



India talks with Naga rebels

The challenge of peace in Nagaland

BY RUPAK CHATTOPADHYAY

There are times when the Government of India and armed separatists are not only willing to talk but to agree on something. That happened on January 31 in Bangkok when both India and one such group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland — Isaac Muivah faction, known as NSCN-IM, extended an eight-year-old ceasefire for another six months as both sides attempt to find a solution to this long-running insurgency.

The Naga revolt is centred in the state of Nagaland – one of seven in North East India. They are known as the “seven sisters”: Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, which are among the most neglected and underdeveloped parts of India. The North East is a remote region connected to the rest of India by a thin strip of land bordering on Nepal, Bangladesh, China and Bhutan. The eastern boundary of Nagaland is the India-Myanmar border. Very few of the inhabitants of this area speak Hindi as their mother tongue, and many are related to Tibetan and Burmese tribes in the region. The current revolt goes back to demands for independence from India in 1947.

The Naga ceasefire announcement came after four days of talks between the federal government and NSCN-IM leadership in Bangkok. The limits of Indian federalism have been continuously tested by rebellions and insurgencies since independence. Even when the Indian state has prevailed, the process of reconciliation has usually left its mark on the evolution of Indian federalism. From the Dravidian movement of the fifties to the Sikh separatist campaign of the eighties, each has contributed uniquely in the strengthening of India’s federal structure, either directly by forcing national compromise, such as the official languages policy, or indirectly by contributing to the demise of the political system dominated by a single party.

That the Naga ceasefire has largely held for eight years shows the seriousness of the parties’ intent to find a solution, as well as the difficulties of finding a solution that meets the aspirations of both sides. The involvement of civil society (especially students, church groups and tribal councils) in the peace process has been significant, symbolizing an intense yearning for peace. The Naga insurgency has been India’s longest running. It is also one



In New Delhi, the Secretary-General of India’s upper house of parliament receives members of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly.

of the most complex.

The Nagas before 1975

There are seventeen major and an equal number of smaller Naga tribes, each with its own recognizable dialect and customs, linked traditionally by a shared way of life and religious practices, and indeed more recently by Christianity. There are more than 14 tribes that make up the Nagas. Tribal conflicts have complicated the process of peacemaking in the state of

Nagaland, and other Naga inhabited areas, over the years. Nagas also reside in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur.

The Naga rebellion dates back to India’s independence in 1947, when separatist sentiments represented by A. Z. Phizo’s Naga National Council called for an independent state for half a million Nagas. This culminated in the establishment of Nagaland by the Indian parliament as a full-fledged state of the Indian Union in 1963. In creating the state of Nagaland, the Federal government broke with the precedent of establishing states along linguistic lines (as per the States Reorganization Act of 1956) and set a new precedent that has led to the creation of “tribal” states such as Mizoram, Meghalaya, Jharkhand and Chhatisgrah.

The creation of Nagaland provided political opening for more groups to join the political mainstream. Even though the NNC reached a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in 1964, infighting led to the Council of Naga People (CNP) splitting off from the NNC. The emergence of the CNP followed by the liberation of Bangladesh and the resulting loss of insurgent safe havens in East Pakistan contributed to a significant weakening of the NNC and Naga separatism. The CNP and its allies went on to conclude a peace agreement, the Shillong Accord, with the Indian government in 1975.

1975: the NSCN revolts

Neither the granting of full statehood to Nagaland, nor the subsequent Shillong Accord, in which the NNC accepted the Indian constitution, diffused the separatist impulse in Nagaland. Those Nagas who viewed the Shillong Accord as a sellout of the Naga cause went on to found the NSCN, which gained the allegiance of many Naga nationalists. After 1975, the NNC was reduced to a marginal player.

What was missing in the Shillong Accord was a final settlement that would define the Nagas’ relationship with

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India and something that would address the issue of a unified Naga political entity. Both of these issues became rallying points for the NSCN, established in 1980 by younger activists of the NNC — namely Isaac Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah, and S.S. Khaplang. Like movements before it, the NSCN too split along tribal lines in 1988 with Khaplang forming the NSCN-K.

In 1997 the NSCN-IM reached a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government. This was followed in 2000 by the NSCN-K. Talks between the Indian government and the NSCN-IM had begun earlier with Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in the mid-1990s and were then followed up by subsequent Prime Ministers before a formalized structure of negotiations began between the Government delegation led by a representative of the Prime Minister and the Naga group led by Thuingaleng Muivah, who is the Kilo Kilsoner or Prime Minister of the “Government of the Republic of Nagaland.”

