

# LIVING ON THE FRONTLINES: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE NEELUM VALLEY

*Dr. Shaheen Akhtar \**

## Abstract

The impact of Kashmir conflict and volatility of the 740km Line of Control (LoC) dividing erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, on the lives of peoples inhabiting the frontline villages in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) remains an untold story. The Neelum valley runs parallel to the LoC and in many places the Neelum river itself forms LoC. It is highly vulnerable to firing and shelling on the LoC and was the worst affected region during the 1990s. The bordering areas in the valley faced the brunt of hostilities on the LoC in the 1990s and felt much relieved by the 2003 ceasefire. The study tries to examine the impact of escalation of conflict on LoC and post 2003 ceasefire on the people living on the zero line the Neelum valley.

**Keywords:** Kashmir Conflict, Line of Control, Neelum Valley, Impact on People, 2003 Ceasefire.

## Introduction

The Kashmir conflict has deeply impacted the lives of the people living in proximity of the LoC. The people living in frontline villages of AJK, particularly in Neelum valley are highly vulnerable to volatility of the LoC which adversely affects their physical security, livelihood, socio-cultural life, educational development, psychological health and wellbeing. The region was the worst affected by LoC firing and shelling during the 1990s. The 2003 ceasefire restored a semblance of peace on the LoC which resulted in marked improvement in the lives of the people living in the valley. The study assesses the impact of Kashmir conflict and escalation of LoC tension on the lives of the people living on the zero line in Neelum valley in the 1990s and subsequently the impact of 2003 ceasefire on these areas. It is divided in two periods: the first period explores impact of Kashmir conflict and escalation of conflict on the LoC on the people living in the Neelum valley in the 1990s. The second period analyses the impact of 2003 ceasefire on these people. It argues that impact of Kashmir conflict on the people living along the LoC should be recognized, ceasefire institutionalized and stalemated political dialogue for the resolution of Kashmir dispute should be resumed.

---

\*Dr. Shaheen Akhtar is Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, National Defence University, Islamabad.

The study is mainly based on the field analysis.<sup>1</sup> The universe of the study was the bordering villages of Neelum Valley that were deeply affected by firing and shelling on the LoC from 1990 to 2003. These included Bugna, Bore, Lawat, Rwata, Lala, Laswa, Nagdhar, Athmaqam, Kundal Shahi, Dawarian, Mirpura, Jura, Alagdar, Athai Anmigan, Dudhnial, Karalpura, Chandermano, Kawja Siri, Sharda, Phulwari, Pernat, Wawar Haji, Pernai, Chakmaqam and Karen. The LoC divides Bugna and Bore while there are two separate but contiguous villages called Karen, falling on both sides of the LoC.

### **Specificity of LoC in the *Neelum Valley***

The Line of Control, referred to as ceasefire line (CFL) until 1971 divides the pre- 1947 state of Jammu and Kashmir into Indian and Pakistani Administered zones of Kashmir. The Karachi Agreement signed between India and Pakistan in July 1949 established the CFL that ‘runs from Manawar in the south, north to Karen and from Karen east to the glacier area.’<sup>2</sup> It reflected the troop positions of December 1948 and was to be supervised by United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP).<sup>3</sup> However, after 1972 Simla Agreement India maintains that the mandate of UNMOGIP has lapsed while Pakistan disagrees with this position. The mission has remained in the area to ‘observe developments pertaining to the strict observance of the ceasefire’ and report them to the Secretary-General.<sup>4</sup>

Neelum Valley falls in Muzaffarabad division and until 2008 was part of Muzaffarabad district. Geographically, the valley is in the lower reaches of greater Himalayas. It is mainly hilly with thick forests, and is relatively inaccessible, especially the northern part beyond Kel which is snow bound in the winters. Endowed with rich natural beauty, mineral and water resources, it has great potential for tourism but remains underdeveloped due to the volatility of the LoC.

The Neelum valley straddles the LoC, and at several points the Neelum River forms LoC between Indian and Pakistani positions. Much of the valley is vulnerable to the Indian positions, commanding strategic heights. In particular 7 km. stretch from Athmaqam to Dawarian and another 12 km between Chillyana and Barian where the Neelum river forms LoC, is quite exposed to the Indian firing and shelling. The valley has been the front-line between India and Pakistan since 1948. Until November 2003, small arms and artillery firing by both sides

were a frequent occurrence. Thereby the people living on the frontlines have faced the brunt of the tension on the LoC.

### Impact of Firing and Shelling

The people living in frontline villages of the Neelum valley were severely affected by firing and heavy shelling on the LoC from 1990 to 2003. This resulted in heavy loss of human life, destruction of public and private property, damages to road infrastructure, schools, and healthcare facilities. According to Mian Abdul Waheed, Education Minister of AJK, about 2300 people were killed while over 5000 were injured or disabled due to shelling.<sup>5</sup> The field analysis revealed that before the 2003 ceasefire, people living in the frontline villages in the area felt extremely insecure, in terms of threat of life, threat of losing loved ones, losing their belongings and livelihood. An overwhelming majority of over 86 percent of the respondents maintained that their lives were directly threatened while over 13 percent feared loss of life most of the times.

