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Ethno-Nationalism and the Politics of Terror in India's Northeast

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India's north-eastern frontier is one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots. With as many as 30 armed insurgent organisations¹ currently operating there and pushing demands ranging from secession to autonomy and the right of self-determination, and a plethora of ethnic groups clamouring for their rights and distinct identity— at times not just fighting the Indian state but engaged in internecine turf wars— the region has all the ingredients that make for and sustain tension and turmoil. Moreover, the location of the eight north-eastern Indian states² itself goes to explain why it has always been a hotbed of militancy with trans-border ramifications. This region spreading over 263,000 square kilometres shares a highly porous and sensitive frontier with China to the north, Myanmar to the east, Bangladesh to the southwest and Bhutan to the northwest.³

Moreover the region is connected to the Indian mainland by a tenuous 22 kilometre-long land corridor passing through Siliguri in the eastern state of West Bengal, fancifully described as the 'Chicken's Neck'. This is the region where India's longest-running insurgency is located—spearheaded by the Naga tribal separatists who have been clamouring for an independent homeland ever since India attained independence from the British in 1947. And in four of the eight north-eastern

¹ The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs' Annual Report for 2003–2004 lists 18 active insurgent groups in the north-eastern states (there are several dormant ones). In the chapter titled 'Security Scenario in the North East', the report states: 'The North-Eastern States have been affected by insurgency for quite some time now. Militant activities of various underground groups and ethnic divisions have kept the conditions disturbed in several areas of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura, as well as in some areas of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh'. See Ministry of Home Affairs, *Ministry of Home Affairs Annual Report, 2003–2004* (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2004), pp.2 & 33 [<http://mha.nic.in/Annual-Reports/ar0304-Eng.pdf>].

² The state of Sikkim has recently been formally bracketed under 'Northeast' after it was included in the North Eastern Council (NEC), the region's apex funding and development agency. The other seven states of the Northeast are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

³ It is located at longitude 89.46 degrees E to 97.30 degrees E and latitude 21.57 degrees N to 29.30 degrees N.

Indian states, namely Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura, the violence has reached a level that can justifiably be categorised as Low Intensity Warfare—that level of conflict in which fatalities are over 100 but less than 1000 per annum.⁴ Between 1992 and 2002, there have been 12,175 fatalities due to insurgency or other types of armed conflict in India's Northeast.⁵

The region is an ethnic minefield, as it comprises around 160 Scheduled Tribes,⁶ besides an estimated 400 other tribal or sub-tribal communities and groups. Turbulence in India's Northeast is, therefore, not caused just by armed separatist groups representing different ethnic communities fighting the federal or local governments or their proxies to press for some form of autonomy, but also by the recurring battles for territorial supremacy among the different ethnic groups. If the faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland headed by Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (NSCN-IM) has been pushing ahead with its demand for an independent Naga homeland to be carved out of India, the Naga and the Kuki ethnic groups in the state of Manipur, and the Bodo and Santhal tribespeople in western Assam have been struggling no less fiercely to retain control of their ancestral lands and thereby preserve their identity and rights.

What the Northeast of India is witnessing is essentially an ethno-national push by these groups to further their sub-national aspirations. For instance, the movement for greater autonomy by the Bodos, Assam's largest plains tribal community, led to the group securing a new politico-administrative structure within the existing state of Assam following a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the central government on 10 February 2003. The Bodo-majority areas came under the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), a 40-member elective body that would run the day-to-day administration of the areas under it and undertake developmental projects to improve the condition of the community and the areas which they inhabit with funds allocated to it by the federal government, and the state governments.⁷ The BTC—run initially by an interim team of administrators—held its first elections on 13 May 2005. The 2003 MoU was reached between the government and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), the insurgent group spearheading the autonomy

⁴ Ajai Sahni, 'Survey of Conflicts and Resolution in India's Northeast', in *Faultlines: Writings On Conflict and Resolution*, Vol.12 (May 2002), p.39.

⁵ South Asia Terrorism Portal [<http://www.satp.org>, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

⁶ Those tribes or tribal communities that are recognised under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution.

⁷ The MoU with the BTC, signed on 10 February 2003, reads: 'In order to accelerate the development of the region and to meet the aspirations of the people, the Government of India will provide financial assistance of Rs100 crores per annum for 5 years for projects to develop the socio-economic infrastructure in BTC areas over and above the normal plan assistance to the state of Assam'. For the full text see South Asia Terrorism Portal [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/memorandum_feb02.htm, accessed 16 Feb. 2004].

movement. Thus it was not a surprise to find the BLT-floated political party, the Bodo People's Progressive Front headed by the BLT chief-turned-politician Hagrama Mahilary, winning the polls and coming to run affairs at the Council. The BTC Accord is seen as a fulfilment of the sub-national aspirations of the Bodos of Assam.

Similarly, the six-year-long anti-foreigner uprising spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), the state's apex student body, from 1979 to 1985, was triggered by the indigenous Assamese community's fear of being overwhelmed by the ongoing influx of illegal Bangladeshi migrants from across the porous border. The anti-foreigner stir—perhaps among the biggest mass uprising in India since the country's freedom struggle—ended with the signing of an agreement, popularly called the Assam Accord, between the federal and state governments and the AASU on 15 August 1985. As far as the illegal foreign migrants were concerned, the Accord fixed the arrival date of 25 March 1971 as the cut-off for their detection and expulsion from the state.

