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INDIA'S NORTHEAST IN 2015

Insurgency and Peace Process | Ethnic Conflicts | Maoist Consolidation |
Spread of Islamist Militancy

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IPCS Special Report # 176
January 2015





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IPCS Forecasts

India's Northeast in 2015

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Statistics is a slightly different story, but there has been a definite decline in the sting of insurgency in Northeast India. During 2014, there were 456 fatalities in insurgency-related incidents in the region, which included 242 civilians, 191 insurgents and 23 security force personnel.¹ This figure was greater than those in 2013 (248 fatalities - 95 civilians, 132 insurgents and 21 security force personnel) and 2012 (312 fatalities - 90 civilians, 204 insurgents and 18 security force personnel).² Most of the fatalities in 2014 was in Assam and the rest of the states in the region have seen a decline in insurgency-related fatalities in 2014 as compared to 2012 and 2013.

Figures aside, on the ground, however, the situation is starkly different. The security establishment continues to be on tenterhooks, largely due to the belligerence of break-away factions of most of the major insurgent groups in states like Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur and, lately, in Tripura. If break-away factions of parent insurgent groups which are emerging dime a dozen, almost as a trend, is a cause for concern, several new insurgent groups have emerged on the scene in the region, a development that has the potential to keep insurgency alive in the northeastern frontier despite the continued peace efforts of the state authorities and the Centre.

Insurgency in Northeast India has always had trans-border ramifications, with rebel groups setting up shop and operating from neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. This fact has been acknowledged by all the three countries concerned, and in 2003, Bhutan led the way by launching a full-scale military assault to uproot the Northeast Indian rebels from its territory. Bangladesh followed suit, albeit in a different manner, by handing over top Northeast Indian insurgent leaders to authorities in India. Myanmar too has been cooperating with India but has not demonstrated its intent fully to deny parking space to Northeast Indian rebels within its territory. Despite cooperation from our neighbours, rebels in Northeast India have continued to make forays to the bordering areas to escape the counter-insurgency heat, forcing New Delhi to keep engaging with Dhaka, Thimphu and Naypyidaw.

In this backdrop, it is not too difficult to make a forecast about the insurgency scenario and the shape of the peace initiatives during 2015. Insurgency in Northeast India is showing definite signs of degenerating into pure terrorism with groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland - Songbijit faction (NDFB-S) and the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) indulging in ghastly cold-blooded murder of innocent civilians with the sole purpose of terrorizing them and in some instances as part of ethnic cleansing programs. The security establishment will have to deal with these terror elements and this may require New Delhi to amend its peace policy. This is because the government obviously cannot engage in peace negotiations with pure terror groups like the NDFB-S or GNLA. Besides, the government also cannot continue to hold peace negotiations with various factions of a single insurgent group like the NDFB. At present,

¹ State-wise Data Sheets, Insurgency-related Killings, South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org

² Ibid.

the Government is engaged in peace talks with two NDFB factions and has, so far, been insisting it will not enter into a dialogue with the NDFB-S, which New Delhi stops short of calling a terrorist outfit instead of regarding it an insurgent group!

The Maoists, who have managed to extend the red corridor to the region during the past few years, are lying low at the moment but they cannot be taken for granted. The security establishment will have to keep a close vigil on them in the days ahead, particularly because of their nexus with ethnic insurgent groups in the area.

A new dimension that security agencies cannot afford to ignore in 2015 is the advent and possible spread of Islamic radicalism in Northeast India, particularly Assam. The arrest of several persons in Assam, many of them directly linked to the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), in the wake of the October 2, 2014 blast in West Bengal's Burdwan area, is an indication of the fact that Islamist radicalism of the 'Jihadi' variety is very much a reality in the region. With groups like the NDFB-S intermittently targeting Muslim settlers as well as Adivasis, killing hundreds of them and uprooting thousands, a close watch has to be kept in this front as well. Moreover, the situation may turn volatile in the wake of brisk politicking ahead of the Assam Assembly elections in early 2016.

