

CSH Occasional Paper



**INSTABILITY AT THE GATE :**  
India's Troubled Northeast and  
its External Connections

**Renaud Egreteau**

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He received a two-year scholarship from the *Centre de Sciences Humaines*, New Delhi, India (2002-2004) during which he published in 2003 his first book : Renaud EGRETEAU, *Wooing the Generals : India's New Burma Policy*, Authors Press & CSH, New Delhi, 2003, 234 p.

His current research focuses on Contemporary Burma/Myanmar (internal dynamics, political transition and external relations), India's Foreign Policy (Look East Policy, India-China relations, India's Burma Policy) and India's Northeast (insurrections, regional security).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & FOREWORD

Writing about India's troubled Northeast is a difficult task. Access has always been restricted (a special permit from the Government of India is needed to travel in five of the seven states known as the Seven Sisters and only Assam and Meghalaya can be freely visited by tourists), the entire area is plagued by insurgency, criminality and trafficking and is furthermore situated in a strategic location neighbouring a powerful China, a Burma (Myanmar<sup>1</sup>) under military rule and a potentially hostile Bangladesh. Consequently, doing research on an issue that is so sensitive not only for governments but also for ordinary people was from the very beginning a difficult challenge. Nevertheless, numerous people provided boundless support in the course of this work and I wish to express my thanks to all of them.

I must first express my gratitude to the *Centre de Sciences Humaines* (CSH), a part of the French Foreign Affairs Ministry's network of Research Institutes in Asia. Without sponsorship from the CSH, this Occasional Paper would not have seen the light of day. I am thus indebted to all those who have patiently supported this research, especially Véronique Dupont (Director) and Attreyee Roy-Chowdhury (Publications-in-charge), who showed a lot of understanding and accommodation towards a researcher always on the road. Thanks are also due to the CSH team of researchers, students and staff for their encouragement, help in coping with computer appliances and maps software and also for the time spent in discussing all issues concerning India and Asia. I must also extend my sincere thanks to my advisor, Christophe Jaffrelot, Director of the *Centre of International Research and Studies* (CERI,

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<sup>1</sup> *Burma* has been renamed *Myanmar* in 1989 by the new military regime (SLORC) that came to power through a coup d'état in September 1988. In this paper, the term *Burma* will be used when dealing with the country in general or in the past, and *Myanmar* when specifically referring to the current government (named SPDC from 1997), this without any political connotation.



Paris, France), who has reposed trust in me since the beginning of my studies.

Given the difficulties linked to the internal situation of the India's Northeast, I have made only few trips there, both privately and on invitation. The Guwahati-based *Centre on Northeast, South and Southeast Asia Studies* (CENISEAS), and its former director, Sanjib Baruah, as well as the *Manipur University* (Imphal), and the *North-Eastern Hills University* (NEHU, Shillong, Meghalaya) were kind enough to invite me and assist me during my various trips (2003-2005). Since I was granted a *Protected Area Permit* (PAP) by the Indian government only once and that too only for Manipur (March 2005), I have not been able to visit and do research in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. As a consequence, most of this work is based on secondary sources and the first-hand accounts on the current situation in the region presented in this paper concern only Assam, Meghalaya, parts of Manipur as well as Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar), which are, ironically, more open to foreigners.

Nevertheless, I am deeply grateful to all the people I have met during my fieldworks in the Northeast and in Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar) and also during my stay in New Delhi (2002-2004). Of the many who have helped me, provided me with material, shared their experiences, exposed their ideas or even described in detail their underground operations, very few wish to be named or even quoted. I absolutely respect this condition of anonymity, but I take this opportunity to thank all those who crossed my path and enlightened me on the Northeast imbroglio: Indian and Bangladeshi government officials and diplomats, Indian and Burmese underground militants, refugees and activists as well as journalists, NGO staff, businessmen and, above all, common people in markets, streets, trains...

Finally, my family and friends also deserve my sincere gratitude for having patiently supported me or just listened, shared views and advised me wherever we met – in Europe, India or on the wonderful highways of Asia.