The region has been caught in a vicious cycle of inadequate economic development and insufficient job opportunities, causing unrest and militancy, and then militancy and violence—which has, ironically, further retarded economic growth.⁸ For instance, the plan for industrial investment in the region between August 1991 and December 1994 involved a mere Rs2,224 crore, whereas in a single state like Maharashtra, the figure for the corresponding period was Rs67,978 crore.⁹ As for the employment scenario, in Assam (total population 26,655,528 according to 2001 census, the largest state in northeast India), the number of total job seekers registered with the state-government-run employment exchanges stood at 1,521,966 at the end of December 2002.¹⁰ This has resulted in the region's various ethnic groups and communities finding it rather easy to press their respective demands through agitation—for they have a bank of aggrieved constituents to draw upon for foot soldiers.

Another dimension to the problem is that underground armed insurgent groups, over-ground socio-political groupings representing ethnic communities, and influential students' outfits based in these communities, are more often than not striving to achieve the same goal, namely to protect the rights of their respective communities.

⁸ For specific indicators demonstrating the economic under-development of India's Northeast, see Wasbir Hussain, 'Contemporary North-East India: Problems and Prospects,' in J.P. Singh (ed.), *Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North East India (1947–97)* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998), pp.129–36.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Directorate of Economics and Statistics, *Economic Survey: Assam, 2003–2004* (Guwahati: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, 2004), p.83.

The Nagas' Homeland Dream and its Impact

Insurgency is by far the most extreme form of any ethno-political stirring, and the Nagas epitomised armed insurrection in the Northeast. Comprising about 17 major tribes and more than 20 sub-tribes, the Nagas have always considered themselves to be an independent nation. 'We are Nagas by birth, Indians by accident', is a common refrain among these indigenous tribal people.

The roots of Naga separatism precede India's Independence. As far back as 1929, under the banner of the 'Naga Club', the Nagas petitioned the Simon Commission, which was examining the feasibility of future self-governance in India, that they be left alone to determine their own future as they had in the past, and not be forced to be ruled by Indians who had 'never conquered them'.¹¹ By 1946 what had started as a political movement for the assertion of Naga identity was turning into an insurrection. Angami Zapu Phizo, regarded as the father-figure of the Naga insurgency, met Mahatma Gandhi on 19 July 1947. Two years later he became the president of the Naga National Council (NNC). Gandhi assured the delegation headed by Phizo that under no circumstances would force be used against the Nagas who were free to stay out of the Indian Union if they so desired.¹²

Emboldened by this, on 14 August 1947, the eve of Indian Independence, the Nagas took the Indian National Congress leadership by surprise and declared their 'independence'. In May 1951 more than 99 percent of the Naga population endorsed this stand in a plebiscite.¹³ Anxious lest the same spirit started engulfing other tribal groups in the Northeast, in 1953 the Indian government moved troops in large numbers into the Naga Hills and launched a crackdown on the NNC. In March 1956 Phizo created an underground government called the Naga Federal Government (NFG) and a Naga Federal Army. In December Phizo left the Naga Hills for Switzerland and London and began to campaign from exile for an independent Naga homeland. He never returned, dying in London in April 1990. His daughter Adinno Phizo, who succeeded him as NNC president, is still pursuing Phizo's dream from the family home in London.¹⁴

Meanwhile in 1972, New Delhi proscribed the NNC as an unlawful organisation under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967 and launched a massive counter-insurgency offensive. Cornered, and faced with reverses, the insurgents

¹¹ Wasbir Hussain, 'Peace in Naga Country: New Delhi's Challenges in the Far-Eastern Frontier', paper presented at a seminar on Peace Initiatives in South Asia organised by the Delhi Policy Group and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung at the United Services Institute, New Delhi, 28–29 November 2001.

¹² Hokishe Sema, *Emergence of Nagaland* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1986), p.160.

¹³ Rev. V.K. Nuh, *Nagaland: Church and Politics* (Kohima: V. Nuh & Bro., 1986), p.131.

¹⁴ Wasbir Hussain, 'Father's Daughter', *The Sentinel, Melange (Sunday Magazine)* (31 Aug. 2003), pp.22–9.

agreed to hold peace talks with the Union Government. This led to the signing of the controversial Shillong Accord on 11 November 1975 between a section of the NNC and its 'underground government', the Naga Federal Government (NFG), and the Union Government.¹⁵ The signatories to this agreement accepted the Indian Constitution and agreed to surrender their weapons and join the Indian national mainstream.¹⁶

A group of around 140 NNC cadres, however, repudiated the Shillong Accord and refused to surrender. They formed a new insurgent group called the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) under the leadership of Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chishi Swu and S.S. Khaplang. The significant point to be noted is that this new group, formed in 1980, took shape and was launched from this faction's bases inside Myanmar.¹⁷ With the passage of time, the NSCN emerged as the most radical and powerful insurgent group fighting for the Naga cause. But clannish divisions among the Nagas (between the Konyak and Tangkhul tribes) resulted in a split of the NSCN in 1988. The Konyaks took the lead in forming the NSCN-K (Khaplang) under the leadership of Khole Konyak and S.S. Khaplang. The other faction—led mostly by the Tangkhuls under the leadership of Swu and Muivah—came to be known as NSCN-IM. After fighting a prolonged guerrilla war with the Indian security forces, the NSCN-IM signed a ceasefire agreement that came into effect on 1 August 1997. Ever since, the NSCN-IM and the Indian government have been engaged in peace negotiations aimed at arriving at an 'acceptable solution' to the Naga problem.