### Responses/Frequencies for the 1<sup>st</sup> Period before 2003 Ceasefire in Neelum Valley

	Security Risk/ Threat	Emotional Loss	Economic Loss	Environmental & Social Loss	Travel and Communication Ease
None	-	-	-	-	95.0
least	-	-	-	-	1.0
Fair	4.9	-	-	1.0	1.0
Good	8.8	12.7	12.7	7.8	-
Most/ Best	86.3	87.3	87.3	90.3	-
Total %	100	100	100	100.0	100

### Besieged Valley in the 1990s

The Neelum valley is connected via Muzaffarabad by the Neelum Valley road which runs for about 100 miles from Muzaffarabad up to Kel. This acts as the main supply route. Until the 2003 ceasefire, the valley was completely cut off from the rest of AJK as this road was permanently closed due to intense firing and shelling. The Neelum Valley, in fact, witnessed some of the heaviest artillery exchanges between the Indian and Pakistani troops in the 1990s and in 2001-02. At three points on this route, "Indian forces occupy distinctly advantageous

positions in the heights overlooking the road from which they can bombard the highway and civilian settlements as well as delicately suspended footbridges across the raging Kishanganga (Neelum).<sup>6</sup> Beyond Kel, there is no all-weather, all-year road so the valley can be completely choked. During firing, Neelum road used to get closed from the point where the river forms the LoC. Consequently, the people living along those stretches were completely besieged. To avoid Indian firing, three bypasses were built to provide access to the Neelum valley in the 1990s. These were the Karen by-pass, Laswa and Jalkhad bypass (Surgan-Nurinar-Jalkhad) which runs from the Kagan valley. The Jalkhad by-pass is a high altitude road; treacherous at the best of times, impassable in the winter and at certain points vulnerable to Indian attack. So as a result of closure of the main supply route, the communities living near the LoC suffered severe shortages of supply of foodstuff such as rice, flour and vegetable oil and daily use items. The prices of daily use commodities were 50-100 percent higher than the prices in Muzaffarabad.

The residents of the frontline villages of Neelum valley narrate stories of the pain and suffering that they went through in that period. Almost every house was hit by firing or mortar shelling. Roshan Jan from Akhai village, Athmaqam recalled:

*'There was always a threat to life. It was a warlike situation. Whenever there was firing or heavy shelling, life was paralyzed and one did not know what will happen in the very next moment. Firing was unpredictable; it would start any time, crippling daily life completely. The businesses were shattered and the people were unable to work in the fields. We used to live in trenches and our children could not go to school. People were under constant stress and could not do anything properly in time.'*

Local community living in Dawarian, Lawat, Bugna, Bore, Karen, Lala, Laswa, Nagdar, and Athmaqam was hit hard by intermittent to heavy firing and shelling on these villages. The heavy firing and shelling destroyed their houses, schools and hospitals and resulted in deaths and injuries. Mahina, a resident of Bugna which is a divided village on the LoC said 'those living near the LoC were always worried about their own lives and that of their near and dear ones. Amiruddin Mughal, a resident of Kundal Shahi added, "There was more firing in summer. People of the border areas went to *dhokes* (alpine pastures) in jungles to escape firing."<sup>7</sup> Many would travel in the dark at night to get essential goods and take the roads or paths that were not directly exposed to Indian fire. Shelling

also scarred the village of Nagdar. Eleven children were killed in a single day when mortars fired by the Indian army landed at a school in the village in 1993.<sup>8</sup> In 1996, a bus travelling at night in front of the Indian positions was hit, resulting in the death of 40 passengers. Almost every family living along the LoC has lost a member. Khawja Farooq from Dawarian, which is half a kilometer away from the LoC, still remembers the “general sense of insecurity and uncertainty.”<sup>9</sup>

## Internal Displacement

For over a decade or so, a large number of people were temporarily or permanently displaced from the forward villages of Neelum due to artillery fire. In general, internally displaced people (IDPs) with sufficient resources of their own rented accommodation in the towns of AJK or moved to neighbouring districts of Punjab province, others stayed with their relatives. However, not everyone had the means to relocate; their relatives could not afford to take them in, or they felt they couldn't earn a living elsewhere as their livelihood was linked with their local habitat. Those who opted to stay behind lived in perpetual fear and with few, if any, means of subsistence; often living on whatever they received in special packages offered by the AJK government. Some camps were set up for the displaced, such as Katha Piran, Thorar and Kalkan. The AJK government also provided tents, ration and daily allowance.<sup>10</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Islamic Relief also assisted IDPs from the Neelum valley. Mohammad Ejazul Islam from Lawat said due to heavy shelling people had to migrate; many moved to Kundal Shahi, which lies a few kilometers away from the bank of the Neelum river and is relatively safer.<sup>11</sup>

## Land Mines Victims

Planted here before 1990, landmines are a serious menace in the Neelum valley, which has not been demined yet. People from Bugna and Rwata villages, in particular, have fallen victim to mines — usually treading on them while collecting firewood, gathering *guchhi* (wild mushrooms) and cutting grass for the cattle. Children have also been struck by toy bombs. Officially, 42 landmine victims have been reported from the two villages. Heavily mined on both sides of the LoC, Rwata though has the dubious distinction of being village with the most landmine victims in the Neelum valley. The melting snow from the high mountains in the nullah Rwata and landslides in the rainy season scatter these mines across unmarked land, often killing people and livestock. A 32-year-old local schoolteacher, Mir Shakeel, accidentally lost both his legs on his way to

work. Incidents like these also make parents anxious when their children leave for school. A woman here expressed her wariness as a mother, even as she revealed that a landmine ripped one of her sister's feet from the ankle while collecting grass for cattle. Women here are put in the path of danger usually when they graze cattle. Unemployment also forces the menfolk of Rwata to venture into the forests nearby to collect mushrooms and herbs, making them vulnerable to landmines too. Similarly, the villagers of Bugna have been hit by landmines and many have lost their limbs, partially or fully. Gulzameen, for instance, lost his leg while cleaning a water channel, which irrigates fields in the area. Children who played unawares with toy bombs have also succumbed to them. In 2005, five young girls died in Kel while playing with a toy bomb. Unexploded explosives used also explode at times, often claiming the lives of women and children.