## India's Northeast, Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar)



## India's Main Northeast Insurgencies and their strongholds



## **PREAMBLE – THE NORTHEAST: LANDLOCKED AND TROUBLED TERRITORIES?**

In the Indian collective imagination, the Northeast has often been perceived as a whole, a single entity with a common political destiny. It has also been labelled as a remote and isolated region, ethnically so diverse and distant from the dominant Aryan-influenced Indian society that the imaginary distinction between the Northeastern melting-pot and “mainland” India has seemed justified. Furthermore, plagued with dreadful inter-ethnic clashes, ever-growing separatist demands and criminalised insurgencies illustrated by the press, the Northeast soon got tagged with the unenviable epithet of “the sick man” of India. Today, an inordinate number of militant groups, all claiming a separate ethnic state (or territory) free from the hegemony of Hindi-speaking rulers, fighting for the identity of a remote tribe or even just for control over a trafficking route, have violently torn the region apart. A former Governor of Assam once remarked that so many insurgent outfits have mushroomed in the Northeast since Independence in 1947 that almost all the letters of the Roman alphabet have been used to name them<sup>2</sup>, adding to the regional political mess. Indeed, the ULFA, NSCN-IM, NSCN-K, PREPAK, KYKL, PLA, UNLF, ATTF, MULTA, NLFT, KLO, ADF, MNF, IRAF, NDFB, KCP (and so on !!) have created such chaos that common people in mainland India refer to the whole region as a troubled entity that needs to be strictly enclosed; it has to remain within the Indian Union, but it must be kept apart and the ethnic troubles that it is embroiled in should not be allowed to go beyond its ‘borders’.

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<sup>2</sup> S.K. Sinha, *Violence and Hope in India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 10, 2002. S.K. Sinha, a former Governor of Assam, was also Vice-Chief of Army Staff.

Truly, the Northeast has now become an area of violence, insecurity, extortion, trafficking, corruption and repression. Most of the ongoing ethnic insurgencies have turned criminal, mainly due to the militarization of the region by the Indian armed forces enjoying special 'rights' and extraordinary powers, but also with the fascination of easy-money earning by local youths. Mired in an appalling under-development that fuels insurgencies, which with the rise of the underground economy they have spawned (smuggling, extortion, robbery, fake currency, arm dealing, drug trafficking, etc.), the Northeast finds itself trapped in its economic backwardness and can be aptly described as India's neglected child.

The solution to the unending crisis proposed by successive central governments in New Delhi, more or less willing to tackle the recurrent insurgency issue, has often been divided between an overwhelming military response (counter-insurgency operations) and a few unproductive political negotiations supported by hefty financial packages hijacked by a corrupt and/or inefficient administration. However, with a change in the nature of most of the insurgent organisations since the mid-nineties, the militancy issue in the Northeast needs to be addressed by other means. Most of the insurgents groups have given up their lofty ideals and their fight for a noble 'identity' cause and adopted a more pragmatic and unscrupulous strategy to gain power and control over the parallel economy. They now appear to the people as a bunch of unlawful organisations out to make the most of the political chaos in the region. Having assumed a more urban character (thus moving away from the "Robin Hood" image which was behind their initial popularity as well as the struggle in support of various ethnic minorities against the Hindi-speaking/Hindu majority arrogantly sent from Delhi or Kolkata), the militancy is now fully organised to harvest easy money (through abduction, extortion, robbery, trafficking, etc.), threatening both the government and the population<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Various discussions with Jaideep Saikia, Security Analyst, Guwahati, May-September 2004.

But the most threatening change that has affected the insurgency issue is its globalisation. Despite the fact that ethnic insurgencies and militant outfits have always found shelter, funding and sympathy across the border, recent external linkages set up by insurgents groups could prove to be a much greater threat to stability in the region as the strife has spilled over the borders of the Northeast to affect neighbouring countries as well as regional underground networks. The unique location of the Northeast, situated as it is between the Himalayas (China, Bhutan and Nepal), the Indian Ocean (Bangladesh) and wide fluvial corridors (Brahmaputra, Chindwin and Irrawaddy Rivers), has made it a strategic area capable of becoming a dangerous cross-roads of instability.