Before it made up its mind to enter into peace negotiations with New Delhi, the NSCN-IM may have concluded that it would work on a compromise formula. After all the rebel leadership—in the wake of several previous failed peace initiatives—must have realised the futility of sticking to a demand for nothing less than total independence. If one analyses the progress of the peace negotiations between the NSCN-IM and the Indian government during the past decade, it appears that the rebels may be willing to give up their demand for an independent Naga homeland but not, under any circumstances, their dream of the different Naga tribes to 'live together in one land as one family'.¹⁸ It would like to deny it, but the NSCN-IM wants something like a 'Greater Nagaland' to be formed by the merger of

¹⁵ For the complete text of the Shillong Accord, see Nuh, *Nagaland: Church & Politics*, pp.158–60.

¹⁶ Hussain, 'Peace in Naga Country'.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ 'Unified Naga Homeland; Foundation of Any Political Settlement', *Nagalim.NL News* (9 September 2005) [<http://www.nagalim.nl/news/00000138.htm>].

Naga-inhabited areas in the adjoining states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and if possible those in Myanmar, into the present state of Nagaland.¹⁹

Indeed the NSCN-IM has made it clear, through a careful play of words, that it has an expansionist agenda. In an interview in 2002, the NSCN-IM General Secretary Muivah said that his group is not campaigning for a greater Nagaland or a smaller Nagaland, but added that the 'division drawn on the Naga territories had been done by the British colonialists and the Government of India, not by the Nagas'.²⁰ This means that the present territorial boundaries of the states in the Northeast are not acceptable to the NSCN-IM. 'Besides, Muivah has said that the Nagas are not claiming land belonging to others and that the areas where the Nagas are living (in states like Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, apart from Nagaland) belong to them. All these go to reinforce the fact that the NSCN-IM is bent on uniting the Naga areas in the Northeast, transgressing the present state boundaries. And, here lies the problem'.²¹ Such demands, however, elicit strong protests and opposition from these states as well as from different tribal groups that reside in the areas claimed by the Naga leadership.

During most of the peace dialogue between the NSCN-IM and New Delhi, the issue of resolving the dispute over the jurisdiction of the ceasefire area has dominated proceedings. The rebel leadership has been pressing for the truce to be extended to all the Naga-inhabited areas outside Nagaland; the Indian government has been reluctant. But at length, on 14 June 2001—after a two-day meeting in Bangkok with the NSCN-IM headed by General Secretary Muivah—New Delhi's peace envoy announced that the ceasefire would be extended for a further year, and that henceforth the truce would have no 'territorial limits'.²²

The agreement triggered off the biggest-ever mass uprising of the majority Meiteis in the Imphal Valley in the adjoining state of Manipur, who feared that an extension of the ceasefire could lead to parts of Manipur being sliced off and merged into Nagaland as part of a deal with the NSCN-IM. Up to 50,000 Meiteis took to the streets in Imphal on 18 June 2001—four days after the extension of the ceasefire limits outside Nagaland was announced—to oppose the extension of the NSCN–New Delhi truce

¹⁹ *Ibid.* See also Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'Manipur: The Siege Within', in *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol.4, no.1 (18 July 2005) [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/4_1.htm].

²⁰ Wasbir Hussain and Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'Naga Identity, Meitei Nationalism and Electoral Politics: Sub-Nationalism in Northeast India', in *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, Vol.10 (Jan. 2002), p.128, [<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume10/Article8.htm>].

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.128–9.

²² The joint statement issued in Bangkok, for instance, said the ceasefire agreement was between the 'Government of India and the NSCN as two entities without territorial limits'. See 'Extension of Truce Beyond Nagaland Withdrawn', *The Hindu* (28 July 2001) [<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/2001/07/28/stories/01280001.htm>].

to Manipur. A rampaging mob burnt the Manipur Legislative Assembly building and a dozen other government offices. Eighteen protestors were killed when security forces eventually opened fire to quell the frenzied mob. A massive civil disobedience movement followed and Imphal was placed under curfew for nearly a month. Finally, on 24 July, after a meeting with the chief ministers of the north-eastern states in New Delhi, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced that the ceasefire would once again be restricted only to the state of Nagaland. This concession eased the situation in the Imphal Valley.

However it did not satisfy the Nagas. The NSCN-IM accused New Delhi of going back on its Bangkok agreement of 14 June 2001 and questioned the sincerity of the Union Government. Nevertheless contrary to speculation, the NSCN-IM did not call off the ceasefire and resume its guerrilla war, although several of the group's top leaders, including V.S. Atem, its former military chief, threatened to resume the campaign if the jurisdiction of the truce did not cover all the Naga-inhabited areas in the region. Why? Firstly, the NSCN-IM was under tremendous pressure from Naga NGOs not to take any hasty steps. This was because there was a general mood for peace among the civilian population in Nagaland, and prominent civil society groups were at the forefront of the peace move. Secondly, it could have been a tactical ploy on the part of the NSCN-IM not to over-react on the ceasefire jurisdiction issue, and instead pursue the Naga unification plan in a more systematic manner. For its part, the government was apprehensive that an extension of the ceasefire to all Naga-inhabited areas would have meant recognising the NSCN's claim to all Naga-inhabited areas in the Northeast, including those outside the present state of Nagaland.

