of their crime was still alive : a daughter of the clerk. I cannot describe properly the tragic way she narrated her sad tale despite bleeding pole-axes wounds on her temple. I think her name was Pyari.

Evidently the guru had seen the dead family members of the Control Clerk's family in the morning but he did not disclose it then. As Pyari lay unconscious the guru thought her dead as well.

Apart from Pyari's parents, the Head Master of the local school and a part of his family fell victim to the rioting. A few brave Sikh women committed suicide instead of allowing themselves to be desecrated by the enemy or the Baltis.

By midnight of February 11. almost every civilian Hindu-Sikh in Skardu had taken shelter inside the cantonment. Lt.-Col. Thapa informed his headquarters thus:

"Skardu cantonment surrounded and attacked by enemy at 6-30 hrs. today, Enemy armed with 3" and 2" mortars, M.M.Gs., L.M.Gs., and reifles. One M.M.G., 4 rifles, two boxes 303 ammunition captured. Enemy casualties ten dead bodies found. Own casualties 15 wounded. All Muslim strength including wireless department deserted and joined enemy. Enemy included our Muslim deserters here. Muslim soldiers of Infantry Six at Bunji and locals of Gilgit. Strength

more than 200.

“Wazir, Sub-Inspector police missing, Civil Engineer killed. Many Hindu and Sikh refugees brought in cantonment. Treasury probably looted. Second batch (of reinforcements) expected to arrive here tomorrow. Enemy most probably gathering to trouble them. Air support for them and us very essential. No means of intercommunication available. Signalling equipment with signallers as already requested badly needed.”

It was an experience to see the first dead enemy lying in a corner of the cantonment. In uniform he did not much differ from Jawans, as Pakistanis had not changed their uniforms till then, but instead of ammunition shoes, he wore goat-skin puttees and moccasins. It made him agile on snow and immune from frostbite. His skin was black, branding him as an outsider from Jammu and Kashmir State.

The next day (12-2-48) the following message went to Srinagar :

“Rundu bridge had already been blown off. Two 3” mortars with about 200 bombs brought by first batch. Twenty-six Sikh soldiers under Captain Krishan Singh were at Tsari. No news about them. Thirty-two Muslims under Captain Nek Alam also at Tsari. They joined enemy.”

Probably the reference to the blowing off of the Rundu bridge was an answer to Srinagar when it told Skardu that R.I.A.F. had bombed Rundu and blown the bridge.

Same day one of the enemy was captured and Skardu supplied Srinagar with all the information gathered after interrogating him :

“Morning patrol captured an enemy alive with 2” mortar. He is of late Infantry Six. Reports 600 enemy with Major Ihsan Ali, Captain Mohammed Khan and Lt. Babar Khan advancing this side. Three hundred attacked Skardu remainder still in rear. Enemy included about 80 of Infantry Six. Remainder are tribal people.”

Another message same day said:

“After yesterday’s fight with enemy (we) had no firing.

I am sure that a party of enemy have gone and cut off our reinforcements. They must be having very bad time. Their reaching here today is not possible."

It must have been the news of reinforcements that made enemy retreat the first day of attack. They had the advantage of surprise and were well armed and entrenched. Another commander, instead of Major Ihsan Ali, would have seen to it that the cantonment garrison remained bottled up and the reinforcements were ambushed. But he preferred to retreat, albeit for a short while. Perhaps he did not wish to take any chances.

The next day, February 13, the second batch of 70 Jawans under Lt. Ajit Singh reached Skardu. They had only encountered a few simple road blocks on the way and no enemy.

Mr. Thapa reported:

"No contact (with the enemy) today. Second batch reinforcements under Lt. Ajit Singh arrived today. They had no contact but route was demolished at many places. They also faced transport difficulties. Civil representatives had fled away. Many villages on way were found evacuated.

"Thirty-one Muslims including three wireless personnel deserted from here. One public and two private Muslim followers also deserted. Eight deserted with arms. Three Muslim soldiers were with Captain Krishan Singh. No news about them. No Muslim soldiers except one prisoner with us."

On the morning of February 14, I accompanied the patrol towards Ranbirgarh side looking for father (the Wazir) and to retrieve whatever we could from our residence. The guru, along with many other civilians, was with us.

In a ravine beyond the treasury, we found the corpses of my father, the Sub-Inspector and the Sikh constable huddled together. Father's costly shoes had been removed, but his bullet-ridden and blood stained valuable coat had been left behind. The smell of the blood is same all over the world and very few among the humanity can bear it.

Due to the fear of the enemy, we could do no more than bury them where they lay—no fanfare and no sandalwood

funeral pyres for these martyrs. I could not even peep at his face. Dr. Lt. Parkash Singh, one of the group, gave a piece of earth to me to be thrown in that improvised grave as a mark of respect, tribute and last rites for the departed. I did that.

After burying the other dead in Ranbirgarh we returned to the cantonment with a photograph of my father, a religious book and a few useless papers—the leftovers from the loot. Father's horse and dogs also followed us.

On the same day, the third batch of reinforcements consisting again of 70 Jawans was expected. Lt.-Col. Thapa made proper arrangements to receive them and sent the following message to Srinagar :

“Clear and sunny. Due difficulty of transport sending coolies under escort from here to Gol to bring third batch who are expected to reach today.”

His reference to the clear and 'sunny' weather underlined his hope that perhaps Srinagar might still land troops by air and at least relieve him of the refugee burden by evacuating them in empty planes flying back so that he might concentrate on the fighting job on hand. This hope was belied.

Although the Skardu garrison strength now stood at about 280, it was too meagre for a strong defensive belt around Skardu. As all the local population had deserted, the Jawans did carry their rations and water to the pickets. Hindu-Sikh youth, though untrained in the art of war, did their best to relieve the Jawans by working as riflemen, watchmen and even porters.

In Skardu there is a lone hill, Blukro, having a peak at 8853 ft., which overlooks practically the whole of 12 miles flat ground containing Skardu town and other adjoining areas and which is called Point 8853 in Army parlance. The base of the hill is an ellipse, whose major and minor axes are approximately one mile and half mile respectively. The eastern and southern slopes of the hill are too steep for climbing and the peak is accessible only from the south-west and north. Half way up the eastern slope, there is a small old fort, which is neither visible from Point 8853, nor anybody can see Point 8853 from the fort due to a precipitous hump. The hump also prevents any traffic between the two.

Along the river bank runs a sandy belt of one mile width. The belt extends to the foot of Point 8853. Probably some time long ago river Indus had changed its course, leaving this area sandy. Point 8853 is very important for the defence of Skardu.

Although Lt.-Col. Thapa had established a picket at the fort, military considerations of supply and communications dissuaded him from occupying Point 8853. But the enemy installed snipers on the night of February 13-14 there. The access to Point 8853 was also under enemy control. This forced Lt.-Col. Thapa to close the ring of defence around the cantonment.

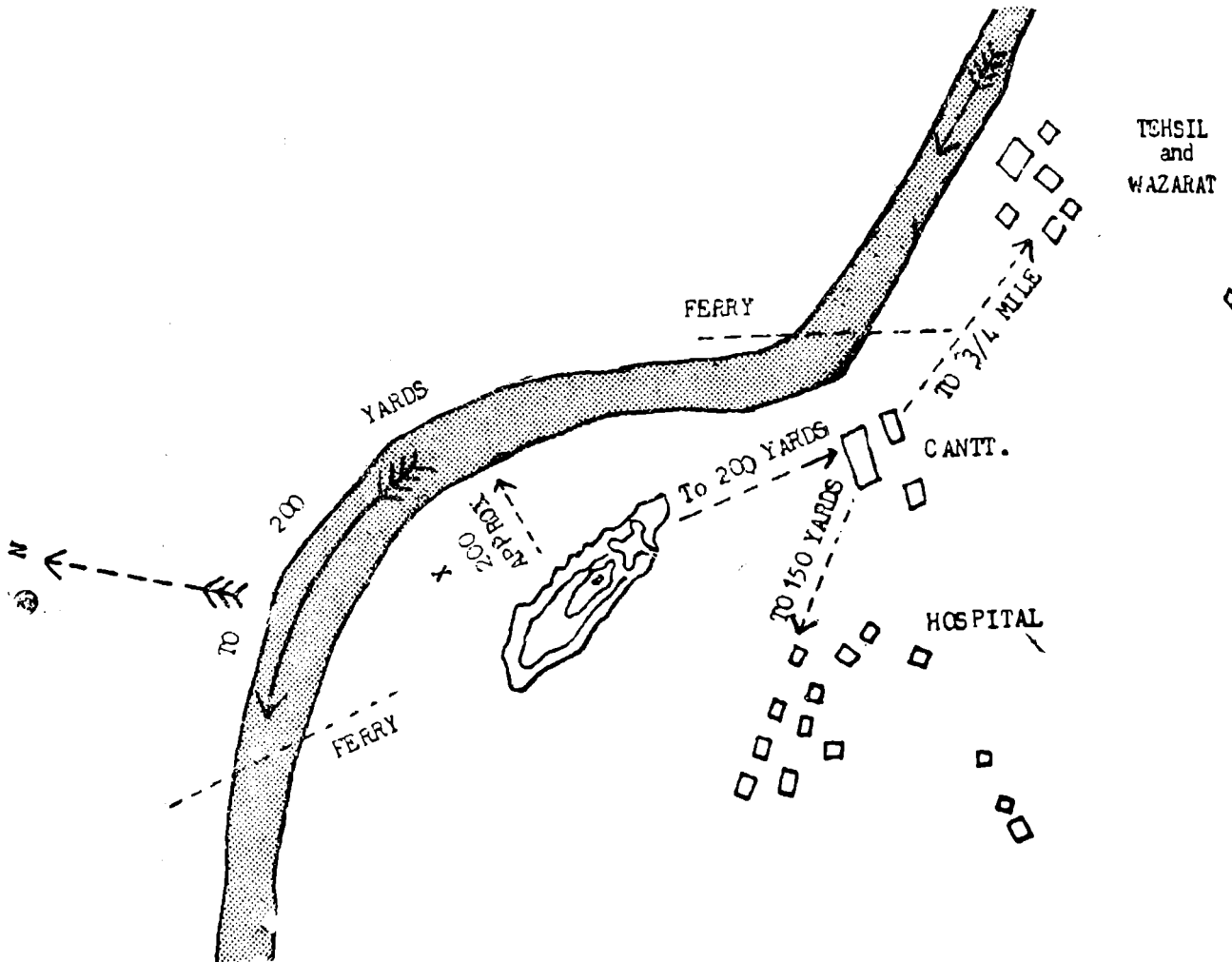
Mr. Thapa established six pickets around the cantonment as a ring and restricted the Jawans to intensive patrolling within a radius of five miles in all directions to keep the enemy away from the perimeter. The enemy could see all the pickets from Point 8853 except the one at the fort. Whereas Lt.-Col. Thapa was handicapped by lack of reinforcements and proper equipment and ammunition, the enemy did not have any such drawbacks. His line of communication was open and reinforcements and other supplies kept pouring in unabated and he laid siege to the cantonment.

Lt.-Col. Thapa was sure he could not dislodge the enemy from Point 8853 on his own. He requested Srinagar on February 16 :

“Heavy firing from hill north of Skardu height figure 8853. Enemy M.M.G. on that. Enemy concentrating in village Nansok by crossing Indus in boats. (Air) bombardment of above hill and village be arranged immediately.”

On the same day Mr. Thapa informed Srinagar again :

“Two platoons were at Tsari one on each bank of river Indus. That route was considered the only route open from Gilgit side. Remaining garrison was protecting treasury, guarding cantonment and doing constant night patrolling. Reports from Tsari were received through local unreliable messengers every third fourth day. No means of inter-communication were available. Hence could not get information of enemy attack on these platoons.



Bird's eye-view of Skardu cantonment and its adjoining areas.

“Air should drop messages over them telling any remnants to come back to Skardu which is being held by us. Tsari and all suspected places be bombed. And boats seen in Indus anywhere be destroyed.

“On February 11 at 0630 hrs. enemy surrounded cantonment and opened 3”, 2” motars, M.M.G. fire, making our movement inside and outside cantonment impossible. Muslim platoon at Tsari joined raiders as one of their men was seen near treasury. Treasury guard also joined them. Treasury was looted. Attacked with two smoke bombs near cantonment and captured one M.M.G. Enemy was found retiring that day.”

Again on February 17 Lt.-Col. Thapa reminded Srinagar :

“Enemy entrenched on hill north of Skardu. Continued sniping on us whole day. In spite of repeated requests no air support arrived. Enemy pressure increasing all sides. Situation getting critical. Under such circumstances impracticable to hold on—immediate help if not arrived.”

Mr. Thapa’s defensive attitude at Skardu was criticized by many. Even some of his subordinates were itching for action and offensive. For them waiting for the enemy to strike was a nerve-wrecking pastime. They wanted to take the initiative.

Our Jawans could have adopted aggressive posture in the first 48 hours of the enemy attack on Skardu. After that it was too late. Even in the early stages of the attack they would have spread themselves dangerously thin without any proper line of communications with Srinagar and no sign of reinforcements. Moreover, Lt.-Col. Thapa knew and understood his capability to strike.

He told Srinagar :

“Enemy firing on our positions continued. Large enemy concentration of 500 observed in village Nansok and hill Blukro. M.M.Gs. still at Kargil. 3” mortar ammunition very limited. Large enemy concentration, few supporting weapons and less chance of immediate help reaching here. Immediate help requested.

Again on February 18 Mr. Thapa informed Srinagar :

“Prisoner sepoy Masar Din of late Infantry Six states : About 50 Muslim soldiers of Infantry six with 100 Scouts left Bunji. About 500 came from Gilgit. Whole lot moved into two batches.

“Major Ihsan Ali, Captain Mohammed Khan, Lt. Babar Khan were with them. They have two M.M.Gs. two 3” motars and a few 2” motars. Sepoy does not say anything about our platoons at Tsari being in second batch. Orders to them were to capture Rondu.

“Governor and Colonel Abdul Majid are prisoners at Gilgit while Captain Baldev Singh, Sukhdev Singh and Lt. Raghunath Singh are at Bunji. Subedar Jamiat Singh and Jemadar Jagdish Raj were killed. Remaining Hindu C.Os. and O.R. are prisoners at Bunji. Planes visit Gilgit frequently.”

Moreover, the position of ration stocks at the cantonment was precarious. The stocks were meant only for 80 men up to August end. But the cantonment population had increased ten fold with the refugees. The stock was augmented initially by capturing ration from shuttered bazar, Government granary and vacated houses of the local population, but still it was inadequate.

Those who could have helped Lt.-Col. Thapa in procuring rations like Tehsildar and Naib Tehsildar, Raja Mohammed Inssari, were reluctant to do so for one reason or the other. The following message from Mr. Thapa on February 18 to Srinagar will clear my point.

“Naib Tehsildar returned to Skardu after making arrangements for column (which arrived on) February 15. He was told to bring his and Tehsildar’s families in cantonment. Naib replied they would stay out and try rehabilitate people who had deserted Skardu by own example. Today patrol was sent to bring him for discussions. Naib and Tehsildar with families have left Skardu. Do not know gone where. Tehsildar never reported to us.”

On February 24 a minor skirmish took place when two

platoons of the enemy tried to ambush one platoon of our Jawans out on patrol. Two Jawans were seriously wounded.