The Partition in 1947 certainly upset the geostrategic configuration determined by the British in the Northeast which was formerly linked to the Bengal Presidency. The colonial economic set-up in Assam led the British to link the Brahmaputra Valley and the tea plantations to the West and Southwest, in other words to Calcutta's port and railway facilities<sup>4</sup>. Eastwards, even after the British had annexed the entire Burmese province (1885), the Northeast was never linked to Burma (now Myanmar) as the British took over the north-south trade corridor along Burma's Irrawaddy River, building north-to-south railway lines and roads from Rangoon harbour to Myitkyina and Lashio in Upper Burma. No railways were built to link Assam to Upper Burma as the British consciously decided not to build a west-to-east communication corridor between the Northeast and their Burmese colony, an axis that seemed much less viable and feasible. Only small roads were built along the historic Southern Silk Road to maintain its strategic importance and the British set up military installations along this route only in the 1930s, keeping the traffic flow as low as possible. There was thus no real continental link

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<sup>4</sup> Discussion with D.C. Goswami, Head, Environmental Science Department, Guwahati University, Guwahati, February 2003.

between British Assam and the province of Burma and only maritime links prevailed.

The partition of British India and then the political instability and civil war in independent Burma from 1948 isolated the Northeast even more by cutting off its links with the Indian heartland. Indeed, an area of nearly 150,000 sq. km – East Pakistan – was cut off from ‘mainland’ India together with all the communication channels that once crossed what is now Bangladesh (since 1971). Consequently, the Northeast is today connected to West Bengal only by a narrow strip of land near the city of Siliguri (the famous “*chicken’s neck*” or “*Siliguri neck*”), which has become the main obsession of the Indian Army that apprehends every possible threat<sup>5</sup> to this strategic corridor controlling access to the “Seven Sisters” of the Northeast (Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, seven states covering presently 255,000 sq. km).<sup>6</sup>

The northern part of this geographical region (Arunachal Pradesh and Bodo territory) is bordered by the Chinese (Tibet) and Bhutanese Himalayas, with peaks rising to a height of 6,000-7,000 meters. Only a few passes connect India to Tibet (through Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim),<sup>7</sup> but the roads linking Arunachal Pradesh to China are difficult to maintain and control<sup>8</sup> even though the Chinese and Indian Armies are present in strength in this region (China still claims most of Arunachal Pradesh but has officially

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<sup>5</sup> This 200 km long and 20 to 60 km wide sensitive corridor unfortunately prevents the Northeast from having any strategic depth. Pinaki Bhattacharya, *The Siliguri Corridor – Question Mark on Security*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 10, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Just 2% of the borders in the Northeastern Indian states are national borders (between Assam and West Bengal) - all the rest being international borders: Assam-Bhutan & Bangladesh, Arunachal-China & Myanmar, Nagaland-Myanmar, Manipur-Myanmar, Mizoram-Myanmar & Bangladesh, Tripura-Bangladesh, Meghalaya-Bangladesh.

<sup>7</sup> The Hindu, *Accord on opening border trade through Sikkim*, June 24, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Hindustan Times, *Arunachal wants roads along border to meet Chinese Threat*, February 14, 2003.

recognised Sikkim as an Indian Territory in 2004). South of the Himalayas lies the wide valley of the Brahmaputra River (known as Tsangpo in Tibet where it has its source), which flows through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam and then through Bangladesh flowing into the Bay of Bengal.<sup>9</sup> The Meghalaya plateau comes next, lying in the curve of the Brahmaputra River (on the east) and dominated on the west by the hills and mountains of Tripura, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram (and the Patkai and Kumon Mountains in Myanmar).

This entire area, inhabited by about 40 million people, seems empty when compared with the densely populated areas of Bangladesh and the Ganges Valley. Moreover, the southeastern extension of the Himalayas consisting of the Kumon, Lushai and Patkai Hills and having an average height of 1,500 to 2,000 meters poses a major obstacle to East-West mobility. They separate the plains of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra (India and Bangladesh) from Burmese territory and hinder communication. Yet, there have been numerous exchanges between tribes on both sides of the international border and ethnic kinships are particularly visible.<sup>10</sup> Historically, most of the ethnic groups in Northeast India come from China (Tibet) and the Indochinese peninsula which makes the Indian Northeast closer to Indochina than to the Indian subcontinent. The Ahoms, who came from the Shan territories (Northern Burma and Laos) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, are the backbone of what anthropologists today call the Tibeto-Burmese base of the Northeast. The tribes living in Burma, Tibet, India and Bangladesh are perfectly aware of their close ties.