In fact, signs of a systematic campaign were obvious. On 26 October 2001 the United Naga Council, Manipur (UNC), which purports to represent Naga opinion in Manipur, met Prime Minister Vajpayee in New Delhi and submitted a memorandum demanding the integration of the Naga areas in Manipur with Nagaland. In the words of K.S. Paul Leo who led the UNC delegation:

Historically, Nagas have been wanting to live as one people, under one political roof. Therefore, we want that all Naga inhabited areas in Manipur be merged with Nagaland as an immediate interim arrangement pending a final settlement of the Naga problem so that the community's distinct culture and identity can be protected.²³

In support of this merger, the memorandum cited Jawaharlal Nehru's letter dated 13 May 1956 to then-Assam Chief Minister Bishnu Ram Medhi:

²³ Interview with K.S. Paul Leo in Guwahati on 5 November 2001.

One of their [the Nagas'] grievances is that under our Constitution we split them up in different political areas. Whether it is possible or desirable to bring them together again is for us to consider. Also what measure of autonomy we should give them so that they can lead their own lives without any sensation of interference. . . .²⁴

Although the NSCN-IM is engaged in bitter inter-group rivalry with the Khaplang faction of the NSCN as well as the Naga National Council, all these groups are in direct confrontation with the Indian nation-state. 'Internal conflicts in India's North-east are overwhelmingly conceptualised within the framework of unique ethnic identities that are threatened by, and in confrontation with, the nationalist state, which is often seen as a representative of an inchoate cultural mainstream'.²⁵ That is the primary reason why the rebels, who enjoy the backing of a sizeable section of the Nagas, are determined to unify all the Naga-populated areas in the region under a single administrative set-up. Both the Naga's aspirations for a unified homeland and the Meitei's fears of having to lose territory to the Nagas are grounded in the absolute determination of these groups to preserve their identities.

Inter-Ethnic Feuds: Battle of One-Upmanship

New Delhi appears to have been convinced that an integrationist policy in holding the Northeast together with the national mainstream was not a correct approach in view of the diverse nature of the region's demographic profile. The Union has ceased to present itself in the region as a 'homogenising state', and now takes into account the unique differences and distinct identities of the region's ethnic groups and communities. But this change of vision has opened a Pandora's box, encouraging a proliferation of movements aimed at economic and political liberation on ethnic lines, and thereby sparking feuds between the ethnic groups located in different parts of the Northeast over territorial supremacy.

Prior to the 10 February 2003 agreement between New Delhi and the leaders of Assam's Bodo ethnic group, another Bodo Accord had been signed in February 1993 that led to the creation of a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC).²⁶ The BAC was a non-starter as the government could not arrive at a consensus

²⁴ Letter no.1116-PMH/56 cited in the UNC memorandum to the prime minister dated 26 October 2001. See Hussain and Routray 'Naga Identity, Meitei Nationalism and Electoral Politics: Sub-Nationalism in Northeast India. ²⁵ Sahni, 'Survey of Conflicts and Resolution in India's Northeast', p.46.

²⁶ For the text of the Bodoland Autonomous Council Agreement 1993 see Chandana Bhattacharjee, *Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement: Case of Bodo-Kacharis of Assam* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1996), pp.347–83. For the Memorandum of Settlement on the Bodoland Territorial Council signed on 10 February 2003, see http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/memorandum_feb02.htm.

over the territorial boundary of this Council. Nonetheless, the set of modalities that it put in place to fix the Council's boundary triggered off a violent ethnic cleansing in western Assam.

What triggered the inter-ethnic violence? In the summer of 1996, the Bodos clashed with the Santhals, another ethnic group that cohabited around the principal district town of Kokrajhar, 250 kilometres west of Guwahati, Assam's capital. More than 300,000 people belonging to both communities were displaced, and around 250 people killed in the ethnic riots that began in May 1996 and continued sporadically until the end of the year.²⁷ As of February 2004 an estimated 130,000 people belonging to both communities were still living in the so-called relief camps set up by the government.²⁸ Although a relative calm now prevails in the area, the schism between these two groups has widened.

Both communities, Bodos and Santhals, have been living in the area for decades. But after the Bodo Accord of 1993, the Union government came up with a formula whereby only those villages with a Bodo population of 50 percent or more were to be included into the proposed BAC. This provision—which sought to preserve the non-Bodo population—resulted in a section of Bodos, including armed militant groups, launching an ethnic cleansing drive—which saw vast stretches of territory turned into Bodo-majority areas ripe for inclusion in the proposed Bodo Council.²⁹

Radical elements in the Santhal population responded by forming a raft of rag-tag armed groups with menacing names such as the Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam. The Cobra rebels soon started snatching arms from the police and paramilitary, and if they can transform themselves into a more organised outfit the chances of peace in Assam's Bodo tribal heartland—also home to the Santhals—will be remote.³⁰

The Kuki–Naga riots that rocked the state of Manipur during the mid 1990s, and especially in 1992–93, led to the deaths of hundreds of people.³¹ Both the Nagas and the Kukis are fighting for separate homelands and their territorial demands

²⁷ Wasbir Hussain, 'Our Land, Our Refugees', *The Hindu* (26 May 2000).

²⁸ Interview with Dr. A.K. Bhutani, Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar, 26 February 2004.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Wasbir Hussain, 'Meeting the Challenges of Insurgency in NE: The Centre's Responsibility', paper presented at a national seminar organised by the Indian Council of Social Science Research on Terrorism: An Unending Malaise, New Delhi, 2–3 March 2000.