Victims of landmines are treated free of cost at the Muzaffarabad Physical Rehabilitation Centre (MPRC), says its director Dr. Bilal Zafar. MPRC was set up in 2007 with the support of the ICRC after the earthquake in 2005.<sup>12</sup> However, there is not much information about the Center in remote villages infested with landmines. The local government and Pakistan Army organise sessions at schools to create awareness and avert landmine accidents.

### **Psychological Scars of Security Conditions**

Villagers, especially young children who grew up in an atmosphere of fear; riddled with incidents of firing, heavy mortar shelling and mines, have suffered deep psychological trauma. Raised under warlike conditions, they have developed special survival instincts over the years. In the survey, a huge majority of 87.3 percent respondents felt that the environment of fear and uncertainty, restrictive mobility, dislocation, destruction of homes and livelihood had a telling impact on their psyche, while another 12.7 percent felt that conflict conditions greatly affected their lives psychologically and emotionally. Junaid Mir, who grew up in the Athmaqam tehsil, observed, "I never enjoyed a normal childhood; threat to life and fear of migration were constants in our lives."<sup>13</sup> Forced isolation also marked the conflict years for many on the LoC. Abdul Waheed from Palari, Dawarian, remarked, "The movement of civilians was severely restricted due to heavy shelling, and most of the times, they were confined to their homes."<sup>14</sup>

## Economic Impact on the Communities

During the 1990s, up until 2003, intense cross-LoC firing affected the socio-economic fabric of the Neelum Valley. Even though occasional firing and skirmishes along the LoC did occur prior to 1990, it did not affect the life and livelihood of people as much as it did after the eruption of heavy fighting along LoC in the 1990s. The field analysis revealed that 88.3 percent of the respondents strongly felt that the conflict along the LoC destroyed their houses and their sources of income; 11.7 percent felt it affected the local economy badly.

During this period, the civilian population and infrastructure were constantly at the receiving end of firing and shelling, altering the ways of life and socio-economic sustainability in the valley. There was massive damage to private property, livestock, crops and businesses. The public infrastructure, schools in particular, healthcare units and roads were damaged. Already an economically marginalised region, the LoC conflicts caused further devastation to the valley's economic infrastructure. Intikhab Jan, a resident of Warwar Haji, a village on the zero line, recalled how the decade was marked by heavy shelling, dread, and destruction. A large number of cattle were also killed. Unemployment increased too as people were forced to stay indoors. Fishing was hardly possible anymore. Being the center and trading hub of the Neelum valley from where goods are transported upward to Kel and Phalawai, Athmaqam was the site of the heaviest pounding — disrupting trade, shops, healthcare units, schools, colleges, and administrative offices. The LoC shelling burnt the local Bazaar to the ground on five occasions, in which many shops were gutted. Besides incurring huge losses, the bazaar lost its traditional woodwork heritage. The supplies of daily essentials were also suspended, causing severe shortages of food and medicines in the valley and pushing up the prices. The cost of a single packet of salt shot up to PKR 150-200.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Jura Bazaar went up in flames and Kel Bazaar was heavily damaged. As the area ahead of Nauseri was cut off from Muzaffarabad, road travel and vehicular movement was also not possible either. People had to walk for hours, carrying utilities and consumables on their back mostly in the night to avoid casualties. Long walls were erected along the road to make movement in vehicles and on foot safe from fire.

People were unable to sow or harvest crops or water their fields in the Nagdar and Neelum villages. At times, sudden firing forced them to flee the fields. A considerable number of farmers died or were severely injured every year. But it was women, who were the primary victims since they had to tend to cattle,

cut grass and harvest crops. Even marriages and funerals were targeted, resulting in more civilian casualties.

The most fertile and populous land on the right bank of the Neelum river — stretching from the villages of Marble, Barian, Jura, Kundal Shahi to Athmaqam, from Karen to Nagdar, from Lawat, Dawarian to Changhan and from Dudnaya to Tejan — was directly under small arms and heavy artillery fire. Prior to the eruption of hostilities about 80 to 100 tons of walnut was produced and sold from the valley. Apart from cattle and sheep farming, paddy, wheat, corn and lentils were grown here as well. The wool produced was either sold or used to make blankets and *gaba* (textile). But such sources of income dried up due to the conflict. Visitors avoided the valley too. “How would tourists come,” said Waseem, a resident of Karen, “when we could not step out of our own homes?”<sup>16</sup> The village of Rwata, 7km away from the Athmaqam market on the left bank of the Neelum, and southwest of the Karen village, suffered the most in the valley until the ceasefire was declared in 2003. The uneven pedestrian track leading to it runs along the Nullah Rwata. It has about 40 wooden huts with a small bazaar of five shops. The population here has always relied on incomes generated through cultivation and animal husbandry, and has foraged mushrooms and herbs from the mountains, later sold to contractors. Under direct fire through the 1990s due to its proximity to the LoC, the village is a classic example of one of the most marginalised settlement in the Neelum valley. It has no government schools and most children here walk two hours to a school in Athmaqam.