The motivations for reaching a ceasefire on all sides are many. Both factions have been under considerable pressure from civil society to participate in a political process that leads to a final solution. Decades of conflict have inflicted severe human and economic costs on the Nagas. Both parties have also suffered attrition at the hands of Indian and Myanmar security forces. From an Indian perspective, the Naga insurgency is the Gordian knot of northeastern insurgency. To untangle it would bring benefits not just to the region, but also to the entire country. First, the Naga insurgency — the NSCN-IM, in particular — provides the logistical and philosophical underpinnings for most of the other groups in the region — including the ULFA, NFLT and the Bodo groups. Without NSCN support, most of these groups would cease to function effectively. Indeed, two other armed separatist groups in North East India, namely the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front for Bodoland (NDFB) have recently reached ceasefire agreements with the Indian government. Second, a permanent solution would open the region up for investment; in particular its untapped potential for hydro-electric power might considerably ease the country's energy burden.

Challenges Ahead

A final agreement remains elusive, but there have been some significant attempts at reconciliation. Despite statements that represent movement away from earlier positions, recent pronouncements by the NSCN-IM indicate growing impatience with the slow pace of negotiations. Speaking in Bangkok at the beginning of 2006, Thuingaleng Muivah offered a glimpse of the NSCN's position:

“We have climbed down from our demand of absolute sovereignty and said we want a special federal relationship with India but India is neither moving decisively to implement it nor taking steps to unify Naga areas in northeast India.”

The NSCN-IM has been insistent on the integration of Naga-inhabited areas into a greater Nagaland — which they call Nagalim — thereby pressing a demand that

predates its creation. Given that this would involve the partition of three states — Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh —and require their consent, the federal government will find it very difficult to offer concessions on this issue without involving the relevant states.

The second main issue of “a special federal relationship” is likely to be more easily resolved. Speaking in Bangkok last January, Thuingaleng Muivah elaborated this demand, which represents a significant and pragmatic shift from the positions enunciated earlier by both the NNC and NSCN. He indicated that they were prepared to explore an appropriate federal relationship made sacrosanct in an agreement that cannot be changed unilaterally by either side in future. Furthermore, the NSCN-IM was willing to discuss how various competencies can be shared in such a way that they serve the interest of both New Delhi and the Nagas. In stating the Indian government's determination to explore “new initiatives,” Mr. Oscar Fernandes, the Indian Minister overseeing the process, underscored the seriousness of India's response to the NSCN's offers. Furthermore, the retention of former Union Home Secretary K. Padmanabhaiah as India's interlocutor by the current Congress Party led government shows how important the whole process is to India.

One of greatest hurdles to finding a permanent and comprehensive solution is deep-rooted tribalism with the Naga groups. The NSCN-IM's insistence that is speaks for all Nagas has been challenged not just by Khaplang but by several NGOs and church groups. There are significant tribes such as the Angamis, Aos and Konyaks whose interests the NSCN-IM doesn't represent. Muivah is a Thangkul from Manipur and his tribe has virtually no physical presence within Nagaland. Similarly, Isaac Swu represents one faction of the Sema tribe. The Konyaks, the single largest tribe, is represented by NSCN-K, which has some basis for demanding a say in any final settlement. The biggest challenge for the Indian government is arriving at a future settlement that is both inclusive and comprehensive, and doesn't repeat the shortcomings of the Shillong Accord. Given the past instances of arriving at innovating administrative arrangements (hill councils, territorial councils, etc.), the precedent exists for finding solutions that meet the aspirations of disaffected people. The challenge in Nagaland should not be underestimated and is sure to test the creativity of both Indian and Naga negotiators as well as the resilience of Indian federalism.

Since the nineties it has become fashionable to hold up Kashmiri disaffection as the test case for Indian federalism. Such a view overlooks the contribution that events in the northeast have had in shaping Indian federalism. With each subsequent insurgency, the state's capacity to deal with the security fallout has grown, but more importantly so has its creativity and pragmatism in identifying appropriate constitutional arrangements. The demilitarization of the Mizo National Front, the establishment of the Darjeeling Hill Council and the Bodo Territorial Council all offer lessons in the management of ethnically diverse societies within a federal system. (6)