

Indian Army cracks down in Assam

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

On Nov. 30, the Indian government dismissed the duly elected state government in Assam and imposed President's rule. Simultaneously, 30,000 troops were deployed to ferret out secessionist guerrillas from their hideouts in the dense and inhospitable terrain of upper Assam. Initial reports indicate that the Army has met with little success in netting any noteworthy guerrilla leader belonging to the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), although news of some large arms caches has been reported.

Located in the northeastern part of the country bordering Bangladesh and Bhutan, and split down the middle into upper and lower Assam by the Brahmaputra River, the state acts as the vital road link to the isolated and strategically important northeastern states. Assam has seen little peace and tranquility since independence. The situation drastically deteriorated over the last decade and a half, during which one agitation after another led to repeated episodes of violence and carnage. An upsurge in 1979-80 against the "foreigners"—mostly the Bangladeshi refugees, millions of whom had allegedly settled in western Assam—led to massacres. The anti-foreigner movement also raked up the dormant anti-Bengali prejudices of the Assamese middle class, and gave a powerful boost to Assamese chauvinism.

After a number of splits within the politically active student body that led the anti-foreigner charge, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) emerged as an expression of the Assamese middle class only two months before the 1985 state assembly elections to take on the aging Congress Party. The AGP was a product of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP), dominated by ethnic Assamese intelligentsia. The party won a spectacular victory in the elections, and the state's well-being was passed on to a group of leaders whose ages ranged from 25 to 35. Most of them, especially those who were in leadership positions, were student activists and adept in the art of organizing demonstrations, setting up pickets, courting arrests, and spewing anti-establishment slogans. It soon became evident that those qualifications were not enough to administer the state. Most serious, perhaps, the AGP leaders, who are after all mostly conformists in social and political outlook, found it increasingly difficult to curb the growing radicalism and chauvinism of their fellow-travelers.

Despite these apparent failures of immature leaders, there

is little doubt that the AGP was accepted with open arms by most Assamese.

However, the AGP as the new ruling party began to encounter growing pressures from the fragmented Assamese society with a wide mix of tribals, Muslims, and Bengalis, and in 1989 a movement by the Bodo tribals to carve out a separate state north of the Brahmaputra led to months of terror and violence. The Bodoland Movement led by the All Bodo Students Union was soon overshadowed by a new terror: the ULFA. Though the ULFA has existed in Assam for the last decade, it is only recently that it has acquired the image of a terrorist outfit, demanding a sovereign Assam nation, separate from India.

Robin Hood or Pol Pot?

Having paralyzed the AGP leadership, the ULFA began to project the image of being executioners of the exploiters, and friends of the poor. They have justified the murder of tea-garden managers and Indian Oil company executives and extortion of large sums of money from the wealthy as acts of justice.

It has become evident that a number of AGP leaders were working, at least in effect, in tandem with the terrorist outfit. More specifically, it is generally known in Assam that the AASU, also the braintrust of the AGP, is hand in glove with the ULFA guerrillas. In addition, a number of exposés have begun to tarnish the ULFA's well-cultivated Robin Hood image. Former Railway Minister George Fernandes claimed at a seminar last September that he had definite information that the ULFA had succeeded in forging links with the militants operating in Kashmir and Punjab, as well as with Tamil insurgents, presumably in Sri Lanka. It has also been reported widely that the ULFA has close contacts with other secessionist groups in the neighboring Indian states of Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur, and its members have been sheltered and trained by Burmese insurgents of the Kachin variety. ULFA's strong links with the pro-Beijing National Socialist Council of Nagaland have come to light. Last June, two ULFA agents in Dhaka, Bangladesh were found depositing large sums of money extorted from tea-gardens.

Whether or not the ULFA movement is yet another Beijing-sponsored effort to destabilize India's strategic border states is expected to be revealed in the coming days, if the Army succeeds in grabbing the guerrilla leaders. So far, the Army's failure has been attributed to the wide-scale infiltration by ULFA sympathizers into the state's law enforcement apparatus. Documents seized from the guerrillas indicate that the ULFA head Paresh Barua had ordered his members to strike camp least two weeks before the Army operation began. The Army operation, however, has already brought a few facts to light. In Lakhpathar, bordering Arunachal Pradesh, the Army has come across a shallow mass grave where decomposed bodies of young men and women, with hands tied behind their backs, were found.