### **Social, Educational Losses & Impact on the Environment**

The conflict situation along the LoC in Neelum valley shattered the education sector and socio-cultural life of the local community. An overwhelming majority of 90.2 percent respondents maintained that the warlike conditions on the LoC hugely impacted their cultural and social activities and denied their children the opportunity to go to schools, and 9.8 percent felt that there was substantive impact in these areas. Education was the greatest casualty in the Neelum valley through the decade of conflict between 1990 and 2003. Cross-LoC shelling destroyed many buildings of educational intuitions, including the Nagdar High School, which was hit by Indian shelling that claimed the lives of 38 children.<sup>17</sup>

“Due to seething conflict along the LoC, many families had to migrate from their [domicile] areas, and it was not possible for the children to continue



their education,” remarked Professor Khawaja A. Rehman, who teaches at a postgraduate college in Muzaffarabad.<sup>18</sup> “For 15 years, our children were unable to go to school, and we couldn’t apply for jobs in other places. We couldn’t leave our families behind due to the constant firing,” said Ali Raza from Rwata, adding, “We dug ditches and lived inside these to save our lives for days and weeks, coming out only at night to do what was necessary.”<sup>19</sup> “Our generation never got the chance to attend schools,” said, Mir Iklaqu, another resident of Rwata.<sup>20</sup>

The healthcare facilities also came under fire, and doctors were unavailable. Many who were wounded lost their lives because they couldn’t be taken to health centres due to the unrelenting exchange of fire. Living in bunkers also pushed people to live in unhygienic conditions, resulting in poor health. Lack of mobility also gave rise to arthritis, a disease that is otherwise rare in mountainous regions. “We have been treating hundreds of arthritis patients in recent years. They got it because they were forced to spend long hours — sometimes up to 18 hours at a stretch — sitting on damp ground inside the bunkers,” said Mohammad Khursheed, a pharmacist who runs a medical store in Athmuqam.<sup>21</sup>

## **Effect on the Environment**

Neelum is a lush green valley, rich in flora and fauna, ravaged during this period. “Forests caught fires along the LoC due to heavy mortar and artillery shelling,” said Safina Bibi from Lala village.<sup>22</sup> Trees were charred in mortar shelling in Akhai, Athmuqam, and a lot of precious wood was lost as a large number of pine and deodar trees were gutted. It was difficult to put out fire during firing, which continued for days. In 1998, a jungle was set ablaze by intense Indian shelling and continued for two months. Burnt trees are still visible in Athmuqam. The indiscriminate damage caused by forest fires resulted in pollution and environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity and habitat. The soil erosion has led to landslides, sometimes forcing people to migrate even. Springs were also affected, making access to water more difficult. Wild animals like bears and chimpanzees were compelled to come down from the forests into human habitat, giving rise to man-animal conflicts.

## **Travel and Communication Ease**

The movement of the local population was impinged upon in the Neelum valley and communication with the people outside the area was virtually

cut off. Those who lived along the riverbank, especially Chillyana, Lawat, Karen, Bugna and Bore lost contact with their relatives across the river. An overwhelming majority of 98 percent respondents stated that they were compelled to live in bunkers, their mobility was restricted and contact with their relatives across the LoC was entirely disrupted.

### **The Impact of the 2003 Ceasefire**

#### **Improved Security Conditions along the LoC**

The ceasefire restored a great sense of safety and provided relief to the frontline villages of the Neelum valley. The field survey revealed that a majority of 89.2 percent felt very secure after the ceasefire in 2003, while 10.8 percent felt fairly secure. Threat to life and livelihood was visibly reduced. Life returned to normalcy and people now moved freely in their fields, at home and outside. The threat of dislocation subsided too. Most people returned to their homes and started rebuilding them. The Neelum Valley Road was reopened, improving connectivity with the region and bolstering the socio-economic conditions in the area.

#### **Responses/Frequencies for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Period Post 2003 Ceasefire in Neelum Valley**

	Security Risk/Threat	Functional Loss	Economic Loss	Environmental & Social Loss	Travel and Communication Ease	Support for Ceasefire/ CNMs
None	89.2	71.6	82.4	92.2	-	
Least	0.8	28.4	17.6	7.8		
Fair	1.0	-	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.8
Good			0.0	0.0	13.8	12
Most/best	-	-	-	-	75	80
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100

The ceasefire meant that people living in the most vulnerable villages and border towns like Athmaqam, Bugna, Rwata, Bore, Karen, Dawarian, Nagdar and Lawat now could live outside bunkers and move about and pursue their daily lives without restraint. "The ceasefire has restored physical security, and the fear of loss of life has greatly subsided," said Seemab Ahmad from Athmaqam.<sup>23</sup> For a while now, adds Mansoor Ahmad from Bonchattar, dislocation and death were no longer a threat. However, traumatised by years of

strife, many locals were apprehensive still and believed that the ceasefire was fragile, and one bullet could shatter the peace and security in their lives.

### **Positive Psychological Impact**

Improved security conditions contributed hugely reduced the sources of psychological and emotional stress. The fear of losing life, home, kith and kin and livelihood was replaced by normal social, economic and cultural activity. Now, people can celebrate festivals, attend weddings and share their grief at funerals held in broad daylight. The field survey revealed that over 71 percent of respondents strongly felt that the ceasefire had had a positive impact on their emotional life and over 28 percent observed that it had restored their peace of mind to a great extent.