³¹ According to one estimate 750 Kukis lost their lives and a total of 114,300 others belonging to both Naga and Kuki communities were displaced during the conflict. See Bhagat Oinam, 'Patterns of Ethnic Conflicts in the Northeast: A Study on Manipur', *Imphal Free Press* (26 June 2003).

overlap. Members of the two groups have frequently clashed in the past for control of the lucrative heroin trade route through Moreh, an Indian outpost close to the border with Myanmar. The key factor that has prompted Kuki–Naga clashes include the desire of the Nagas' rebel elements to ease out the Kukis from the four hill-tribe-dominated districts in Manipur. Faced with this threat, the Kukis formed insurgent groups of their own to defend their community in remote hill-top hamlets. But they have struggled to hold their ground. Now the Nagas in Manipur, led by the United Naga Council, Manipur, are openly seeking the merger of the Naga areas in Manipur with the adjoining state of Nagaland.

The armed insurgent groups in the region may be fighting the Indian state, but when it comes to protecting their own homeland cause, they do not hesitate to lock horns with other rebel groups or forces within the region. For instance, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)—Assam's frontline rebel group which has been fighting since its formation in April 1979 for a 'sovereign, Socialist Assam'—openly came out against the designs of the NSCN-IM to unify the Naga-inhabited areas in the Northeast by merging Naga-dominated territories in states like Assam with the state of Nagaland.

On 17 July 2001 through its mouthpiece, *Freedom*, the ULFA ridiculed the idea of Nagalim or a 'greater' Naga homeland and observed that 'history should not be distorted only to satisfy the chauvinistic ego'.³² Terming the decision to extend the ceasefire 'a suicidal act', the ULFA expressed the hope that the Naga leaders would 'review' their ambitions to extend 'Nagalim over others' territories'.³³ This has, of course, been one of those rare occasions when the ULFA chose to criticise its former ally, and was obviously aimed at playing to its Assamese constituents in the state.

The Battle Rages On

Homeland aspirations have affected other tribal communities of the region too. As the Indian state over the years has shown signs of listening only to the voices of people holding guns—which could be seen as a policy of rewarding terror—each passing day has added to the number of tribal communities threatening to wage war against the Indian state unless their demands for autonomy are addressed.

³² Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'Naga Cease-Fire Extension: Clash of Imagined Homelands', *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* [<http://www.ipcs.org/ipcs/issueIndex2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=812&issue=1014&status=article&mod=b>, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

³³ *Ibid.*

For instance, over the past decade or so 35,000 Reangs, also known as Brus, have been fighting for autonomy from the state of Mizoram from their base in relief camps in North Tripura. In October 1997 these tribals were forced leave Mizoram after the Mizos, led by the influential student organisations the Mizo Zirlai Pawl and the Young Mizo Association, allegedly burnt several Bru villages and killed and raped a number of Bru men and women.³⁴ Since then the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) has been negotiating the status of the refugees with the Mizoram state government. On 26 April 2005, the BNLF signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Mizoram government.³⁵ The MoU was supposed to have led to the repatriation of the estimated 40,000 Bru refugees from the six relief camps in North Tripura. But this has not happened yet. On 5 April 2006 the Mizoram government informed New Delhi that it would initiate repatriation of Bru refugees only after the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM)—believed to be a break-away faction of the BNLF which wanted to negotiate its own separate peace deal—laid down its arms and eschewed violence.³⁶ Up until the first half of 2006, the Mizoram government remained adamant about not negotiating with the BLFM, perhaps because it did not attach much importance to this splinter group.

However 809 BLFM militants did surrender at Naisingpara relief camp in North Tripura on 23 October 2006. They deposited 70 firearms, including AK series rifles, grenades, a mortar and explosives. Mizoram Home Minister Tawnluia declared that the state government would provide Rs40,000 to each of these BLFM militants and free rations for one year in transit camps in Mizoram. But on 4 November Tripura Police Chief G.M. Srivastava disclosed that the surrender was a 'stage managed' affair and that those who had laid down their weapons were not really BLFM rebels at all but merely ordinary Bru youth from the relief camps.³⁷ Things remain hazy. While Mizoram sticks to its promise of taking back the displaced Bru,³⁸ the finality of an autonomous region for the tribal group hangs in the balance.

In Assam's southern districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, there has been a continuing push for an autonomous state since the mid 1980s. Both

³⁴ Syed Sajjad Ali, 'The Reang Refugees', in *Frontline*, Vol.15, no.15 (18–31 July 1998).

³⁵ 'Mizoram Assessment 2006', South Asia Terrorism Portal [<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Mizoram/index.html>].

³⁶ See Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'Mizoram: Surrender Swindle', in *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol.5, no.21 (4 Dec. 2006) [http://satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/5_21.htm#assessment2].

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ On 20 January 2004 Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga met Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in New Delhi and assured him that that the Reang tribal refugees, sheltered in six North Tripura camps for over six years, would be taken back within two months. See 'Mizo Refugees to be Taken Back: Zoramthanga' [<http://sify.com/news/othernews/fullstory.php?id=13369784>, accessed 12 Feb. 2004].

these districts enjoy special protection under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution,³⁹ and have in place Autonomous District Councils to look after their administration. However, fear of being dominated by ‘outsiders’ (which means anyone not a local tribal) has generated a call for full statehood by the prosaically-named Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC).⁴⁰ Complicating this situation is the fact that the ASDC movement has split into two groups—the ASDC-United and the ASDC-Progressive—and that the Autonomous District Council is run by the Congress Party. The demand for an autonomous state, even though not dead as yet, has effectively been pushed onto the backburner.

