

Insurgent Politics & Negotiations: Is a Moratorium on Peace Talks Needed?

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The road to peace in the insurgency-hit northeastern region of India continues to be slippery. For several decades now, insurgency has been a determining factor in the politics, economy and human development scenario in most of the states in the Northeast. Starting with the Naga insurgency since India's independence in 1947, most of the states in the region have experienced various forms of insurgency. At one point of time, about 120 insurgent groups carried out their activities in the region.¹ Their demands too, have been extensive. While groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) aim at establishing independent states, outfits such as the erstwhile Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) demanded separate states for their tribal constituency. Smaller outfits, such as the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), confining their activities to the geographical limits of separate districts in Assam, have fought for maximum autonomy, within the purview of the Indian constitution.

Insurgency² in India's Northeast has been a combination of political, economic as well as ethnic factors. In fact, the use of the term insurgency does recognise the political motivation of those who participate in an insurgency. Though a counter insurgency approach with the use of the military has been the usual state response to insurgency, other approaches to tackle the problem have been the adoption of measures to protect the population, and by political and economic actions of various kinds aimed at addressing the very claims of the insurgents like lack of development and opportunity. Dialogues or peace talks between the State and the rebel groups, on the other hand, have been playing a crucial role in resolving violence.

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¹ http://cdpsindia.org/ne_insurgency.asp

² Insurgency is an armed rebellion against the State. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insurgency>

Viewed generally, the State response to insurgency movements in the Northeast has been a complex mix of military operations, developmental packages, surrender schemes, peace overtures and emphasis on harnessing the economic potential of the region. While military operations formed a crucial component of the counter-insurgency campaigns in Mizoram and Nagaland in the period between 1950s and 1970s, New Delhi, starting in the 1990s, was inclined to dole out economic largesse for the region in a bid to wean away insurgency through developmental schemes.³ The ability of the state police forces to match the insurgents, with access to sophisticated weapons, has been found wanting. As a result, it has been a trend on the part of each of the states to depend on the deployment of the army and para-military forces.⁴

It has been observed that while military operations against the insurgency movements in the Northeast have achieved only limited results, it is the dialogue for peace with them that has brought some order to the region. Dialogue with the Mizo National Front (MNF) culminated in the signing of the Mizo Peace Accord in 1986 ending the 20-year-long insurrection in the entire state of Mizoram in 1986.⁵ MNF had waged a war of secession with the Indian state—receiving aid even from inimical countries like Pakistan. But the settlement saw not only the return of the militants to the mainstream, but also their participation in the Indian democratic process. Mizoram is not only an instance of successful conflict resolution, but is today one of the most peaceful states in India.

Not all the peace accords have been successful as the Mizo Peace Accord. Peace deals such as the Shillong Accord in 1975 with the Naga National Council (NNC) in Nagaland, the 1988 agreement with the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in Tripura, the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) agreement of 1993 with the Bodo hardliners in Assam fell through as new factions, dissatisfied with the terms of the agreement resumed hostilities under new leaderships. On 3 December 2003, all the cadres of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) surrendered and subsequently, Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed. This appeared to solve a near

³ http://cdpsindia.org/ne_insurgency.asp

⁴ Three states, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, have set up the unified command structure (UCS) mechanism, to coordinate the activities of the police, para-military and army personnel. While Assam set up the UCS in 1997, Manipur replicated the mechanism in 2004 and Arunachal Pradesh in 2008.
http://cdpsindia.org/ne_insurgency.asp

⁵ http://cdpsindia.org/ne_peace.asp

decade long insurgency in the areas inhabited by the Bodo tribals in Assam. But all was not well.

The Bodo Issue

Starting 21 July 2012, riots between ethnic Bodo-tribes people and Muslim settlers broke out in Western Assam's Kokrajhar district, the nerve centre of the Bodo community. The rioting soon spread to Chirang and Dhubri districts. The clashes had led to the death of more than 80 people belonging to both sides, and displaced more than 400,000 people from their homes forcing them to live in nearly 300 ill-equipped relief camps. This is the sixth major ethnic conflict in the strife-torn Bodo belt in western Assam since 1993, and fourth between the Bodos and Muslim settlers from East-Bengal (now Bangladesh). The other two riots took place between the Bodos and the Adivasi Santhals.⁶ The first clash between the Bodos and Muslim settlers took place in October 1993 after the failed Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Accord signed on February 20 in the same year. The Accord was unsuccessful because it specified that the villages with a 50 per cent Bodo population will come under a newly formed Bodo Council. This condition led a section of people in the area where their numbers were low, target Muslim settlers and Adivasis in order to establish their majority – a clear cause of the conflict.