It took a while, in fact, for the villagers of Rwata to get a feel of the ceasefire. “Four years after the declaration [in 2003], we could not start living a normal life, worried that the firing might start again. Even the government never considered constructing any roads or helping the local community by establishing a school or dispensary, which strengthened the fear that firing might erupt any time,” said Muhammad Nawaz from Rwata.<sup>24</sup> In Lala, Nighat Jabeen observed, “We live on the edge every minute of our life and are always ready to jump into the bunkers as soon as we hear the sound of gunfire. Each time we hear a blast, even when it’s just fireworks at a wedding, our hearts sink in the fear that one of our loved ones might have been struck by a mine.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Revival of Economy**

In contrast to the 1990s, the ceasefire had the most visible impact on the economy of the Neelum Valley. People started rebuilding their houses, but not everyone has the means to do that, so it has been a slow process. Businesses have been restored and shops are being reconstructed as well. Agricultural activity has also been revived. People are cultivating their land, a major source of income in the area, and the livestock is safer too. But in many ways, the socio-economic conditions of the valley started improving only when the rebuilding of roads and communication networks were initiated after the ceasefire. Infrastructure along the LoC and the forward villages also improved, and the reconstruction generated a lot of economic opportunities for the locals. The field survey revealed that over 84 percent respondents felt that the valley has undergone tremendous socio-economic progress post-2003, and 17 percent respondents

recognised that peace has enhanced economic conditions in the area. With the reopening of the Neelum Valley Road, the supply of essential daily items has also been restored and the prices have gone down. "One can gauge the impact of peace from the price of a packet of salt, which means a lot to the local population," observed Shah Ghulam Qadir, a leading political figure of the area.<sup>26</sup>

### **Tourism Taking Off**

With peace and normalcy and the reconstruction of roads and communication infrastructure, tourists started pouring in the valley. This has injected new life in the local economy. Karen and Neelum villages, once most affected areas of the valley have now developed tourist resorts. As Swat valley in the Khyber Pukhtoonkhaw Province of Pakistan, a major tourist hub came under attack by the Taliban, a bulk of the domestic tourists found their way to the newly opened Neelum valley. Further reconstruction after the earthquake in 2005 also put a lot of emphasis on building tourism infrastructure in the area, consequently transforming the entire socio-economic framework. In a short span, several government and private tourist resorts were established here. And by 2013, several dozen hotels and motels were available in the Neelum valley to accommodate the surge in tourism. Meanwhile, Sharda, an ancient archaeological site, was reopened for tourists and researchers.

According to Shehla Waqar, former Secretary for the Department of Archaeology and Tourism, AJK, the year 2011 saw 250,000 visitors in the valley; in 2012, the number had more than doubled to 600,000.<sup>27</sup> In the Neelum valley, there was no private guesthouse till 2011, but in 2012 tourist season, there were 115 private guesthouses, built in the span of a year. At the moment, the target group for them is domestic tourists because of restrictions on foreigners.

### **Revival of Education and Socio-Cultural Life**

There has been great revival of educational activities and the socio-cultural life in the Neelum valley. The field survey revealed that over 92 percent respondents felt strongly that the prevailing peace had allowed them to send their children to schools and enjoy normal cultural activities that were rarely, if ever, experienced due to the firing/shelling and recurrent migration earlier. In addition, peace had resuscitated the local ecology and wildlife. Another 8 percent also appreciated the dividend of peace for the residents of the Neelum valley.

The education sector, which was devastated in the 1990s, found its feet again after the ceasefire. Many new schools and colleges were reconstructed, especially in the wake of the earthquake in 2005, and several educational activities were restarted. The University of AJK opened the doors to its campus in Athmaqam, and is now planning to open a branch in Sharda. The number of students from the Neelum valley who enrolled in other universities in AJK has also gone up sharply. In Rwata village, a private school was recently opened for primary education.

The cultural life has also got an impetus, as social gatherings are no longer off limits. "People had lost contact with each other, snapping social linkages within the community. Peace has now restored societal interaction," said Khawja Muhammad Akber from Athmaqam.<sup>28</sup> Plus, many locals are engaged in community work in their areas. The healthcare facilities too have improved a lot, and many new Basic Health Units have been constructed. Hospitals damaged in the firing have been rebuilt and are now equipped with state-of-the-art equipment.

### **Improved Environmental Conditions**

Peace has given new life to the environmental sustainability of the area. Forests, grazing lands, orchards and fields are becoming green again. The forests damaged in the firing and heavy shelling are recovering. The grazing pastures, which had turned barren after being hit by explosives, are turning green again. Although the adverse impact of the explosives used has not disappeared completely, the situation is gradually improving. Thus, peace is restoring the biodiversity of the region and consequently, improving the livelihood opportunities of the local population.

### **Ease in Travel and Communication**

The ceasefire has effectively reconnected the people of the Neelum valley with each other and with the rest of AJK. Communication with the world beyond had been severed almost entirely for those living in the frontline villages during the conflict years. As the roads vulnerable to Indian shelling became safer, movement was less restricted and the valley witnessed a revival of the economic and socio-cultural life. Given the difficult terrain and the 2005 earthquake, the reconstruction of the roads took some time. But now, the arterial Neelum Valley Road is fully operational. Communication links with the

valley have improved, and the resumption of cross-LoC bus services and the opening of the crossing points, especially the Nauseri-Titwal point, has restored some contact across the LoC as well. While this allows people to meet their relatives, since the 1990s refugees cannot travel across, there is lot of frustration amongst those who crossed over to the AJK and are living closer to the LoC or in refugee camps. A huge majority of the 75 percent of people is very satisfied with the freer movement along the LoC and improved communication facilities, while a segment of 25 percent is fairly satisfied.

