

Pro-secessionist insurgency gains momentum in northeastern India

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The news from Manipur's state capital, Imphal, that three guerrilla groups which are seeking secession from India have joined hands under a unified command, and a letter by a member of parliament belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main opposition to the ruling Congress (I) in New Delhi, addressed to Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao urging him to intervene, have raised the specter of yet another round of wanton violence in the strategically sensitive northeastern India.

In his letter to the prime minister, Member of Parliament W. Kulabidhu warned: "The anti-Indian, anti-mainstream, and pro-secessionist mood is gathering momentum and is even joined by the intelligentsia. . . . It is learned that Manipur, which is already insurgency-affected, may go the way of Punjab and J&K [Jammu and Kashmir] due to the lack of display of statesmanship on the part of leaders of the mainstream."

There are reasons for Kulabidhu's sense of urgency. Intelligence sources from Imphal reported recently that the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has bases in six of the seven northeastern states; the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (Prepak), which was decimated by an intra-party feud in the early 1980s; and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), the least potent of the three, were brought under a unified command at a secret meeting near Khonjon on the Indo-Burma Road. This unified group is also actively supporting the language issue which has been the main platform of the Manipur intelligentsia against New Delhi.

In addition, a tribal group, represented by the Kuki Nagas, who inhabit the southern part of Manipur and across the border in Myanmar (Burma) along the western bank of Chindwin River, has formed a new underground organization, the Kuki National Front (KNF), for a campaign of carving out a homeland for the Kukis. They are reportedly involved in a massive fundraising drive in the areas they inhabit and also in parts of Assam and northwestern Burma.

Insurgency in northeastern India, bordering China, Bangladesh, and Burma, is nothing new. In fact, less than 24 hours before India became an independent nation in 1947, the Nagas of Nagaland had taken up arms and declared themselves independent. A decade or so later, the Mizo of Mizoram rose up in armed revolt, and at about the same time the

Meitei Hindus of Manipur, who constitute 70% of the 1.83 million population and live in the Imphal valley, raised the demand for a separate state, since they had discovered that they were Mongoloid as opposed to the fellow Hindus of the plains of India.

In time, these uprisings were subdued, but the major ingredients which gave rise to insurgency were left largely untouched. Over a period of time, a whole new range of dissenters joined the fray. Some were fighting for a socialist state, others for Christianity, and still others, like the Kukis, were demanding separate tribal states. Easy access to Burma allowed all these groups to survive and mobilize for fresh forays into Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram from time to time to justify their existence. In this context, the assistance of various insurgent groups in Burma, in turn helped by China, and the abundant availability of arms and heroin, played a crucial role in keeping these groups intact.