Besides the political movement led by the ASDC factions, there are two fringe, yet violent and militant outfits, in these two districts, namely the United People’s Democratic Solidarity (UPDS)⁴¹ and the Dima Halam Daogah.⁴² Even though negotiations are in progress with both groups, violence still has not ceased. Interestingly, the proposed homelands of both these outfits eat into the NSCN-IM’s dream of a ‘Greater Nagaland’.

Additionally, in Karbi Anglong itself, the Kuki population, the antecedents of whom remain a matter of speculation, are locked in a bitter conflict with the Karbis in general and the UPDS in particular. The Kuki demand for an autonomous region within Karbi Anglong has met with violent opposition from UPDS cadres—opposition which has enjoyed silent support from Karbi politicians who view the Kuki autonomy movement as a threat to their own aspirations for autonomy. In October–November 2003, a number of deaths were reported from Karbi Anglong as a result of militant attacks by the UPDS and the Kuki militant outfit, the Kuki Revolutionary Army.

Yet another struggle for autonomy involves the Hmar tribespeople. The Hmars live scattered in Mizoram, Manipur and Assam and have, since the mid 1980s, been demanding a homeland for themselves. Initially the Hmar People’s Convention

³⁹ The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides for the creation of autonomous district councils in exclusively tribal areas so they have an elected politico-administrative body of local representatives who can run their respective regions through powers vested in them. These councils are empowered to prepare their own annual budgets for the development of their regions, although the allocation of funds has to be ratified by the legislature in the respective states.

⁴⁰ For details see ‘The Karbi Anglong and NC Hills Experience’ [<http://www.cpiml.org/PGS/polorgreport/7.htm>, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

⁴¹ For a profile of the United People’s Democratic Solidarity, see South Asia Terrorism Portal [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/upds.htm, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

⁴² For a profile of the Dima Halam Daogah, see South Asia Terrorism Portal [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/dhd.htm, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

(HPC) pressed for an administrative structure that conferred limited self-governance for the north and northeast of Mizoram:

In 1992, HPC representatives and the Government of Mizoram mutually agreed to hold ministerial level talks. Consequent to nine rounds of such talks, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed at the Mizoram capital Aizawl on 27 July 1994, for establishing the 'Sinlung Development Council' and subsequently 308 HPC militants surrendered along with their arms.⁴³

However, that led to a hard-line section of HPC cadres parting ways with the movement and forming the HPC-Democracy (HPC-D) in 1995. The HPC-D has shown little sign of responding to calls for peace. In 2003 HPC-D militants fought with Dimasas tribals for a period of two months in Assam's Cachar and North Cachar districts—a conflict that claimed an estimated 60 lives.⁴⁴

In Tripura, a bitter militancy has continued for three decades.⁴⁵ Over the years, new terrorist outfits have originated and violence continues to haunt the state. Currently three outfits—two factions of the National Liberation Front of Tripura⁴⁶ and the All-Tripura Tiger Force⁴⁷—are locked in mortal combat with government security forces. Even though the demands of these three outfits are various—ranging from the expulsion of the immigrant Bengali population to the establishment of an independent homeland for the tribals—the pattern of violence resorted to by these organisations demonstrates that they have long given up their separatist ideology and have degenerated into criminal gangs. This pattern is unfortunately rather typical. Many insurgent outfits have gradually given up their ethnic nationalist pretensions and become overtly dependent on foreign support and/or guided by foreign elements.

Homeland Battles, Foreign Links

Trans-border links between Northeast Indian insurgent groups started developing less than a decade after India became independent in 1947. After the NSCN was

⁴³ 'Hmar People's Convention-Democracy', South Asia Terrorism Portal [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/terrorist_outfits/HPC_D.htm, accessed 20 Feb. 2004].

⁴⁴ 'Dispur Needs to Apply Wise Counsel', *The Statesman* (Calcutta) (1 July 2003).

⁴⁵ The first organised militant grouping, the Sengkrak, was formed in the mid 1960s in opposition to non-tribals settling in the tribal reserve forest areas. See website of the Tripura State Police [<http://tripurapolice.nic.in/amilitancy.htm>, accessed 30 Jan. 2004].

⁴⁶ For a profile of the National Liberation Front of Tripura, see South Asia Terrorism Portal [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist_outfits/nlft.htm, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

⁴⁷ For a profile of the All-Tripura Tiger Force, see South Asia Terrorism Portal [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist_outfits/attf.htm, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

formed inside Myanmar and had established itself as a front-ranking insurgent group in the Northeast, it began providing arms training and other logistical support to newer rebel outfits such as the ULFA. The ULFA in turn sent its cadres for advanced 'military training' at the hands of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), who have been fighting the Burma government since 1948. Surrendered or captured ULFA rebels interviewed by this writer have confirmed that they received such arms training.⁴⁸ And American author Shelby Tucker testifies to having met ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa at the Pajau Bum headquarters of the Kachin Independence Organisation, the political wing of the KIA, around 1989.⁴⁹ Former ULFA rebels say the group's commander-in-chief, Paresh Barua, was also in Myanmar's Kachin Hills around that time.

