

TESTED BUT TIRED, THIS FORCE COULD BE IN DISTRESS

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Remembering Pulawama, in Srinagar on February 14, 2023. | Photo Credit: The Hindu

A day of remembrance of the [Pulwama attack](#) passed yet again last month. The attack that happened on February 14, 2019, claimed the lives of 40 personnel who were a part of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), India's largest paramilitary force. The Pulwama attack was different as it resulted in unprecedented public outcry. The emotional response it evoked in the country cut across all sections of society. As a force, the CRPF takes everything in its stride.

Before this dark day, on April 6, 2010, 76 CRPF personnel were felled by left-wing extremists numbering in their hundreds, in Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh. It is saddening that this terrible attack faded away from public attention even though it was another dark day —it remains the deadliest attack on security forces in any counter-insurgency or anti-terrorist operations in independent India.

The internal security scenario in the country has been showing marginal improvement especially in insurgency-affected northeast India. But one can say that there has been 'insignificant improvement' in left-wing extremism areas and also terrorist-affected Kashmir. It is here that the point about deployment levels is of relevance. The deinduction of the Indian Army has taken place, with the void filled mainly by the CRPF. Hence, personnel of these forces continue to be tasked with carrying out hard duties and are overstretched without any rest or respite. As a consequence, training becomes compromised. The need to hone tactical skills cannot be overlooked as it would adversely reflect in the operational capabilities of any force, making them vulnerable to surreptitious attacks by anti-national forces.

The central government has been compelled to entrust a number of assignments that are becoming riskier by the day to these forces — especially to the CRPF because of the force's versatility and flexible operational procedures. The huge and continuous deployment of the regular army would invite adverse attention from the international press and, consequently, the perspective of other world nations would also be coloured. It is natural that the CRPF pays for it the hard way. A cursory glance of records in the various operational theatres in India in the last few years would reveal the higher casualty rates suffered by the paramilitary. These tested but tired forces can attain and maintain the optimum level of performance needed only if the training and the morale of their personnel are taken care of. Without addressing these aspects, any induction or introduction of any potent weaponry or technology would hardly bring about desired

change.

What makes the observance of Pulwama day different from previous years is that former personnel and their families turned up in large numbers in different parts of the country to demand the old pension scheme to serving members of the fraternity. The old pension scheme was stopped for personnel joining service after December 31, 2003.

They cited the Delhi High Court order of December 2022 that reiterated their status as a force under the category of 'Armed Forces of the union'. It is no surprise that a day of remembrance was used to give vent to pent-up feelings of discrimination vis-à-vis the regular armed forces (the Indian Army, the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force) in matters that range from pension to service facilities such as Canteen Stores Department. The fraternity is grieved that despite facing a war-like situation on a daily basis — a point that is recognised by the public and the judiciary — the government is reluctant to grant the paramilitary these benefits.

The most important goal in observing Pulwama day should be to avoid a repeat of that dark day in 2019. The lessons learnt will have to be analysed and corrective measures taken. For the government, it would be only appropriate and befitting to listen to the genuine grievances of the personnel of the forces concerned as public opinion seems to be mobilised in favour of the paramilitary forces. The morale of these personnel needs to be kept high. It would help the security environment of the nation if paramilitary personnel feel that they are being treated on a par with comparable defence forces personnel.

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