

Naga Peace Talks: Can Delhi Convert The Truce Into A Deal?

Wasbir Hussain

Consulting Editor, The Sentinel, Guwahati & Associate Fellow, Institute for Conflict management, New Delhi

On July 30, 2004, after two days of meeting at in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, the Indian Government and the Isak-Muivah faction of the separatist National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) resolved several emerging differences and agreed to extend the prevailing ceasefire for one more year. Under the fresh agreement, the truce between the NSCN-IM and the Indian authorities, that first came into effect on August 1, 1997, will be in force till July 31, 2005, unless there is a further extension.

The context in which the latest ceasefire extension deal was clinched - the first since Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government assumed office in New Delhi - needs to be examined for answers as to why getting the truce extended, and keeping the Naga peace process on track, was more difficult this time than in the past six years. The problem was over the UPA Government's clear-cut declaration that the territorial boundaries of the northeastern states would not be altered. This stand of the Manmohan Singh Government was reflected in the UPA's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) that said, "There shall not be any erosion of the current territorial status of the northeastern States."

This posed a problem because the NSCN-IM, that still continues to be rigid on its demand for an integration of all Naga inhabited areas in the Northeast into a single politico-administrative unit, saw in the CMP statement a rejection by New Delhi of its unified Naga homeland idea. Nothing could have been more serious for the NSCN-IM than the Indian Government's new stand. After all, it is safe to presume that the NSCN-IM had agreed to enter into peace negotiations realizing

that New Delhi was not going to concede its independent homeland demand. Therefore, the group could well have been banking on its idea to unify the Naga inhabited areas and get Naga territories in the neighbouring states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal merged with Nagaland. This could indeed be the magic compromise formula that the NSCN-IM leadership is hoping to translate into reality through a possible peace agreement with New Delhi.

Prime Minister of the time H.D. Deve Gowda's unorthodox initiative in 1996 - when he handpicked an opposition Congress leader Rajesh Pilot to make contact with the NSCN-IM leaders - is in fact responsible for whatever progress the Naga peace process has made till now. It is also possible that Gowda and Pilot could convince the NSCN-IM to give up its sovereignty demand in lieu of some arrangement to get the Naga areas in the region together, under a common administrative mechanism. If that was so, it was fine because Gowda & Co at that time was not to know that the masses in Manipur, Assam or Arunachal Pradesh could go to any extent in preventing territories from their respective states to be sliced and merged with Nagaland.

But as things unfolded, it was clear that altering the boundaries of the northeastern states was next to impossible. The June 2001 uprising in Manipur against the extension of the Naga ceasefire to that State, in which 18 protestors were killed in police firing at capital Imphal, is a case in point. On August 6, 2004, weeks after suspected NSCN-IM rebels were locked in a gun-battle with the Assam Police in Assam's Karbi Anglong district, the State Assembly adopted a resolution not to allow Assam's map to be redrawn and territory ceded to the Nagas as

part of a possible deal with the NSCN-IM. The gun-battle followed attempts to evict some Naga families who had come and settled down in Assam territory, right on the border with Nagaland, allegedly with the backing of the NSCN-IM.

Against this backdrop, what was it that helped New Delhi's chief interlocuter for the Naga peace talks, K.Padmanabiah, break the deadlock in Chiang Mai and get NSCN-IM Chairman Isak Chishi Swu and General Secretary Thuingaleng Muivah sign the truce extension deal for another year? It is on such matters that transparency is needed for the peace process to actually reach the desired end. Doubts are being expressed as to whether Padmanabiah had made a secret promise to the NSCN-IM leadership that New Delhi would be reconsidering its demand for unification of the Naga areas in the region.

The joint communiqué issued on July 30, 2004 at the end of the Delhi-NSCN-IM talks made two key points:

- No new conditions had been imposed or changes made in the agenda or scope of the talks.

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- All issues will continue to be discussed with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable and honourable settlement as soon as possible.

It is good to learn that no new conditions have been imposed. Since it has been agreed to reach a 'mutually acceptable and honourable

settlement' to the Naga problem, plaguing the area since India's independence, the question of a sovereign Nagaland as a solution does not arise. That leaves the issue of Naga areas' unification as raised by the NSCN-IM. Both New Delhi and the NSCN-IM have their own reasons to reach a solution 'as soon as possible.' While the Indian

Government would like peace to return to the Naga areas so that it could pull out most of its forces from the region and concentrate its energies on developmental issues, the NSCN-IM would like things to move fast as its top leaders are well past their sixties and would like to enjoy the fruits of their 'labour.'

If sovereignty or a unified Nagaland is out as possible formula for a solution, how does one hope to bring the curtains down to the insurrection? That is the million-dollar question.