Next day Mr. Thapa reported :

“Fighting patrol one platoon sent out at 1400 hrs south-west of our cantonment. Encountered strongly held positions about one mile from here. Were heavily fired be enemy M.M.Gs., L.M.Gs. and 2" mortars. Enemy strength estimated two companies with two M.M.Gs. Own casualty one wounded. Lost two rifles. Enemy casualty not known. Patrol remained engaged up to 1800 hrs and withdrew.

“Enemy M.M.G. and 3" mortar fire continued from hill north of Skardu. Enemy reinforcements have definitely arrived. Enemy has surrounded us and will launch large-scale attack any moment. Fourteen days have passed since last attack on us and in spite of repeated requests for help neither air support nor reinforcements have arrived. Under such circumstances massacre of handful of troops here and all refugees is evident. Once again request for immediate air help and reinforcements, preferably paratroops if Skardu is desired to be held.”

Srinagar answered :

“Air support asked for by you will take considerable long time as it entirely depends on weather. It will be given at the first opportunity—still you will not entirely depend on it. Use your own resources to stage an attack on Point 8853 before enemy gets dug in. You will carry out intensive patrolling.

“Brigadier Faqir Singh with a Gurkha company on way to you. Ammunition including 3" mortar and signalling equipment despatched with Brigadier. He has wireless set and will intimate you his position every day.”

Another Srinagar message in this connection is worth noting :

“You were instructed to retain Inchalvi. But you have allowed this to pass to enemy by offering passive resistance only. Second, consider vital for your defence

that you capture Point 8853 and establish string pickets there. Third, as already intimated more reinforcements on their way but they will not be able to help you much unless you take aggressive action now before enemy gets time to build up and fortify his present position. If enemy allowed to fortify now it may be impossible to dislodge him later.

“Fourth, do not rely entirely on air action. Fifth, you will give every possible help to refugees in the cantonment and build up reserve food and water if not already done. Also consider possibility of evacuating refugees back when you get more troops.”

Mr. Thapa ordered the Jawans to scale the hump from the fort and attack Point 8853: It was an impossible feat as there was nothing to grip on the hump. Ropes were thrown up and they fell down. Then they tried to scale the hill from major axis side, but failed.

Lt.-Col. Thapa reported to Srinagar on February 28 :

“Staging an attack on Point 8853 with present resources not a possibility. I have only two companies with very limited 3" mortar ammunition. Only one man can handle captured M.M.G. Hill is more than a mile long and can only be climbed from enemy side, being steep rock from our side. Attacking now means too many casualties which I cannot afford at present. Patrolling being done.

“One Gurkha company not enough. More reinforcements must come. Enemy already dug in on hill and whole area west of us and cannot be dislodged with two or three companies. Brigadier Faqir Singh has not intimated his location. Please request him to do it.”

The next day Mr. Thapa sent two messages :

“Enemy observed using signal lamps for inter-communications during night. Today lots of enemy movement observed from direction village Nanure towards village Olting. About two platoons of enemy seen at 1300 hrs today in area of track junction village Kresmathung. They were coming from direction of

Satpura. Enemy probably concentrating near Satpura
Weather today very fine. Air support anxiously
awaited.”

The second read :

“Reinforcements being delayed too long. Enemy
positions being strengthened towards Kargil. Route
from Skardu to Kargil might have been demolished
by enemy. Longer the delay more resistance rein-
forcements likely to meet on way.

“Reinforcements be directed to do forced march and
from Kargil onwards should bring only arms and
ammunition and light bedding of two or three
blankets per head. Season is changed now. All heavy
kit be dumped at Kargil. Further suggest each party
moving from Kargil to Skardu should at least be one
company strong with supporting weapons.”

That was how February passed.

MARCH, 1948

In Delhi

Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's Prime Minister, admitted in the Pakistan's Assembly that Pakistan's defence expenditure was "very high". He did not give any reason for it.

Premier Nehru told Indian Parliament that members of certain tribes belonging to Afghanistan side of the border had been identified among the raiders. The matter had been brought to the notice of Afghan Government and they had promised to take deterrent action.

"One American, Mr. Haight, did certainly take an active part," Mr. Nehru said, "But he has been recalled by the American Government. I am not personally aware of any other American or British people who are taking part in the raids."

Mr. Nehru said the Government had no information if some raiders were from Chinese Turkistan. "In fact we are positively unaware of any such report."

He said he was not aware of the ancestry of Sardar Ibrahim Khan, leader of the so-called "Azad Kashmir" Government, but he had a vague impression that he belonged to somewhere round about the frontier of Kashmir. But this was the first time it had been suggested that he might have come from outside India. Until few months ago no one knew about the

existence of such a person.

Mr. Nehru had no information if raiders were using Russian guns. R.I.A.F. encountered anti-aircraft fire in Bhimber and Palandri.

India's Defence Minister, Mr. Baldev Singh, said : "Raiders from Sialkot district have looted and burnt villages within the Indian territory near the Sialkot-Jammu border and on either side of the Kathua-Samba-Jammu Road."

No passport system had been introduced till now to cross into Pakistan from India and vice versa.

Mr. Nehru disclosed in Parliament that the Kashmir ruler had given up executive powers and an interim Government was formed with Shiekh Abdullah as premier. He said Kashmir question was not communal.

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan after taking an oath of allegiance in Pakistan Assembly said : "India has achieved freedom. Pakistan, with more British Governors and more Britons in its administration than ever before had passed from one oppression to another."

Sheikh Abdullah said: "We have decided to work and die for India. We made our decision not in October last (1947) but in 1944.....We resisted the advances of Mr. Jinnah."

Amidst repeated interruptions in Pakistan Assembly, Mr. H.S. Suhrawardy, a Pakistani leader, pleaded for more active steps to reassure the minorities and induce them to remain in Pakistan.

Khan Ahdul Ghaffar Khan formed an all Pakistan Peoples Party to take members of all communities in its fold. The party envisaged taking over power from the British, friendly relations with India and resettlement of refugees in their original homes.

A high official of the Maharaja of Kashmir said that Jammu and Kashmir State practised democracy for the past 15 years with the establishment of Praja Sabha or State Legislature, which had a non-official elected majority. As late as 1931, H.H. Hari Singh had appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Sir Bertand Glancy to suggest constitutional reforms. The commission's suggestions were implemented and further reforms were introduced in 1939, which added

weight to the Praja Sabha.

The State had an efficient system of judiciary, thoroughly overhauled and separate from the executive. There was provision for direct recruitment of qualified Muslims to certain posts without competition with non-Muslims.

Britain denied that it was indulging in anti-Indian propaganda through the British Information Service in U.S.A. Jews were gradually leaving Pakistan owing to nervousness and insecurity.

The Indian Muslim League, led by Mohammed Ismail, said it would retain its identity with a new constitution. But Suhrawardy said in Dacca there was no justification for Muslim League to exist in India.

Jinnah talks of joint defence with India against foreign aggression, if they "put their house in order internally." Pakistan plans to have a network of airfields.

India announces the establishment of National Cadet Corps for the youth "so that our citizens shall never again be exposed to such risks" as were encountered by the Indian civilians from tribesmen and raiders.

Mr. Nehru was observed touring the country frequently and extensively. For him the war in Kashmir appeared to be a friendly game of cricket in which winning or losing mattered little.

R.I.A.F. carried on "offensive reconnaissance" over Poonch and Naushera areas. In Skardu and Uri areas, raiders sniping at forward pickets were engaged by Indian troops and dispersed. Heavy casualties were inflicted. Brigadier Khuda Bux, Chief of Staff J & K Forces, had gone to Jammu front to conduct manoeuvres against the enemy.

Pakistan Government floated a loan which attracted over Rs. 17 crores.

India's High Commissioner to Pakistan, Sri Parkasa, advised Hindus not to leave Pakistan.

Indo-Pakistan joint Defence Council concluded its talks in Delhi. Pakistan's demand for immediate delivery of 16,000 tons of military stores figured prominently in the discussion. Pak argument was that since it had already returned 36 Tempest, 56 Spitfire and other aircraft held at Karachi,

it was now for India to release Pakistan's share of military equipment.

India said the share could not be delivered earlier due to transport shortage. It would be made available as soon as possible. Unlike previous meetings, neither party mentioned Kashmir. Though the Council had been dissolved, the Defence Secretary would lead Indian delegation to Karachi next month to renew discussions.

Liaquat Ali Khan, who was leading Pak delegation, visited Birla House, where the Mahatma was assassinated, with Mr. Nehru.

Hostiles used 3.7" Howitzers in Poonch against Indian troops.

Quaide Azam Jinnah, who was in Dacca, said those who were thinking of joining India were living in a dreamland and were enemies of Pakistan. He was not going to tolerate them even if they were Muslims. His Government will take strong measures to deal with fifth columnists and Communists. The State language of Pakistan should be Urdu, he declared. He called for the revival of martial spirit. He said in a broadcast from Dacca that the language issue might lead to dire results.

Reserve Bank declared Pak currency as illegal tender in India.

Khan of Kalat expressed concern about preserving the unity of Pakistan and Muslim world. National Party of Kalat launched anti-accession to Pakistan campaign and the State's premier resigned. Pakistan feared Kalat might join India. The Kalat ruler desired friendship with Pakistan, but no merger.

A few days later, Kalat acceded to Pakistan. The ruler denied an All India Radio broadcast that he had approached India for accession and the latter Government had rejected it. Mr. Nehru also refuted that Kalat had approached India and said A.I.R. broadcast was incorrect.

In Skardu

Plenty of enemy activity was observed in Skardu and he started a war of attrition. On March 4 from 4 P.M. the enemy shelled three of our piquets with 3" and 2" mortars. One Jawan was seriously wounded. Our troops replied with

a few 3" mortars and silenced the enemy.

On March 6 the enemy assaulted one picket with two platoons under cover of 2" and 3" mortar fire. The enemy also used rifle grenades. The attack was repulsed by the Jawans aided by our 3" mortar, which neutralized the enemy supporting fire. The enemy suffered one dead and we had no casualty. But all the while the enemy strength both in men and fire power went on steadily increasing. Our patrols, therefore, also began having more frequent encounters with the enemy patrols.

On March 14, Jawans ambushed an enemy patrol and inflicted heavy casualty. Owing to constant enemy M.M.G. and L.M.G. fire from Point 8853, his casualty could not be counted. Next day some enemy detachments were seen moving towards Gol, thereby Kargil side.

Similarly, on March 16 a bigger enemy column about two companies strong moved from village Kuardo towards Gol. Obviously, the enemy's intention was to intercept and ambush our column proceeding towards Skardu under Brigadier Faqir Singh.

All this enemy activity was reported to Srinagar for air-strike. But it was a wastage of breath, as nothing happened.

Our reinforcements were ambushed and completely routed by the enemy on March 17 at ThurgaonIpri, about 10 miles from Skardu towards Kargil side and historically notorious for ambushes.

Srinagar had informed Skardu that the column will reach Skardu on March 18 but, unluckily it arrived a day early to meet disaster. On March 17, the Skardu cantonment was subjected to heavy shelling and firing by the enemy so that no help could reach the ambushed column from our side. Nevertheless, two weak platoons were sent from Skardu on March 18 to meet and receive the reinforcements. The Skardu platoons were also ambushed and fired upon from three sides but they returned home safe after giving the enemy a befitting answer.

Perhaps Srinagar thought that the column under Brigadier Faqir Singh was going on a picnic and not war. The column did not carry even a wireless set to inform Skardu of its

position. Had it been able to do so, the tragedy of such magnitude would definitely had been averted. Needless to add that the enemy fattened himself with the colossal booty of arms, ammunition and other material with the column and the loot boosted his morale sky-high.

To make the picture more clear, I (Suraj) am reproducing verbatim the messages sent from Skardu commander to Srinagar in March.

“Twenty-one days since enemy attacked us. No reinforcements have arrived. No air support in spite of repeated requests received so far. We are surrounded. Enemy is increasing in strength and daily closing round us. Under these conditions holding of this place any longer is impossible and massacre and slaughter of this small garrison with all refugees is imminent.

“If Skardu is to be held please push up reinforcements immediately and arrange air support at once. We even do not know how far and in what strength reinforcements, if any, have arrived. Reinforcements if do not arrive in time will be useless. Situation here is grave but being taken very lightly.” (4-3-48)

“Our morning patrol today captured one local who states : About 1,000 enemy are in this area. They have two 3" mortars. More reinforcements of enemy are expected. Enemy aircraft will come when weather permits and land in strip prepared by us (in Ranga area).

“He says Tehsidlar Wilayat Ali Khan is also here and was promised to be made Wazir of Skardu. Enemy have collected all boats near village Kohra. Enemy dumping rations in villages Gombat, Hurgon and Gomot Hurgon.” (4-3-48)

Prior to this confirmation there had been some wild allegations that the Tehsildar was involved actively in bringing the enemy to Skardu. It was also alleged that the Wazir, Mr. Amar Nath, was shot dead at his instance. Although the murder charge—or abetting in a murder, to be precise—could not be proved against him beyond a reasonable doubt, his

actions clearly showed that he betrayed the country of his origin. On the other hand, Naib Tehsildar Raja Mohammed Inssari, remained loyal until he was forced to opt for Pakistan by various pressures. This assertion could be highlighted by the fact that he did not desert the reinforcements sent to Skardu and even accompanied them to the cantonment. Perhaps Wilayat Ali Khan, who was not a Balti, would have claimed the Naib's head as well, but the Raja was too influential a person to be trifled with. He was the son of one of the local Rajas.

This reminds me that Mehmood, son of Tehsildar Wilayat Ali Khan, was captured loitering near the cantonment in the first days of attack. Lt.-Col. Thapa saved him from being humiliated, manhandled and even killed by the Hind-Sikh mob, as it was suspected that he had engineered the Wazir's death. It was confirmed later, however, that he was with the treasury guard near or at the time the Wazir was shot dead.

“Enemy movement towards Gol being seen since three four days. Also hear blasting noises from that direction. Believe enemy blowing up the route. Suggest reinforcements from Kargil should bring some guide to show them alternative routes which exist everywhere. Also suggest Raja of Kharmang may be useful if got at Kargil.” (4-3-48)

“Enemy shelled today at 1600 hrs some of our piquets with 3" mortars. Enemy sniped our positions whole day. Enemy strength increasing rapidly and have plenty of 3" mortar ammunition which we have very little. Send reinforcements immediately.” (5-3-48)

“This country is hilly and very difficult. Enemy is in whole area. Locals give them shelter, food and proper transport and other facilities. Enemy reinforcements of mortar and ammunition reach here earlier than ours. At present only route open to Gilgit is through Rondu. In less than two months Skardu will be accessible to enemy from all directions.

“Believe crossing Zojila safer in March after which dangerous due to avalanches. One company more

also not of much use. Reinforcements piecemeal not sound. Previous reinforcements arrived very late. Further reinforcements taking too long to come which will definitely prove fatal. If Skardu is to be held and if some operations are to be taken towards Gilgit then suggest reinforcements must consist of at least one brigade with plenty supporting arms and must reach here before all routes from Gilgit side open. Long route also require lot of transport.