Such trips were among the first attempts by rebels from Assam to forge strategic alliances with militant groups located in neighbouring countries like Myanmar. In 1985 the ULFA opened operations in Bangladesh by setting up safe houses at Damai village in Moulvi Bazar district bordering the north-eastern Indian state of Meghalaya.⁵⁰ By 1990, the ULFA had its Pakistani contacts in place, thanks to the efforts of Munin Nobis (since surrendered) and other leaders. Nobis told this writer in October 2002 that the Pakistanis had facilitated the cross-over of a number of ULFA leaders, including Paresh Barua, into Afghanistan through Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. There, assisted by the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the ULFA representatives met Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a top Afghan *muja-hideen* leader of that time. No wonder ULFA rebels who surrendered in the wake of a Bhutanese military assault on them in December 2003 talked of the presence of an Afghan-trained artillery expert at one of their Bhutan bases.⁵¹

As to the origin of these bases, which were set up mainly in the district of Samdrup Jongkar, bordering western Assam's Nalbari district, the major catalyst was a counter-insurgency operation launched by the Indian Army against ULFA elements in Assam on the night of 27–28 November 1990 codenamed 'Operation Bajrang'. The army's offensive was in retaliation for a ULFA reign of terror in the state. For months ULFA cadres had been killing, kidnapping and extorting money from tea companies' representatives and others. New Delhi dismissed the Assam

⁴⁸ Wasbir Hussain, 'We Picked Up our AKs and Fled', *The Sentinel* (24 Dec. 2003).

⁴⁹ Shelby Tucker, *Among Insurgents: Walking Through Burma* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), pp.82–3.

⁵⁰ This information was disclosed by a top ULFA leader who had surrendered during an interview with the author on 23 October 2002 at Guwahati.

⁵¹ Hussain, 'We Picked Up our AKs and Fled'. Surrendered ULFA lieutenant Domeswar Rabha stated that Afghanistan-trained rebel Satabda Kumar was the chief instructor of the ULFA's artillery squad inside Bhutan. Kumar, he said, was also the commander of the group's General Headquarters in Bhutan that was smashed during the Bhutanese military assault in December 2003.

government headed by Prafulla Kumar Mahanta for its failure to maintain law and order and sent in its troops. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan was selected as a refuge by the ULFA (and later by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland and the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation or KLO),⁵² because its southern frontier was not properly policed, was densely-wooded and was located just across from Assam. Besides, Bhutan had very limited military capabilities and certainly none, in the beginning, sufficient to take on a band of heavily-armed rebels. These factors made Bhutan an excellent staging area for separatists bent on carrying out violent strikes in Indian territory. But unlike Thimphu, which has admitted the presence of these foreign militants from the beginning, Dhaka has always tried to deny the fact that Indian insurgents operate from within Bangladesh.

Strategic Alliances as Force Multipliers

Events in the insurgency front in India's Northeast have shown that rebel groups have often succeeded in neutralising reverses suffered by them by entering into deals with other insurgent groups that act as force multipliers. Insurgent politics in the region registered a very important development in the year 2000—the signing of a deal for joint operations by the Assamese ULFA and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), a Manipuri insurgent group whose primary area of operation has been Manipur's Jiribam valley and neighbouring Assam's Cachar district. A UNLF statement of 29 July 2000 disclosed for the first time the agreement between the two groups. Significantly, that statement came less than a fortnight after the UNLF claimed responsibility for the 16 July 2000 killing of three Jat Regiment soldiers of the Indian Army in Cachar district in Southern Assam. Given its admission about the agreement, the ULFA could well have provided logistical support for that ambush.

Formed on 24 November 1964 by Areambam Samarendra Singh to fight for an independent socialist Manipur, the UNLF has had a rather impressive record in attracting allies. During the 1960s, the outfit had a close 'political relationship' with the government of East Pakistan, and in 1969 underwent military training in that country. It is also said to have supported the Pakistan Army during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. But the UNLF has not just depended on Pakistan. In 1975 it sent a team headed by N. Bisheswar Singh to Lhasa to ask for assistance from Beijing. Now headed by Rajkumar Meghen alias Sana Yaima, the UNLF is also close to the NSCN-K and has training camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh.⁵³

⁵² For profiles of the ULFA, NDFB and KLO, see South Asia Terrorism Portal [<http://www.satp.org>, accessed 27 Jan. 2004].

⁵³ Wasbir Hussain, 'Northeast Rebels: Strategic Alliances and Open Borders', paper presented at seminar on Dynamics of Border Management, Past, Present and Future, organised by the Border Security Force at the Police Officers' Mess, Shillong, 7–8 October 2002.

It is linkages such as these and the potential for immense trans-border movement by these groups that has made the ULFA–UNLF pact so significant. The ULFA would like to describe the agreement as a ‘fraternal bond sealed to fulfil certain tactical goals’.⁵⁴ It may not have been an exclusive bilateral pact, but both the ULFA and the UNLF were part of the loose pan-Mongoloid coalition forged in May 1990 called the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF). Formed to wage a ‘united struggle for the independence of Indo-Burma’,⁵⁵ the IBRF was a failure. It failed primarily because it was too much of a problem for its leaders to hold on to a group of rebel outfits that claimed to represent diverse tribes and communities seeking to protect distinct ethnic identities and interests.

