



An Assessment of Insurgencies in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in 2009

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Summary

The North East of India has been plagued by insurgencies since independence in 1947. Most violent amongst the armed movements had been the Naga National Council in the 1950s and today the NSCN (IM). States like Assam and Manipur also witnessed armed organized violence since the 1960s and the 1970s. At present, while violence levels have come down in Assam and Nagaland, Manipur continues to suffer from high levels of violence orchestrated by multiple insurgent groups inhabiting the state. This Issue Brief offers an assessment of insurgencies in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in 2009. The author argues that Assam could well see the end of the 30-year old ULFA insurgency due to the arrest of its leaders in December 2009. Nagaland's path to peace also appeared more hopeful in 2009 with a signed 'reconciliation' between rival armed groups mostly propelled by strong civil society movements for peace. Manipur, however, continued to be plagued by insurgencies in 2009, although it can be argued that peace in Assam and Nagaland could have a 'domino-effect' for peace in this conflict ridden state.

Introduction

The North Eastern region of India is a rugged territory of 225,000 square kilometres of hill and plains located between four neighbouring countries of India, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar. With an international border stretching up to 4,500 kms, the region has been plagued by instability, insurgency, and social unrest since independence. Leading the host of aggrieved and violent actors are the Nagas, whose movement can be traced back to 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club. In 1946, the Naga National Council (NNC) was formed and it declared Naga independence on August 14, 1947, a day before India declared its own independence. The Naga movement turned violent in the 1950s and is active till date under the aegis of the National Socialist Council of *Nagalim*-Isak-Muivah [NSCN (IM)] and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-S.S. Khaplang [NSCN (K)]. Manipur has also been greatly disturbed by armed violence with the formation of the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLF) on November 24, 1964. Another significant Manipuri armed separatist group known as the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) and its armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has been engaging in armed struggle since 1976. The RPF and the PLA were supposedly trained by the Chinese in the 1960s and 1970s in Maoist guerrilla warfare and both outfits aim at violent revolutionary change to bring about a classless society in Manipur.

Most feared in Manipur, however, is the *Kanglai Kana Yan Lup (KYKL)*, which has taken up social afflictions such as fighting corruption, drug trafficking and sub-standard education practices. Another group known as the **Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)** was established in the 1970s with the objective of fighting for Manipur's independence from India. Neighbouring Assam, the most dominant state in the North East in terms of demography and resources, has also been plagued by insurgent violence since 1979 with the formation of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). The hills districts of Assam, North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong, have also witnessed the rise of armed groups since the 1990s like the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) and the United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS). It is important to note that most of these insurgent groups have thrived primarily due to strong external connections. Countries like China in the 1960s and the 1970s as well as Pakistan and later on Bangladesh have supported most of these outfits in their fight against India by making available arms, training and most importantly base areas for underground camps. As recently as 2007, India accused Bangladesh of enabling insurgent groups like the UNLF, ULFA and NSCN (IM) with small arms through its Cox Bazaar area as well as with the establishment of underground camps in the Chittagong and Mymensingh areas.

2009: An Assessment

While states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura have been peaceful for some years now, 2009 witnessed significant developments towards peace in Assam and Nagaland, though Manipur continued to reel under multiple insurgencies. In Assam, the Dima Halam Daogah (Garlosa) faction [DHD (G)] surrendered and is now housed in designated camps; ULFA Chairman and founding member Arabinda Rajkhowa and Deputy Commander-in-Chief Raju Barua were arrested along the Meghalaya-Bangladesh border by the Assam Police in December 2009. This is a critical development for Assam as most of the violence it has suffered over the years is suspected to be the handiwork of the ULFA operating from Bangladeshi soil. Nagaland witnessed further moves towards peaceful reconciliation between the insurgent factions in 2009 with the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) jointly signing a “reconciliation convention”.

Violence levels remained high in Assam and Manipur in 2009 while Nagaland witnessed a steep drop in violence as compared to the previous year. Assam suffered 371 insurgency related deaths in 2009 as compared to 387 in 2008; Manipur, 369 in 2009 as compared to 499 in 2008, and Nagaland, 17 in 2009 as compared to 201 in 2008. While Assam and Manipur registered a drop in the numbers of people killed, the percentage of difference was not sharp; whereas in Nagaland, the decline in violence was in the margin of 80 to 85 per cent. This is a good sign as it reflects the success of not only the cease-fires between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) in place since 1997 and 2001 respectively, but also the success of efforts for peaceful reconciliation between the two armed groups by Naga civil society actors like the Naga Hoho (Tribal Apex Council) and the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR).

Let us now dwell on each individual state specifically with regard to the state of insurgency in 2009.