“At present I have no signallers and equipment. Only 2”, 3” mortars with limited bombs. Some platoons do not have single binocular. Ammunition though used with greatest care being daily expended. Suggest Kargil be made a base. Airstrip should also be prepared at Kargil. Ration problem also requires consideration.” (6-3-48)

“Enemy fired upon our piquets today. Enemy pressing hard and daily closing round us. Snowing since morning.” (11-3-48)

“On March 6, at about 1400 hrs one of our pickets about 1500 yds. south of cantonment was heavily fired upon by enemy from three directions. Enemy as reported by picket commander was firing from within 50 yds. Enemy used 2” mortars and grenades.

“Own 3” mortar fire was opened on a small hump occupied by enemy about 300 yds. from our outpost. On this enemy withdrew and continued long range sniping. Similarly enemy gained nearest to the same piquet on March 8 morning and opened fire but withdrew after a short time.” (12-3-48)

“Enemy about 50 seen in Kapehan village moving towards Olting. Movement also seen in area of village Sneuron.” (13-3-48)

“Enemy two companies strong armed and wearing battle-dress were seen mid-day today coming from direction village Kuardo north of Indus river. Enemy crossed Shigar river and collected north of hill Blukro. They may proceed to Gol or may attack us from Gol side. Another enemy platoon seen at

1300 hrs coming out of Satpura nullah. They moved towards village Kapehan. Enemy is all round us. Morale of our troops here seems gone low. Again request air strike be arranged at once. Weather was ideal today." (17-3-48)

"Enemy sniped whole day. Enemy shelled cantonment with mortar at 1400 hrs. No casualty. Enemy about one platoon with coolies moved from Satpura nullah towards Gol. Enemy number increasing daily. Unless air support is arranged daily Skardu column may not reach here. Weather here fine since yesterday. Airstrike over Skardu as already requested most essential lest it is too late." (19-3-48)

"Enemy sniped and shelled our positions throughout night. Enemy fired 2" mortar shells from Point 8853 into cantonment. From Point 8853 enemy shouted and abused us yesterday evening. Request that Point must be bombarded at once. No information about Skardu column (under Brigadier Faqir Singh). As already pointed present strength of column will not be able to reach destination unless air support arranged. Weather fine today.

"If timely air support not arranged result will be slaughter of column which we have been expecting for the last five weeks. This will cause more delay which means slaughter of this garrison also. According to your information column left Tolty March 16. On normal march it was to reach yesterday. Enemy probably greater in number must be holding them somewhere. To avoid disaster air (strike) must be arranged. Air be requested to take some risk." (20-3-48)

"Skardu column not yet arrived. Went for patrolling towards village Tok. Met strong enemy opposition about 800 yds. beyond Tok. Patrol was shelled with 3" mortar. No casualty. One local of Tok stated begins : About 150 State troops arrived Thurgaon March 17 heavily fired upon by about 100 enemy hold Ipri near Thurgaon about 10 miles from Skardu.

Our troops suffered 20 to 30 casualties and withdrew towards Gol. Enemy still holding Ipri.

“About 100 enemy in area village Kapehan. Enemy has one 3” mortar and one M.M.G. in the area. All non-Muslims at Shigar killed except two women and a few children. Raja Shigar has helped enemy by supplying 50 soldiers equipped with local rifles. Enemy wearing battle-dress overcoats. Ends.

“As reported time and again there is no possibility of so weak column without 3” mortar and air support reaching here. It is rather slaughter of scattered small parties of troops. Again request if Skardu is to be held and small garrison and refugees here are desired to be saved strong column must be pushed up immediately.

“Have often received promises for air support which has not come even once. Is there any hope of it? It will help raise morale of troops if promises materialize. We are waiting for reinforcements since 1½ months. Rest assured Skardu column as such will not reach here until reinforced and air help arranged. Situation here probably being taken lightly which is not so. Enemy strength daily increasing and getting bold after contact with our column.” (21-3-48)

“Two of our piquets fired on enemy trying to approach last night. No casualty on either side. One local informed our patrol that 100 more Scouts have arrived at Tsari.”

“Lot of enemy movement being observed since morning. No information about Biscuit Column.” (23-3-48)

“Enemy attacked one of our pickets at 0030 hrs. Attack repulsed after two hours’ fight. Large scale attack was again launched by enemy on all our positions at 0500 hrs. Heavy fight still going on. Enemy heavily shelling our positions. 3” mortar (ammunition) with enemy seems unlimited. Details will be submitted on receipt of information from pickets. Request for immediate air support.” (28-3-48)

“Enemy too close to our positions. Circle tightening

every moment. Pickets cut off. Water supply at pickets only for today. Consequence inevitable. Reinforcements must be pushed up immediately and it could be done easily. Airstrike must be arranged tomorrow even at risk of personnel and machines otherwise good-bye from this neglected garrison". (29-3-48)

"Fighting went on throughout night. All of our pickets south of us are still cut off and hard pressed by enemy. No information from them. Enemy still in position all round us and very close range. Request immediate airstrike." (29-3-48)

Ultimately an advanced party of reinforcements, named "Biscuit Column", arrived at Parkutta on March 31. The column consisted of 5th and 7th J & K Infantry and a mortar column platoon. Its commander was Lt.-Col. Sampuran Bachan Singh, who was assisted by one Major Coutts. As the column advanced in company strength, the enemy harassed it at various stages. Only three companies reached Parkutta.

Suddenly Lt.-Col. Sampuran Bachan Singh was recalled to join his unit at Srinagar and Lt.-Col. Kirpal Singh of 5th J & K Infantry was made the commander of "Biscuit Column". Following the order, Lt.-Col. Sampuran Bachan Singh left Parkutta. Major Coutts also followed suit without rhyme or reason. They not only left the advance batch in a leaderless lurch, but also took away the wireless set, which left no means of communications with the Jawans in Parkutta.

The new commander of the column, Lt.-Col. Kirpal Singh was held up way back in Tolty with one company. The rest of the column was either at Kargil or split on Kargil-Skardu route in small groups. Thus this column was split into three or four bits, each trying vainly to advance towards Skardu.

The Jawans at Parkutta could not advance because the opposition was stiff and the enemy had occupied all high features and was well entrenched. As all the villages had been evacuated by the enemy agents, the Jawans could neither get rations nor porters. If some porters came forward, more often than not they were enemy agents. It was believed that the brother of Raja of Shigar was among them.

The porters, therefore, knew when and where the first bullet would be fired. They would throw their burdens and run away or carry away the ammunition boxes with them. They also told the enemy about Jawans' strength and the arms and ammunition with them.

APRIL, 1948

In Delhi

Indo-Pak financial pact was signed. "Azad Kashmir" Government accused India of violating cease-fire agreement in Poonch. India would censor mail to Pakistan. Kalat signs the instrument of accession to Pakistan.

The Indo-Pak joint Defence Council was replaced by Inter-Dominion Defence Committee. Pakistan laid claim to 50,000 tons of defence stores; India would transfer 16,000 tons.

"Azad Kashmir" Government announced Rs. 50,000 award for the capture of Brigadier Usman.

Pak-Bihar border incident reported.

The Army Commander of Western Command estimated that 20,000 raiders operated in Kashmir.

General Bucher was reported to continue as Commander-in-Chief of Indian Armed Forces, as Indian officers "do need more experience".

Pak Premier called for sacrifice from Pak army.

Indian troops carried offensive sweeps in Jhangar area; entered Rajouri. Intense R.I.A.F. activity made Rajouri's capture possible.

General Sir Douglas Gracey, C-in-C Pak army, accompanied by British Embassy Military Adviser and American Embassy

Military Attache, visited Dacca.

Jammu and Kashmir Government ordered forfeiture of Jaghirs of Mirs of Hunza and Nagar and the Raja of Puniyal for assisting raiders.

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Jinnah met for 90 minutes in Peshawar. The Khan was reported against the merger of Khudai Khidmatgars with Muslim Leaguers.

Ian Stephens, The Statesman's Editor, reported from Pakistan that Sikh holy places were safe there. He did not say anything about Sikh population, though. It was a callous attempt to alienate Sikhs, the only community among Hindus which Muslims feared, from Hindus.

Indian troops inflicted heavy casualty on raiders : about 100 were killed in Uri, Poonch, Samba, Kathua and Rajouri areas. R.I.A.F. Tempests raided Choumukh and Mirpur. The aircraft encountered anti-aircraft fire in Uri-Domel skies. The enemy was reported using Howitzers and 40 M.M. Bofors. Indian patrols were reported active in all sectors. The Army routed three battalions of hostiles in Uri and captured a hill feature in Baramula.

India announced the release of 87,000 tons of defence stores to Pakistan.

India also delivered 3,000 tons of sugar, out of 10,000 tons duty free supply meant for Pakistan.

Major-General Kalwant Singh relinquished the command of J & K forces.

In Skardu

The weather had changed perceptibly. The water was a shade less cool than before. The trees around the cantonment showed signs of preparing themselves for spring. No birds were visible in or around the cantonment, though. They had migrated from Skardu to peaceful regions. The birds had braved the first few days' firing noise and shelling concussions but evidently they could not tolerate these for long and so they left.

But the cantonment residents had neither time, nor inclination, nor patience to observe these changes in nature. Most of their time was taken up in playing cards, picket duties,

scanning the sky for our aircraft and eating whatever frugal meals of pulses and cereals were prepared from the cantonment's meagre stocks.

Products like milk and tobacco lingered only in people's memories. As is usual in such circumstances, innovation solves the problem. Hence the Jawans drank tea without milk and dried the used tea leaves to serve as tobacco. They also smoked dried tree leaves and rice husk. This they did without rancour and with lot of spicy jokes. Meat, eggs, vegetables, fruits and other perishable commodities were equally scarce. Their morale had suffered a few shockingly severe jolts, but as yet it had not been completely deflated. They had implicit faith in their superiors' judgement and in their own fighting ability. They believed they would not be thrown to the hungry wolves, as the Pakistani hordes were appropriately called, by their masters.

Instead of improving, the situation continued deteriorating, however. The enemy had already made a mockery of the Skardu garrison by bypassing its pickets and cutting off its supply and reinforcement line. The garrison was but a minor thorn in the enemy's side—painful, yes; dangerous, no.

The enemy had enough fire-power to keep the Skardu garrison fully engaged. without exposing himself to any undue risk. His sniper on Point 8853 saw to it that none of our Jawans moved even an inch without his permission. Constant rifle, M.M.G. and mortar fire from point 8853 for 24 hours a day would have unnerved ordinary mortals, but now it appears strange that none of us at the cantonment lost our mental equilibrium then.

The enemy bullet sounded "tik" its echo would answer "dum" and finally the whole valley would reverberate with "shaon". When one bullet could create so much fuss, you could well imagine the cacophony caused by M.M.G. bursts, which were interspersed with mortar fire. Ricocheting shots not only made uncanny noises in the air, but were also a hazard.

To protect the refugees, bunkers were dug inside each room. With the overhead roof, it provided double protection. Boards were nailed on the verandah pillars and the intervening

space was filled with earth to check splinters and bullets. As soon as the telltale thud of mortar fire was heard, an alert was sounded through whistle. As it took a few seconds for the shell to land and explode, people had ample time to gain cover. Even piquet bunkers were fortified manifold.

This kept the casualty to the minimum. But even a minimum casualty the Skardu garrison could ill-afford due to inadequate stock of drugs. Wounded Jawans and civilians died untimely death. Later, some lost their limbs owing to gangrene. A typical example of lead poisoning was a soldier, who sustained a wound on the middle finger and died within 24 hours.

The enemy pressure kept increasing and he tried to strangle the besieged garrison by tightening his circle around it. He made many bids to overpower or isolate the pickets. His successes, despite superiority in numbers and ammunition were temporary. He was always dislodged from his newly acquired defensive positions by the daredevil Jawans and he invariably suffered heavy casualty. Unfortunately, there were many vacant houses around the cantonment, some of which the enemy was able to occupy.

When it dawned on the Pakistanis that they were not fighting clay statues, they launched a psychological warfare. They would concentrate all the local civilians they could gather on Point 8853 and shout slogans and abuses. Sometimes dire consequences were threatened if the garrison did not surrender. At other times a general amnesty was declared. At night they would hand torches to civilians to blink at one another from different places, which were out of range of garrison fire. This fact was confirmed later.

The garrison also joined in this game and counter-shouting of slogans and torch exercises were undertaken. The game, however, could not last long, as once our torch cells expired we could neither recharge them nor replace them. The absence of answering blinks made the enemy so bold that he attempted a few daring blinks without cover from Point 8853. All our pickets concentrated their fire on that light and obviously scored a direct hit, as after that the enemy always signalled from behind a secure position.

Henceforth this one-sided psychological warfare started having its adverse reaction among the Jawans. In their hearts of hearts they were sure that so many enemy signallers could not possibly have centered in one war theatre: Skardu. But it was also evident that some of the blinking was in Morse. Which was it? What did it say? And how to obliterate it when it was out of the range? These were some of the questions that started corroding their morale. They were after all human beings and Srinagar had done nothing tangible so far to boost their sagging morale. They started having doubts about the chances of their own survival, what to speak of recapturing Skardu from the enemy. As would be proved later, theirs was not the only batch to have these thoughts. Thanks to Srinagar, or whosoever was conducting the campaign against the enemy on Skardu front, everything was in a mess, militarily speaking.

Naturally, the Jawans started thinking and talking in terms of retreat till they joined up with the reinforcements. As is natural under such conditions each Jawan had his own master plan of withdrawal, which assured full protection to Hindu-Sikh civilians and no casualty to the infantry. These discussions were both pathetic and humorous. For Mr. Thapa these thoughts were potential time-bombs. He did his level best to dispel the Jawans' doubts and informed Srinagar.

The talk of retreat did not leave even my (Suraj's) household unaffected. Our servants, who had not received their salaries since February, rebelled and demanded immediate payment of past dues. Otherwise they would not work. Our promise that they would be paid every single rupee when the circumstances normalized and we were able to lay hand on some cash did not mollify them. Not that money could have bought then anything then; it was just a whim. Only when some Army officers granted our bonafides did they agree to work. Just like Jawans, the servants now attended their duty half-heartedly.

My friend Bansi Lal was also very excited about the withdrawal. As he was alone, more often than not some N.C.O. or J.C.O. would patronize him and take him to his piquet. It was obviously against the regulations to expose any civilian

least of all a child, to danger, but Lt.-Col. Thapa wisely did not press this point, as it was difficult in Skardu to stick to regulations alone. He might have become very unpopular indeed if he had done so. However, Bansi Lal, by virtue of his visits to the pickets, learnt much more about weapons and Army parlance than any other child in the cantonment. Therefore, when he explained the term retreat to us children with the confidence of a general, it did stir inferiority complex in many of us.

The adult world realities were quite different from childhood fancy and these could best be underscored by reproducing the messages exchanged between Skardu and Srinagar.

From Skardu :

“Enemy have practically occupied all houses near and around our positions. Enemy heavy firing and shelling going on since morning. Cut off pickets are very hard up. They could not get water for two days. They cannot continue without food and water for long. “We were ordered and we will hold until last round and man but it is pity that promises for reinforcements and air help made from time to time have not materialized since last two months. Even our queries and messages regarding progress of reinforcements are not being replied.