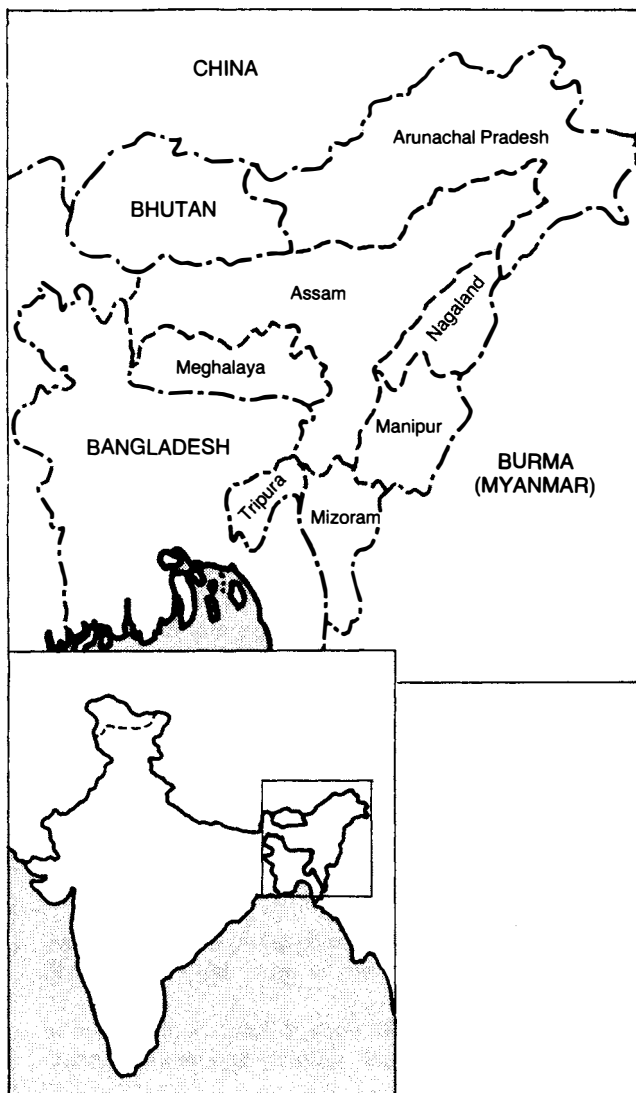
The insurgents

Of all the groups in Manipur, the PLA is by far the most potent. The vanguard of the Maoist cult in northeastern India, the PLA has attracted young radicals from the middle class, including a prince from the defunct Manipur royal family. A number of PLA leaders, known as the *Ojhas* (Teachers), were sent to Lhasa, Tibet, in the 1970s for indoctrination and arms training by the Chinese. Although all the *Ojhas* are either dead or nabbed, their adherents have continued to advocate the cause of their leaders in strong Maoist terms.

In 1981, with the arrest of PLA leader Bisheswar, it looked as if the PLA menace would be eradicated from the valley. But an inadequate political leadership and a number of extraneous factors have kept the PLA alive and kicking. Besides the PLA, the Prepak is also a violent, valley-based organization. Prepak went through a murderous phase in the early 1980s following the arrest of their leader, Tulachandra. The blood-feuds and killings brought counterinsurgency to Imphal, jeopardizing the survival of even the PLA. Since then, it has been noted that the Prepak was deeply affected by a lack of leadership.

In addition to these valley-based insurgent groups, the hills around Imphal, inhabited by the Thangkul and Mao Naga tribes, who are mostly Christians, have been disturbed since the 1960s. While the PLA and Prepak are involved in

Northeastern India, Bhutan, and Bangladesh



violent activities in the valley, seeking a "Greater Imphal State" outside of India, these tribal groups are demanding separate tribal homelands.

In their insurgency activities, a number of factors have come to contribute significantly. First, the perpetual non-administration of outlying areas of Burma. For decades, the Burmese government in Rangoon could exercise only nominal control over areas located on the western banks of Chindwin and Upper Irrawaddy rivers. As a result, the northeast insurgents developed close relations with the Burmese insurgents, particularly the Kachins, Karens, and Mons, and received arms training as well as drugs in the form of opium and heroin. Under pressure from Indian security forces, the Naga, Mizo, and other insurgent groups would vanish into the thick jungles of Burma where they were sheltered by the

Burmese insurgents.

Second, the explosion of opium cultivation in Burma and China has made the insurgent group financially stable. In recent years, Manipur has become the main entry point of Burmese and Chinese heroin into India. The drug is handled by these insurgent groups and carried all the way over to the state of Assam, bordering Bhutan. As a result, Manipur has also become a victim of heroin. Thousands of heroin addicts, more than 5,500 drug traffickers languishing in jail, and an exceedingly high number of individuals who are HIV positive, inhabit the Imphal Valley. Recent reports indicate that from there heroin is now carried into Bangladesh, and from there finds its way to the Persian Gulf. Heroin trafficking has provided the insurgents the much-required cash for buying arms and for sheer survival. In addition, the PLA also requires cash to publish propaganda and indoctrination material from time to time.