I

Insurgency and Peace Process

Change in Peace Policy of the Government

A definite shift is being noticed in the policy of the Government of India on the issue of dealing with insurgency in the Northeast. After the NDFB-S killed more than 70 persons in Assam in December 2014, the Government of India decided not to engage in peace talks with any outfit which is involved in killing of innocent civilians³. Now, any group which indulges in killings of innocent civilians will be treated as a "terrorist organisation" and will be dealt with accordingly. This resolve of the government was witnessed with the launch of full-scale military operations against the NDFB-S, leading to the death of one of its senior commanders and arrest of more than 30 hardcore cadres of the outfits, including some of its top commanders.⁴

In 2015, it can be expected that the government would continue with this policy of not entering into talks with outfits involved in killings of innocent civilians. Analysts and several think-tanks, including CDPS, would, however, expect New Delhi to announce a moratorium on peace talks with new insurgent groups or break-away factions during 2015 even while continuing with the peace negotiations with groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and a few others.

Sustained Counter-Insurgency Operations

With the government rejecting peace talks with outfits involved in heinous killings, it can be expected that 2015 would see sustained counter-insurgency operations against the active militant groups in the region.

³ "Centre changes policy on talks with NE ultras", The Assam Tribune, December 29, 2014, <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=dec2914/at052>

⁴ Wasbir Hussain, "Government's flip-flop on Counter Insurgency Operations can cost State dear", Point of View, Centre for Development and Peace Studies, <http://cdpsindia.org/point-of-view.asp>

At present, there are many insurgent outfits which are still active in various states of the Northeast. ULFA-Independent, led by Paresh Baruah and NDFB-S in Assam, National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in Tripura, GNLA and Liberation of Achik Elite Force (LAEF) in Meghalaya are still carrying on with its activities in these states. In Manipur, various insurgent outfits/factions are still continuing with their bush war against the Indian state. With government rejecting the idea of offering olive branch to such outfits, the region may witness counter-insurgency operations on a greater scale. This is because the BJP Government at the Centre has been talking of a 'zero tolerance policy' on terror.

Continuation of peace talks

Engaging the insurgent groups in the Northeast in peace talks has been a frequently used mode of conflict resolution by the Government of India. Virtually every significant insurgent group, or at least factions within each, is now in a truce with the government. The major northeastern rebel outfits currently engaged in talks with the government are United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland - Progressive (NDFB-P), National Democratic Front of Bodoland - Ranjan Daimary faction (NDFB-RD), Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLHF) in Assam and National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isak Muivah faction (NSCN-IM) in Nagaland. Ceasefire Agreement has been signed with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Khaplang faction (NSCN-K) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Khole Kitovi faction (NSCN-KK) in Nagaland and Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with United Progressive Front (UPF) and Kuki National Organisation (KNO) in Manipur.⁵ Also, Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed with three Meitei insurgent groups in Manipur - United Revolutionary Front (URF), Kangleipak Communist Party - Lamphel (KCP-L) and Kanglei Yawal Kanna Lup (KYKL).⁶ Apart from these, ceasefire agreements have been signed with several Adivasi insurgent groups in Assam. However, peace talks have not yet started with all these groups.

In 2015, it is expected that the ongoing peace talks would continue and such talks could also start with outfits which are on a ceasefire but have not yet come face-to-face with the Government for negotiations. Already, the government has appointed interlocutors for talks with some of these outfits and once the modalities are prepared, dialogue may begin with these outfits. Signing of peace accord with some of the outfits may also be expected in 2015.

But what would still remain a complex problem for the government will be the dilemma of signing accord with more than one factions of the same outfit. In Assam, peace talks are on with two factions of NDFB; in Nagaland, talks are on with one faction of NSCN and two factions are on ceasefire. The year 2015 may see government developing a new formula for bringing together the different factions of one insurgent group on the same table and pursue them to sign a common peace accord.

Demonstrating strike potential: Insurgents stepping up violence

With many major insurgent outfits entering into talks with the government and due to sustained counter-insurgency operations, the influence of the insurgent groups have reduced even in their traditional strongholds. Their strike capabilities have been eroded with arrests of their cadres and their coffers have dried up due to their inability to extort money unlike their heydays. In such a situation, we may see the active insurgent groups in the region step up their

⁵ Ministry of Home Affairs, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No 1524, Answered on 02.12.2014

⁶ "Northeast Peace & Security Scene 2013: A Review", Point of View, Centre for Development and Peace Studies, <http://cdpsindia.org/point-of-view105.asp>

violent activities in order to demonstrate their strike potential and put fear into the minds of the people. Random explosions or killing of innocent civilians, like what the NDFB-S did in Assam in December 2014, may be witnessed in 2015.