Highlights of 2009

- Assam witnessed the arrest of ULFA leaders and surrender of the DHD (G).
- Manipur witnessed 19 organizations of the Kuki National Organization agreeing to a Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the Government of India. Also, UNLF called for unified struggle with the Naxalites against the Indian state.
- Nagaland witnessed a steep fall in violence and progress towards peace amongst its various insurgent factions

development of these remote areas of Assam; in the recent past, the DHD (G) had violently disrupted construction work either by killing construction workers or kidnapping site engineers. The DHD (G) cadres who came over ground in September 2009 are now housed in two designated camps in Jatinga and Kapucherra in North Cachar Hills of Assam. Peace negotiations are now scheduled to begin between the Centre and the DHD (G) in New Delhi.

The arrest of ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and Deputy Commander-in-Chief Raju Baruah is another significant development in Assam. The ULFA, which came into being in April 1979, had been behind most of the violent incidents in Assam in recent years. The ideology of the ULFA *professed Marxism and advocated the Assamese right to dual citizenship and self-determination in the 1970s and 1980s. From 1992 onwards, the ULFA widened its support base to include all non-Assamese by stating that theirs was a movement for all Asombashis (people who resided in Assam). ULFA seeks to revert Assam's status to the Ahom ruled Assam, pre-1826 treaty of Yandaboo between the British and the Burmese, which ushered in British rule in Assam. ULFA's Vice Chairman Pradip Gogoi states that his organization's political objectives are "Sovereign, Socialist Assam" in which "All indigenous people must stay, all others must leave".*

While the ULFA enjoyed public support in the 1970s and the 1980s due to growing Assamese disenchantment with state structures, it is important to note that over the years its ideology and violent practices have made Assamese society wary of its end goals. This change occurred with the killing of noted social activist Sanjoy Ghosh. Ghosh, who headed the NGO AVARD-NE, was kidnapped by ULFA in July 1997 from Bongaon area of Majuli and was subsequently killed. Incidentally, on July 20, 2008, the man behind the killing of Ghosh, ULFA leader Amrit Dutta, was killed in an encounter with the CRPF and the police in Majuli. The spate of kidnappings by ULFA in the 1990s also added to societal discomfort. Added to this was the nexus between the ULFA and officials from the TATA Tea estates in Assam, including Executive Director S. K. Kidwai and General Manager S. Dogra. This nexus came to light after Pranati Deka, ULFA's Culture Secretary, was arrested in Mumbai on August 23, 1997. While ULFA's credibility started dwindling when these malpractices came to light, *Operation All Clear* launched by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) in December 2003 to weed out insurgent camps from Bhutan's territory further weakened ULFA's organization and leadership. In this military offensive, 30 ULFA camps were burnt down, and ULFA ideologue, Bhimakanta Burhagohain, was arrested.

In recent years, ULFA's claim of legitimate representation of Assamese aspirations for political sovereignty (if that is indeed the case) has also come under deep critical scrutiny since the outfit is non-transparent, run by a handful of men and women who are extremely dictatorial in behaviour. Also, the violent means adopted by the ULFA has increased apprehension in Assamese society about the effectiveness and cost to Assam's overall economic and political progress as a result of the existence of such a violent force in their midst, the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration notwithstanding. The ULFA has

increasingly attacked Hindi speaking people especially from the year 2005 onwards. Hopefully, the arrest of the ULFA leaders in 2009 will bring about an end to the violence. The only caveat that remains as an obstacle to a peaceful settlement with the arrested ULFA leaders is that the ULFA Commander-in-Chief Paresh Barua is still at large and is now hiding somewhere in the Myanmar-China border from where he has been sending emails to the Assamese media about the continuation of the ULFA ideology under him. It is, however, hard to believe that without a proper political propaganda machine in place and the absence of popular Assamese support, Paresh Barua can singlehandedly revive the ULFA. It is perhaps the beginning of the end for the ULFA.

Manipur:

At the outset, it must be noted that the deaths in insurgent violence came down in Manipur from 499 in 2008 to 369 in 2009. Significantly, 19 organizations of the Kuki National Organization and the United Peoples' Front (11 groups under KNO and 8 groups under UPF) agreed to mutual Suspension of Operations (SoO) after reviewing the peace process under the "Agreed Ground Rules", extending the SoO for one more year with effect from August 22, 2009. Under this, all the armed groups will be restricted to the SoO camps. According to the KN spokesperson, Seilen Haokip, "the main purpose of SoO is to engage in political dialogue to find a political settlement for the Kukis within the Constitution of India. Extension of SoO signals a positive stand on the part of all the parties concerned." The stage has, however, not been set yet for a peaceful dialogue between the Government of India and these armed groups, since there are simmering differences between the armed groups.

