

Terrorism Ravages Northeast India

by Ramtanu Maitra

On the birth anniversary-day of modern India's greatest son, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, terrorists in northeast India, particularly in two of the eight northeastern states—Assam and Nagaland—went berserk and planted bombs which killed about 70 people. The powerful bomb explosions at a packed railway station, and at a popular market in Dimapur, the commercial hub in the state of Nagaland, on the morning of Oct. 2, 2004, took 26 lives, and injured another 104.

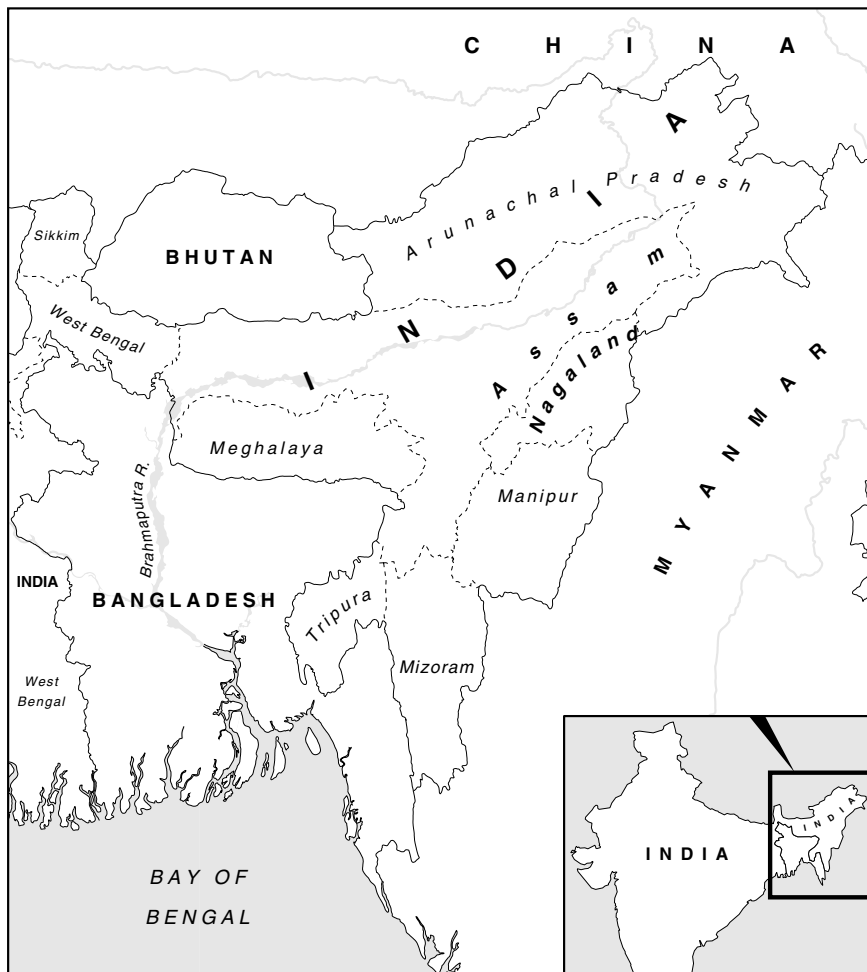
Rebels also carried out a string of attacks in neighboring Assam, killing at least 34 people over a span of 36 hours (Oct. 2-4, 2004), in 17 separate incidents. At the time of writing, the bombs are still going off in the state of Assam. This terrorism in northeast India, home to nearly 40 million people and wedged between Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China's Tibet province, is not the handiwork of the Islamic jihadis, but may have acquired the support of the international Islamic militant groups operating in Bangladesh. On the ground, the terrorists belonged to the local tribal groups seeking autonomy and separatism.

British Legacy

In Assam, the attacks were carried out by the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Both the ULFA and the NDFB have separately claimed responsibility for different incidents.