### **Response to the Ceasefire and the CBMs**

The local population, especially in the forward locations in the Neelum valley, strongly supports the ceasefire because it has restored normalcy to their lives. They are also quite positive about trade- and travel-related CBMs, but feel that due to many operational difficulties they could not benefit from them, not as much as they would have liked to. Reopening of the crossing point of Nauseri-Titwal is much appreciated too, but it provides limited opportunity to the divided families to reconnect with their relatives across the LoC. The field survey found that a staggering majority of 92 percent respondents were in strong support of peace on the LoC, while 8 percent were quite satisfied with the ceasefire and felt that it has stabilised the security situation and helped them rebuild their lives. The local community is pitching to consolidate the ceasefire along the LoC, especially after an upsurge in the incidence of cross-LoC firing in recent years. The women of Neelum valley in particular have organised peace marches in support of the ceasefire as tension on the LoC escalated. Chand Bibi, a 60-year-old illiterate housewife from Athmuqam, has led at least three demonstrations by women between July 2008 and August 2013 to sustain peace along the LoC.<sup>29</sup> The protestors urged India and Pakistan to maintain peace along the LoC to avoid civilian and armed casualties. Locally, the civil society is also quite active in this regard.

### **Fear of renewed firing and shelling in the Neelum valley**

During the past 14 years, the ceasefire has largely been upheld along the Neelum valley, barring few occasions. In some incidents, people living in vulnerable villages have gone missing while cutting grass, collecting firewood or foraging for herbs. In September 2007, three men went missing from the Dhakki and Chaknar hamlets of Neelum valley. Their relatives maintained that they had been 'kidnapped' from the AJK side by the Indian Army. In June 2009, another

resident of the same area was allegedly picked up and taken across by the Indian troops. In July 2013, four Neelum valley residents who were collecting medicinal plants along the LoC went missing — later, it turned out that they had been taken across by the Indian Army and killed.

In the last few years however, the ceasefire has come under lot of strain which has created fear and anxiety amongst the LoC residents in the Neelum valley, besides Nakyal and Battal area. This rising incidence of ceasefire violations has revived bitter memories of 1990s amongst the locals. They fear that yet again heightened military activity on the LoC would adversely impede their normal lives and means of livelihood. In the Neelum Valley the people feel even more threatened given their far worse experience of LoC conflict and as the incidence spiraled in the Poonch, Kotli and Working Boundary, they got scared of its expansion to their area. In August 2013, killing of a Pakistan army Captain in LoC firing in Shaqma sector near Skardu created panic in the bordering areas of the Neelum Valley. After the killing of Burhan Wani in July 2016, tension went up on the LoC and further escalated in the wake of Uri attack on September 18 in which 18 Indian soldiers were killed.<sup>30</sup> On September 29, 2016, India claimed to have conducted a “surgical strike” in the Bhimber, Hotspring, Kel and Lipa sectors against alleged “launch pads of terror” in AJK. Pakistani side brushed aside the claim, but exchange of fire on the LoC has not abated since then. This spiral in LoC tension has claimed several civilian lives, beside killing soldiers on both sides. In a major incident in Neelum valley, on 23 November 2016, eleven people were killed and nine others injured as a passenger bus heading towards Muzaffarabad from Kel was attacked by mortar shells fired by Indian troops near Lawat Kanari Bala.<sup>31</sup> The ambulance carrying injured also came under fire. This has created anxiety amongst the locals in the area. They consider ceasefire as tenuous and fear that an escalation of hostilities in the Poonch-Kotli region and Working Boundary as witnessed over the past few years will extend to Neelum valley as well. To impress upon the governments of India and Pakistan to end escalation of tension on the LoC, the local civil society, especially residents of Rwata and Athmaqam, have organized peace rallies.

## **The Way Forward: Consolidating Ceasefire & Resuming Dialogue**

The fragility of ceasefire on the LoC and absence of political dialogue between India and Pakistan is impending threat to the dividend of peace,

accrued to the people living along the LoC in the Neelum valley. The ceasefire is tenuous and will remain so until it is institutionalized and is supported by a vibrant political dialogue.

## **Consolidating the Ceasefire**

The 2003 ceasefire put in place after the 2001-2002 military stand-off between India and Pakistan was the first major CBM that restored a sense of security to the communities living along both sides of the LoC. It allowed those displaced by recurrent shelling across the LoC since the escalation of hostilities in the 1990s, to return home, rebuild their houses and restart their livelihood activities. From 2003 to 2005, there was no incident of firing across the LoC and only three occurred in 2006. With India-Pakistan peace process slowing down, the number of violations on the LoC began to increase. The figure on violations varies from the Indian and Pakistan official and media sources, but an increased trend in ceasefire violations is quite obvious.<sup>32</sup> From 2008 through 2012, there were occasional spells of firing across the LoC. This situation began to change in late 2012 when India began to build additional bunkers along the LoC.<sup>33</sup> Firing across the LoC increased further in January 2013, with reports that two Indian soldiers were killed, their bodies mutilated, and one beheaded. The situation along the LoC calmed somewhat in the following months, but firing again surged from late summer through November 2013 and became a routine occurrence. Ceasefire violations have continued since Narendra Modi's came to power in May 2014. Incidents of shelling have increased in intensity and duration and have usually graduated to the use of heavy weaponry as was the case in 1990s.