But the Accord signed by the Government of India with the BLT (Bodo Liberation Tigers, a former Bodo militant group) in 2003 bears the root of unrest in the Bodo heartland. In Section 2 of the Accord, it is mentioned that the main objective of the agreement is “to fulfill economic, education and linguistic aspiration and preservation of land rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos....”⁷ This clearly shows that BTC has been formed for the development of the Bodo people only, the framers of the Accord did not think about the majority of non-Bodo people living in the area. A total of 3082 villages were identified to be included under the BTC, while the fate of the additional 95 villages were to be determined by the State Government “on the basis of the criteria of tribal population being not less than 50 per cent”. It is claimed that many villages included under BTC have even less than 25 per cent Bodo population. This has led

⁶ Wasbir Hussain, *Assam: A Method in the Madness* <http://cdpsindia.org/point-of-view74.asp>

⁷ Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Accord, 2003

to various forms of agitations by the majority non-Bodo people. In the beginning, agitations were organized by Non-Bodo Security Front, a conglomeration of 27 non-Bodo organizations opposing inclusion of more than 57 villages of Kaligaon and Udalguri as a part of the Bodoland stating that these villages were not Bodo majority⁸ ones. Even in the formation of the 46-member BTC, only 5 seats were meant for non-tribals.

This disparity of treatment under the Accord has led to a feeling of insecurity and discrimination among the non-Bodos, which include Muslims, Adivasis and other communities. If the immediate cause may be different, the root of the present crisis between the Bodos and Muslim settlers is surely a consequence of this flawed Accord. The riots have begun at a time when several Bodo organizations, including both the pro-talk and anti-talk NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) factions have renewed and intensified their demand for a separate Bodo state. If the Bodos are to be granted more autonomy, the general tendency among the people would be to accept the new leadership under whose stewardship such autonomy may have been achieved. For Hagrama Mahilary and the other BTC leaders who have won the elections twice and ruling the Bodo Council, this poses a challenge with the feeling that they may be sidelined as leaders who have already ruled for 10 years. As such, they too, are trying to pick up emotive issues and catch the imagination of the masses.

The Dimasa Issue

Following the en masse surrender of the Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) in November 1994, a new outfit called DHD (Dima Haram Daogah) was formed in January 1995. A few cadres of DNSF led by Bijoy Naiding, Kanto Langthasa and Jewel Garlosa did not surrender and went on to form the DHD with an avowed objective of carving out a separate Dimasa homeland "Dimaraji" comprising the Dimasa inhabited areas of Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hills), Karbi Anglong, parts of Nagaon district, and parts of Dimapur district of Nagaland. Jewel Garlosa became the founder president but most of the organizational activities were done by Bijoy Naiding. On 1 January 2003, DHD signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government. But in July 2004, Jewel Garlosa, one of the front-ranking DHD leaders, went on to form a new outfit, the Black Widow (now known as DHD-J).

⁸ Nani Gopal Mahanta, *Vilent Bodoland: When Policies Become the Factor of Violence (Amar Asom, 27 July 2012)*

Since then, the DHD has been led by Pranab Nunisa who is the designated president of the outfit and Dilip Nunisa, who is the Chairman.⁹

DHD continues to maintain the ceasefire agreement with the government and most of its estimated 500 cadres are located within the designated camps set up for the purpose. From 10 August 2009 onwards, its cadres started depositing arms in accordance with the revised ground rules at its designated camp in Maibong. Though peace talks have been taking place, lack of a favorable resolution frustrated the group members leading them to warn the Government for several times to start a new rebellion.

The breakaway faction (DHD-J) under the leadership of Jewel Garlossa (Chief) and Niranjana Hojai (Commander-in-chief) created havoc and a reign of terror by killing civilians and Government officials, blowing up rail tracks and derailing trains, extorting people. This went on until Jewel Garlossa was arrested at Bangalore in 2009. Subsequently, Niranjana Hojai was arrested in the same year. The Centre banned the DHD (J) and then the outfit showed interest in peace talks. On 2 October 2009, a total of 382 cadres of DHD-J laid down arms before the authorities at Haflong, headquarters of NC Hills district.¹⁰ Talks followed and the Government has reached an agreement with the DHD (J) and the date for signing a formal agreement with the outfit is awaited¹¹.