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<sup>9</sup> For a deeper analysis of Assam's spacial location and geographical composition see David Ludden, *Where is Assam? Using geographical history to locate current social realities*, Guwahati, CENISEAS Paper n°1, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Discussion with R. Gopalakrishnan, Professor of Political Geography, NEHU, Shillong, March 2003.



But that does not mean that the Northeastern peoples are culturally closer to Southeast Asia than to India.<sup>11</sup> Its remoteness and internal ethnic turmoil have made this region unique and its uniqueness is further bolstered by the security curtain under which the successive Indian governments have tried to keep the Northeast “secure”. In line with British perceptions, New Delhi has adopted the same “colonial” policy of reducing the Northeast to a mere buffer zone since the Independence.

This paper intends to give first a clearer overview of the political troubles that have affected this region since Independence by analysing the rise of the insurgency and giving the details of the numerous militant groups in the Northeast. It will give a general idea of the history, formation, capacity and threat posed by these ultra outfits which have at first strongly struggled for the recognition of their cultural rights and then for autonomy or clearly, independence.

The focus will then shift to the degeneration of those sub-nationalism and ethnic separatism into mere criminal enterprises. Forgetting the lofty ideals that once lead their fight, most of the separatists groups have gradually become criminalized organisations based on wide underground networks. The criminalisation of the insurgency and loss of ideology since the late 1980s are today one of the main factor of trouble and a considerable hindrance to any enduring peace process in the Northeast.

Thirdly, the paper will try to analyse how the external links of those separatist and criminal outfits have fuelled the instability of the region. Indeed, most of the current instability in the Northeast is now the outcome of the numerous underground transnational

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<sup>11</sup> Various discussions with Sanjib Baruah (Guwahati, May-September 2004), regarding his paper: *Between South and Southeast Asia: Northeast India and the Look East Policy*, Sanjib Baruah, Guwahati, CENISEAS Paper No.4, 2004.

links on which this paper will throw light so as to prove that India's Northeast is much more open and linked to the "outside world" than it is commonly admitted. Nevertheless and paradoxically, if the externality has been so far a factor of instability, it could also be part of the solution to the current stalemate, as an economic and well-planned economic opening up of the region could stabilize it.

This paper will thus try to provide a key for analysing the political turmoil from an outsider's perspective, by explaining how the insurgency has risen, then degenerated while being fuelled by transnational linkages. It is necessary to undertake a deeper study of this reclusive region to understand the potential threat that instability in India's Northeast could pose to an increasingly globalised regional scenario. The region, from Bengal to Burma (Myanmar) and Southwest China, could certainly be overwhelmed by the spread of criminal insurgency, large-scale trafficking, social despair due to unemployment and the rise of HIV-AIDS and drug dependency affecting its overall situation.

## **Instability at the Gate : India's Troubled Northeast**

# I. The Rise of Separatism in the Northeast

## a. An Historical Background of the region

Originally inhabited by Australoid and pre-Dravidian peoples, the Brahmaputra Valley and the surroundings hills came under the influence of Hinduism brought by a Mongoloid people around 1000 BC, soon after the compilation of the Vedas. The Southern Silk Road, coming down from Chengdu and Dali (Xiaguan) in South-West China, entered the region by crossing the Burmese and Kachin Northern Hills and reached the fertile delta of Bengal and the Ganges Valley civilisation. Many Chinese travellers, Buddhist monks and Hindu merchants travelled on this route. In his *Geography*, the Greek astronomer, mathematician and geographer Ptolemy (100-170 BC) as well as the Chinese traveller Chang Kien mentioned this fertile area inhabited by small prosperous kingdoms. In the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, H'uen Tsang (or Xuan Zang as this monk-turned-explorer is known in China<sup>12</sup>), wrote about the Kamarupa<sup>13</sup> kingdom which reached the peak of its glory during the following centuries thanks to trade along the Brahmaputra River.