“I (Mr. Thapa) do not know how long you expect us to defend this place with our present resources against enemy who are superior in number, at least four times superior in armament with unlimited amount of ammunition, particularly 3” mortar. Under all these disadvantages and disappointment troops so far are fighting very well, but how long? There is limit to everything.” (2-4-48)

From Skardu :

“Enemy shelled our cantonment today. No direct hit no casualty. Enemy heavy firing continues day and night. Practically each and every house near our positions is occupied by enemy. Enemy cannot be dislodged unless airstrike arranged. Bazar and granary in possession of enemy who are daily removing

grain and other stuff. Further collection of ration articles (by us) impossible.

“May I once again ask details of progress of reinforcements if any on their way to us. This information will inevitably be helpful to raise morale of troops and discharge my duties here.

“Again request reinforcements must be given air help from Tolty onwards if enemy position met beyond it. Otherwise bound to meet fate of Biscuit Column. Three inch mortar ammunition must be dropped immediately.” (5-4-48)

From Skardu :

“Enemy as already reported in every building near us. Enemy has come so close to our cantonment that movement inside cantonment has become impossible. Enemy launched dawn attack today. One refugee Inder Singh wounded. Airstrike must be arranged daily. If airstrike not arranged today then goodbye from us. Weather is very fine. Let air also take some risk. Air must bombard Point 8853 and all houses near our positions.” (7-4-48)

From Srinagar :

“Personal from Force Commander. Have been watching your gallant defence with interest. Reinforcements are on way. I am sure you will continue to defend Skardu till reinforcements arrive. Your name will go down in history as gallant defenders” (7-4-48)

From Skardu :

“We will defend Skardu till last round and man provided we are saved from starvation which is most imminent if airstrike is not arranged.” (8-4-48)

From Skardu :

“Enemy had occupied an important point between cantonment and one of our pickets thereby cutting it off from water, etc. Picket remained without water and meals for three days. On April 10, a small party under Naik Chatru Singh launched dawn attack on enemy occupied houses and forced enemy to withdraw.

“Had that point remained in enemy hands for another day, cut off picket would have fallen and consequently cantonment could not stand. I very strongly recommend Naik Chatru for immediate award for his gallantry. He won Military Medal on Burma front.” (12-4-48)

From Skardu :

“Enemy movement towards Gol observed again. Think this time enemy going to put up stiff resistance than before and may contact our column near Tolty or even beyond towards Surito. Again request air support must daily be arranged for column and Skardu. Also suggest column once contact made (with the enemy) must be at least one battalion strong.” (12-4-48)

From Srinagar :

“Personal for Col. Thapa from Force Commander. Your fine stand will be remembered as landmark in the Kashmir campaign. Continue bravely as you have done so far. Am doing all I can to give you aid. Am recommending Naik Chatru for an immediate award.” (14-4-48)

From Skardu :

“Wounded being spoiled for want of medicine particularly penicillin and anti-tetanus serum. Kindly arrange immediately.” (16-4-48)

From Srinagar :

“Reinforcements in sufficient number are on way. Kargil is being made a base. 3” mortar (ammunition) has been sent. You are aware of the transport difficulty. That is the reason of delay. Brigadier Faqir Singh at Kargil and will advance tomorrow. Signal equipment sent to you.”

From Skardu :

“Enemy sniping continues. Telly is probably in enemy hands. Iglu is threatened by enemy who will easily take it if not reinforced immediately. With fall of Iglu goes whole frontier and with it will be destroyed all men and material scattered over this

area.

“To retake this frontier afterwards will be much more difficult and costly than it is now. To save present situation immediate air landing at Iglu can only help which if not done within a day or so might be too late.

“Also request for immediate rushing of large reinforcements self-sufficient in every way via Zojila which is open. Meanwhile, regular air support and particularly ammunition and supply dropping to existing isolated garrisons very essential to help them hold their positions till reinforcements arrive. Also point out Iglu area can produce lot of transport.”

From Srinagar :

“For Lt.-Col. Thapa from Army Commander. I am indeed delighted to see how bravely you and the brave men under your command are holding out. Well done. Once again remember you are all far, far superior to the enemy in every way. Expected reinforcements for you should be arriving very shortly.”
(20-4-48)

From Srinagar :

“Personal for Col. Thapa from Force Commander. Your work has been splendid. Reinforcements column is now near you.” (29-4-48)

To say the least, these were hypocritical words and neither could be used to contain the enemy nor to cure the wounded. An agonizing April ended thus.

MAY, 1948

In Delhi

A sort of censorship seemed to have come into force and news about war in Kashmir was reduced to just a trickle. Government of India evidently believed in keeping the masses ignorant so that they could not over-react to the losses inflicted by Pakistan. Of course, there were other people who were in the thick of the fighting; but they did not matter much for two reasons: they were only a handful and they had no means to communicate their sufferings outside Kashmir.

Therefore, we heard Mr. Nehru reaffirm the Government's intention to turn the last raider out of Kashmir, but not to cross into Pak territory.

Pakistan said it still had to receive over 165,000 tons of military stores from India. India proposed to send 2,000 tons per month, which, according to Pakistan, would take seven years to lift fully.

India admitted that a substantial part of stores had been delivered to Pakistan.

Jawans purged areas around Poonch of raiders, killed 30 in Uri and 23 in Naushera. A hill feature was captured from the hordes in Naushera. Jawans also repulsed an attack

in Jhangar area. Next day in the second attack Pakistanis suffered 2,600 casualties. India had used artillery.

Sheikh Abdullah cut the privy purse of H.H. Hari Singh by Rs. 3,60,000.

An apologist for the Defence Ministry of India said : "For over six months (?) now a small force of Indian troops are guarding the north-eastern approach to Srinagar. Stationed in Skardu, they have not only successfully resisted attacks by the raiders but have kept the Skardu region clear of their menace.

"Supplies to Skardu garrison go from Srinagar. But there is no direct road link between the two points. Convoys have to take a circuitous route passing through high hills. Even in summer months, the hills are snow-capped and convoy routes snowcarpeted.

"Communication by air is impossible over these high, snow-capped hills. Surface communication alone can be undertaken. The task of food convoys, milling through snow, has been very unenviable. Through their tenacious efforts, the troops at Skardu have been receiving trickles of food supplies.

"Piquets, posted along the route, are not only continuously engaged in clearing the snow but also repulse determined attacks by parties of raiders coming from Gilgit. Well armed and equipped, and coming in great strength, these raiders have been making repeated attempts to extend their area of influence from Gilgit. These efforts have all ended in heavy losses to the raiders.

"The raiders, attempting to infiltrate into the interior, harass Indian communication lines. Engagements between Indian pickets and the raiders have taken place. The problem of supply to the Skardu garrison has been rendered more difficult by these raids. Indian pickets at Kargil, an important point on the supply route, have been engaged in heavy fighting with the raiders."

India-Kashmir road via Pathankot would be ready after June 30 at a cost of Rs. 3 crores.

Pakistan organized a Ghazi Lashkar to defend Pak territory against possible Indian intrusion.

In Skardu

On May 12 Kargil fell to the enemy. This was followed by the fall of Dras. By the end of May the enemy had assumed complete control on the line of communications from Zojila to Skardu.

Before taking up the May happenings in detail, let us recapitulate the events descriptively that had led to it. The enemy tempo had increased on this frontier with the localization of Skardu garrison in February. In March-April it acquired a ferocious intensity matched only with the stubbornness displayed by the besieged Skardu garrison.

On March 28, at 3 A.M. the enemy launched its first determined attack on a piquet in Skardu. He was two platoons strong and followed a herd of cattle for protection from our bullets. The attack was supported, as usual, with heavy M.M.G. firing from Point 8853, laced with 2" and 3" mortar shells. Jawans fought gallantly and repulsed the attack after two hours,

Two hours later, the enemy launched another attack at a much larger scale that engulfed all Skardu pickets. A furious battle was fought throughout the day. At night the enemy withdrew from all piquets except two commanded by Lt. Ajit Singh and Jemadar Piar Singh respectively upon which he went on increasing his pressure. Throughout the night, the pickets held out determinedly. Next morning they were relieved by a counter attack launched by one of our platoons. The enemy retreated, leaving behind 20 dead. Our casualties were four killed and ten wounded.

This severe punishment made the enemy realize the futility of trying to overrun the cantonment at one go. Despite his loftiness in men and material, he understood, he would be required to pay a terrific price if he persisted in his attempts to penetrate these impregnable defences, which had been organized very carefully. The bunkers of the pickets, as stated earlier, had been made practically immune from 2" and 3" mortar shells. No less important was the indomitable spirit of the defenders.

Again the enemy tried similar tactics on April 7. One of our pickets remained cut off for three days. As in the past, a

platoon attacked the enemy positions to relieve the beleaguered piquet. The enemy was thrown out of the houses occupied by him. He left behind three dead. But he had succeeded in establishing his position very near to our piquets. In some cases, only 20 yards away. As a result, subsidiary pickets had to be withdrawn.

This left the Skardu garrison roughly an area not more than 1,500 yards long and 600 yards wide around the cantonment top atrol, with enemy looking over his gun-sights 50 yards or less away. The enemy also changed his strategy and instead of face to face battle he chose to sneak behind our pickets. He was somewhat checked by our patrols.

In May, the enemy pressure acquired new intensity in Skardu and he shelled our piquets more frequently and heavily. Our meagre ammunition had to be conserved and, therefore, strict fire control was ordered. That meant shoot only when you sight the enemy. Once the enemy landed more than 200 3" mortar shells on our two pickets. Two Jawans were killed and four wounded.

Our critical ammunition position can best be grasped by the fact that the first batch of reinforcements had brought only 200 3" mortar shells with them, which included 20 smoke bombs. Eighty bombs were fired to disperse the first attack on February 11 and about 20 to counter the second. So the garrison had to fight with only 80 live bombs throughout its six-month struggle. Therefore, a hundred shell from the enemy were answered by one or two of ours. At times we had to ignore wholly the enemy shelling, although our gunners were excellent marksmen and could silence enemy mortars even with one or two shells.

The enemy was aware of our weak ammunition stock and contented himself with occasional nibbling attack to exhaust our stores. That he did not succeed at this stage was due entirely to the fire conservation order in force.

As far as ration stock was concerned, Jawans' meals were almost bordering on starvation diet.

As stated earlier, the enemy had compelled Skardu garrison to reduce the radius of its patrolling. The lack of sufficient—not to talk of proteinous—food, coupled with operational

pressure began to tell adversely on the health of Jawans. The hospital cases began to increase from battle sickness, casualties and ordinary ailments. The medical equipments and medicines were not adequate to cope with the serious situation, although the cantonment was lucky to have four doctors—two civilian and two military—among its population.

The situation deteriorated to such an extent that even the wounded and the sick, who barely managed to sit, were employed to man the defences in biting cold. Jawans, although their vitality was greatly reduced, accepted these tasks gracefully, fully realizing the helpless situation they found themselves in.

Meanwhile, where were the reinforcements? This question can best be answered by the following messages exchanged between Skardu and Srinagar.

From Srinagar :

“Fully alive to your difficulties. Arranging push forward reinforcements at Tolty and Parkutta to you earliest. Meanwhile try regain Inchalvi by aggressive patrolling. Strongly urge you undertake limited operations south towards Parkutta to relieve pressure on column there and help its advance to Skardu. Existing aircraft not fitted with necessary equipment to clear height over 15,000 ft. and drop supplies over Skardu. Arranging obtain special type aircraft capable undertaking supply dropping mission over Skardu when supplies and ammunition will be dropped.” (2-5-48)

A few pertinent questions could be asked : Why had the aircrafts' drawback remained a closely guarded secret until now? Why had not New Delhi acquired such aircraft so far? Or was it a red herring let loose by the Air Force to save their own skin?

Here is a secret message sent from General Thimayya to General Cariappa regarding the overall position on this frontier. The message is an eye opener.

“Situation Skardu and its reinforcements between Kargil and Skardu as follows : At Skardu ammunition and supplies almost exhausted. Besieged garrison highly demoralized and Commander apprehensive of

capitulation. Relief columns sent approximately three months back held up at Tolty and Parkutta and unable to advance further owing to enemy opposition and shortage of supplies and ammunition.

“Tolty and Parkutta garrisons are surrounded and cut off from each other and Skarda and Kargil. According to local Commanders garrisons at both places running short of ammunition with supplies since May 12.

“Detachment at Kargil attacked and presumably captured by enemy on May 10. No communication with Kargil garrison since that date.

“Owing to long and precarious lines of communication, intercommunication difficulties mounting and situation getting vague every day. Therefore, I do not visualize reinforcements advancing from Tolty and Parkutta to relieve Skardu. Low morale of troops another factor.

“Now my problem is how to maintain Skardu garrison and stranded columns at Parkutta and Tolty. Present system run by porters and ponies most unsatisfactory owing to long time lag of approximately one month from time supplies leave Srinagar to their arrival at Skardu and because fairly strong escort prerequisite for any such convoys.

“Consider timely replenishment of garrisons at Skardu Parkutta and Tolty possible only by air drops. In case air drops not repeat not possible in immediate future request permission withdrawal garrisons at Skardu, Parkutta and Tolty with civilian population to Kargil. This will involve garrisons fighting their way through enemy opposition and likely to sustain casualties.”
(13-5-48)

“Likely to sustain casualties” was a much understated fact; “will be massacred” would have mirrored the true circumstance. It is equally strange how and why General Cariappa endorsed the withdrawal plan, thereby by one stroke of pen he not only rendered the finest fighting machine in Asia asunder but made it a butt of international ridicule for years to come. Even up to December 1971, foreigners one met questioned

Indian forces' ability to fight.

However, the following order was issued on May 16.

“Enemy pressure at Skardu and line of communications between Skardu and Kargil increased considerably recently. Enemy attacked and captured Kargil on May 12. Enemy now reported at Bod Kharbu with intention to advance to Leh.

“Garrison at Skardu, Parkutta, Tolty and other places on line of communications between Kargil and Skardu will temporarily withdraw from above places as early as possible and concentrate at Olthingthang with a view to recapture Kargil.

“Withdrawal will be carried as follows: Skardu garrison to fight its way back to Olthingthang soon as possible. Every effort will be made to bring back all arms, ammunition and civil population. Arms ammunition and equipment which cannot be brought will be destroyed.

“For Parkutta and Tolty. Commander 5th Kashmir Infantry will make every endeavour to withdraw Parkutta garrison to Tolty. Whole garrison will then fight its way to Olthingthang and establish a firm base there. Effort will be made to contact Sampuran Bachan Singh and Maj. Coutts and help their detachments at Olthingthang.

“Regarding recapture of Kargil further orders will be issued when the garrisons gather at Olthingthang.

“Forces advancing from Srinagar who are between Sonamarg and Dras will concentrate at Dras, establish a firm base there and await further orders for recapture of Kargil.”

Evidently, the authorities had not thought out any solid long-term plan to recapture Kargil so far. They were reacting rather than acting.

Among such confused thinking one cannot help admiring the clear vision of Lt.-Col. Thapa, who sent the following reply to Srinagar.

“I gather intention is to withdraw and concentrate at Olthingthang with a view to recapture Kargil. May I

bring to your kind notice that two days after we were attacked we said we could not hold Skardu and then it was easy to withdraw as enemy had not occupied line of withdrawal and plenty of transport was available. We were ordered to hold up to last man and round.

“We are holding for more than three months. We are left with no mortar ammunition and other ammunition practically exhausted. With that we have to fight back about 80 miles (long) route all (of it) held by enemy in well prepared positions and having all supporting weapons with plenty of ammunition.

