

ULFA & THE PEACE PROCESS IN ASSAM

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The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) — one of the most prominent militant organisations in northeastern India — has been in the limelight for expressing its interest to negotiate with the Union government.

On 8 September 2005, the ULFA appointed an 11-member delegation — Peoples' Consultative Group (PCG) — to hold negotiations with the Indian government. The group put forward six demands as conditions for talks, including the demand for a sovereign and independent Assam. The Union government accepted most of the conditions, considering the ground realities, but the contentious issue of sovereignty remained unresolved.

Two rounds of negotiations were held between the PCG and the Union government without any tangible results. Both parties agreed to hold the third round of talks after the results of the assembly elections. A sense of mistrust prevailed between both sides during the crucial phase of talks, as the ULFA did not abjure violence even after repeated appeals.

BACKGROUND

Many observers and analysts contend that the ULFA's decision to enter the peace process stems from two factors. First, 'Operation Flush Out' by the Royal Bhutan Army in 2003 deprived

the ULFA of a safe haven. Secondly, there are divisions within the organisation over the question of sovereignty. This resulted in the surrender of a large numbers of the ULFA's cadres, including many of its top leaders and activists, to the army. Besides, the ULFA's declining popularity, and support, within Assam has also forced it to enter the peace process. The group has lost considerable ground among the masses because of its continual resort to violence.

The economy of Assam has been shattered during the last 26 years and no significant development work has commenced. Political parties and civil society organisations are also pressurizing the ULFA to negotiate with the Union government. Gyanpith awardee, Dr Mamoni Raisom Goswami and two other influential organisations, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), are playing leading roles in bringing the ULFA to the negotiating table.

The ULFA has been fighting for sovereignty since 1979. It conveyed its willingness to hold talks with the Union government, thus granting another opportunity to end the insurgency in Assam. The PCG,

mainly appointed by the ULFA, is largely drawn from civil society organisations. Some of its members are known to be sympathisers of the ULFA or ex-ULFA cadre. The members are Arup Borbora (lawyer), Lachit Bordoloi, Mukul Mahanta (engineer), Ajit Bhuyan (editor), Haider Hussain (editor, Asomiya Pratidin), Brajen Gogoi (doctor), Dilip Patgiri (adviser to the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad), Diganta Konwar (journalist), and Hiranya Saikia (sports organiser). Goswami is the chief interlocutor and she is assisted by Reboti Phukan, a former footballer and childhood friend of the ULFA commander-in-chief, Paresh Barua.

PRINCIPAL PARTIES' POSITION

The ULFA advanced six major demands for resolving the problem in Assam. They are

- Demand to end, or suspend, army operations against its cadres,
- Release of its top leaders captured by the security forces,
- Information about those cadres captured during 'Operation Flush Out' in Bhutan in 2003,
- Third party mediation for peace talks,
- Holding talks in world fora like the United Nations (UN) and
- Demand for a sovereign and independent Assam.

The ULFA has repeatedly insisted on the issue of a sovereign and independent Assam and has instructed the PCG to make this demand the lifeline of the peace talks. The demand to end, or suspend army operations against the ULFA cadres also sparked controversy.

The ULFA has, so far, faced three major army operations; Operations 'Bajrang' and 'Rhino' in 1991-92, and

'Operation Flush Out' conducted by the Bhutan Royal Army in 2003. The ULFA's backbone seems to have broken after these assaults, and the withdrawal of army operations may lead to the regrouping of the ULFA.

The release of its top five central committee members: vice chairman Pradeep Gogoi, publicity secretary Mithinga Daimary, Ramu Mech, Arpan Saikia, and founder adviser Bhimkanta Buragohain is one of its demands. Buragohain has since passed away.

Other demands include information about missing cadres, particularly Abhijit Deka, Prakash Gogoi, Ashanta Baghphukan, Bening Rabha and Nilu Chakravarthy. They went missing during Bhutan's operations. The ULFA's demands such as holding talks under auspices of world fora like the UN, or with third party mediation, has softened. Nevertheless, it has threatened to indulge in violence unless its demand for sovereignty is endorsed.