Given the state of archaeological and historical research in this remote and troubled region<sup>14</sup>, the first confirmed date accepted at present is 1228 when the Ahom dynasty, a once powerful T'ai (Shan) tribe, came to this region in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century fleeing before the advancing Mongols troops through Northeast Burma and Southern China. Finding shelter in the upper part of the present

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<sup>12</sup> For a modern account of the journey undertaken by Xuan Zang (H'uen Tsang), see Shuyun Sun, *Ten Thousand Miles without a Cloud*, Trade Paperback, London, 2003, where the author retraces the footsteps of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese monk.

<sup>13</sup> See the first section (*Pragjyotishpur to the End of the Ahom Period, AD 1826*) of Alokesh Baruah (Ed.), *India's North-East : Developmental Issues in a Historical Perspective*, Manohar-CSH, New Delhi, 2005, pp 42-117).

<sup>14</sup> Discussion with Dr. Monirul Hussain, Head, Political Science Department, Guwahati University, Guwahati, March 2003.

Indian Northeast then ravaged by court intrigues and internecine royal rivalries, they settled down in the region, embraced Hinduism and gave up their T'ai language to adopt the local tongue then known as *Asamiya* (Assamese)<sup>15</sup>. With Sibsagar as its capital, the Ahom dynasty established a strong kingdom which controlled the region for 600 years. Even the powerful Mughal Empire (1526-1858) could not challenge its stronghold. Although Mir Jumla, the unrivalled Army general of Emperor Aurangzeb, briefly occupied the Ahom kingdom's capital (1662-63), he soon had to retreat to Bengal to secure the Mughal positions in the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta (but died before achieving its objective in March 1663).<sup>16</sup>

From then on, the Assamese ruled over a flourishing independent state, trading as well as quarrelling with the neighbouring tribal princely states that had mushroomed in the plains and the hills. The Jaintia (or Jayantia) tribal kingdom maintained cordial relations with their Northern neighbours on the Meghalaya plateau. The Kachari princes (pre-Ahom tribes) struggled along in the Eastern part of the Ahom territory (Dimapur in the current Nagaland State) as also the Manipuri (or Meitei and their Kuki rivals) and Tripuri kingdoms. The Koch dynasty (founded by Bishwa Singh in 1515 around Cooch Behar) built up another tiny principality which once defeated the Ahom rulers (1562) but was annexed by the Mughals in 1615. Thus, because of its remoteness, the Ahom dynasty remained unconquered for six centuries, but at the same time it built up external trade relations, especially with Bengal.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Amalendu Guha, *The Tai Migration and its Impact on the Rice Economy of Medieval Assam*, in Alokesh Baruah (Ed.), *India's North-East : Developmental Issues in a Historical Perspective*, Manohar-CSH, New Delhi, 2005, pp 93-117.

<sup>16</sup> Alokesh Barua, *The rise and decline of the Ahom dynastic rule : a suggestive interpretation*, in Alokesh Barua (Ed.), *India's North-East : Developmental Issues in a Historical Perspective*, CSH-Manohar, New Delhi, 2005 (pp 93-117), page 100.

<sup>17</sup> Monirul Hussain, *Society in the Bhrmaputra Valley*, Indian Horizon, Volume 48, No.3, 2001, pp 66-92.

However, the weakening of the Ahom rule in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century following an internal power struggle and a mass local up-rising (Moamoria Revolt) created a political vacuum in the region where the British colonial power was gradually pushing northeastwards from its foothold in Bengal while the powerful Burmese kings advanced westwards through the Patkai, Lushai and Arakan Hills. Indeed, the Burmese court of Ava<sup>18</sup> under King Bodawpaya (1782-1819 – who actually transferred the royal capital from Ava to Amarapura) made successive incursions into the area. In 1784-85, the Burmese Army, which initially consisted mainly of Burman (*bama'r*) soldiers, conquered the Muslim Arakan state at the very doors of British Bengal. Following repeated skirmishes and the influx of Arakanese refugees into the Chittagong area (Eastern Bengal), the British broke off relations with the Burmese kingdom in 1811. Then, after a first attempt in 1813, the Burmese eventually invaded the tiny Manipur kingdom in 1819 for a period known to the Manipuris as the “*Seven Black Years*”. Under General Maha Bandoola (1780-1825), the Burmese entered Manipur and then Assam (1821), which was weakened by internecine clashes, thus causing much trouble and threatening the British colonial power. The Burmese installed a vassal king (Jugushwar Singh from the Jorhat region) as their puppet ruler over the whole of Assam (1822-1825).