Political chaos

The third factor is the political chaos that reigns supreme in Manipur. The political scene, dominated by a group of highly sophisticated elites based in the Imphal Valley, is an unending chain of manipulations. Manipur's political leaders, a vast majority of whom belong to the royal family and are denoted by the initials R.K. (*Raj Kumar*, which means "Prince"), change parties on account of personal feuds. From time to time, one R.K. heads the Congress Party while the other heads the leading opposition group. Then, when convenient, they change sides. One such major player is R.K. Dorendra Singh, who has been in and out of the Congress Party in order to head the state government. These political leaders have close ties with the PLA leaders, according to political observers based in Manipur. It has been said that R.K. Dorendra Singh, in particular, had become quite close to the PLA leadership and that that was one reason why the PLA was not decimated in the early 1980s.

The insurgent groups are also drawing succor from two other factors—the language issue and the lack of developmental efforts in the northeast by New Delhi. The language issue, which had alienated the intelligentsia from New Delhi, involves the demand that the Manipuri language, Meitei-lol, be included in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution. According to the agitators, Meitei-lol is the principal symbol of Manipuri identity. As the story goes, following the order of a local king some two centuries back, the people in Manipur were forced to use Bengali script and Maitei-lol was pushed out. With the creation of Manipur as a full-fledged state in 1972 and the declaration of Manipuri as the state language, this demand for its inclusion in the Constitution began. The Manipur state assembly passed a resolution in 1988 voicing such a demand. However, New Delhi, reportedly afraid that this might set a precedent for several other linguistic groups to press for the inclusion of their respective languages, has kept the issue at bay causing a great deal of resentment. In fact,

regular street demonstrations against the national language Hindi has become a passing scene in Imphal.

The developmental issue, which involves the entire northeast, is also a matter of serious concern. Endowed with an exceedingly fertile valley, Manipur is poor in agriculture. The state is fully dependent on rainfall for its agriculture: A number of irrigation projects have been mooted, but have yet to see daylight.

Another key issue is the lack of transportation. The state is cut off from the rest of the country as far as a rail link is concerned. While New Delhi claims that Manipur is too mountainous to support a railway, it is pointed out that places like Shimla and Darjeeling, situated over 6,000 feet high in the mountains, were connected by rail during British rule.

The rail link between Manipur and the rest of India will not only enable essential commodities to be supplied to the state, but it will also allow the people of the state to move out and form an emotional cohesion with the rest of the country. At present, a road connects Imphal to Dimapur, Nagaland, via Kohima, Nagaland, and one has to spend the whole day in a bus or car in order to reach Imphal by land.

Economically, northeastern India has remained in the colonial age, dominated by tea, oil, and timber production. However, little of the profit earned from such exploitation has been ploughed back into the economy, and there is a strong grievance that the region has remained a captive market for

consumer goods manufactured in the rest of the country. Because of the lack of adequate institutions, the money allocation made by New Delhi finds its way into the hands of a selected few, adding to the disparity between the haves and have-nots.

Finally, the foreign element in northeast India cannot be underestimated. The Chinese involvement in the form of indoctrinating the insurgents and arming them is well known. Less known is the fact that right after the partition of India, the British had worked out a strategy to make northeast India and the western part of Burma a colony. In their design to carve out a separate colony, they also planned to maintain two ports for carrying on their trade from the region. One was the Maungdaw-Bathiadaung region in Burma, just south of Bangladesh, with Chittagong (Bangladesh) to be made a free port, and the other was the Moulmein-Tavoy region to the sea, where the Karens and Mons predominate.

Recently, two British nationals, Steven Hillman and David Ward, were arrested in Naga when it was found that they did not carry the necessary permits to travel to Nagaland, which is a restricted area. The two Britons were arrested by security forces during a shootout with Naga rebels on the Nagaland-Manipur border. It was subsequently discovered that Ward and Hillman were members of the London-based Naga secessionist organization "Naga Wigil." London was also the base of the late Naga secessionist leader A.Z. Phizo.

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