One of Manipur's main insurgent actors, the UNLF, issued a statement in September 2009 calling for a unified armed struggle along with the Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI (M)] or the Naxalites against the Indian state. This development must not be taken lightly because both the UNLF and the CPI (M) favour a common leftist ideology and both look up to China as a role model. *The UNLF, founded by Arambam Samaranda Singh in 1949, is based on leftist ideology vis-à-vis the economic and social alienation of the people of Manipur. Significantly, the UNLF has not signed a cease-fire with the Government of India, and like the Maoists it targets Indian security forces. Most of its underground camps are in the Myanmar border near Moreh in Manipur and its armed cadres cross over to India frequently. In April 2009, UNLF armed cadres from the Onzia camp, opposite Chassad, housed about three kilometres inside Myanmar from the Indo-Myanmar border, targeted the Tangkhul Naga village, Kamjong, in Ukhrul district of Manipur killing one Indian security personnel and injuring five others. The UNLF also has camps in Tamu, Phaisat and Chikka in Myanmar. The PLA underground camps are located in Mintha in Myanmar, about two kilometres from the Ukhrul-Chandel border in Manipur.*

These attacks from Myanmar by the UNLF on a Tangkhul village has increased the suspicion between the Meiteis, the community that the UNLF claims to represent, and the Tangkhuls, which is represented by the NSCN (IM). Animosity between the Meities and the Tangkhuls also exist

due to the fact that the NSCN (IM)'s map of Nagalim include the hill districts of Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul which constitute 90 per cent of the territory of Manipur. Local politicians have also played havoc with these ethnic divides for selfish political ends. 2009 did not witness any significant inter-community dialogues between the Meiteis and the Nagas to bridge these long standing differences. Manipur state agencies must be faulted for their lacklustre law enforcement approach resulting in a "security deficit" especially in the NH-39 where rampant extortion networks are run by the insurgent actors. Kidnappings have also been orchestrated by the PREPAK, especially of children, to serve as cadres for armed movements. In response, the police have requested the local population never to let their children venture out alone, especially in the evenings. This is a tall order and out of desperation many Meitei families have been forced to send their children to boarding schools in order to secure them against insurgent violence. This is a sorry state of affairs and rather unacceptable in a democratic country like India where states like Manipur are clearly failing in their basic constitutional duty to protect citizens from harm.

Nagaland:

Nagaland has by far enjoyed the best record in 2009 with regard to decline in violence. While insurgency related deaths in 2008 numbered 201, in 2009, the number was down to 17. This is a positive development and mainly a result of a decrease in inter-factional violence between the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K), the success of the cease-fire mechanisms, and civil society efforts. The FNR, an organization comprising the churches and the civil society groups, which was established in February 2008, had a role to play in bringing about an end to violence. The FNR held 28 different meetings in 2009 in which, according to Dr. Wati Aier, the Convenor of the FNR, "the Naga political groups and the Naga frontal organizations and the public have made solemn commitments to the process of genuine reconciliation, unity and peace among the Nagas and with confidence today, the Nagas can say, there is no turning back." As these meetings continued, the FNR requested people to hoist white flags in their houses, and most vehicles in Nagaland showcased the sticker 'A Journey of Common Hope' - the FNR catchword on Naga reconciliation. The representatives of the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) have also participated in these meetings and registered their own support for the reconciliation moves. In June 2009, the 'Covenant of Reconciliation' was signed by Isak Chishi Swu, Chairman of the NSCN (IM), and S. S. Khaplang, Chairman of the NSCN (K). The Covenant of Reconciliation declares: "We affirm our total commitment to work together in the spirit of love, non-violence, peace and respect to resolve outstanding issues amongst us. Therefore, we pledge to cease all forms of offensive activities in toto." This is a significant development as it is for the first time that the leaders of two rival factions have got together and signed a peace covenant after a past history of violence between them spanning over two decades.

Added to these civil society initiatives, the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) held their 59th round of peace talks in Zurich, Switzerland in March 2009, which process has

been underway since 1997. Since the ceasefire has been extended indefinitely since 2007, the talks focused specifically on the NCSN (IM)'s demand for Naga sovereignty and territorial unification. These talks obviously ended in a stalemate as the NSCN (IM)'s demand for sovereignty and territorial integrity is unacceptable to India on two counts: first, the demand for Naga sovereignty is a direct affront to India's territorial integrity and its notion of pluralism. Second, the NSCN (IM)'s demand for territorial unification of Naga inhabited areas in the North East is strongly resisted by Assam and Manipur since it includes territory that belongs to them. According to the Indian Constitution, the consent of the states from which territory is to be taken to form another state is crucial. Hence, there has been a deadlock in the peace talks over the years.

Nevertheless, 2009 has been an eventful year for these three states, especially Assam, which witnessed the arrest of a generation of ULFA leadership, an armed movement which has continued for more than 30 years. The surrender of the DHD (G) was also a significant development. While Nagaland slowly marches towards peace, Manipur continues to reel under the impact of multiple insurgencies. Hopefully, the time has come for Assam and Nagaland to follow the path of peace and prosperity that is today witnessed in states like Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. Once that happens, Manipur's path towards peace will be a gamble worth betting on.