A limited number of military and political CBMs are in place to defuse tensions between the Indian and Pakistani armies. Hotlines are in place between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs),<sup>34</sup> and sector commanders. In 2005 both sides agreed to upgrade to a secure and dedicated hotline between DGMOs, hold monthly flag meetings between formation commanders at four points on the LoC - Kargil (Olding in Pakistan), Uri (Chakothi), Naushera (Sadabad) and Jammu (Sialkot) - and implement the 1991 agreement on airspace violations. They also agreed not to build any new posts or Defence Works along the LoC and to ensure the speedy return of those (mostly civilian but the occasional military personnel) who inadvertently crossed the LoC. Formal agreements on construction along the LoC and the return of those mistakenly crossing the line have been under negotiation since 2006 but remains unconcluded.



Meanwhile, the LoC continues to be heavily militarised with Indian and Pakistani soldiers equipped with small arms and heavy artillery sitting eye ball to eyeball. In the absence of credible and effective monitoring mechanism the ceasefire violations remain point of contention between the two countries. The management of the LoC requires cooperation between the two countries to monitor the ceasefire violations. Pakistan supports strengthening of UNMOGIP, while India proposes joint patrols which Pakistan finds impractical. The UK, EU and US had explored an international helicopter borne force to monitor infiltration along the LoC during the 2001- 2002 standoff. This could be revived without prejudice to existing Indian and Pakistani positions on the issue. Several other steps could be taken at the bilateral level to institutionalise the existing CBMs or further build on them:

- The early conclusion of agreements regarding construction of new posts on the LoC and speedy return of inadvertent line crossers.
- Demining of areas along the LoC and expansion of the no man's land area regulated by designated authorities on both sides.

Military CBMs can be expanded to consolidate de-escalation measures on the LoC. These may include:

- Increasing the frequency of meetings at the local commanders' level.
- A policy of no construction without informing the other side.
- The facility to call a meeting with the other side within 24 hours.
- Delegation of responsibility to brigade commander level.
- No firing on civilians or civilian transport.
- Creation and maintenance of safe farming zones on both sides of the LoC.
- Relocation of heavy artillery to at least 30 km away from the LoC.
- Reduction of troops along the LoC.

## **Resumption of Political Dialogue**

A sustained political dialogue between India and Pakistan is essential for stabilising ceasefire on the LoC and taking Kashmir specific CBMs on trade and travel to the next step. Cross-LoC travel and trade are facing several operationalization difficulties which could not be removed due to stalemate in the India-Pakistan peace process. Similarly, intra-Kashmir dialogue could not take off due to lack of interest in particular on part of India to make people of

Kashmir are primary stakeholders in the resolution of the Kashmir conflict. It is pertinent to note that degree of tension on the LoC and in India-Pakistan relations directly affects the growth of cross-LoC CBMs. Thereby an early resumption of dialogue process between India and Pakistan is crucial to revive cross-LoC CBM process that would directly and indirectly improve the security and economic conditions along the LoC.

## **Conclusion**

The Kashmir conflict has profoundly affected the people living along the LoC that remains highly militarized, volatile and mined. In Neelum valley the lives of the people, their livelihood, socio-cultural interactions and educational activity is subjected to the prevailing security conditions on the LoC which in turn largely depends on India-Pakistan relations. The 2003 ceasefire and India-Pakistan dialogue led to resumption of travel and trade across LoC which brought a semblance of normalcy in the lives of the people living in proximity of LoC. The deadlock in the dialogue process growing escalation of tension on the LoC has raised apprehensions that gains of ceasefire and CBMs would wither away if peace process is not resumed and steps are not undertaken by India and Pakistan to consolidate ceasefire and existing CBMs on Kashmir.