Two events were responsible for the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), two skirmishes which would have a significant impact on the future of the Northeast. In 1823, after having lost his territory to the Manipuri kings who fled before the Burmese Army invasion, the Raja of Cooch Behar, who was allied to the British crown and acted as a buffer state between British India and Burma (like the Jaintia kingdom), asked for the British Governor’s help to face the troubles caused by both the Manipuri runaways and Burmese soldiers. Secondly, from his military bases in Arakan, the Burmese general Maha Bandoola invaded first a tiny island – Shahipur

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<sup>18</sup> Near Mandalay, at the heart of Burma/Myanmar.

belonging to the *East India Company* (EIC) – and then the British military outpost of Ramu (today in Bangladesh's Teknaf District). Thereupon, the British Governor-General in Calcutta, Lord Amherst, declared war on the Burmese king Bagyidaw (1819-1837) in March 1824, fearing an invasion of the prosperous Bengal Presidency by the Burmese Army.

However, instead of attacking Maha Bandoola's troops in Arakan or the rest of the Burmese Army in the Jaintia/Assamese/Lushai Hills, the British gathered their forces in the Andaman Islands and sent by sea a well-armed contingent directly to Rangoon. Maha Bandoola was forced to retreat to the Irrawaddy River where he was defeated and died in 1825 during the siege of Danubyu (Donoobew).<sup>19</sup> While the main operations took place in the Irrawaddy Delta with the British taking over Rangoon, Martaban, Prome and Tonghoo,<sup>20</sup> an expeditionary corps was sent to Assam in 1825 under the command of Lt-Col. Alfred Richards who soon defeated the disorganised Burmese and their allies stationed there. Following the rout of the Burmese<sup>21</sup> (as well as the dreadful outcome of the war for London with the death of nearly 15,000 British soldiers mainly due to tropical diseases),<sup>22</sup> the Treaty of Yandabo was signed (February 24, 1826) and the British annexed the Arakan and Tenasserim provinces of Burma as well as the Assam region which became the new eastern outpost of the British Empire in India.

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<sup>19</sup> The *New Light of Myanmar*, mouthpiece of the current Burmese military regime, published a biography of Mingi Maha Bandoola (New Light of Myanmar, *The Saying – Patriots who discharged duties for perpetuation of the Union at risk to their lives*, Article, March 03, 2004. It is interesting for understanding the junta's nationalistic Myanmarese perspective, but not necessarily true or accurate.

<sup>20</sup> For a first-hand account of the 1824-26 War, see Major Snodgrass, *The Burmese War (1824-26)*, (first edition 1826), Bangkok, Ava House, 1996 (new edition).

<sup>21</sup> Terence R. Blackburn, *The British Humiliation of Burma*, Orchid Press Books, Bangkok, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> See U-Myint Thant, *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

As a part of the new defense system the British wanted to build on the eastern frontier of their Empire in India, the Assam region rapidly became a part of the British colonial design. After twelve years of direct military rule (1826-1838) under two Joint Commissioners (one for Western Assam and the Jaintia Hills based in Shillong and the other for Eastern Assam having his headquarters in Rangpur, the “Assam liberator” Lt-Col. Richards being the first Eastern Commissioner), the Assam division came under the political rule of Bengal (Calcutta), with an Agent posted in Shillong. It then became a distinct province in 1874. The Tripura kingdom remained autonomous until 1871 accepting the appointment of a British Agent (or Permanent Resident reporting to Calcutta) while in 1891 the Manipuri *Manikya* (king) surrendered to the British after the military invasion of his kingdom by British troops. Later, in 1898, the Lushai Hills (mainly inhabited by Mizos) were carved out of the Assam Province and governed as an autonomous territory.