In a recent development, reports¹² state that the two factions of the DHD led by Dilip Nunisa and Jewel Garlossa will sign Memorandum of Settlement with the Centre and Assam Government in September 2012. The DHD (Nunisa) has already signed a draft MoS earlier. The agreement will pave the way for the creation of Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council.

It appears that more a militant outfit succeeds in creating havoc and reign of terror, more the Government is likely to take it seriously. Now, new militant groups like the Karbi National Protection Force (KNPF) are emerging in Karbi Anglong district.

⁹ http://cdpsindia.org/assam_mgp.asp

¹⁰ http://cdpsindia.org/assam_insurgency.asp

¹¹ Peace pact with DHD(J) almost finalized, *The Assam Tribune*, 11 January 2012, <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jan1212/at094>

¹² *The Telegraph* Guwahati, 29 August 2012

It has been seen that most of the peace overtures with militant groups make way to formation of splinter groups. The splintering of militant groups in the region over the issue of talks has resulted in the persistence of violence in the state, despite significant advances towards a negotiated settlement.

The Naga Issue

In the case of the more than six-decade-old insurgency in Nagaland, the Central Government has been dialoguing with the NSCN-IM since the last 15 years. Recent reports state that discussions between NSCN-IM and the Government have once again hit a roadblock with New Delhi rejecting the group's demand for integration of Naga-inhabited areas to form a Greater Nagalim. Again, in a recent statement by NSCN-IM, the outfit reminded the Central Government not to toy around with the ongoing dialogue. (At present, NSCN has three factions: Isak Muivah, Khaplang and Khole Kitovi.) In a recent political development, the Khole-Kitovi group has intimated to the Government of India through the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) Joint Secretary Shambhu Singh to seek settlement within the boundary of the so-called Nagaland state. To this, Mr Shambhu Singh responded: "If we don't take all three factions into account, no kind of agreement is going to succeed."¹³ This has irked the NSCN-IM, forcing its joint council to state that NSCN-Khole Kitovi's move is a calculated and deliberate step to sabotage the negotiations. After more than 80 rounds of talks, the present stage of talks indicates that it has entered into a challenging situation where crucial decisions must be taken.

As far as the Government of India is concerned, conceding two things are 'out of question' — a sovereign Nagaland and 'greater Nagaland' (or Nagalim) that envisages unification of all Naga inhabited areas in the Northeast under one administrative unit. While the Centre has been unambiguous that sovereignty is not negotiable, the redrawing of inter-state boundaries in the Northeast is a near-impossible proposition considering the passions any such move would provoke across the entire region. The sense one gets from various government and other sources is that the government may offer Constitutional sanction for the setting up

¹³ NSCN (IM) cautions Government of India, The Sangai Express , 20 May, 2012, <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=4..210512.may12>

of a political-social-administrative body to look after Naga affairs in different parts of India.¹⁴

Talking Peace: Government's new challenge

The Government, fighting armed separatist rebels for six decades, is now having a new challenge. It was indeed necessary for the Government to bring the rebels to a ceasefire mode in order to maintain order and stability. Every significant group, or at least factions within each, is now in a truce with the government in insurgency-hit Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura. Hundreds of rebel fighters have been lodged by the government in the so called 'designated camps', as they await 'acceptable solutions' to their 'problems' through negotiations with the authorities.¹⁵ The challenge for the Government is to carry on multiple peace processes to the next level – an indeed complex process, since in many cases, demands of one insurgent group contradict the others'.

Again, it has to be seen whether peace talk with any particular rebel group is indirectly providing a status of legitimacy to that group. For instance, the Government in engaging the NSCN-IM in peace talks since the past 15 years, has only succeeded to control the so called 'violence', but the group has been openly carrying out its extortions, smuggling of narcotics and arms to smaller outfits to expand their area of control.¹⁶ Mostly, it is the Government and the media who give legitimacy to the splinter groups. Once legitimacy is attained, Government invariably starts peace talks with such groups. Thus, while on one hand, the Government is giving legitimacy to the demands raised by the rebels, on the other, it seems to be clueless as to what could be offered to the different groups in their respective peace deals. BTC was formed for the Bodos after talks with the BLT. But what will be offered to the other groups like the two factions of the NDFB who have been still fighting for their demands in Bodoland? These are big questions.

Talks are an end, or means to an end?

