

SUSTAINING THE PEACE PROCESS IN ASSAM

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BACKGROUND

The delicate exercise of finding ways and means for restoring peace in Assam began on September 7, 2005 when the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) made a surprise announcement of setting up of a People's Consultative Group (PCG). The mandate of this nine-member hand-picked team comprising of journalists, rights activists, lawyers and academics, was to clear the roadblocks and prepare the grounds for direct talks between the ULFA and the Government of India.

Indira Goswami, a celebrated Assamese writer and Delhi University professor, was already working as a peace facilitator in her individual capacity since November 2004. The ULFA had endorsed her role although she had restricted herself to only appeals for a negotiated settlement. In fact, Goswami is the first person to have been approved by the ULFA to play the role of peace facilitator since the group's formation on 7 April 1979. Therefore, it was not surprising to find her being vested with the responsibility of acting as coordinator of the PCG after its formation.

It was also not surprising to see a second coordinator in Rebati Phukan, a childhood friend of ULFA's elusive 'Chief of Staff' Paresh Barua. Besides, Phukan was a go-between in the failed

peace initiative in the early nineties when he had come into contact with MK Narayanan, the current National Security Adviser and New Delhi's key mover in the ULFA peace move. That means that the PCG, for all practical purposes, has an 11-member panel—nine members, and two coordinators, who would liaise between the panel and the Union government.

PCG-GOVERNMENT NEGOTIATIONS: ACHIEVEMENTS & FAILURES

The PCG held three rounds of talks with the Union government in New Delhi. The first meeting on October 26, 2005, was attended by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The second PCG-Government meeting was held on 7 February 2006, and the last on 22 June 2006, was attended by Home Minister Shivraj Patil. What became clear was that had the ULFA not appointed the PCG, one would not be talking of possible face-to-face meetings between the rebel group and the Government of India.

What did the PCG achieve in these three rounds of 'exploratory talks' with New Delhi?

- It could tell the Government, with the sanction of the ULFA, that the rebel group was serious about restoration of peace in Assam by

working out an acceptable solution through a process of dialogue.

- It pressed for and perhaps managed to convince the Government to concede the ULFA demand for releasing five important leaders from prison, all members of the group's 18-member decision-making central committee, to meet and prepare for entering into direct talks with the Government.
- It encouraged the Government to call a temporary halt to military operations against the ULFA.

What the PCG failed to achieve was to set the course for a ceasefire between the ULFA and the Government. The PCG had not chosen to discuss the ceasefire as it had maintained all along that it was up to the ULFA and the Government to decide. Whether the Government pressed the PCG to convince the ULFA to enter into a truce, even if temporary, is not known. In the absence of a ceasefire, violence by the ULFA and counter-insurgency responses, continued even while the PCG-Government talks were on. This was a failure of the PCG and the Government.

Look at the following statistics:

- According to the Assam Police, the ULFA militants have triggered off some 52 blasts between September 2005 and June 2006, the majority of these attacks being in late January and the early part of February, 2006, and again between June 8 to 12, 2006.
- At least 41 civilians were killed and 135 injured in ULFA violence between September 2005 and June 2006.
- During the same period, rebels attacked security forces on 15 occasions, killing six and injuring 41 others. The security forces

engaged with ULFA cadres on 20 occasions, in which 21 militants were killed and 48 arrested.

- While only 11 civilians were killed between January and August 2005 before the PCG's formation, as many as 29 civilians have been killed in ULFA violence in the first six months of 2006.

The obvious question that arises is: why did the ULFA carry out subversive activities even while indicating its willingness to resolve its problems through negotiations? The answer provided by the security establishment is along predictable lines. They state that the ULFA was merely buying time by talking of peace while regrouping and extorting money. Intelligence reports did indicate that the ULFA was regrouping, as also suggestions that the rebel group was seeking to demonstrate its strike potential; however, this is too simplistic an assessment of why the rebels engaged in violence while the talks were on. What is possible is that the hardliners within the group, who may not necessarily form part of the top leadership, were unwilling to join the peace process, at least not immediately. The ULFA, of course, denies that the group is divided over this issue of talks, but an independent assessment of the thinking within the outfit is not easy.

ULFA: IS THERE EXTERNAL PRESSURE?

The question that needs to be answered with hard evidence is whether the ULFA top brass has the freedom to take independent decisions on such crucial issues as entering into a ceasefire with the Government of India, and beginning a peace dialogue to resolve the 27-year-long insurrection in Assam. This question

must be posed keeping in mind the assessments by the Indian security agencies that the top ULFA leaders are based in Bangladesh, under the 'care and influence' of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), Bangladesh's premier intelligence outfit. These security agencies highlight the fact that the ULFA, unlike many mainstream organizations in Assam like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), have never talked or raised concerns over the issue of illegal migration of Bangladeshis into Assam.