Will some insurgent groups declare unilateral ceasefire?

With the changing insurgency scenario in the Northeast and the rapidly eroding public support and sympathy for the insurgent groups, we may expect to see a few more insurgent groups of the region declaring unilateral ceasefire and coming forward for holding talks in 2015.

A seemingly tough posture being adopted by the new Government at the Centre may also compel some of these rebel outfits to call a truce on their own. In the case of smaller or newly formed outfits, government may accept such offers of peace but it is highly unlikely that it will now accept peace proposals from outfits involved in heinous crimes like the NDFB-S or the GNLA. So, even though there may be offers of truce from some insurgent groups or factions in 2015, there is very little chance of the government accepting such offers.

More factions within the existing insurgent groups?

Already, all the major insurgent outfits of the Northeast have split into factions over the years. In Nagaland, NSCN has three factions; in Assam, NDFB has three factions; in Manipur, there exist several factions of a single rebel outfit. The split in these outfits is mainly because of ideological differences, fight over monetary benefits and disgruntlement among some leaders or cadres of the outfits. Decision of rebel outfits to hold peace talks with the government is another major reason that has caused several groups to split into pro and anti-talk factions. Only in Manipur, this is not the case because groups have split into factions in order to gain territorial control.

In 2015, this trend may still continue and further splits among the insurgent outfits could occur. With the scale of counter-insurgency operations picking up, there are chances that some leaders of the insurgent outfits may want to declare ceasefire and come forward for peace talks. Whether the government accepts the proposal or insurgent factions.

Emergence of new insurgent groups?

With many insurgent groups entering into ceasefire with the government and confining themselves to designated camps, there are chances that the void created may lead to the formation of some new insurgent outfits. Also, increasing disgruntlement among some ethnic groups, which do not yet have an insurgent group with cadres drawn from the community, may lead to the formation of a new outfit. This has already happened with six insurgent outfits being formed in Assam during 2012 and 2013.⁷ These include the Karbi National Liberation Army (KNLA), United Peoples Liberation Front (UPLF), Dima Haram Daogah-Action (DHD-A), Dima Jai Naiso Army (DJNA), National Liberation Front of Bengalis (NLFB) and United Dimasa Kachari Liberation Front (UDKLF).⁸ The year 2015 may see the birth of a few more insurgent groups in the region. With insurgency almost becoming an industry in the region, it can be said that more and more players may try to enter the arena.

Greater access to sophisticated weapons by insurgents

During the ongoing counter-insurgency operations against the NDFB-S, the security forces have recovered various sophisticated weapons from its cadres, which include AK-56 rifles, HK-33

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

rifles, M-20 pistol, M-16 ammunition, etc⁹. Of these M-16 and M-20 are US-made and HK-33 is German-made. The availability of these modern sophisticated weapons in the hands of NDFB-S cadres shows that the insurgent groups of the region continue to have easy access to modern weapons. This also indicates that the clandestine arms market now has deep roots in Northeast India, through which these outfits can procure weapons. With Paresh Baruah, the chief of ULFA-I, being reported to be one of the top arms dealers in the region, in 2015, we may see further proliferation of sophisticated weapons among the insurgent groups.

II

Ethnic Conflicts

The northeastern region has been witness to numerous ethnic conflicts. Whether it is the Bodo-Adivasi conflict in 1996 and 1998 or the Karbi-Dimasa conflict in 2005 or the recent December 2014 massacre of Adivasis, this region has been prone to conflict along ethnic lines. In Assam, the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) has remained a constant theatre of ethnic conflict, mainly between the majority Bodos and the Adivasis and, more recently, the Muslim settlers. The BTAD region is home to three factions of NDFB, of which two factions are talking with the government and the Songbijit faction is still carrying out its violent activities, and these groups try to influence the politics in this region.