The Union government has elucidated that any peace negotiations with the ULFA is possible only if the organisation softens its stand on the sovereignty demand. After the first round of talks on 25 October 2005, India's National Security adviser, MK Narayanan, disclosed the Union government's decision to discuss all contentious issues regarding the state's peace and development. The government reiterated its willingness to talk to all insurgent groups if they abjure violence and urged the ULFA to do the same. The Union government illustrated its eagerness to suspend counter-insurgency operations and also expressed willingness to release some of the ULFA's top leaders for creating a

conducive atmosphere for talks. However, the Union government has categorically stated that sovereignty is non-negotiable. On 1 April 2006, India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in an election rally in Assam ruled out any understanding, or negotiations, with the ULFA on sovereignty. Singh revealed that all the demands advanced by the ULFA are not subject for negotiation.

The state government also took measures to initiate direct negotiations with the ULFA. The Assam government announced an offer of safe passage on 7 January 2006 for a span of 14 days, hence allowing the ULFA cadres to meet their family members, with prior intimation to the concerned authorities. However, the ULFA expressed its unwillingness to avail of such offers by calling it a political gimmick. Such an offer is not exceptional; in 1991, the state government made a similar offer to the ULFA's top leaders to meet the then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao. Again, in 1999, the AGP government proposed a 10-day safe passage, where around 250 militants responded. However, some of them apparently did not go back as they surrendered to the authorities. The Union government remains firm, and rather inflexible, on the ULFA's core demand of sovereignty and stresses the need to solve this issue within the purview of the Constitution.

FIRST ROUND OF TALKS

On 25 October 2005, the PCG and the Indian government held their first round of talks, thus raising hopes of ending the insurgency movement. The talks, however, received a jolt in the initial stages when the army launched an operation in the Dibru-Saikhowa

National Park in upper Assam's Tinsukia district. During the operation, code-named "Operation Balwan", two ULFA camps were destroyed and five of its top leaders were killed. The first round of talks was meant to prepare the ground for a formal bilateral declaration of ceasefire, and then to facilitate direct talks with the ULFA at later stage. MK Narayanan led the government's team, and Assam's Chief Minister, and other senior officials, also attended. Manmohan Singh articulated his willingness to discuss 'all issues' concerning the state, but insisted on solving it within the constitutional framework.

The PCG has appealed to the government to restrain army operations. The Union government acquiesced to this request. Nevertheless, the Union government instructed the security forces to remain vigilant against any possible attacks. The first round of talks addressed many issues, aiming to bring the ULFA to the negotiating table. The ULFA expressed its satisfaction with the PCG's move to raise the issue of 'sovereignty' during the talks. According to the ULFA, it is the first organization to take up the issue of sovereignty with the Union government.

In an editorial of its mouthpiece Swadhinata (Freedom), the group said, "25 October was a red-letter day in the history of the northeast as, on this day, the issue of sovereignty was raised by the group through the PCG." However, the ULFA was not pleased with the ongoing army operations and reiterated its demand to halt these operations. Even Indira Goswami expressed concern about army

operations and urged the government to stop it.

SECOND ROUND OF TALKS

The beginning of the second round of talks was marked by three complications: Violence unleashed by the ULFA prior to Republic Day in January 2006, the ULFA-AASU spat on the issue of sovereignty and the Union government's decision to invite five members from the PCG to the second round of talks. As a result, the ULFA asserted its unwillingness to negotiate with the Union government, and expressed its willingness to hold talks in an international forum like the UN. It expressed doubt over the sincerity of the Indian government, in its decision to invite five members, though the PCG attended the second round in full strength. These talks were held on 7 February 2006. MK Narayanan, ESL Narasimhan, Union Home Secretary VK Duggal, other senior officials of the PMO, and the home ministry attended the talks.

Three main issues that were discussed include: suspension of army operations, release of the ULFA's central committee members, and the information about missing cadres during Bhutan's operation. The discussion helped both parties to resolve some differences. The Union government's statement stated that it agreed to demands like suspending army operations and releasing the ULFA's detainees. Narayanan stressed on the need to work out modalities before suspending army operations. Furthermore, the Union government agreed to release some of the detainees in consultation with the state government. Both sides also agreed to hold another round of talks before commencing direct talks with the ULFA. No doubt, the talks helped resolve some difficulties, but the

contentious issue of sovereignty continued to be the sore point.

VIOLENCE/EXTORTION BY ULFA

The peace parleys between the ULFA-nominated PCG and the Union government has not stopped the ULFA's reign of violence. The ULFA perpetrated several attacks before the Republic Day celebrations, thus derailing the peace process.

