

Siachen Glacier

The Siachen Glacier is a glacier located in the Karakoram range in the Himalayas.

Although India controls the entirety of the Siachen Glacier since 1984, Pakistan still has territorial claims over it, controls the region west of Saltoro Ridge, lying west of the glacier and operates many outposts there.

This article will give information about the Siachen glacier which will be useful in the Geography segment of the IAS Exam. To know more about other topics in this segment, visit the UPSC Syllabus page.

Facts about Siachen Glacier

- The Siachen Glacier is the **longest glacier in the Karakoram range** and the second longest in the world outside of polar regions.
- The Siachen Glacier **lies in that part of Karakoram which is referred to as the “Third Pole”** of the world. It gets this name because Siachen Glacier lies south of the great drainage divide that separates the Eurasian Plate from the Indian subcontinent.
- Including all tributary glaciers, the Siachen Glacier system covers about 700 km².
- The region is **home to rare species including snow leopard**, brown bear and ibex that are at risk because of the military presence in the region.
- At the height of 6000 ft, the **Siachen Glacier is the world’s highest battleground**.

Dispute over the Siachen Glacier

As the wider part of the ongoing Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan, the dispute over the Siachen Glacier has played a crucial role in the relation between the two countries.

Both have claimed total sovereignty over the entire Siachen region. In the 190s and the early 1980s, the United States and the Pakistan’s governments, being Cold War allies at the time, showed incorrect maps of the Siachen Glacier with point NJ9842 having a dotted line all the way to the Karakoram Pass. As far as India was concerned this was a cartographic error and a violation of the 1972 Shimla Agreement which stipulated that neither India nor Pakistan would take unilateral steps to change the representation of the Line of Control without consultation.

In 1984 Operation Meghdoot was launched by India. It resulted in India gaining complete control over all of Siachen Glacier and included its tributaries. It pre-empted Pakistan’s own military move -

Operation Ababeel by a day to occupy the dominating heights on Saltoro Ridge located at the west of Siachen Glacier.

The harsh conditions in the Siachen Glacier have led to loss of life on both Indian and Pakistani sides. Frostbites, avalanches and frequent winter storms kill more troops than bullets. Despite the harsh conditions, India and Pakistan continue to deploy troops to Siachen. Attempts to demilitarize the region have proven to be unsuccessful so far.

Present heads of state of India like Prime Minister of India, President of Pakistan have visited Siachen Glacier from time to time. Erstwhile President of India, APJ Abdul Kalam (born on October 15 1931) was the first head of state to visit from either country to visit the region.

Since September 2007, India has opened up limited mountaineering and trekking expeditions to the area. The first group included cadets from Chail Military School, National Defence Academy, National Cadet Corps, Indian Military Academy, Rashtriya Indian Military College and family members of armed forces officers.

Environmental Concerns in the Siachen Glacier

Uninhabited before 1984, the heavy military presence has led to environmental degradation at the Siachen Glacier.

Satellite images indicate that the glacier is melting away by 110 metres a year and the glacier size decreased by 35%.

One of the reasons believed for the high-rate of glacial reduction is attributed to chemical blasting meant for construction of camps and outposts.

Waste generated by the military presence is dumped in the crevasses of the glacier. The waste consists of empty ammunition shells, parachutes, garbage, not all of them are biodegradable. And due to the sub-zero temperatures it is next to impossible to burn them.

The Indian Army is planning a cleanup campaign called 'Green Siachen, Clean Siachen' to clear the region of biodegradable wastes with the use of biodigesters in the absence of oxygen and freezing temperatures. At least 40% of the wastes left at the glacier is of plastic and metal (The metals like cobalt, cadmium and chromium.)

This is dangerous as the Indus River being in close proximity to the Siachen Glacier, the metals will find their way into the water of its tributaries such as the Shyok River and can poison the entire water supply.

Frequently Asked Questions Related to Siachen Glacier?

Why is Siachen Glacier important?

The Siachen glacier demarcates central Asia from the Indian subcontinent, and separates Pakistan from China in the region. Due to its control over Saltoro Ridge, India is better placed to strike a bargain while settling bilateral territorial disputes with Pakistan in the future.

What is the lowest recorded temperature at Siachen?

The lowest temperature to be reported for Siachen was minus 57 degree Celsius.