All in all, the territorial transformation of the Northeast during the colonial period was engineered to suit the growing interests of the British in the region.<sup>23</sup> Although the departure of the Burmese was considered a liberation and the British troops were greeted as pacifiers capable of bringing stability to the region, the system set up by the British soon aroused frustration due to the emergence of strong nationalist feelings. While a couple of tribal rajas were allowed to stay in power in their remote principalities, the ancient Ahom egalitarian political administration system was suppressed and replaced by a new administrative framework. The British then brought in English-educated Bengalis to run the day-to-day administration in Assam (and Bengali became the official language to the detriment of Assamese for fifty years until the latter was re-established when Assam became a separate province in 1874).

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<sup>23</sup> And not in the interest of the people according to H.K. Barpujari, *North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects*, New Delhi, Spectrum Publications, 1998, especially chapters I and II.



Further, Assam was soon to become the nucleus of an increasingly lucrative and exploitative regime thanks to its natural resources. It was linked to the world economy through the export not only of its famous tea (with plantations extending far beyond the Darjeeling area) but also timber, opium and later coal and even oil (20<sup>th</sup> century), as a result of which the province grew rapidly. Railways and roads were built to facilitate these commercial operations, but only to the extent that they benefited the British system. Indeed, despite everything, this eastern frontier was totally cut off from Burma (which after the second [1852-53] and then the third Anglo-Burmese War [1885-86] was completely annexed to British India) thanks to a buffer zone of hill kingdoms and tribal states (Chins, Nagas...). Neither roads nor railways were built to link the provinces of Assam and Burma, even though both were thoroughly exploited by the British. All commodities were diverted to Calcutta, Rangoon or a few British-controlled ports along the Indian Ocean (Chittagong, Akyab, Moulmein, Tavoy...etc...), thus putting into disuse the ancient Silk Road that once connected China to India through the jungles of Assam.

Later, many Assamese nationalists pointed out the consequences of this skewed development of the entire Northeast. For security and commercial reasons, the British completely reorganised the region to suit their own interests.<sup>24</sup> It may be seen that the introduction of “outsiders” (Bengalis, Bihari and Tamil coolies, Sikh and Gurkha soldiers...) into Assam followed the same pattern as in neighbouring Burma where the British brought in thousands of Indians (Hindi/Urdu or Bengali speakers mainly) to run the colony. Years later, resentment against this kind of sub-colonisation and discrimination would erupt (in the form of riots and insurgency, as we will see later) both in the Northeast and in Burma.

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<sup>24</sup> Monirul Hussain, *Society in the Brahmaputra Valley*, Indian Horizon, Volume 48, No.3, 2001, pp 66-92.

Lord Curzon's Partition of Bengal (1905) dividing the province into two entities (West Bengal and East Bengal & Assam) further accentuated this sentiment of neglect and being a second-rate zone. A strong opposition to this new step in the "*Divide and Rule*" policy (mainly from the high-caste Assamese opposed to the Bengali Muslims apparently favoured by the reforms), grew in the region.<sup>25</sup> Though rapidly abandoned in 1911, the project nevertheless marked the region politically and above all religiously (even the imperial capital was transferred from Calcutta to New Delhi). Then, Assam was put under a Governor in 1921 and Burma was definitively separated from India in April 1937 (following the *Government of India Act* of 1935).

The Second World War (1941-1945 in Southeast Asia) also left deep scars in the Indo-Burmese region. The Japanese troops invaded Burma in January 1942 and seized Rangoon in March, forcing the Anglo-Indian community to flee through the Burmese jungles to Assam and Manipur.<sup>26</sup> The Japanese Army was stopped only after a fierce battle in Kohima and the cemeteries of Lekhapani, Kohima, Imphal as well as Chittagong and Comilla (in Bangladesh) serve as reminders of the fierceness of the conflict. Under the command of Lord Mountbatten, flanked by the American General Joseph "Vinegar" Stillwell, the Allies reconquered Burma by driving out the Japanese thanks to the re-building of the famous Burma Road linking Assam to Yunnan through Burma's Kachin state also called the *Ledo Road* or *Stillwell Road*. Starting at Ledo, a tiny town lying in the extreme-East of Assam, it ran for 1,700 km to reach the Chinese *Burma Road* linking Kunming (Yunnan) to the Irrawaddy River. Unfortunately buried under the tropical forest, the Stillwell road was the only continental west-east link between Northern Burma