“We have eight stretcher cases. In addition some indoor patients and old civilian males and females and young children are unfit to move (with the Army). No coolies to evacuate them. To leave them behind inhuman and too cruel.

“Two routes open for us to follow : One through Gol and Parkutta and second via Satpura. Both very strongly held by enemy in great depth. Simply impossible to pass through. If attempted more than 50% casualties of troops and not less than 80% of refugees certain. Not a single coolie for ration, etc.

“There are no troops at Kargil, Olthingthang and Bagicha. Maj. Coutts, etc., have reached Leh.

“Troops at Tolty and Parkutta are one battalion strong and have not been able to clear opposition and reach here. We are hardly two companies with no mortar ammunition. Cannot possibly fight back such a long distance all held by enemy.

Troops from Srinagar could advance much quicker than collection of scattered garrisons here to recapture Kargil. If Kashmir troops not available, Indian troops be rushed,

“Suggest and request that ammunition be dropped immediately. More troops be immediately pushed from Srinagar to recapture Kargil. Troops in Tolty area may not be withdrawn. If our withdrawal is imperative suggest troops at Tolty and Parkutta be pushed here

and we all fall back collectively. Lastly to avoid disaster request to please reconsider your order.” (17-5-1948).

This was the second time on this front within a few months that Maj. Coutts and party turned tail on their own. They forgot the maxim of war : you must outlast the enemy—even by a second—to defeat him.

Nevertheless, apart from Skardu garrison whose order was countermanded and was promised air support, all other garrisons withdrew according to instructions. What casualties they suffered in men and material and what indignities and demoralization they faced at Olthingthang, which was obviously enemy occupied, I (Suraj) could not confirm. But it does not need an exceptional imagination to visualize the scene.

As it was, the Parkutta and Toly detachments were already surrounded and cut off. Kargil-Skardu path is rock-hewn and twists and turns along with the mountains. It is so narrow that it affords no cover whatsoever. Anybody sitting on the distant hill with an M.M.G., well protected behind boulders and shrubs, can cover it devastatingly.

Now a message from Skardu :

“Strongly asking for air to arouse morale of the troops who have naturally lost faith in officers.” (27-5-48)

Another said :

“Enemy under heavy shelling attacked one of our piquets last night at 2230 hours. Attack was repulsed. Enemy used rifle grenades.” (28-5-48)

We leave May here.

JUNE, 1948

In Delhi

In Ladakh region a threat to Leh from infiltrating tribesmen from Gilgit was averted by the timely action of R.I.A.F. which flew, under still wintry conditions, a detachment of troops.

H.S. Suhrawardy was detained in Dacca for promoting communal harmony. Pakistan liberalized arm licences to its civilians. Japan bought 20,000 bales of cotton from Pakistan. Pak Premier said in a letter to U.N. : "India is now but for a military decision" in Kashmir.

Trade with Ladakh, which was subjected to raiders' loot will be resumed from Kashmir. Mr. Krishna Menon, India's High Commissioner in London, said he would not be surprised "if the whole of invading forces in Kashmir were cleared from the territory within 30 days."

Lt.-Gen. Francis Robert Roy Bucher, Indian Army C-In-C., awarded Knight Commander of the Military Division of the Order of the British Empire (K.C.B.E.).

"In the last three weeks, Maj. Gen. Thimayya's troops have liberated about 3,500 sq. miles of Kashmir territory," said a Defence Ministry Press release. "They have deprived the hostiles of their lines of communications from Muzaffarabad to Gurais along the Kishenganga river

and safeguarded the Kashmir valley against infiltration from the west and from the north.

“They have prevented further infiltration from Gurais and Kargil. By the push from Uri along the Domel road, they have drawn in all the enemy’s forces threatening the southern flank. Hostiles are no longer in a position to infiltrate behind the Indian lines. But they have the advantage of shorter communication lines. Reinforcements to Leh by air has enabled Indian troops to clear the Ladakh valley where they are no longer in contact with the enemy.”

Indian Armed forces will have three separate commands.

Liaquat Ali Khan cancelled his meeting with Mr. Nehru in Delhi due to indisposition. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was arrested for anti-State activities and sentenced to three years’ R-I. for his “offence.”

Reports from Ladakh told of desecration and looting of Buddhist monasteries, murder of Buddhist priests, abduction of women and forcible conversions in the raider-occupied areas of Ladakh. The raiders were reported to have taken away gold and silver ornaments and precious stones from statues of Buddha in some of the monasteries while atrocities on the civil population followed in the usual way.

Details were not available due to lack of proper communications but whatever news trickled through to Srinagar made grim reading. Of about 100,000 Buddhist inhabitants in Ladakh, about 20,000 were in raider-held area part of which was now liberated. There was perfect communal harmony in Ladakh and often there were Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians in the same family.

Leading Ladhak Muslims, including Abdulla Shah, High Priest of Leh, had condemned the hostiles’ vandalism. Members of all communities had formed national militia to participate in the fight against the enemy. The Indian Army and the Kashmir Government had made arrangements for protecting participants in the mela at Himis Monastery scheduled for next day. In peace time over 100,000 people attended this annual fair.

“Three attacks by a party of raiders armed with two medium machine-guns and three light machine-guns were beaten off

by Indian Army pickets situated 80 miles beyond Srinagar and guarding the strategic Zojilla pass from snow covered mountain ranges 15,000 ft. to 17,000 ft. above sea level," said a Defence Ministry communique.

"The enemy launched his first attack at 7 A.M. and by 1 P.M. three attacks had been repulsed although the enemy was still firing from long range. Details of the engagement, which took place at Matyan beyond the pass, and any further developments are awaited.

"Zojila itself is 11,580 ft. above sea level and is about 70 miles from Srinagar via the famed beauty spot of Sonamarg. This is the first engagement in this sector since the enemy was repulsed on May 23 near Machhoi, six miles beyond Zojila, by Patiala troops.

"In that engagement the enemy strength was 200 men, armed with two medium machine-guns, two light machine-guns and two 2" mortars when the Patialas after a bitter fight took a feature two miles beyond Machhoi. The enemy abandoned 21 bodies, 2,785 rounds of ammunition, two rifles and blankets. A captured diary showed that the raiders had started from Chilam Chauki on the junction of two tracks one along Kishenganga and the other leading to Kargil."

Earl Mountbatten relinquished Governor-Generalship to Rajaji. London customs detained on suspicion of carrying illegal cargo a Pak bound plane with Canadian markings.

Poonch linked with headquarters at Jammu. Garhwalis fought hand to hand in Kashmir and captured a Pakistani belonging to 3/12 Frontier Force Rifles.

Dr. Otto Wenger of International Committee of the Red Cross was assured by both "Azad Kashmir" and Indian Governments that prisoners would be treated according to Geneva Convention.

Information received from Peshawar indicated that Jamel Khan, Raja of Hunza, had been appointed Governor of Gilgit by Pak authorities in the name of "Azad Kashmir" Government. Maj. Brown, Assistant Political Agent at Chilas before August 15, 1947, was under detention.

Brig. Ghansara Singh, Kashmir Government's Governor of Gilgit, was now a prisoner in the hands of Raja of Hunza.

Information was also available that direct postal and telegraphic communications had been established between Gilgit and N.W.F.P. and between Gilgit and J&K territory held by enemy up to Gurais, 10 miles from Srinagar. Considerable enemy activity was reported in the area.

A Defence Ministry communique said : "Indian Army entered the township of Gurais early on June 29 morning. Enemy resistance was routed and the raiders are reported to have suffered a large number of casualties. Gurais is an important communications centre in the Gurais valley reputed to be the Eastern Switzerland.

"We occupied the whole of Gurais valley within a few hours. Our troops are still bombing the valley. The enemy was last seen fleeing towards Chorwan, about seven miles beyond Dawar fortress on the Gilgit road. Two hundred hostiles are reported to have been killed in the fighting, which took the form of rearguard action on the part of the enemy.

"An earlier message said the Indian troops in a new drive from Razdhanangan, 54 miles north of Srinagar, had captured Viji Gali, 10 miles further north-east on the Gilgit route.

"Forward troops, the message says, fighting in bitter cold, in rain and snow, are within ten miles of the important communications centre of Gurais.

"Since this frontier flared up on June 24, the enemy has abandoned large quantities of equipment and supplies, including arms two medium machine-guns, 3" mortar shells and small ammunition, tentage, clothing, blankets, etc. One 3" mortar was thrown by the enemy into a nullah. The tentage belongs to J&K State and other equipments to Pak Frontier Constabulary.

"Facing Indian troops are about two battalions of the enemy, mostly consisting of Frontier Constabulary, other Frontier Scouts, Gilgit Scouts and Chitralis. They are very well armed and led and have all the weapons which Indian troops have, except heavy guns.

"The present operations started on June 25, but there was a feint on June 24, when Indian troops caught the enemy napping and captured a large quantity of enemy stores and equipment. On June 25, a night attack was mounted in three to

six ft. of snow and Kuljan Gali hill feature was captured.

“After consolidating their gains the Army moved forward on June 26. At 5.30 P.M. the same day the capture of Viji Gali was reported. Details of the action were not available but the enemy was reported to be armed with three medium machine-guns and some 3” mortars. The enemy so far has been on the run.”

In Skardu

In June Skardu garrison's fate trembled in balance—one day they were extremely happy and confident of overcoming the enemy; the next day they were completely demoralized and vague.

Before taking up the June affairs, let us see what rumours had to say about routing of Biscuit Column in May. Following their order for withdrawal, the column remained out of touch with Srinagar for many days. Later news suggested that the column was ambushed in Kharmang area and suffered 200 killed. Some of its units climbed peaks of the mountains to elude the enemy and perished due to exposure and starvation. Others fell prisoners to the enemy. All this caused utter confusion in the ranks and net result was that the column ceased to exist as such. Only abouts 150 of them reached Srinagar under the command of Col. Kirpal Singh. “Had they advanced towards Skardu, would they have suffered similarly?” is a moot question and its discussion in 1972 would be simply academic.

With the column's extinction, no overland reinforcements could be rushed to Skardu. Even with its passive existence, there was a chance, albeit remote, to clear Kargil-Skardu path of the enemy hold by connecting scattered units. But without it the picture was indeed dismal for Skardu garrison. The news of this disaster completely shattered their morale.

A message from Skardu on June 5 told Srinagar :

“Enemy heavily shelled our positions with 40 3” and 20 2” mortars at 1900 hrs on June 3 from Point 8853. Enemy strength has increased in this area. Enemy ammunition supply seems unlimited while ours practically finished. Our strength also decreasing due to casualty and sickness. Please arrange airstrike and ammunition

drop immediately. Progress our reinforcements appears too slow. Please push them soon. Request for immediate help.”

Another said :

“More enemy movement observed from Gol to Skardu. Please arrange immediate airstrike over villages Sondus, Solting and Kapehan and Point 8853. Ammunition situation very grave. Ration situation also getting serious. Everybody on reduced scales since last two months and may pull on with further reduction up to June end. With present rate of reinforcements’ progress only air can save us.” (8-6-48).

“Jawans have lost faith in us and believe that we tell them all lies. Am afraid some of them may now attempt to desert which will result in disaster to whole garrison”. (8-6-48).

On June 17, the enemy played his trump card. He sent a brainwashed sepoy Amarnath of 5th J & K Infantry, who was captured in Parkutta, with a white flag to Skardu garrison. The sepoy’s mission was to persuade the garrison to surrender. He had also been tutored to demoralize the Jawans. Before he could do much harm, Lt.-Col. Thapa jailed him. The jail was constructed inside the cantonment.

The sepoy had brought the following letter :

“To the officers and men Kashmir State Forces Skardu Garrison from Col. Shahzada Mata-ul-Mulk Commander Azad Chitral Forces Skardu.

“One. All attempts to relieve your garrison by Brig. Faqir Singh, Lt.-Col. Kirpal Singh and Sampuran Bachan Singh have resulted in absolute failure resulting in numerous killed and prisoners taken. Azad Forces are now operating in Kangan-Sonamarg and Bandipur area also in some cases within 15 miles of Srinagar.

“Two. You have done your duty as every soldier should do. Now that it is crystal clear that no relief can reach you in this mountainous area there is no doubt about the ultimate fate of your garrison and I am quite determined about it. It is no use to carry on a struggle which will result in your total annihilation.

“Three. I therefore advise you to lay down arms and I take full responsibility to give protection to one and all. You must believe me and trust me as I am not only a soldier but also possess royal blood. I have given instructions to my officers and men that any one approaching with a white flag will not be fired at but taken into safe custody.

“Four. Lastly as a proof of my goodwill I wish to inform you that not a single non-Muslim property looted or damaged and up till now they carry on their business as if nothing at all had happened. I therefore, advise you to lay down arms and thus save your lives. An officer should accompany back the white flag if you consider my words sincere and honest.”

The Shahzada was the brother of Mehtar of Chitral, who was on ex-I.N.A. officer.

Lt.-Col. Thapa acquainted Srinagar with the above and said :

“Enemy sent with white flag one sepoy Amarnath of Infantry Five now prisoner with enemy to cantonment today. He says enemy two companies of Chitralis reached here yesterday. Two more reaching tomorrow. Enemy had about two companies already in this area. Enemy definite intention to attack Skardu. Enemy headquarters in village Sondus, about three miles west of cantonment. He personally saw heaps of ammunition including about 600 boxes of 303.” (17-6-48)

From Skardu :

“Enemy has practically ceased fire since sepoy Amarnath was sent to us yesterday. Enemy waiting for reply from us. Amarnath further says one wireless set is in village Sondus. Wireless set lost by Coutts is at Kargil and Subedar Abdul Rahman with it. Wireless set lost by Col. Kirpal Singh while coming from Bagicha to Skardu about ten days ago despatched to Gilgit. About five enemy companies moving towards Kargil. He was also told by the enemy commander here that battery guns one or two (numbers) being brought by their reinforcements from Gilgit.” (18-6-48)

From Srinagar :

“Two aircraft coming over you approximately 1000 hrs. Mark own position with letter X.” (19-6-48)

For the first time since Skardu siege started two R.I.A.F. aircraft made their appearance in Skardu sky at about 10.35 A.M. on June 19. First they saluted the cantonment flag by flying past it. They remained over the cantonment area for about half an hour and after displaying aerobatic techniques, one of them fired one burst of its machine-guns on one of our own pickets, presumably mistakenly, and then they left.

On June 20, one aircraft flew in at 10.15 A.M., attacked Point 8853 and Ranbirgarh, which had been occupied by the enemy. Some of the bombs dropped were duds.

Skardu Commander reported :

“Own one aircraft came over us about 10-15 hrs today. Rocketted enemy occupied position east of cantonment (Ranbirgarh) very effectively. Also attacked very accurately Point 8853. It was really a fine show. Please arrange ammunition drop immediately. We have no means of inter-communication with piquets but runners in night. Hence request any information about dropping, strafing, etc., be conveyed to us previous day so that pickets could be informed.”