There is a greater possibility that the Dimapur explosions were also carried out by the NDFB, and not by either of the two Naga insurgent organizations—the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-Isaac Swu-Muivah) or the NSCN (Khaplang). Both these organizations have been observing a cease-fire, and the NSCN (I-M) has entered into negotiations with the authorities to find a political solution to their grievances. The talks have not broken down or reached a dead end. Moreover, the NSCN (I-M) is reported to have denied any involvement, and has offered a reward for anyone who would help them identify those responsible for the explosions.

The insurgency, and the associated terrorism, in northeast India is an old problem. In fact, since India's independence in 1947, northeast India has been split up into smaller and smaller states and autonomous regions. The divisions were made to accommodate the wishes of tribes and ethnic groups which want to assert their sub-national identity and obtain an



The states of Assam and Nagaland, in northeastern India, have been the recent scenes of terrorism.

area where the diktat of their little coterie is recognized. More than 50,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in India's northeast since independence.

New Delhi has yet to comprehend that its policy of accepting and institutionalizing the superficial identities of these ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groups has ensured more irrational demands for even smaller states. It has also virtually eliminated any plan to make these areas economically powerful, and the people scientifically and technologically advanced.

In reality, the root cause of the problem is the conditions set in place by British rule in the Northeast since 1826, and the formation of East Pakistan in 1947. New Delhi's inability to integrate the region stems from its failure to recognize that the British Raj had converted Northeast India into a human zoo, where each tribe was allowed to roam free within its "own territory," but was not allowed to cross the boundaries set forth by their British masters, to establish contact with the rest of India. A situation has now arisen in which New Delhi's promised carrot of economic development and integration

with the rest of India evokes little enthusiasm in the Northeast. Money from New Delhi for "development" serves to appease the "greed" of a handful and to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, fresh separatist movements bring the area closer to the precipice.

Tribal Fiefdoms

Assam has been cut up into many states since Britain's exit in 1947. The autonomous regions of Karbi Anglong, Bodo Autonomous Region, and Meghalaya were all part of pre-independence Assam. Citing the influx of Bengali Muslims since the 1947 formation of East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971), the locals demand the ouster of these "foreigners" from their soil. Two violent movements in Assam, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), formerly known as the Bodo Security Force (BdSF), are now practically demanding "ethnic cleansing" in their respective areas.

The Bodos are a major tribe from the plains of Assam; they have been in a state of ferment since 1967, reacting to alleged discrimination against them by the majority Assamese. This ferment, particularly amongst the Bodo youth, led to the formation of two militant organizations, one called the Bodo

Security Force (BdSF), came to notice in 1989; the second, the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF). The NDFB advocates an independent Bodoland, while the BLTF wants a separate state of Bodoland within the Indian Union.

To fund their movements, both the ULFA and the NDFB have been trafficking heroin and other narcotics, and indulging in killing sprees against other ethnic groups and against Delhi's law-and-order machinery. Both these groups reportedly have close links with other major guerrilla-terrorist groups operating in the area, including the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac Swu-Muivah) and the People's Liberation Army in Manipur. Assam, unlike most other areas of the Northeast, was better integrated with mainstream India prior to independence; Assam participated in the national independence movement and contributed much to India's intellectual and cultural wealth. In 1972, Meghalaya was carved out of Assam through a peaceful process. Unfortunately, peace did not last long in this "abode of the clouds." In 1979, the first violent demonstration against "foreigners,"

identified as Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, and Nepalis, resulted in a number of deaths and arson. By 1990, firebrand groups such as the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo People (FKJGP), and the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), came to the fore. Violence erupted in 1979, 1987, 1989, and 1990. The last violent terrorist acts occurred in 1992. Similar "anti-foreigner" movements have sprouted up across the northeast, from Arunachal Pradesh in the east and north, to Sikkim in the west, and Mizoram and Tripura in the south. Along the Myanmar border, the states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram remain unstable and extremely porous. The area provides all that terrorists/insurgents need for keeping alive their movement—sanctuaries in Bhutan, Myanmar, the pre-1971 East Pakistan, and the post-1971 Bangladesh; facilities for across-the-border training and procurement of arms and ammunition; state-sponsorship from the intelligence agencies of Pakistan and Bangladesh; a regular flow of funds from the smugglers of narcotics from the Golden Triangle; and an ineffective administration in the northern part of Myanmar.