With the Assam Assembly Elections coming up in early 2016, there is every chance that ethnic tensions may flare up in the region. Intimidation of electors in order to force them to cast vote for candidates of a particular ethnic group may flare up tensions, which may lead to conflicts. With presence of large number of illegal arms, there are chances that such conflicts may lead to large number of fatalities. As such, one can predict that in 2015, ethnic conflicts can happen again in the BTAD area in Assam.

III

Maoist Consolidation

The Maoists have been able to extend the red corridor to the Northeast. The arrests of various top Maoist leaders in this region during 2013 revealed the extent of Maoist infiltration in Northeast India¹⁰. Though at present they are restricted to certain pockets of this region, like along the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border areas, there is every possibility that they can extend their influence further in 2015.

The Maoist rebellion in Northeast India is at present in its latent phase. The 'latent phase' involves mobilization of the masses, political awakening, visiting villages, engaging in small struggles on local issues, picking up students' issues, fighting corruption, short-listing shelter and arms dumps and identification of local militant elements, etc.¹¹ This exactly is what the Maoists in Northeast India are doing at present. But this phase may soon pass away. With the arrested Maoist leaders already revealing that they were in touch with youths from Meghalaya

⁹ Wasbir Hussain, "Government's flip-flop on Counter Insurgency Operations can cost State dear", Point of View, Centre for Development and Peace Studies, <http://cdpsindia.org/point-of-view.asp>

¹⁰ Wasbir Hussain, and Arunav Goswami, "Maoists in Assam: Filling the Void Created By Rebels In Peace Talks And Truce", in Hussain, Wasbir (ed), "Northeast India: The Maoist Spread", Wordweaves India, Guwahati (2014)

¹¹ Wasbir Hussain, 'Maoist Strategy Wakes Up Assam Government from Slumber', Point of View, Centre for Development and Peace Studies, <http://cdpsindia.org/point-of-view88.asp>



and they being able to create a support base in the districts of Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Silchar, Karimganj and Kamrup in Assam¹², it is a possibility that the Maoists may be able to consolidate their presence further in the region during 2015 and we may see the Maoists begin to engage in violent activities against the state machinery.

IV Spread of Islamist Militancy

Northeast India, shares an 1880 km long porous border with Bangladesh, a country that is a hotbed of Islamist militancy. Though radical Islam has not yet seeped into the Muslim population in the region, the arrests of twelve persons¹³ in Assam during November-December 2014 with links with the Islamist terror outfit Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) shows that radicalization of a section of Muslim population has begun in the region. The arrested persons have confessed that JMB was eyeing pockets inhabited by people of Bangladesh origin as well as districts like Sivasagar in eastern Assam, where it is said to have motivated some people.

Though Islamist militancy is yet to find a root in Northeast, we may see efforts from Islamists to spread radical Islam among the Muslim population in the region in 2015. With low levels of development and lack of access to proper education and healthcare services in various parts of the region, especially in the Muslim-dominated Char or riverine areas of Assam, fundamentalists may try to lure people towards their fold using these issues.

Conclusion

The grim cycle of insurgency has somewhat subsided in Northeast India over the years but few pockets in this region still are yet to come out of its grip. Periodic incidents of violence, extortion, bomb blasts are still being witnessed in these areas. The security establishment has been working constantly to dismantle the insurgent framework in the region and have achieved considerable success. We hope to see such more success in the year 2015. But new threats like Maoism and Islamist militancy are raising its head in this region and the government needs to develop a strong action plan to eradicate this menace before it spreads its tentacles in the whole region. Along with security measures, it is imperative that the government also take steps for developing the poorly developed interior areas of the state. A dedicated development plan along with tough security measures would surely be able to curb the menace of militancy in this region.

¹² Wasbir Hussain and Arunav Goswami, "Maoists in Assam: Filling the Void Created By Rebels In Peace Talks And Truce", in Wasbir Hussain (ed), "Northeast India: The Maoist Spread", Wordweaves India, Guwahati (2014)

¹³ Tracing jihadi elements in the Northeast, Centre for Development and Peace Studies, http://cdpsindia.org/Timeline_Jihadi.asp