From Srinagar :

“For Commander Skardu garrison from Army Commander. My best congratulations to your officers and men of Jammu and Kashmir for gallant stand you are making in Skardu. I hope our air action has helped relieve enemy pressure. Will do my utmost to send relief column as early as possible. Signal name of persons recommended for recognition of gallantry and devotion to duty in action.” (22-6-48)

From Skardu :

“Sepoy Amarnath Infantry Five prisoner with enemy was sent to us as emissary on June 17. He is still with us and does not want to go back.” (24-6-48)

“Enemy strength about one company with some coolies came from Sondus side at 1400 hrs and are building about 1000 yds west of our cantonment. May attack

our piquets during night. Could engage but for want of 3" mortar ammunition. Please do arrange ammunition drop without which difficult to stand any large-scale enemy attack." (25-6-48)

"Enemy activity increasing in the area. Please arrange ammunition supply. Enemy shelled our position on June 28 at 1200 and 2030 hrs. We suffered heavy military and civil casualties." (30-6-48)

"Locals with their belongings seen moving from Satpura side towards Sondus. Probably evacuating village Satpura, while garrison happy to see dropping today and all now feel sure that they will not run short of ammunition and ration. Suggest aircraft engage Point 8853 while dropped packages are being collected from open." (30-6-48).

Although the garrison was very happy at the appearance of aircraft—some of the Jawans even jumped out of their trenches and cheered and shouted with joy disregarding their own safety—the aircraft unfortunately could not carry much load as they were Tempest fighters and not transporters. The Jawans kept repeating "Ab To Zinda Phar Lenge" (now we will catch them alive) and the aircraft dropped one or two containers only. The contents of one container were as follows : 12 bombs of 3" mortar and 300 round of 303 ammunition, 12 rifle grenades and 500 cigarettes. It was a very limited quantity of supply.

The aim of the pilots while releasing the containers was also erratic which resulted in 50% of the supplies falling in enemy's hands. The frequency of drops was also irregular and mostly after a long interval. Therefore, it was impossible for Tempests to maintain the garrison which required a minimum daily ration of 800 lbs. plus ammunition.

JULY, 1948

In Delhi

A Press release said: "One more enemy attack has been repulsed by Indian troops guarding the snow-bound Zojila pass, about 70 miles from Srinagar. On June 29 after receiving reinforcements the enemy made a determined bid to overrun our forward positions beyond the pass. They concentrated particularly on one Indian detachment with medium machine-gun and mortar fire and then tried to assault our positions. The raiders approached within 200 yds. but our isolated detachment put up a gallant defence and halted them. After a six hour battle the raiders were beaten back and dispersed."

Hostiles in Kashmir were using 25 pounders, 4.2" mortars and light anti-aircraft guns. Indian troops and R.I.A.F. remained active on different fronts in Kashmir, chasing the enemy and hitting his positions. Brig. Usman was killed in action.

Said a communique: "In Skardu, the enemy mortared our garrison on the night of June 28-29. Our aircrafts were effectively engaged in this area and dropped supplies to the hard-pressed garrison, which is still holding out in spite of heavy odds.

"In the Leh sector, our troops engaged the enemy at Khalatsa bridge on the Indus, and at Biagdangdu in the Nubra

valley. The enemy attacks were successfully beaten off.

“On the Sonamarg front the enemy was observed bringing more reinforcements beyond Machhoi. Our mortars scored direct hits on the enemy medium machine-gun.

“In the Gurais area the enemy suffered 258 casualties including 40 dead. A large number of fresh graves have been seen in the area indicating that the enemy had buried some of those killed earlier. Arms and ammunition captured by our troops in this sector include three pistols, one medium machine-gun, magazines, huge quantity of ammunition (including anti-aircraft) ammunition and signal equipment sufficient for three companies.

“The local population in this area complained that forced labour was exacted from them by the enemy who snatched away cattle and food stuff from the people.

“On the Chakoti front, the retreating enemy from Pir Kanthi ridge was chased by our troops. The enemy suffered eight killed and a large number of mules belonging to the enemy were done to death. Our aircraft engaged an enemy convoy on this front and a number of 3 ton lorries and jeeps belonging to the enemy were seen burning or damaged.”

Indian forces captured a strategic town in Pir Panjal pass area and seized ammunition with Pak markings.

While opening Pathankot-Jammu road, Pt. Nehru said that Pakistan was built on lies and thrived on deceit. In the beginning it feigned to take no part in the fighting (in Kashmir) adding that a few hot-headed tribesmen had entered the State against its wishes. Now Pak forces had stealthily entered the State.

“One cannot respect an enemy like that. One respects the enemy that fights openly. We have from the very beginning never concealed our intentions. We must protect the State that has willingly come to us for help. We shall do so with all our resources,” Mr. Nehru said.

Government of India barred Muslims returning from Pakistan to resettle in India.

Indian troops captured new features in Uri-Pir Kanthi sector and briskly patrolled all the other fronts.

A Defence Ministry communique said : "In the mightiest strike the R.I.A.F. has so far made in Kashmir a strong force of R.I.A.F. aircraft today for the first time heavily plastered raiders supply basis in far off Gilgit and blew up raider military installations there. The attack was concentrated and achieved very satisfactory results. The aircraft attacked with rockets and 20 M.M. cannons. Gilgit is the main supply base for raiders in Skardu, Kishenganga, Leh and Sonamarg."

Raiders adopted loot and flee tactics again.

A Press release said: "Our artillery dispersed enemy concentration 10 miles north-east of Gurais on July 14. The local population confirmed that the enemy carried away his casualties on stretchers. Our troops from Gurais were out on offensive patrolling. Confidence has been restored in this area and the locals, who had been forced to leave their homes by the enemy, are fast returning."

When U.N. Commission on Kashmir, which was in India, called for cessation of propaganda to facilitate settlement of the Kashmir dispute, Mr. Nehru told it in no uncertain terms that its appeal raises no issue for India. Pakistan assured the commission that she would observe restraint.

"In a patrol encounter west of Leh on July 19, our troops dispersed an enemy party and captured 2" mortars and some stores. Documents captured show that, amongst those fighting against our troops, are personnel from Gilgit area.

"A company of hostiles, armed with machine-guns and 3" mortars, fired heavily on our troops in the area north-east of Gurais, but were silenced by our guns," said a Press release.

Another communique said: "Beyond the Zojila pass our artillery neutralized enemy mortar fire and active patrolling continued in the hilly snow-covered countryside."

A military spokesman denied Pak Press reports that Zojila had been captured by enemy. He also denied "other exaggerated claims" made by Pak papers and said Indian Army was holding Zojila pass and territory miles beyond it. The enemy's claim of having shot down a bomber near Khalaste in Ladakh was another fantastic assumption.

Indian Army captured two Pak soldiers.

In Skardu

By July the vitality of the Jawans was reduced to zero level. Almost all of them were suffering from one disease or the other. Often malaria, dysentery and diarrhoea patients—both military and civilians—relapsed, creating more problems, as no specific drugs were available for their treatment. Only panniers were obtainable. Ladies' saris and cotton from quilts provided bandage material.

Doctors admirably performed surgery without anaesthesia—and it used to be for the betterment of the patients—but the patients' screams during and after the operation were heart rending and demoralizing. Usually the patient was tied with the bed and many hands pinned him down during the operation.

Once one expulsion gave 17 casualties and many among the wounded died for want of proper medical care. This sort of happening was another demoralizing factor.

After repeated requests, a few penicillin and anti-tetanus drug phials were air dropped. But here, too, an unscrupulous store-keeper, or some other person, played a dirty trick. The dated on 12 penicillin phials had expired. Hence the medicines' potency was reduced. To line his own pocket, the chiseller had despatched off ineffective and old stock of medicine to Skardu. The chiseller was not worried if the garrison lived or died, or, if, by implication, his country breathed in freedom or slavery. However, it added to the trend of demoralization already set in.

The death roll due to enemy action was daily mounting. The Jawans had been reduced to bags of bones for want of food, improper medical assistance and prolonged and constant battle strain.

They augmented their three chhatak daily ration with green grass (boiled as spinach) and mulberries.

Yet a majority of them stuck with their guns; a few deserted. The latter had a little chance of surviving the enemy or equally cruel mountains.

During this month another mishap happened. The battery charging engine failed and thereby rendered the wireless set incommunicado for a few days. The importance of communications with the outside world during a siege is well recognized universally. Skardu was no exception. Everybody made a

beeline to Mr. Thapa's office to enquire about the set's condition. They anxiously kept coming till they were assured that the set had started functioning.

Let us now examine a few messages exchanged then.

From Skardu:

"Enemy sniping continued. Our aircraft engaged Point 8853 and areas in villages Solting and Kapehan. Probably they observed some enemy movement in above villages. Enemy location not exactly on Point 8853 but in area of Satpura has built dummy trenches. Container dropped will be collected tomorrow and acknowledged." (1-7-48)

"Enemy sniping. Understand Dakotas cannot undertake dropping over Skardu and fighters have to maintain air. We so far received only 36 3" mortar bombs, 1,300 303 ammunition and 12 rifle grenades. Though much helpful but considering our demand and daily expenditure much more ammunition is still required. Problem of ration getting acute. Daily consumption of ration 10 mds. After a week we won't have any ration. Request with ammunition a month's ration be dropped immediately. "(3-7-48)

"In addition to ration, munition (battery) charging set stopped working. Request immediate dropping of first two and third spare parts." (5-7-48)

"Ration situation most serious. Reserve totally finished. Please arrange drop tomorrow at any cost." (10-7-48)

"Rations totally finished since yesterday. Situation grave. Please save by immediate dropping." (12-7-48)

"With very little stock we have tried to feed our garrison for more than five months. For last one week we are living on barley which we had collected for animals. Barley even is finished. It has sickened 70% garrison. Ammunition little and impossible to stand even one attack which enemy is bound to launch soon.

"Reinforcements from all side 100 miles from us. Only way to help and prolong garrison's life is drop from air. Again request dropping of ammunition and ration from

air before it is too late.” (16-7-48)

Even though the Jawans had suffered so much they were still willing to make sacrifice. They themselves ate barley and let the children and women be fed on wheat. This gesture was wholly voluntary.

Here is a very important message from Western Command to higher authorities sent on July 16.

“Air supply to Skardu. Minimum daily requirement of supplies 800 lbs. That is two sorties plus two sorties required for ammunition, ordnance and medical stores.

“Two additional sorties considered necessary to build up some reserves. Thus making minimum six Tempest sorties daily until garrison relieved.

“This not possible with present resources. Garrison supply finished July 9. You will appreciate air supply by Tempest aircraft wasteful unless for very limited period. Request GOC-In-C’s ruling whether garrison to hold out in which case arrange supply drop by Tempest aircraft from Air Headquarter’s resources. Suggest if no immediate plans for relief garrison be allowed to surrender.”

From Skardu:

“Two of our aircraft came and very accurately and effectively strafed and bombed Point 8853 and Kapehan on July 16. Received one package containing atta 75, rice 75, sugar 15, salt 7, tea $2\frac{1}{2}$ lbs., 24 milk tins and 2000 multi-vitamin tablets.” (17-4-48)

“One of our piquets saw three casualties being removed from Point 8853 afternoon aircraft engaged enemy on July 16.” (18-7-48)

“Own aircraft came over us twice on July 17—two sorties each time. Dropped five containers. Aircraft engaged enemy more in Kapehan area and beyond. They rocketed Point 8853 very accurately and effectively. It was a wonderful show indeed.” (19-7-48)

Actually the aircraft’s second visit was quite unexpected. Lt.-Col. Thapa thought that they came from the enemy and took precautionary measures by forbidding everybody not to

venture out of their rooms. But once it was established that the aircraft were Indian, it was very much difficult to restrain people's joy. They laughed and they shouted and they talked excitedly. Second appearance of our aircraft within a day was surely a delightful topic.

From Skardu:

“Enemy sniping continued whole night.” (20-7-48)

“Enemy sniping continued whole day. Please arrange ammunition and ration drop immediately. Hard up. Enemy also using tracer 303 ammunition.” (25-7-48)

“Enemy fired heavily on our positions during night July 29-30 and used mortar and rifle grenades.” (30-7-48)

“Enemy strength two sections seen moving from Satpura direction towards Sondus on July 29. Rations completely finished. Humanly not possible to live without rations any further. Ammunition situation as already reported very grave. Request for immediate ration and ammunition drop.” (30-7-48)

AUGUST, 1948

In Delhi

Liaquat Ali Khan was silent that he had informed U.N. Commission on Kashmir that Pak troops were actively fighting in Kashmir. India felt that its stand was vindicated in the U.N. by Pak admission. England wished to extract British army officers in India and Pakistan, who were facing each other with guns in their hands in Kashmir.

India protested to Pakistan over its soldiers' involvement in Kashmir. Mr. Nehru warned that Kashmir campaign may be extended because of Pak fighting on Kashmir soil.

A hostiles' attack was beaten in Tithwal sector, they yielded ground in Chakoti area and were kept in check in all sectors.

Hereunder are listed a few Press communiques issued by the Government of India :

(I) "In the snow-covered area around the Zojila pass over 300 hostiles trying to approach our pickets were engaged by our supporting arms. Eleven direct hits were scored and the hostiles are believed to have suffered 40 killed and four wounded.

"Earlier our positions in this area were fired at by the enemy with 3" mortars, medium machine-guns and Brown-ing guns. Our mortars silenced the enemy fire."

(II) "Except for one minor engagement in the Zojila pass

area there is little to report during the past 24 hours. Exchange of artillery and mortar fire, however, continued in all sectors.

“South of the Zojila the enemy supported by 3” mortars and medium machine-guns attacked our picket on the afternoon of August 10. Our troops repulsed the attack successfully and inflicted casualties on the enemy, estimated at 15 killed and four wounded.”

(III) A small Indian Army force is keeping the enemy at bay in the Ladakh valley, west of Leh on a snow-covered feature 17,900 ft. high.

“Reports from Leh indicate that the enemy has looted several villages in the Ladakh valley and is forcing Buddhist monks to work as labourers. Cows and goats belonging to local villagers are being slaughtered daily.

“Our southern piquets in Skardu were attacked by the enemy under cover of heavy machine-gun fire. The attack was successfully repulsed by our troops, who inflicted casualties on the enemy, eight counted killed and 12 wounded. Heavy enemy fire and shelling continued on our position in this area on August 13. The enemy also fired 15 rounds from 3.7 Howitzers. Enemy building bunkers beyond Zojila were engaged and dispersed by our patrols.”

(IV) “An enemy platoon climbing a hill in the Zojila pass area was engaged by our troops. The enemy suffered eight casualties. Our forward positions in this area were shelled by the enemy who fired light 3” mortars and 16 shells from 3.7 Howitzers.

The following epitaph was written for Skardu on or around August 19 :

“The small besieged State Force garrison at Skardu, in Baltistan, held by about 200 men has been unable to maintain contact with our Force Headquarters in Kashmir since August 14. It is presumed that the garrison has been overwhelmed by the enemy.

“Situated in Baltistan, Skardu is on the river Indus, about 100 miles north-east of Srinagar.

“Guarding the Skardu fort the J&K State troops became responsible for over 200 refugees who sought shelter with them when the enemy overran the surrounding areas and terrorized

the local population. Holding out without adequate supplies since November (?) last year, the men of this garrison were obliged to live on short rations.

“Contacts by air with this garrison during the winter months necessitated flights over high snow-capped hills was impossible, while surface communications were no less hazardous. Nevertheless despite the hazards involved in the flight, whenever possible pilots of the R.I.A.F. flew sorties to drop supplies and some quantities of ammunition to our garrison in Skardu.

“The gallant resistance put up by this small garrison for eight months (?) against overwhelming odds will go down in the history of Kashmir campaign as an epic.

