

## THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF WOMEN SOLDIERS IN THE NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

By Probal DasGupta and Jason Jacob

Over the years, a rise in ethnic conflicts and insurgencies between state armies and insurgent groups has radically altered the nature of warfare. The trend has shifted from conventional wars to asymmetric or civil wars and has resulted in the continued loss of civilian lives across Africa, Eastern Europe, South America, Southeast Asia and South Asia. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report, “State of World Population 2010,” released in October 2010 notes that women are the worst affected in these armed conflicts.

Addressing the complex and intertwined issues of disaffection and hostility among sections of society assumes greater importance in areas prone to armed violence. Without such attention, the situation often escalates into full-scale civil war. Part of this attention can come from counterinsurgency (COIN), which focuses on economy of force and addresses local grievances through socio-economic incentives. In brief, COIN and peacekeeping involve multiple roles that include combating extremists, engaging moderates, pursuing conflict resolution, upholding human rights, and undertaking society rebuilding initiatives that help allay fears of exploitation and suppression.

Unlike a conventional war, which emphasizes pure combat capability, operations in peacekeeping and counterinsurgency involve a multi-pronged approach with a humanitarian face. In such a scenario, the role of women in the armed forces becomes critical, as the political success of a counterinsurgency campaign is largely dependent upon the efficacy of various important non-combat activities.

Women officers and soldiers in counterinsurgent forces can implement non-combat activities – such as intelligence gathering, information dissemination, awareness raising,

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and engaging in dialogue with belligerent elements – thus enhancing the repertoire of counterinsurgency campaigns. Recent examples demonstrate the important roles women military officers and soldiers can play.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. Army's Marine "Female Engagement Teams," or FETs, achieved success by penetrating a conservative society through regular interactions with local women. Given their easier access to Afghan women than male American soldiers, the FETs managed to build the trust of local women to the point that they were willing to share valuable information about areas within which the Taliban was recruiting.

Tom Ricks writes in *Foreign Policy* magazine that patrols with FETs were even allowed inside Afghan homes while male marines were told to wait outside. Ricks further notes that, "in each case, the FET succeeded in breaking the ice and getting women to open up and discuss their daily lives and concerns."<sup>1</sup>

In the northeastern Indian states of Tripura and Assam, which have active insurgencies, female medical officers of the Indian army, alongside male doctors, attended patients in medical camps held in lonely, hostile, insurgent-affected tribal areas without basic amenities such as electricity and medical assistance. Women medics were not impaired by the barriers of a traditional male-dominated society that prevented male medics from open interaction with the local women. Regular interactions in such camps resulted in establishment of personal bonds with the local women, a previously neglected group. This enabled the village women to come forward and candidly discuss local issues. The growing ties between the women helped the army gain access to certain disenfranchised groups within insurgent outfits and bring them back into mainstream society through surrenders, and subsequently, by imparting vocational training.

Women peacekeepers in UN missions have undertaken proactive security roles in traditionally male-dominated societies, inspiring women and girls to participate in the peace process. The work of women peacekeepers reinforces the principles of the UNSC Resolution 1820 on Women and Security, and the UN Resolution 1325, which reaffirms the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, negotiations, peacekeeping, humanitarian responses, and in post-conflict reconstruction.

UN Resolution 1325 also urges parties in an armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, including sexual abuse. The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) advocates the deployment of more women to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. The UN Police Division plans that 20 percent of its force will be comprised of female officers by 2014.

Though women now play a greater role than before in UN peacekeeping forces and have representation in national militaries ranging from developed nations like the United States, Britain, and Israel to nascent militaries like Afghanistan, gray areas do remain. For one, the role of female soldiers in conflicts needs to be clarified. There are debates in certain countries about whether women should be inducted into combat roles. Instead, the debate needs to focus on how the professional strengths of female soldiers can be best used in counterinsurgency operations.

Successful counterinsurgency campaigns combine a friendly approach aimed at "winning the hearts and minds" of the people with a hard, combative thrust against

extreme elements. This often has the negative effect of labeling all military personnel as combatants and carriers of violence. Women, however, are traditionally viewed as care givers and nurturers. In many insurgency-affected rural areas, this proves advantageous to women soldiers, enabling them to establish trust relations much faster than their male counterparts.

Through their peacekeeping efforts in different areas of the world, women have helped to preserve women's rights and build consensus through a collaborative, sincere approach that complements the hard approach of combat. As low-intensity conflicts proliferate, it will be critical to train and involve women in uniform so as to restrict the fallouts of unconventional wars and create an environment that helps reduce gender-based violence. **Y**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Tom Ricks, "Women in COIN(II): How to do it right," *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2009, [http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/10/09/women\\_in\\_coin\\_ii\\_how\\_to\\_do\\_it\\_right](http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/10/09/women_in_coin_ii_how_to_do_it_right) (accessed December 8, 2010).