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New Chinese Militia Units for High Altitudes

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Why in News

Recently, Chinese Military has raised **new militia units** comprising local Tibetan youth for **high-altitude warfare**.



Key Points

- **About:**

- The new units named **Mimang Cheton** are presently undergoing training, and are to be **deployed mostly in upper Himalayan ranges**, both in the **eastern and western sectors of the India-China border**.

They are being **trained for a variety of tasks**, including using **high-tech equipment** such as **drones** on the one hand, as well as **mules and horses** to reach regions in the Himalayan range that can't be accessed by modern means.

- They have been **raised near Eastern Ladakh**, the site of the **recent border tensions** along the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)**, as well as near its borders with **Sikkim and Bhutan**.

The **LAC** is the demarcation that separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory.

- Trained units have already been deployed along various locations in the Chumbi valley and at Rutog in Tibet, near the **Pangong Tso (lake)** in eastern Ladakh.
- The deployment of the new Mimang Cheton units mirrors India's elite and decades-old **Special Frontier Force (SFF)**.

Just like the SFF which relies on the knowledge of Tibetans, the Mimang Cheton also **relies on the local knowledge of Tibetans as well as locals' resistance to High Altitude Sickness, a problem in alpine warfare**.

- **Objectives:**

- **High Altitude Warfare:**

The new units will be used for **high-altitude warfare as well for surveillance**.

- **Socio Cultural Aspect:**

- A new feature of the units is that upon completion of training, they are **being blessed by Buddhist monks in Tibet**, which is being interpreted as a sign of greater socio-cultural outreach from the PLA to ethnic Tibetans.
- This is possibly a new strategy of the PLA to **get some mileage in the Tibet region**.

- **Recent Chinese Developments along the Border:**
 - **Railway Line:**
 - China has started the first bullet train line in Tibet, linking **Lhasa to Nyimingchi** near the border with Arunachal Pradesh.
 - It is the second major rail link to Tibet after the **Qinghai-Tibet railway that opened in 2006.**
 - **Highway:**

In 2021, China completed construction of a **strategically significant highway** enabling greater access to remote areas **along the disputed border with Arunachal Pradesh in India.**
 - **New Villages:**
 - **In January 2021**, there were reports of **Chinese construction of three villages** in Arunachal Pradesh 5 kilometres from the Bum La pass.
 - In 2020, satellite images emerged showing a new village called Pangda built 2-3 km into what Bhutan sees as its land.
 - In 2017, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government launched a plan to build moderately well-off villages in border areas.
 - Under this plan **628 first line and second line villages**—referring to those right on the border and others in remote areas slightly further within—would be **developed along China’s borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal.**
- **Concerns for India:**
 - **Strategic Location:**
 - Such development in view of the strategic location of Chumbi Valley creates a concern for India.
 - Chumbi Valley** is a 100-km protrusion of Chinese territory located between Bhutan in the east and Sikkim in the west.
 - The **valley’s location has long resulted in concerns** that it could be **used to launch operations** to snap strategic communications links in the Siliguri Corridor.
 - Siliguri Corridor** is a narrow stretch of land located around the city of Siliguri in West Bengal. **It connects northeastern states with the rest of the country**, and is also known as **chicken's neck.**
 - **China’s Strengthening Position:**

These developments have come against the backdrop of the **border standoff** that began in May 2020 and a **rapid build-up of infrastructure on the Chinese side** along the LAC, including airports, helipads, missile facilities and air sites.

- **Steps Taken by India to Strengthen its Border:**

- India has its own **High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS)** in Gulmarg, Jammu and Kashmir.
- India will spend **10% funds** of the **Border Area Development Programme (BADP)** only to improve the infrastructure along the China border.
- The **Border Roads Organisation (BRO)** constructed the **Daporijo bridge** over Subansiri river in Arunachal Pradesh.
It links roads leading upto the LAC between India and China.
- A **tunnel at Nechiphu in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh** will shorten travel time for troops till the LAC through Tawang, which China claims to be its territory.
- A **tunnel** is being constructed under the **Se La pass in Arunachal Pradesh** which connects Tawang to the rest of Arunachal and Guwahati.
- The state government of Arunachal Pradesh has advocated **selection of 10 census towns along the India-China border** as pilot projects for infrastructure development in order to stop people living along its international borders, specifically with China, from migrating to faraway urban centres in the State.
- **Sisseri River Bridge**, located at lower Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, connects Dibang Valley and Siang.
- In 2019, the Indian Air Force inaugurated resurfaced runway at India's **easternmost Village-Vijaynagar (Changlang district)** in Arunachal Pradesh.
- In 2019, the Indian Army conducted **exercise 'HimVijay'** in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam with its newly created Integrated Battle Groups (IBG).
- **Bogibeel bridge**, which is **India's longest road-rail bridge** connecting Dibrugarh in Assam to Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh was inaugurated in 2018.

Special Frontier Force

- **About:**

- It was established in **November 1962** in the immediate aftermath of the **1962 Sino-India war**.
- It falls **under the purview of the Cabinet Secretariat** where it is headed by an Inspector General who is an Army officer of the rank of Major General.
The units that comprise the SFF are known as **Vikas battalions**.
- They are **highly trained special forces personnel** who can undertake a variety of tasks which would normally be performed by any special forces unit.
- The recruits initially consisted of Tibetan refugees hailing from the Khampa community (**now it has a mixture of Tibetans and Gorkhas**).
Women soldiers, too, form a part of SFF units and perform specialised tasks.
- SFF units are not part of the Army but they **function under operational control of the Army**

- **Major Operations:**

Operation Eagle (1971 war with Pakistan), **Operation Bluestar** (clearing Amritsar's Golden Temple in 1984), Operation Meghdoot (securing the **Siachen glacier** in 1984) and **Operation Vijay** (war with Pakistan at Kargil in 1999) and many counter-insurgency operations in the country.

Way Forward

India **needs to be vigilant enough for any new development in China near its border** to protect its interests efficiently. Further, **it needs to build robust Infrastructure in difficult border areas in its territory** to ensure movement of personnel and other logistical supplies in an efficient manner.

Source: TH