“Intense enemy activity had recently been reported in the area surrounding this small garrison. Enemy forces in great strength, well armed and well equipped, had been making repeated attempts to overrun the small number of State Force troops. But the resistance put up by the gallant band of men holding the Skardu fort against a well-equipped army, outnumbering them several times, was so determined that the enemy was forced to bring in 3.7 Howitzers to overwhelm the garrison.”

Words, words, words, meaningless, idiotic and useless words were they. The Indian propaganda masters could at least have publicized the names of the Army personnel and civilians in Skardu. It might have saved many lives.

In Skardu

The Pakistanis, unable to break the resistance of Skardu garrison, brought into action 3.7" Howitzers on August 9. The first day they shelled all our pickets from 5 P.M. to 6 p.m. with about 300 bombs, interspersed with mortar fire. One Jawan was wounded slightly. One of our piquets put one Howitzer out of action by firing one burst from an L.M.G. and killing all the gun's crew. For two days the enemy's impotent silence on Howitzer front was a matter of great chortling for us. But this euphoria was shortlived.

On August 12, the enemy resumed his business of shelling at 6.30 P.M. This time he concentrated on one picket only and followed the shelling by an attack with about two compa-

nies. Both sides used hand grenades abundantly. Hand to hand combat ensued. The enemy was able to come right up to our bunkers, but could not hold his position there; so he withdrew.

The battle lasted four hours. One Jawan was wounded. But the piquet ran short of ammunition and had to be supplied with the last reserve box of 303 ammunition from the cantonment during the fighting.

The entrance of Howitzers proved the proverbial last straw for the Skardu garrison. The demoralization trend that had already set in broke its bonds and open hostility and indiscipline replaced humility and obedience in the ranks. Still a majority of them were willing to obey orders. There was no solid news to cheer them, apart from empty promises and worthless praise showered on them from time to time from Srinagar.

Examine these messages and judge for yourself what could they have done under the circumstance ?

From Skardu :

“Ranks have lost confidence in officers due to false promises. Likely desertions. Ninety per cent sick for want of food.” (2-8-48)

“One container got detached (from the parachute) and contents totally destroyed. Two containers dropped probably in enemy occupied areas. One container collected contents : rice 100, ghee 20, tea 5, sugar 12, dal 15 lbs. and milk 15 tins.” (4-8-48)

Mostly to prod Srinagar to some constructive action than to sop the ranks, Lt.-Col. Thapa called a conference and conveyed its decisions to his headquarters on August 5.

“Starving and demoralized garrison of Skardu decided in officers’ and N.C.Os.’ conference on August 4 to withdraw after six months’ fight. Following were considered to arrive at above conclusion.

“One. Failure to maintain us with ration and ammunition. Two. No hope of reinforcements. Three. To avoid falling in enemy hands I visualize withdrawal which will cause many lives but may save complete disaster resulting from desertion of soldiers.

“On withdrawal I will have to leave behind all civilian refugees and wounded. It is no doubt inhuman and cruel but cannot help it. With all civilians impracticable to get out of this position very strongly held by enemy.

“Will you please signal immediately. A. What route we should follow? B. What help can you possibly give us during withdrawal? On hearing from you will signal my plan with date of action. Immediate reply requested.”

Upon receiving this message Srinagar quickly promised that a specially fitted Dakota would be flown to Skardu to drop supplies.

From Srinagar :

“You have held on for approximately six months under very difficult conditions. In view of U.N. Commission and fact finding mission arrangements for your regular maintenance have been completed and your relief is being planned. You will not withdraw leaving all civilians at mercy of hostiles and at total risk of getting your garrison annihilated while in process of withdrawal.

“Under no condition will you therefore withdraw from Skardu without prior permission of this headquarters.”
(6-8-48)

Evidently too much importance was being attached to the U.N. Commission and not to our own preparation to defeat the enemy.

From Skardu :

“Enemy heavily mortared and fired own positions on August 1. Own one sepoy killed. Lot of enemy ponies and porters movement observed from village Sondus towards Satpura and vice versa on August 1.”
(6-8-48)

The two faces of brass hats, and thereby the country's political leadership, can best be underlined by reproducing the following message sent from Srinagar to Western Command.

“Skardu garrison in officers' and N.C.Os.' conference

on August 4 decided to withdraw from Skardu on account of following reasons.

“A. Apprehension on part of garrison commander of mass desertions on account of low morale of troops. B. Difficulty of maintenance ; consequently garrison half starved and fighting with practically no ammunition. C. No prospects of early relief reaching the garrison.

“Impossible to continue deceiving garrison any longer on false hope of maintenance and relief.” (7-8-48)

From Skardu :

“Own casualty one died of wounds on August 8. Please arrange immediate drop of rations and ammunition as one or two containers dropped occasionally not much help.” (9-8-48)

“Our aircraft effectively engaged enemy positions on Point 8853 and in Ranbirgarh on August 7. One N.C.O. wounded this afternoon.” (10-8-48)

“Rations are literally finished. Very little ammunition left. As requested two or three Tempests must undertake daily dropping till Dakotas get moving. Otherwise disaster of this garrison imminent. Please put Dakotas into operation immediately if maintenance of this garrison is really intended.” (10-8-48)

“Enemy heavily shelled and mortared our position on August 11 between 1830 and 1930 hrs. Enemy used 3.7 gun and fired 80 shells. Enemy fired same number mortar bombs. Casualty one sepoy wounded. Cannot stress more gravity of ration and ammunition situation But not being realized by you. If adequate arrangements cannot be made say so and bid us goodbye.” (12-8-48)

To which Srinagar answered :

“Personal from Divisional Commander. Your wireless conversation of August 13. Please convey my congratulation to all ranks under your command for putting up such a magnificent show and beating back well-determined enemy attacks on your positions on August 11 and 12 and at the same time inflicting heavy casual-

ties on the enemy.

“Plans for your relief are ready and are being put into operation very soon. You will hear more details very shortly. Aircraft carrying supplies and ammunition for you and for your offensive support are waiting at Srinagar airport and will be flown to you the moment weather clears.” (13-8-48)

On the evening of August 13, Lt.-Col. Thapa called another meeting of officers and N.C.Os. and laid his cards on the table. Ammunition and ration situation was critical and the enemy pressure was daily mounting. Srinagar was only making false promises and declining permission to withdraw. The ranks were getting restless and hostile. What should be the solution?

It was decided that the Skardu garrison should surrender in the larger interest of the starving and sick population inside the cantonment. Those who wished to withdraw should be allowed to take with them whatever arms and ammunition they wished. It was thought better that the arms should be given to the retreating personnel than that they should fall in the enemy hands. The officers and N.C.Os., as far as possible, should stay on, if for nothing else, to obey Srinagar order of August 6 and give moral support to the wounded and stretcher cases.

On the historical morning of August 14, 1948, exactly six months and 3 days after Skardu was attacked, Lt.-Col. Thapa informed Srinagar :

“As already expected and intimated to you whole of garrison deserted on August 13-14 night. My officers tried their best to stop them but all effort failed. They had become disobedient and rude.

“The following are left behind. Do not know what fate we are going to meet in a minute or two. Goodbye and good luck. Don't send air now.

“Col. Sher Jang Thapa, Capt. Ganga Singh, Capt. Prabhat Singh, Lt. Ajit Singh, Dr. Lt. Parkash Singh, Dr. Lt. Amrit Lal, Jem. Lakshmi Singh, Hav. Prem Singh, Hav. Chet Singh, Hav. Sewa Singh, L/Hav. Sarb Singh, Nk Surat Singh, Nk. Ram Chand, Nk. Ratan Singh, Nk. Sant Ram, Nk. Bhupinder Singh, L/Nk.

Somam Durje, L/Nk. Jagrath Singh.

Thus India presented Baltistan and the adjoining areas to Pakistan in a platter in August, 1948.

EPILOGUE

Suraj narrated :

The night of August 13-14 was that of utter chaos in the Skardu cantonment. Jawans took whatever guns and ammunition they could carry and after bidding farewell to their stranded colleagues they dissolved themselves in the darkness of the night. Our group, comprising mother, the guru, our servants, a disabled Jawan hobbling on crutches and myself, also made a bid to run towards Srinagar, but were stopped by an N.C.O. right outside the cantonment. He was sure we would not last the arduous journey.

My friend Bansi Lal went away with the Jawans.

The disabled Jawan had come to our family ever since the talk of retreating had gained currency. He said his wound had healed but he would not be able to keep pace with the healthy Jawans, so he requested permission to accompany us. We were glad to have him. After our forced return to the cantonment, the Jawan was crestfallen for a while and then he said brightly : “Why shouldn’t I join the entourage of your servants to dodge the enemy ?” We saw no reason why he should not.

Some other civilians ran about wildly, screaming and shouting in confusion. Many young women and girls jumped out of the windows, ran out of doors and committed suicide by leaping in the Indus. One girl was washed ashore thrice : the Indus refused to protect her from a fate worse than death.

Many women took poison, but its date of potency had expired and was ineffective. However, three of them got buried alive after taking poison—their relatives presumed them dead.

It was only by the early hours of the morning that a sort of lull descended on the cantonment. Lt.-Col. Thapa and his colleagues sat together, smoking, drinking and bartering stories of this war and that. They were tired of running after suicide cases. Sepoy Amarnath of 5th J & K Infantry was taken out of jail and given a VIP treatment, as he was the only link available with the enemy.

As the sun rose, Lt.-Col. Thapa informed Srinagar about the situation, destroyed the wireless set and burnt all the files and papers. His colleague also saw to it that no intact arms or live ammunition fell in the enemy hands. Only a week earlier, they had blown up all the obsolete cannons lying around the cantonment, which were also used to dislodge the enemy from the houses surrounding the cantonment in April.

Sepoy Amarnath was given the white flag he had brought with him to the cantonment in June and an N.C.O. accompanied him to the enemy camp with a message of surrender under Geneva Convention. The N.C.O. returned alone to say that surrender had been accepted without any hitch. He was thrilled at the civilized treatment received at the hands of the enemy. He had been fed properly and given unambiguous assurance of protection and civil behaviour towards all the cantonment population.

Even if the enemy had not promised anything, what choice did we have? None.

The Pakistanis wanted the lists of the officers, the wounded and the civilians, which were sent to them through the N.C.O. Then the former ordered through the N.C.O. that all officers should walk out of the cantonment unarmed and in formation leaving behind the wounded and the civilians. The officers should see to it that the wounded were at one place for quick "medical relief."

The disabled Jawan we had, therefore, parted very happily from us.

In the afternoon, as we restlessly waited in or near our respective rooms for the arrival of Pakistanis, their one column

walked in, with their rifles ready at the shoulder in firing position and the trigger almost half pressed. Although they were dressed like local tribals, their dark skins betrayed them. They were surely well-trained combatants of highest calibre.

The sight was too dreadful for me as a child. Involuntarily, I screamed in terror and embraced guru's legs for protection. We were standing in the verandah and my scream almost cost me my life, as the leader of the column lowered his rifle to shoot me, but the guru had sense enough to raise his hands in submission and shout : "Don't kill the child". Very slowly the leader turned his rifle away. The critical moment had passed.

The combatants were followed by Chitralis, wearing shorts and ram's head ensign of Gilgit Scouts on their pillar-box type rolled-up caps.

The Chitralis herded our family together with other civilians towards the countryside. They did not even allow us to carry our cooking utensils. They said all our luggage would follow us and laughed. We could not understand their joke. That was the last time we saw our belongings.

We travelled about seven miles on foot. On the way, firstly, the Sikh families were separated from us. Secondly, all males were segregated from the women and children. Our group of women and children, numbering about 100, was given a shack in a village to rest. Nobody thought of food.

Even the rest was very temporary. As it was already dusk when we had reached the shack, the night enveloped the countryside quickly. Instead of allowing us a respite from the tiredness and fear, the Pakistani Commander ordered that the prisoners should be searched thoroughly before being permitted to sleep. The search was actually an excuse to feel the pleasure of the women's bodies and to confiscate all the gold or other valuables with them.

Mother asked me to request the commander that she should be spared this indignity. When I approached him, he wanted to know my identity. I told him. My family background or perhaps the thought that one woman either way made no difference forced him to put a reliable guard for mother's protection.

I sat awake the whole night and watched with horror the women and girls being selected for the satisfaction of lust just

as the well-developed goats are chosen for sacrifice. Even though the guard was there, whenever some Chitralis or Gilgit Scouts moved towards our corner, which they often did due to the smallness of the shack, I would throw myself on their feet and humbly request not to harm my mother. They laughed at my antics, but, thank God, did nothing else. Both mother and myself kept reciting holy mantras quietly all through the night.

First, the soldiers had the decency not to rape women in front of the children. They were dragged out of the shack and then ravished. But with the advance of night their goodness evaporated : they started having the women right inside the shack and in front of everybody.

In the morning I requested the commander to allow us a servant. The guru came instead. That was all the more better, We had milkless tea, boiled in a borrowed utensil over an improvised stove of three stones and fallen dry twigs. The commander kindly invited me for dinner, which I attended. The assault on women had started by the time I returned. As our corner had become comparatively safe, all the beautiful women and girls sought shelter there—and almost all of them were beautiful. I was completely exhausted with sleeplessness and tension—so I fell asleep. Next morning I was told that the guru was kicked by a soldier when he tried to save a girl from being dragged out.

Three nights and two days passed like that. We ate whatever we could get, which was not much. Father's valuable watch, which mother had found in the overcoat in February, was still with us and fearing that some soldier might snatch it away, we decided to give it to the commander for safekeeping. The commander consumed it later.

Actually, we wanted to give the watch to Lt.-Col. Thapa, who was imprisoned in another shack along with other officers, and the jewellery mother wore, but he refused to accept it, as he said he was uncertain of his future.

Mr. Thapa's shack was in between our shack and the Pakistani commander's quarters. As I kept running from our shack to the commander's quarters for one reason or another, I would as often peep in Mr. Thapa's shack. The Pakistani sentries guarding the shack were either lax, or overconfident or

indifferent to a child. Whatever it was, nobody stopped me.

On the first morning of our imprisonment I observed that N.C.Os. were cooking a meal for the officers in the P.O.W. shack. On the second morning, all the Sikh P.O.Ws. were missing. They had been taken away, I was told. On the third morning, the officers themselves, including Mr. Thapa, were seen cooking their meals—meaning the N.C.Os. had also been separated from them. Needless to add that Mr. Thapa and his colleagues looked haggard.

Later I was informed that the wounded P.O.Ws. left behind in the cantonment were the first victims of Pakistani wanton and cold blooded killing. As about 24 hours had lapsed after the surrender, it could be safely presumed that the murders of P.O.Ws. were undertaken either with the connivance or explicit orders of Pakistani High Command.

However, the stretcher cases were brutally hauled out of beds and dragged over the stony path to Indus—in which river they were thrown alive. It was reported that the Pakistani's efforts were aimed at inflicting as much pain as possible on the wounded before their death. To achieve this end, either the wounded was dragged by the amputated limb or his wound was exposed to stones. Other wounded were either bayoneted or shot dead. No wounded P.O.W. was left alive.

Then the Pakistanis concentrated on Sikh P.O.Ws. and civilians. All the Sikh P.O.Ws. were killed very cruelly. Capt. Ganga Singh was stoned till he was reduced to a pulp. As he was still alive, he was left alone for a few days to die a painful death.