Looking at the present status of peace approach of the Government with several insurgent groups (e.g. the DHD Nunisa faction) in the region, it appears that

¹⁴ Wasbir Hussain, *Is Peace About To Break Out?* <http://outlookindia.com/article.aspx?264335>

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ 'Peace Talks' in Assam's Post Election Scenario', Kishalay Bhattacharjee, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/PeaceTalksinAssamsPostElectionScenario_kbhattarjee_160511

reaching the level of starting peace talks or ceasefire has been the prime concern of the State. This feeling has been many times reinforced by insurgent groups observing ceasefire for years and still awaiting for talks with the Government. Many such groups have come to threaten the Government that they would once again take up arms. If the leader of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), Th. Muivah, 76, is to retire without a settlement being reached, the group, which has rearmed during the 14 years since the cease-fire, could go back to 'war' under a new leadership. This prediction was made by a Naga activist with links to the group, who spoke on condition of anonymity, in an interview in February 2012.¹⁷ One cannot deny such consequences, provided peace talks remain a never ending process. Another point to be considered is that, militant outfits observing ceasefire agreements tend to get frustrated if no formal peace talks take place with the Government and they have to wait for an uncertain time for dialogue to begin. This, too, may fuel the insurgents' desire to go back to the jungles and take arms again.

Moratorium on Peace Talks: the Debate

The idea of a 'moratorium' on peace talks found ground way back in July 2010 when media reports quoting the then Home Minister P Chidambaram said that the Government was considering the possibility of declaring a moratorium on peace talks, particularly with newer militant groups or factions¹⁸. Or could this be an answer to the question: is the Government actually encouraging insurgency by talking peace or agreeing to talk peace with each and every insurgent group, big or small, ones with some sort of an ideology or without. In this context, the Centre for Development & Peace Studies, Guwahati organized a round table titled *Policy on Peace Talks* in Guwahati on 15 September 2010.¹⁹ Peace activists, militant leaders, academics and journalists, among others, participated in the round table to deliberate on whether the Government can declare a moratorium on peace dialogue with newer militant groups or new splinter groups. This excludes those groups which are already in the peace mode and those whom the Government has invited for talks.

¹⁷ <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/what-threatens-peace-in-indias-northeast/>

¹⁸ PC rules out talks with new outfits, *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2010.

¹⁹ Report on *Policy On Peace Talks—A Round Table* organized by CDPS in September 2010

Addressing the debate, Dr Udayon Misra²⁰ said that the Government's failure to have an inclusive approach at peace making is causing emergence of splinter groups of militants. Any peace process must be inclusive, and multiple voices and dialogue is an inevitable part. Government should ensure distributive justice and rule of law to ease out conflicts and facilitate peace process which is not identical with ad hoc means like peace accord. Any conflict should be analyzed under the historical and democratic perspectives. "One of the important aspects of democracy is devolution of power. Indian nation state has not remained the same, it has gained experience, whatever experiments are going on here are successful to some extent. Parameters of Indian Constitution have expanded. Compared to Myanmar and other African tribes, our experience is unique," he said.

On the other side, Mr G M Srivastava, former DGP of Assam, said that though dialogue is the best way to resolve conflicts in a region like the Northeast, the need for alternative voices in society cannot be ignored. "Unfortunately, here dissent seems to be just a search for political space by a few individuals." Questions arise as whether there is a mechanism for social engineering, or do the militants really represent the people of Assam. According to him, even PCG (People's Consultative Group, an 11 member group, was formed by the ULFA on 8 September 2005 to mediate the peace process between the militant group and the Government)²¹ and Sanmilita Jatiya Abhibortan²² (a group including intellectuals, writers, peace activists, etc. formed in 2009 to facilitate the peace process between the Government and the ULFA) do not represent all segments of the society. The question poses as to which group in Assam really represents the people of the State.

Speaking on whether the Government should stop peace talks with splinter groups of major rebel outfits or newer militant groups, pro-talk ULFA leader Mrinal Hazarika said that at first it should be ascertained if such splinter groups were created by the State or such groups came up because of internal hitches within the outfit. "ULFA has certainly committed errors, but can anyone really reject the issues raised by it?" he asked. Unless the Government comes forward to tackle the main issues raised by the ULFA, militant leaders like Paresh Baruah will continue

²⁰ National Fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Liberation_Front_of_Assam

²² Civil society group hands over charter of demands to ULFA, *The Hindu*, Sushanta Talukdar, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article1999706.ece>

to emerge stronger. So, he said, Government must create a situation which can ensure that talks would be held and leaders like Paresh Baruah²³ may come forward to join the rest of the ULFA leaders who are willing to join the peace process. If Government takes the proper initiatives in bringing about lasting peace, the people of Assam will never reject it.