Early resumption of peace process between India and Pakistan is very important for stabilizing ceasefire on the LoC. Management of LoC requires institutionalization of ceasefire. Steps should be taken to expand military CBMs including strengthening of de-escalation mechanisms, early conclusion of agreements regarding no construction of new posts on the LoC and the speedy return of people who inadvertently cross the LoC. Both sides should engage in serious discussions on reduction of troops along the LoC and relocation of the heavy artillery 30km away from the LoC as civilian population is highly vulnerable to exchanges of heavy firing on the LoC as witnessed in recent times and during the 1990s. The areas along the LoC should be de-mined as they continue to threaten civilians and constrain their livelihood activities.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The study is based on the field analysis and uses various research tools of qualitative as well as quantitative research. The field survey was conducted from August to December 2014. It used the Stratified Random Sample survey (SRS) method and design questionnaire to explore the impact of conflict and ceasefire on the people living in the forward areas Neelum district. The civilian population living along the LoC formed the universe and an appropriate sample of 200 persons from Neelum Valley was drawn to find out the effects of conflict and ceasefire on the local community living in these areas. The survey tried to cover maximum social strata across gender, age and occupation. A ratio of 60 percent males and 40 percent females was maintained. The female respondents included housewives, farmers, health care and social workers, teachers and students. The male respondents comprised those engaged in small businesses, farmers, labourers, traders, transporters, cross-LoC traders, office workers, journalists, students and teachers. There was mix age group across gender- youth, middle aged and elderly who have experienced the conflict in a varied manner and at different times. There were 15 % from 60 and above; 40 % between 40 and 60 and 45 % between 18 and 40.
- <sup>2</sup> See text of the 'Agreement between Military Representatives of India and Pakistan Regarding the Establishment of a Ceasefire Line in the State of Jammu and Kashmir (Karachi Agreement)' [http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IN%20PK\\_490729\\_%20Karachi%20Agreement.pdf](http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IN%20PK_490729_%20Karachi%20Agreement.pdf). In July 1972, India and Pakistan signed an agreement defining a Line of Control in Kashmir which, with minor deviations, followed the same course as the ceasefire line established by the Karachi Agreement in 1949.
- <sup>3</sup> The strength of UNMOGIP is 114 personnel including 45 military observers. It has suffered 11 fatalities including 5 military men since its inception. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unmogip/facts.shtml>. UNMOGIP established headquarters in Rawalpindi (Pakistan) and Srinagar (India) and set up 11 field stations along the ceasefire line. The observer group is financed by the United Nations regular budget and appropriations for biennium 2014-2015 are USD 19.64 million.
- <sup>4</sup> UNMOGIP's functions were to observe and report, investigate complaints of cease-fire violations and submit its findings to each party and to the Secretary General.
- <sup>5</sup> Mian Abdul Waheed, interview with the author, September 8, 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert G. Wirsing, Kashmir Conflict in Charles Kennedy (ed), *Pakistan 1992* (Westview Press, 1993) 154.
- <sup>7</sup> Amiruddin Mughal, a photo journalist from Kundal Shahi, interview with author, November 7, 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> Irfan Ghauri, "Tales from LoC-3: Neelum valley people thirst for peace," *The Express Tribune*, July 4, 2011. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/202001/tales-from-loc-3-neelum-valley-people-thirst-for-peace/>
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with author, October 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Muhammad Akram Sohail, former DC, Muzaffarabad, interview with the author, January 8, 2015.
- <sup>11</sup> A respondent from Lawat.
- <sup>12</sup> Amiruddin Mughal's documentary on landmine victims of Azad Kashmir Behamber to Neelum Valley near Line of control LoC by SAMAA TV. June 21, 2014. [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1zxr4m\\_first-ever-documentary-in-pakistan-about-landmines-victims-of-azad-kashmir\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1zxr4m_first-ever-documentary-in-pakistan-about-landmines-victims-of-azad-kashmir_news)
- <sup>13</sup> A respondent from Athmuqam.
- <sup>14</sup> A respondent from Dawarian.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Shah Ghulam Qadir, former speaker of the AJK Assembly who is extensively engaged in the Neelum valley and contested from the area in the last Assembly elections. December 12, 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> A respondent from Karen.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Amiruddin Mughal.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with Professor Khawaja A. Rehman who teaches at a postgraduate college in Muzaffarabad, September 5, 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> A respondent from Rawata.

- 
- <sup>20</sup> A respondent from Rawata.
- <sup>21</sup> M. Ilyas Khan, 'The housewives taking on militants in Kashmir', November 17, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24426555>
- <sup>22</sup> A respondent from Lala.
- <sup>23</sup> A respondent from Athmuqam.
- <sup>24</sup> A respondent from Rawata.
- <sup>25</sup> A respondent from Lala.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Shah Ghulam Qadir, former speaker of the AJK Assembly who is extensively engaged in the Neelum valley and contested from the area in the last Assembly elections. December 12, 2014.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Shehla Waqar, Secretary for the Department of Archaeology and Tourism, AJK. Also see <https://storify.com/theglobeandmail/in-pakistan-kashmir-a-valley-bets-on-tourism-and-p>
- <sup>28</sup> A respondent from Athmaqam.
- <sup>29</sup> Tariq Naqash, 'LoC peace within grasp,' *Dawn*, December 26, 2013.
- <sup>30</sup> "18 jawans killed in pre-dawn strike at Uri", *The Hindu*, September 18, 2016. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/18-jawans-killed-in-pre-dawn-strike-at-Uri/article14988716.ece>
- <sup>31</sup> M.A. Mir, Kamran Yousaf, "8 killed as Indian forces target passenger bus near LoC", *The Express Tribune*, 23 November, 2016
- <sup>32</sup> According to Indian official sources, the number of incidents of fire increased from 28 in 2009 to 44 in 2010, 51 in 2011, 114 in 2012, 347 in 2013, 562 in 2014, 405 in 2015, and 449 times in 2016. See, Pakistan violated ceasefire daily in 2015, 2016: MHA", PTI May 7, 2017, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pakistan-violated-ceasefire-daily-in-2015-2016-mha/articleshow/58558231.cms>. Pakistani official and media figures are: 20, (2009) 67 (2010), 86 (2011), 230 (2012), 315 (2013), 234 (2014), 221 (2015), 382 (2016). See, "India violated ceasefire 221 times in 2015", *The News*, September 11, 2015. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/8092-india-violated-ceasefire-221-times-in-2015>. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Threats of retaliation traded with India", *Dawn*, June 6, 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1337734/threats-of-retaliation-traded-with-india>. "India violated ceasefire along LoC, working boundary 563 times in 2014-15", *Pakistan Today*, September 19, 2016. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/09/19/india-violated-ceasefire-along-loc-working-boundary-563-times-in-2014-15/>
- <sup>33</sup> Julia Thompson, "The Dynamics of Violence along the Kashmir Divide, 2003-2015", <https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/dynamics-violence-kashmir-divide.pdf>
- <sup>34</sup> A hotline between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) was established in 1971 and after the 1990 crisis the decision was made to use it on a weekly basis.