

Tension between Myanmar-Bangladesh festers on border

Tension festers on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border over the maritime boundary dispute despite exploration of gas having been stopped by Daewoo. Now troop build up and laying of landmines are being reported along the border of the two countries.

CJ: Shyamal Sarkar

THE WITHDRAWAL of warships from the disputed waters in the Bay of Bengal notwithstanding, both Myanmar and Bangladesh are into troop build up along the land border. The Myanmar Army has reportedly planted mines along the border forcing Bangladesh to ask people to stay clear of the “no-man’s land” or cross the border into Myanmar.

Diplomatic parleys between the top brass of the two countries both in Myanmar and on the sidelines of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Corporation (BIMSTEC) meeting held in New Delhi between November 11 and 13, has yielded no result. Burma had earlier rejected Bangladesh’s claim and said the area where exploration was is in its territorial waters.

The Bangladesh authorities in south of Chittagong Hill Tract for instance had been announcing over microphones to Bangladeshis that they should steer clear of the border. The move follows after the Nasaka; Myanmar’s Burmese border security forces reportedly started laying landmines along the border, the Myanmar media in exile and media in Bangladesh reports. Troops from both countries have beefed up patrolling the border and were said to have dug trenches, taken up positions and set up heavy weaponry.

Thus palpable tension between Burma and Bangladesh on the border continues despite the South Korean company Daewoo having shifted from the disputed territorial waters, where it had been conducting test drilling. Both sides withdrew its warships from the region, media reports emanating from Bangladesh said.

Things came to a head last Sunday between the two countries when Myanmar sent two warships as escort for Daewoo’s vessels and rigs to work in the AD-7 block in the Bay of Bengal. Protests followed from Bangladesh along with four warships with Bangladesh claiming that the area was within its maritime boundary. It demanded an immediate halt to gas exploration activities by Myanmar.

Though the tension between the two countries eased somewhat when on November 8, Daewoo removed its rigs from the AD-7 block and moved on to A-3, the laying of the landmine has shifted the area of tension from the sea to the land.

Landmines and the Myanmar military junta have a history of being close.

The Myanmar Army planted landmines along the border between 1995 and 2000 to stop Arakanese rebels from entering Burma from border areas of Bangladesh, the country’s media recalls. It halted planting of landmines on the border after Arakanese rebels were forced away from the border areas by Bangladesh.

The Myanmar ruling junta, often described as a rogue state by the West did not agree to sign the Mine Ban Treaty. Burma abstained from voting on the pro-Mine Ban Treaty in the UN General Assembly Resolution 57/74 in November 2002. Neither have junta representatives attended any of the annual meetings, the Myanmar media in exile claims.

However, the two countries continue to use diplomatic channels to defuse the tension and resolve the maritime boundary dispute.

Bangladesh’s Foreign Adviser Iftakhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win met on the sidelines (BIMSTEC) meeting held in New Delhi and described the talks as cordial. While no agreement was fashioned they said they would continue high-level talks and agreed to resolve the thorny issue diplomatically.

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