On the other hand, DHD President Dilip Nunisa did not advocate talks with splinter groups because such talks may lead to other problems in the process of solving the main problem, and will create further complications. So, Government must not encourage formation of newer groups by offering talks and incentives to all such militant groups, which has, in turn, posed another major problem. In short, Government should analyze if it was correct to give more importance to those factions of a rebel group who have killed more people or who have been able to display its military might strongly.

In the same tune, Col Manoranjan Goswami, a former Army officer, suggested that Government must identify the main militant groups and hold peace talks with only such groups and not with any splinter groups as it is just not possible for the Government to hold peace talks with every minor group that may emerge.

Dr NG Mahanta, who heads the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at Gauhati University, believes that Government must keep its doors open to militant groups for negotiations. “An accord-centric approach can yield limited results, but the peace process should have no limitation.” Mr P J Barua, Executive Editor of *The Assam Tribune*, frontline English daily published from Guwahati, pointed at the identity crisis of the indigenous people of the region in the face of influx of foreign nationals and wanted that the indigenous people should come on a common platform to solve the crisis. Padma Sri Natwar Thakkar said that in a heterogeneous nature of the northeastern society, ethnic groups have their own separate identity. He said that violence should be abolished at all cost, because an armed people cannot be the representative of the society. So, civil society should aim at building a peaceful society. Mr Kanak Sen Deka, former president of Asom

²³ Ulfa splits formally, Rajkhowa 'expelled', *The Times of India*, 9 August 2012. The split in the ULFA took a formal shape after the anti-talks faction led by Paresh Baruah 'expelled' the outfit's chairman, Arabinda Rajkhowa, who is heading the pro-talks group, and elevated acting chairman Abhijeet Barman ('Asom') as the new head of the outfit. The outfit has been divided since 2009 after the majority group led by Rajkhowa declared ceasefire and decided to hold peace talks with the government while Paresh Baruah formed the anti-talks faction, which continues to reject talks without sovereignty on the agenda.

Sahitya Sabha, the highest literary organization in Assam, said that until the mindset of people in Assam is changed, there can be no cohesive civil society that can contribute meaningfully to the process of peace making. The mindset is narrowing down to minor communal issues.

Prof Abu Nasser Ahmed, former Professor at IIT Guwahati observed that the role of the Assam government in peace process is silent and the Central government's policy is not clear. He argued that doors of discussion should be opened to the core militant groups instead of the splinter groups and that the civil society's role in tribal areas is in a dormant state. The PCG, according to actor and social activist Akashitara Dutta, was not the representative of the people. From 1979 till date, it is found that more than 12,000 people were killed.²⁴ A fear psychosis has developed among the victims of terrorist activities which must be removed. At the same time, terrorists willing to surrender must be rehabilitated with a proper scheme in place. So conditions must be laid down in the peace policy.

The CDPS round table concluded that peace dialogues must be held by the Government only with such insurgent groups who enjoy genuine legitimacy. It was found that the splinter militant groups are formed as a result of a possible strategy of postponing peace by the government.

A policy on Peace Talks

Ceasefire by militant groups for dialogue and negotiations has played a key role in maintaining the region's stability. Peace process should become a tool to achieve peace and not an instrument for delaying conflict. The government agencies are well aware of the realities of the difficult situation on the ground. While it is felt essential to bring as many insurgent groups for ceasefire and subsequently for peace talks, the process may, at times, backfire.

Cessation of hostility with insurgent groups in the Northeast by bringing them to ceasefire may be a strategy of the Government to pacify the prevailing unrest, but the long-drawn-out peace talks and negotiations that follow such ceasefires without coming to an end at some meaningful resolutions raise questions about the

²⁴ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/Paresh-Barua-admits-blunder-by-Ulfa-in-Assam/Article1-805806.aspx>

effectiveness of such strategy. It has the potential ranging from violation of ceasefire rules, factional clashes, as well as giving birth to newer factions or new insurgent outfits. Peace talks are giving incentive to some, while those who are left out form new rebel groups to fight for their own causes. Thus, the big question remains: are the talks backfiring? Here, fresh talks with new militant groups imply more militant groups emerging. Therefore, the Government must form a firm policy on peace talks where there will be confirmation that henceforth no more talks will take place with any fresh militant groups.

So there is a need for the Government to formulate a comprehensive policy on peace talks. It is true that apart from the major militant groups, many new groups have appeared in the region. So, it is imperative that the Government formulate a policy as to the desirability and justifiability of carrying on talks with all the militant groups.