No adult male Sikh returned alive from Skardu. They were all murdered, often horribly. Even those boys among the Sikh community who had only developed a hint of moustache were not spared. They were also hacked to death. The Sikh mothers were served with an ultimatum that if any of their male child was seen with long hair he would be killed immediately. The net result was that no Sikh male could be identified in Skardu because all of them had had an haircut.

Adobescent Hardev Singh was thrown in Indus with stones tied to him with his turban, when he started abusing and pelting Pakistans, whom he saw killing his father, brother and

uncles. He was saved by a Balti tailor few hundred yards down the river and kept hidden—even from his mother.

On the third morning after capitulation, our guru was lured away on the plea that some luggage had to be carried for the Pak army and he being an able bodied person should help. Perhaps the guru understood his end was very near. He bade us farewell in a very touching fashion and left. He was murdered along with other Sikh civilians.

Before proceeding further with my story in Skardu, let us examine the testimony of those Jawans who withdrew from Skardu and reached safety. Bansi Lal was with them.

Statement of L/Nk. Ganga Singh and three O.R. of 6th J&K Infantry : “Since July 15 we had to live on one chapati a day in Skardu. When the situation became very grave due to lack of rations and ammunition and daily pressure of hostiles, Lt.-Col. Thapa gave his decision that he was going to surrender to the hostiles. He said that any of us who could escape may do so.

“On Augt 23 afterernon we reached Talel. A party of seven O.Rs. of our unit had also arrived there before we did. The locals had reported their presence to the hostiles who are about 200 in that area. We do not know about their fate but we escaped into the nearby jungle and from there with the help of shepherds made our way to Sonamarg. We followed Skardu-Satpura-Deosai Plains-Talel Sonamarg route.”

L/Hav. Faquir Singh said: “We belonged to a party of 200 men including Jem. Thakar Singh who withdrew from Skardu. When we reached Olthing, we came under heavy enemy fire and split up into several small parties. Most of us escaped into the neighbouring jungles and hills. We crossed Deosai Plains and were captured by the hostiles. First we were taken to Gumri and then to Machhoi. The son of Raja of Nagar, Lt. Shah Mohamed, was in command of the hostiles. The hostiles are making use of the civilian tell-links as far as Zojila.

“Then we were sent to Dras where we found 100 Punjabi Muslim soldiers working with the hostiles. There were 35 prisoners in Dras. Few of them belonged to Col. Kirpal Singh’s column, two wounded Jawans of 5/11 Gurkha Regiment and

the rest were escapees from Skardu garrison. Col. Kirpal Singh's men had lost their toes due to frostbite. We learnt that by the end of September all prisoners were to be marched off to Gilgit. The treatment accorded to these prisoners was far from satisfactory. They were not given any blankets and the food was often mixed with mud."

Sepoy Hari Singh reported : "I left with 35 men of my platoon from Skardu and 54 men from another platoon joined us at Deosai after four days journey. On way to Talel, enemy ambushed us and opened fire. We returned the fire. When our ammunition was exhausted all others surrendered. I managed to escape and went up on a hill, where I had to hide for nine days. I destroyed my L.M.G. when I had no ammunition. I reached Talel which was full of enemy. From there I proceeded towards Kangan. I had to cross a river but fortunately the sentry guarding the bridge was sleeping in the bunker. I reached Kangan and reported to Kashmir Infantry."

The fourth morning of our imprisonment in Skardu saw Ahmed Khan, a Wazarat peon and an old faithful orderly of our household, standing outside our shack with his pony wearing a cushioned saddle and the news that we were free to go anywhere we liked. With folded hands he told mother: "I have brought my pony for you, Bibiji. I will arrange another one for Suraj Saheb. Please accompany me and grace my house. My house is the only place where your shoes should be."

Ahmed Khan was a sensitive, tobacco-chewing Kashmiri, who had migrated to Skardu, married and settled down. He had served father earlier also. At that time father was appointed as Tehsildar in this district. Ahmed Khan was fragile in appearance, but rock-solid in his ideas. None could shake his allegiance to the Maharaja, thereby India.

Before we could say anything to Ahmed Khan, another peon came from Teasildar Wilayat Ali Khan and requested us that both Tehsildar Saheb and his wife desired us to stay with them. Ahmed Khan was very angry at this interruption. And consequently a few hot words were exchanged between the two peons. Somehow we mollified Ahmed Khan by telling him that it was not wise either for him or us to antagonize Tehsildar Saheb. As yet there was no hope of our leaving

Skardu, therefore, it made no difference if we stayed with the Tehsildar first and with him later. We followed the Tehsildar's peon and a dejected Ahmed Khan went his way.

We had the choice of two households to reside in, but there were other unfortunate Hindu-Sikh families whom nobody was willing to adopt except at a price. The price used to be the woman or young girl of the family serving as a concubine to the lord and master of the house. Many Punjabi and 6th Infantry soldiers were "kind enough" to provide shelter to miserable refugees in this manner.

However, we could not stay long at the mercy of Tehsildar Saheb. He had kindly provided us with a separate cottage, best of rations and even an orderly to fetch whatever else we needed; but something—some subtle link of camaraderie—was missing. As the rumour floated that the Tehsildar Saheb was made the acting Wazir of Skardu, it was very courteously and indirectly suggested to us that we should go to Ahmed Khan. Equally courteously we accepted the suggestion.

(Now that I reflect on the suggestion, its absurdity makes me laugh. We were told that Tehsildar Saheb would have to move to the city from the countryside for administrative reasons and the city was still unsafe for us. Hence we should stay on in the countryside.)

When Ahmed Khan was informed he was overjoyed. He came at once with his pony and took us away. He made our stay as comfortable as possible and even went out of his way to make us happy. Here it was that Sarfraz Khan, the killer of my father, met us for the first time after murdering father.

"If you are having any financial difficulty," Sarfraz told mother, "I will be willing to pay for the upbringing of your child. If there is anything else I can do for you, I will be glad to do so."

It had taken a lot of persuasion for mother to face him. He was insisting on meeting her and she was adamant not to see him. Ultimately her curiosity about how her husband was killed brought her face to face with Sarfraz.

She said, holding back her tears with difficulty :

"I cannot forget your kindness. The God will look after

my child. But tell me how did you kill my husband ?”

“Please forget about the past,” Sarfraz said. “What can we gain by discussing it ?”

“Was my husband tortured ?”

“No.”

“How was he killed then ?”

“I shot him”. So saying Sarfraz got up and left the house.

Mother ordered me to follow him and find out how had he shot father. I confronted him outside and there he told me with much ado that he had fired a Stengun burst which killed the Wazir. Just at that time a muezzin took up the cry for evening prayer and I felt very lonely.

It was in Ahmed Khan’s house, that I embraced Islam, though for a day or two. One day as I reached the brook to fetch water, I saw a bullock had been killed in the village square and many persons were crowding it for their share of beef. The village Hadji invited me as well. Upon my refusal, he said either I should become a Mussulman or eat beef; otherwise I was chharoo (unholy) and unfit to touch the brook water. Instead of eating beef I preferred to read the Koran, but due to its complicated pronunciation, I could not progress beyond the first two lines.

As has been observed in this book earlier, many habits of Baltis reminded one of orthodox Hindus. Anything and anybody, who was a non-Balti, was chharoo—even their new-found Pakistani friends were not spared. The Baltis did not permit others to touch their utensils, as it was chharoo. There were many other customs that made foreigners chharoo, but I cannot remember them.

Once Ahmed Khan’s wife asked me along with her family to deposit excrement in their field as manure. No sooner did I pick up the basket to obey her that Ahmed Khan returned. He was so angry that he slapped her in my presence. That was the last time anybody in Ahmed Khan’s house asked me to do work.

Thereafter proper administration and Pakistani politicians made their simultaneous appearance in Skardu. The result was that all the refugees were gathered in a camp and provided for. Our first camp commander had vowed to shave only

after Skardu fell. His second vow—to shave when Kashmir was conquered—proved abortive.

Every night provisions were rushed to the frontier by porters and ponies to escape observation from the sky. One night we heard from inside the house, which was our camp, one rebellious porter being shot dead. His shooting followed the argument by the porter that he was dead tired and wanted a rest. This sort of incidents were quite common. So was the lashing. Neither were Pakistanis ashamed to rob their Muslim brothers; I saw them raiding the fields of poor farmers for watermelons and beating the farmers when they caught them and demanded compensation.

Meanwhile, Pakistani Dakotas undertook supply dropping missions. The sandy belt at the foot of Point 8853 was the best receiving ground. Unlike R.I.A.F. pilots, who could not overfly the snow-capped mountain peaks, the Pakistanis faced no such hardships. Perhaps they had specially fitted aircraft—or perhaps they did not overfly the mountains, but by them. Whatever it was, they delivered goods.

Once an R.I.A.F. fighter appeared and endeavoured to chase the Pakistani Dakota. Instead of running away, the Dakota just turned a mountain corner and reappeared and resumed its dropping when the fighter turned back. Next time two R.I.A.F. fighters came, but there was no Pakistani Dakota to chase, as the latter had started coming in night only. And not one, but a whole string of them.

Our second camp commander was a former officer of 6th J. & K. Infantry. A short-statured person with pock marked face, he had lost all his family and relatives, but one son, during the Jammu riots. The son, Abdul Hameed, was of my age and was saved because he was with his father.

None would have blamed him if he were vindictive; but he was the most kind-hearted and sympathetic camp commander we had. His eyes became tearful when mother narrated our tale of vow. Giving due regard to our family background, he allotted us a separate accommodation. Not only that, he posted a guard outside our house when some miscreants tried to break in. He also insisted that I should study with Abdul Hameed, who had a private tutor. It is a pity that I cannot

remember his name.

During our encampment in Skardu, Indian Army increased its tempo of offensive. Its solid proof was the retreating Pakistanis with frost-bitten fingers and toes and bayonet-torn flesh. Rumbings of Indian artillery were also clearly discernible to us. From all appearance it looked that it was only a matter of days before Baltistan would be retaken by the Indian Army.

R.I.A.F. also showed some activity. They obliterated the cantonment altogether, only a crater was left in its place. Pakistanis must have suffered considerable casualties, but they did not admit any publicly. As I was running to a trench, which was under a tree, to take cover, a pilot caught my movement from above and let me have a burst of machinegun. I had a very narrow escape. I was not the only one to attract the pilot's attention. A Chitrali was also trying to shoot down the plane with his rifle. By the time the pilot returned for a second dive, the Chitrali had run away. It was lucky for all of us in or near that trench that the plane had expended its supply of bombs on the cantonment.

The ceasefire of 1949 came as an anticlimax to us, the stranded refugees in Skardu. We were hoping in our hearts that the Indian Army would liberate us. But our expectations were dashed.

Abdul Hameed had brought us the news of the ceasefire in the dead of the night and without his father's knowledge. He had come with his father's orderly, who loved and respected me as much as he did Abdul Hameed. At the behest of his master, the orderly showed his regard by serving me the tastiest omelet and parathas when I attended the morning class with Abdul Hameed.

After the ceasefire things moved at quite a faster pace. The Pakistanis landed Dakotas at Ranga airstrip. The second camp commander was transferred; so was Wilayat Ali Khan, who had been made a full-fledged Wazir now; we received our first mail from India; and there was a talk of our being exchanged for Muslim refugees stranded in India.

The Baltis whittled aeroplanes out of woodblocks and composed songs in honour of the Pakistani planes. They used dis-

carded mortar caps tied with a piece of cloth to demonstrate parachute descent. Had Indian planes landed instead of the Pakistani, I am sure they would have reacted similarly.

Abdullah, a gardner of the Wazarat, said very convincingly after a plane overflew him : "I said Salam-Alekum and the pilot peeped out of his window and answered Walekum-Salam."

Then came a caravan of Tashkent traders to do business in Skardu. They had brought cloth with them. I took up an interpreter's job with one of them at 25 paise per day. It was also my duty to water my master's herd of horses, who were nothing short of rogues, in the afternoon.

My English and Persian teacher, who was a Balti, wanted me to rejoin the school which had reopened. Firstly, I was reluctant, but then gave in due to his persistent inducements. Fazil Kashmiri, a sensitive poet, artist and intellectual, whose family was in Kashmir, was given the mantle of Headmaster. The Fazil could not stay long in Pakistan and returned to Kashmir at the first opportunity he got.

I could not stay long in the school either, mainly because I was no more a V.I.P. and yet coveted a V.I.P. treatment. Secondly, the thought of our returning to India was uppermost in my mind. Thirdly, I valued my new-found freedom more than regimented education.

By the time we left Skardu, it had been converted into a cantonment city. There were Pak soldier from all its provinces. The aeroplanes brought everyday not only small arms, ammunition and rations, but also medium anti-aircraft guns and other armour. Jeeps and trucks frequently plied between the airstrip and the cantonment, which was another name of Ranbirgarh now.

We were flown from Skardu to Peshawar in the Dakotas entirely manned by foreigners. It took two hours. From Peshawar, we were transferred to Rawalpindi along with other refugees after a few weeks. In Rawalpindi we stayed for about six months. We were shifted to Lahore from there.

At Lahore I met an Indian Jawan in the Central Jail, where we were kept—perhaps for our own safety. He told me that he had been kidnapped from the Indian territory and branded a smuggler. Neither the Pakistanis were releasing him, nor

starting court proceedings against him. They either tortured him or employed him as a labourer. He requested me to tell Indian authorities of his plight, so that they might do something to get him released. The poor man was completely cut off from the outer world, as neither he could receive or send mails nor was he told the date or month. The latter secrecy might have been observed as a prelude to his brainwashing.

I do not recollect exactly if I did convey his message to the authorities or not, as, meanwhile, something happened to me personally which shattered my faith in the Indian officials.

As widows and children were to be exchanged first, we were separated from other families at Rawalpindi. One gentleman, Dr. K.N. Tikku, gave me a letter of introduction for a Kashmiri officer of Indian High Commission in Pakistan.

Dressed in a suit and wearing an imported hat, the officer entered our ward like a V.I.P. that he was and made a beeline for the Kashmiri women and children, throwing just a cursory glance at other Hindu-Sikh families. This was my first contact with Indian parochialism. However, I approached him with the letter. Instead of accepting it, he threw it away as if an asp was placed in his hand and almost ran out of the jail barrack shouting, "I have nothing to do with it.....I have nothing to do with it."

His antics attracted the jail authorities, who, after seizing the letter, subjected me to all sorts of insults, indignities and searches—and all the time they kept enquiring if I had another letter, whereas I had none other.

The letter must have been examined by Pak Intelligence officers for hidden meaning and must have been chemically treated to bring out the message written in invisible ink. A sheepish lady warden, who was spouting fire and thunder earlier, returned the letter a few days later with the comment that I should have taken her permission before giving it to the officer. I quietly tore off the letter.

I was pilloried unnecessarily when I was so near my destination, India, thanks to the officer.

After some days, we were exchanged with the Muslim refugees in India via Wagah. We reached Amritsar in early 1950.

Finally, we asked Suraj : “You must be having a lot of regret that you lost your father and all the property ?”

“On the contrary,” he said, “I am proud that my father sacrificed his life for the country and the property was lost as a consequent. But tell me as an Indian, what do you feel about me, or many others like me ?”

We had no honest answer for that.

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