The ULFA resorted to sporadic acts of violence such as blowing up of oil pipelines, hurling grenades at the Guwahati Refinery, boycotting of the Republic Day celebrations on 26 January, 2006, bombing of the high-security Republic Day venue - Judges Field at Guwahati etc. These attacks resulted in the death of three people and wounded more than 31 people. On 22 January 2006, the ULFA carried out at least ten attacks on vital installations like oil installations, and gas pipelines, at Chetiapathar, under Chabua police station, and Bokulia Chariali under Duliajan police station. This severely crippled the supply of crude oil and natural gas in the state and the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO) was forced to temporarily shutdown. The supply of gas to Assam Gas Company Limited (AGCL) was also disrupted when the ULFA triggered an explosion in the main gas supplying pipeline to the plant. It has become a tendency for the ULFA to engage in such type of violence on important national days, such as Republic Day and Independence Day.

These subversive activities have been explained by the PCG as natural reactions to the Indian government's delaying tactics in holding the second round of talks. The PCG justified its statement by arguing that the group has not declared any ceasefire and

therefore, such violence is not unexpected. On 6 February 2006, Assam's Minister of State for Home Affairs, Rockybul Hussain, issued a statement stating that, "70 subversive incidents took place and public property worth Rs 95,70,300 was damaged. Four army personnel and 24 people were killed, including civilians and militants." "In fact, the ULFA's violent activities have been more systematic," he added. Since the inception of the peace talks, the ULFA has served two extortion notes. First, it imposed a Rs 500 crore extortion demand to the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in the first week of January 2006, when the oil major was planning to invest Rs 33 billion in exploration and other activities in Assam. The ULFA's extortion demand created ripples of fear and uncertainty among the 5,000 ONGC employees serving in Assam. A majority of ONGC's workers are engaged in field operations in isolated and difficult terrain. Hence, they become soft targets for kidnapping and shooting.

The ULFA issued another extortion demand of Rs 25 lakhs to an independent candidate in the assembly election, Bijoy Krishna Nath. Such extortion bids by the ULFA led to a drying up of the inflow of capital into the state. Investment has been low and foreign technical experts are reluctant to take up projects in Assam. These acts of violence, and extortion bids, raised serious doubts in the minds of the peacemakers regarding the real motives of the ULFA, and a sense of untrustworthiness prevailed.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Civil society organisations have been accused of overtly promoting and supporting the ULFA. Human rights

organisations such as the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS) and the Peoples Committee for Peace Initiatives in Assam (PCPIA) have been accused of being sympathisers of the ULFA. As a result, the ULFA enjoys the confidence and the credibility of such organisations. Therefore, the neutrality of these organisations is repeatedly questioned by the government. The PCPIA, described as a conglomeration of 21 organisations, adopted a resolution in Guwahati on 30 January 2006, demanding a justice oriented solution without compromising the dignity of Assam and demanded the restoration of sovereignty to the ULFA. In essence, the organisation called for a plebiscite on the contentious issue of sovereignty and the right to self-determination. Importantly, the rally was addressed by many leading public figures and intellectuals, including Indira Goswami. The resolutions adopted in the rally appealed to the Union government to expedite the peace process, suspend army operations, and include sovereignty in the agenda of talks. Genuine civil society groups need to take the front seat in developing an atmosphere for peace and stability in their respective states. Civil society organisations must take the initiative in developing an atmosphere for peace rather than supporting the ULFA's cause.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to anticipate whether the peace parleys between the Union government and the PCG can lead to an end of the insurgency, and whether durable peace will prevail in Assam. The atmosphere in which the two rounds of talks took place certainly provides some encouragement.

However, the violence unleashed by the ULFA seriously threatens the pace of the peace process. The ULFA must shun violence and its armed activities. A negotiated settlement to the insurgency is possible only if there is an abandonment of certain mutual demands, or conditions, from both sides.

If the ULFA were to rethink its demand for sovereignty, and the Union government about suspending army operations in the state, then, peace is possible. Furthermore, the ULFA must be sincere and respond positively to a negotiated political settlement. The vicious terror that the ULFA has unleashed is being perceived as self-serving and it has lost considerable support from the masses.

There is covert support from civil society organisations backing the ULFA, but this must be avoided and they must take the initiative to strive for peace. The positive statement of the Union government, after two rounds of talks, for scaling down military operations raised the expectations for peace. The ULFA's positive attitude was on display when it abjured violence during recent assembly elections. However, nothing can be expected unless direct talks are held and ceasefire prevails.