THE PEACE PROCESS: WHY DID IT FAIL?

What must be noted is that the issue of a ceasefire was, significantly, not among the conditions and counter-conditions put forth by both sides, which led to a stalemate, if not derailment, of the ULFA peace process in Assam. What led to the peace process off track?

- First, the Government of India wanted ULFA to formally name its negotiating team. The ULFA responded by saying it cannot do this unless its five detained central committee members are freed.
- New Delhi then called for a 'firm commitment' from the ULFA that it was interested in talking peace with the Government. The ULFA responded by asking New Delhi to give a written assurance that the group's core issue of sovereignty would figure in the talks.
- The ULFA also insisted on getting information on the whereabouts of 14 of its members who were 'missing' after the Bhutanese military assault on the rebels inside the kingdom in 2003.

- The Army expressing doubts publicly (through a press statement issued by the Press Information Bureau's Defence Wing) about the ULFA's intentions while the truce was operative, suggesting that the Centre was talking in different voices.

The end result was that New Delhi called off its unilateral decision of August 13, 2006 on suspension of counter-insurgency operations in Assam. The security forces were once again put on the ULFA's trail on September 24, 2006. However, some days before the resumption of military operations, the ULFA had attacked a police patrol, killing a police officer, and had shot a tea planter dead after his company failed to concede to the rebel group's extortion demand. Both these incidents took place in eastern Assam, a region where the group's dreaded 28th Battalion, also known as the 'Kashmir Camp', is active, staging offensives from bases in the dense Myanmar jungles, across Arunachal Pradesh.

Where did the Government and the PCG bungle? The Government bungled by not talking in one voice—the Army issuing a statement expressing doubts over the peace process was unnecessary. Besides, senior Union Ministers like the then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee also made statements that ran counter to the mood in the Prime Minister's Office. Secondly, the Government was ill advised in sticking to its demand for a written assurance from the ULFA that it was really interested in peace talks. The ULFA's argument was that, had it not been interested in peace, it would not have set up the PCG in the first place. The Government could also have set the five detained ULFA

leaders free to drive home the message that it was interested in restoring peace in Assam, and that it was now the turn of the rebel group to reciprocate in a meaningful manner. One needs to remember that counter-insurgency operations are proceeding in Assam since November 1990, with only short breaks, but the ULFA insurgency is still raging.

And, the PCG? It made a big blunder by formally announcing that it was withdrawing from negotiations with the Centre in protest against the resumption of military operations. It thus gave the impression that it was only a group working under the ULFA's direction without any relevance or independent role. The PCG is not a true civil society group as its members were hand-picked by the ULFA. However, during the year that it has been in existence, it came to be acknowledged as a group that has relevance for peacemaking efforts.

THE PEACE PROCESS: WHAT NEXT?

What can now be done to get the peace process back on track? Some of the following steps could be considered:

- The State Government must play a proactive role. By saying that it has no role to play as the ULFA or the PCG are only interested in talking to the Centre is not enough.
- The Centre can extend a fresh invitation to the PCG for resumption of talks to break the current stalemate.
- The State Government in this scenario (if a fresh invitation is extended by New Delhi) can meet the PCG and convince it to resume the peace talks.
- If the PCG refuses to accept this invitation, people like Indira

Goswami or Rebaty Phukan could be approached to act as facilitators in their individual capacity.

- The Centre can take the peace process several steps forward by appointing an interlocuter or a Group of Ministers to exclusively deal with the ULFA issue.
- The Centre could work out on its own modalities for a ceasefire with the ULFA and then ask the ULFA to respond.
- Such a blueprint could be sent to the ULFA through individuals and modified, if necessary, after mutual agreement, so that a ceasefire agreement could be reached.
- The Centre can hold a meeting with civil society representatives, student leaders, media personalities and academics from Assam to gauge the people's mood on the ULFA issue.
- The five ULFA leaders may be released if key facilitators in the PCG give a reasonable assurance that this move would increase the possibility of direct talks between the rebel group and Government.
- Diplomatic pressure needs to be exerted on neighboring countries believed to be engaged in influencing rebel leaders not to enter into peace negotiations with New Delhi.

Everything, however, will now depend on whether the ULFA is truly interested in starting the quest for peace in Assam and whether the Government is prepared to take some risks, think out of the box and forge ahead in making things easy for face-to-face talks with the ULFA before working out an acceptable solution. The road to peace in Assam, as of now, is extremely slippery.