- Could it be dual citizenship for the Nagas (a Kashmir-type status through greater devolution of powers under Article 371 (A) of the Constitution had been rejected in the past by the NSCN-IM)?
 - Could Nagaland's administration, as a feel good factor of the Naga areas being a distinct entity, be brought under the ministry of external affairs (this indeed was the situation a long time ago)?
 - Could the Nagas get a new autonomy package?
1. Could New Delhi take a re-look at what then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi was supposed to have agreed to examine way back in 1966? a Bhutan-type protectorate status for Nagaland (the Naga National Council led by the father of Naga insurgency, Angami Zapu Phizo, had rejected the idea at that time)?
 - Could Swu, Muivah and other NSCN-IM top guns be simply installed as government leaders to run the affairs of the Nagas in accordance with the Indian Constitution after a deal that gives the Nagas maximum autonomy and some sort of economic independence, and, of course, a proper rehabilitation of the NSCN cadres (this was more or less the model that New Delhi used to clinch the deal with the Mizo National Front in Mizoram in 1986)?

There are plenty of options for New Delhi to seriously look at and push for a possible deal to end the NSCN-IM uprising. But the question that arises is whether a deal with the NSCN-IM is going to solve the Naga problem. Another question that needs an answer is whether the NSCN-IM is the sole representative of the Nagas, and whether the

group reflects the Naga opinion in its totality. The answer is no. If this was not so, frontline Naga civil society groups like the Naga Hoho, the apex tribal council of the Nagas, would not be working relentlessly for unification of the different Naga rebel factions so that they could talk peace with New Delhi from a common platform or separately, but simultaneously. Veteran Naga political leaders like former Chief Minister S.C.Jamir, currently Governor of Goa, are still firm in their belief that unless all Naga insurgent groups are part of any possible deal, permanent peace would not return to the Naga areas.

The Khaplang faction of the NSCN or the NSCN-K considers itself an important player in the Naga insurgency and political theatre. This group, too, has entered into a ceasefire agreement with New Delhi, but has not begun formal peace negotiations yet, perhaps because New Delhi does not attach much importance to it, and, therefore, not paying much heed to conditions that the group may have set. The fact, however, remains that the NSCN-K is an important player in the area with close working arrangement with the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and other separatist groups in India's Northeast. The NSCN-K aside, another dormant Naga rebel group, the NNC of Phizo, now headed by his daughter Adinno Phizo, from her home in London, appears to be turning aggressive.

During an extended conversation at her London apartment in the winter of 2003, this writer found that even 40 years after first arriving in the United Kingdom to join her father (who died in London in 1990) in leading the Naga movement, she is still optimistic about 'freedom' for her people, and is convinced that an acceptable solution to the Naga problem would be reached at 'the right time' in the future. "The Indian Government," she had said, "cannot deny the Nagas their freedom." But, Adinno questioned New Delhi's wisdom in holding 'stage managed' peace negotiations with just the Isak-Muivah faction of the NSCN, whose leaders she sought to described as 'renegades.' "These factions (the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K) emerged in the eighties with no history, no mandate and no popular support. They emerged on the scene with neo-Marxist ideologies and do not represent the will of the Nagas. As such, the Nagas' conflict with India cannot be resolved by New Delhi even if it

succeeds in signing a deal with these factions," Adinno went on, while stating that New Delhi has not contacted her group for possible peace talks.

Without doubt, there are alternative opinions among the Nagas, a fact New Delhi must take note of while pushing ahead with its Naga peace initiative. For seven years, since the truce with the NSCN-IM was put in place, the talks, held in such locations as Bangkok, Amsterdam, Paris, Osaka, Zurich, The Hague, and so on, have largely been on such issues as the jurisdiction of the ceasefire, charges and counter-charges of ceasefire violations etc. Now, for the long awaited 'substantive talks' to start, New Delhi need to examine some of these points:

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- Try and get the NSCN-IM leaders to India to continue with the peace negotiations (the last time Swu and Muivah visited India at the express invitation of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was in January 2002).
- Withdraw the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958, from Nagaland, that gives the security forces sweeping powers to deal with their 'enemy,' now that both the NSCN factions are on a ceasefire mode.
- Make it clear to the NSCN-IM that sovereignty and a re-structuring of the northeastern states was not possible in the present circumstances and that other ways to reach a solution needs to be looked into seriously.
- Take the talks to a political level and open simultaneous talks to work out different models for an acceptable solution with the Naga civil society groups to be taken up with the NSCN-IM at the proper time
- Ask, as a tactical move, such influential groups as the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) or the

Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) to begin consultations with their counterparts in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, like the All Manipur Students' Union or the All Assam students' Union, whether they would be willing to part with areas inhabited by Nagas to be merged into Nagaland and so on.

In the final analysis, one can safely state that the road to Naga peace is thorny and would require a lot of compromises by both New Delhi and the Naga insurgent groups for an acceptable solution to be arrived at. Only a set of bold and unorthodox steps can bring the curtains down to insurgency in India's Naga heartland.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE
AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B 7/3 Safdarjung Enclave,
New Delhi 110029 INDIA