Effect of War on Terrorism

The increasing presence of Osama bin Laden's International Islamic Front (IIF) over the recent years in adjoining Bangladesh territory, through the intermediary of the Harkatul-Jihad-al Islami (HUJI), has further destabilized northeast India. As the United States stepped up its anti-terrorist watch, and its operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Saudi Arabia triangle, pro-bin Laden terrorists of various hues have been heading toward Bangladesh during the last two years. Bangladesh's Begum Khaleda Zia government, which is increasingly becoming dependent on the militant and orthodox Islamic groups for political survival, draws support from, and looks askance at, the growing militancy.

These militant Islamic groups do not like India, and morally and materially help the insurgents active in India's Northeast. The recent formation of an organization in Assam called the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam, has also been reported. The group's objective is to work for a separate state consisting of the six districts of Assam where the Muslims are in a majority (caused by large-scale illegal migration of Muslims from Bangladesh).

New Delhi's reaction to the Oct. 2-4 explosions so far is one of surprise. Its failure to follow up the intelligence made available to the present United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government by the intelligence agencies is evident from the outbreak of violence. Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil has since visited Assam and Nagaland. Patil's handling of the growing crisis in Nagaland's adjacent state, Manipur, has already drawn criticism from Indian observers.

Initiative by U.S. Ambassador Mulford?

In addition to the existing complexity, and a whole range of chaos, New Delhi was surprised to find that the U.S. Am-

bassador to India, David Mulford, a former banker, had sent a letter to the state chief ministers of Assam and Nagaland offering help to investigate terrorist attacks. The U.S. embassy in New Delhi has since confirmed the offer. "We are prepared, if requested, to facilitate the appropriate assistance of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) to aid in the criminal investigation by Indian authorities so that the perpetrators can be identified and brought to justice," an embassy spokesperson said in a statement.

A senior Indian official told the India Abroad News Service: "We [India and the U.S.] have an understanding to assist each other in dealing with terrorism, but I don't know if [this] is the best way to go about it." It seems, however, that the U.S. offer is now being considered seriously by the Assam authorities. Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi told news media that the Bodo militants in recent days had been using "very sophisticated" explosives, which the various security agencies were unable to detect with their existing gadgets.

"We definitely need help to battle insurgency, and I am hopeful New Delhi would give us the nod for enlisting the help of the U.S. experts," he said. He also assured New Delhi that "we would see to it that national security is not compromised in our efforts at roping in foreign experts in counter-insurgency."

On the other hand, since Feb. 20, 1993, when Narasimha Rao was the Prime Minister, the governments of India and Assam reached an agreement with the Bodo leaders for setting up a Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) within the state of Assam with considerable powers of autonomy for the Bodos. A major problem in finding a solution to the demands of the Bodos has been that villages of Assam, where the Bodos are in a majority, do not constitute a contiguous stretch of territory. What they look upon as the territory of Bodoland is interspersed with many non-Bodo villages. Following his visit, Home Minister Shivraj Patil stressed the need for coordinated counterinsurgency measures, including intelligence-sharing, between the states in the Northeast. According to the Assam Chief Minister, the "roots" of the insurgency problem lie beyond the borders. "The roots are in Bangladesh and Myanmar. These roots have to be uprooted," he said in Guwahati, referring to allegations of camps being run by Indian fugitives across the border.

Observers point out that such sharing of intelligence is complex and New Delhi did little to alleviate the problem. For instance, in Assam, the Army, police, and paramilitary forces operate under a unified headquarters, with the Army heading the operational command. In the neighboring state of Manipur, a loose unified security set-up prevails. But, there is no formal mechanism for a coordinated security structure in Nagaland or Tripura. This makes any attempt at a broad coordinated counterinsurgency campaign in the region difficult. Besides, in all eight northeastern states, state authorities have their own channels open with one, or many, rebel groups.