What then was the need for the ULFA to tie up with the UNLF and vice-versa? Until 2003 the ULFA’s main fighting machine was located in Bhutan. But several years before that the ULFA had come under pressure from the Bhutanese government to vacate the kingdom. According to then-Bhutanese Home Minister Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, by 31 December 2001 the ULFA had indeed closed down its four camps as per an agreement reached in June 2001.⁵⁶

Forced to leave Bhutan, the ULFA would have been eyeing the UNLF’s bases and training facilities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Denials from Dhaka notwithstanding, it is a fact that Bangladesh has long been a favourite ‘hiding’ place for ULFA leaders. A pact with the UNLF was, of course, a prerequisite for the ULFA to gain access to these bases.

Meanwhile, the ULFA had been receiving arms consignments from the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia under a deal brokered in 1993 by General Bo Mya’s Karen National Union (KNU), another long-standing anti-Burma government guerrilla group.⁵⁷ That deal was apparently clinched by the ULFA’s self-styled foreign secretary Shasha Choudhury, who visited the KNU base at Manerplaw on the Thailand–Myanmar border. As surveillance increased, making the importation of weaponry more difficult, the ULFA might have pinned its hopes on the UNLF to serve as a conduit for shipments of military hardware.

⁵⁴ See Wasbir Hussain, ‘Ominous Signs in the Northeast’, *The Hindu* (9 Sept. 2002) [<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2002/09/09/stories/2002090900041000.htm>].

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ ‘Bhutan to ask ULFA to Close Down HQ’, *Assam Tribune* (internet edition) (8 July 2002) [<http://www.assam-tribune.com/jul0802/at02.html>, accessed 15 Feb. 2004].

⁵⁷ Wasbir Hussain, ‘ULFA gets New Weapons from Khmer Rouge’, *The Asian Age* (14 Aug. 1995). Bo Mya, vice chairman and elder statesman of the KNU, has been engaged in successive rounds of talks with the Myanmar authorities since January 2004. ‘Karen Rebels Wrap Up Peace Talks with Junta, Describe It as “Successful”’, Associated Press (25 Feb. 2004) [www.burmanet.org, accessed 26 Feb. 2004].

The UNLF has also had dealings with the military junta in Myanmar—but the relationship seems to have been a chequered one. In December 2001 as many as 192 UNLF cadres, including some top leaders, were ‘arrested’ by the Myanmar Army. Interestingly, all of them were set free by 14 February 2002 in four phases. The entire episode is still shrouded in mystery, particularly because Yangon has been simultaneously promising New Delhi of its help in checking cross-border insurgency. Does this mean that the UNLF has some sort of an understanding with the junta in Myanmar, or a section of it? Answers are difficult to find, but theories abound, particularly because New Delhi, from the mid 1990s onwards, is supposed to have improved its relations with Yangon considerably.

Even groups (such as the NSCN-IM) engaged in peace negotiations with New Delhi supported the 48-hour general strike called in Assam and other parts of the region on 20 and 21 December 2003 by the ULFA, NDFB and the KLO in protest against what they termed the ‘brutal operations’ and ‘human rights violations’ of the Indian military inside Bhutan.⁵⁸ The conflict dynamics as well as the complex rebel equations have contributed to keeping India’s Northeast on the boil.

Response of the Indian State

The response of the Union government towards resolving the ethnic conflicts in the country’s Northeast has to be seen in the context of its stance towards the region as a whole, which has swung from apathy and negligence to generosity. According to Prime Minister Vajpayee, between 1998–99 and 2002–03 New Delhi pumped in more than Rs44,000 crore to the north-eastern states.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the Indian states that have been steadfast in their loyalty to the centre are bemused to see disaffected states in the Northeast receiving bigger per capita handouts than the rest of the country.⁶⁰

But even the Union’s dealings with the Northeast region are muddied by its appeasement of extremism. It tends to reward the more violent separatist outfits, while closing its eyes to the more subtle clamourings of groups pushing for autonomy within the country’s legal framework. For instance, the more violent of the two

⁵⁸ See Nava Thakuria, ‘Expectation Rose from Burma and Bangladesh to Drive Out Indian Insurgents’, *BNI Weekly News* (29 Dec. 2003) [<http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/BNI2003-12-29.htm>].

⁵⁹ Wasbir Hussain, ‘NE should be Bridgehead to SE Asia, Centre ready to Meet NE Ultra Threat: PM’, *The Sentinel* (Guwahati) (21 Jan. 2004).

⁶⁰ Between December 2003 and January 2004 the federal government advanced grants for the development of small towns in the Northeast. States like Arunachal Pradesh, where the BJP government was in power, received the sum of Rs192 crore while Assam, which was under Congress rule, received a paltry Rs40 crore. ‘Arunachal Scores over Assam’, *The Telegraph* (Guwahati) (22 Feb. 2004).

Naga outfits, the NSCN-IM, was preferred over the less militant NSCN-K during peace negotiations, even after ceasefire agreements had been signed with both. Likewise, the hard-line Bodo outfit, the Bodo Liberation Tigers, has been rewarded with a territorial Council. In these circumstances, there is little hope for the smaller outfits or more moderate tribal groupings to get their grievances redressed. Ironically, this has led to a rise in the number of ethnic organisations demanding autonomy and willing to take militant tactics to achieve it.

Thus New Delhi's strategy of giving precedence to its more strident opponents has turned out to be counter-productive. A change of policy is sorely needed if the nationalist aspirations of north-eastern India's diverse ethnic groups are to be diverted from the path of armed struggle into democratic and peaceful channels. Only recognition by the Union of their distinctive identities, and legal safeguards to preserve them, will achieve that transformation.