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<sup>25</sup> Dilip Gogoi, *Quest for Swadhin Asom: explaining insurgency and role of the State in Assam*, in Dipankar Sengupta & Sudhir Kumar Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India – The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2004, pp 37-57.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Brookes, *Through the Jungle of Death*, John Murray, London, 2000.

and Assam. Many people in India's landlocked Northeast are now advocating the revival of this historic road to open up the region.

### **b. The Birth of the Seven Sisters – the post colonial splitting up of the North-East**

In April 1945, Lord Mountbatten of *Burma* triumphantly entered a liberated Rangoon and was later appointed Vice-Roy of India, charged with preparing the independence of the British Indian Empire, which took place on August 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup>, 1947 (and on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1948 as far as Burma was concerned). In the aftermath of Independence, Assam became a full-fledged state of the Indian Union with Shillong on the Jaintia Plateau as its capital. However, the former Maharaja of Manipur, Bodhchandra, chose to follow a separate path. Instead of joining the Indian Union, he introduced in 1947 the *Manipur Constitution Act*, which governed the state of Manipur for two years through an Assembly elected democratically in October 1948 with the King's brother as Chief Minister. However, complying with Jawaharlal Nehru's injunctions, the Governor of Assam proposed to the King talks on Manipur's merger with the Union. The King refused the offer and thus was arrested by the Assam Rifles in September 1949. Bodhchandra had then no choice but to sign an agreement with New Delhi and Manipur was officially integrated with India (as an *Autonomous District* of the Assam state) on October 15, 1949 and its first elected assembly (the first ever in independent India) was dissolved.

Tripura followed the same path but without a head-on confrontation. The last Tripuri king, who died just after Independence in 1947, had negotiated a deal with the British government and the Indian Nationalists. Administered from New Delhi (1947-49), the former Kingdom of Tripura also became an *Autonomous District* of Assam on October 15, 1949 as was also the third separate district of Assam, the Lushai Hills, which was

renamed the *Mizo Hills Autonomous District* later on, in 1952. To the north of Assam, the Himalayan *North East Frontier Agency* (NEFA), bordering China along the disputed *MacMahon Line* drawn by the British in 1914, was directly ruled by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs until 1965.

Ironically, the same security concerns that had long preoccupied the British in Assam entered India's geopolitics in the Northeast. For security reasons, New Delhi kept its Northeastern region under firm military and political control. Caught between a rising and threatening People's Republic of China, an openly hostile East Pakistan and a Burma torn apart by insurgency, the Northeast was linked to mainland India only through the strategic corridor of Siliguri in West Bengal. The Nehru government, preoccupied with the war in Kashmir (1947-48) could not afford an implosion in the Northeast and ruled it as a unified territory in spite of a strong Naga rebellion that sparked off as early as 1947. Nevertheless, the rise of separatism due to feelings of neglect, discrimination and insecurity and growing lawlessness gradually led to a complete reorganisation of the region.

In 1956, while the rest of India also was subjected to sweeping administrative reforms, Tripura and Manipur were both granted the status of *Union Territory* (UT). Seven years later, the state of Nagaland was carved out of Assam (without passing through the UT status) on December 1, 1963. Then, in April 1970, the Meghalaya district was created around Shillong and the capital of Assam was shifted to Guwahati/Dispur. The most significant reorganisation took place on January 21, 1972. With the passing of the *Northeastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act*, 1971, by the Union Parliament in New Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh (former NEFA) and Mizoram (former Mizo Hills) were granted *Union Territory* status while Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura gained full-fledged statehood. The creation of a *North East Council* (NEC) was supposed to promote development programmes and coordinate the economic projects in the region.

The last reorganisation on February 20, 1987 saw Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh becoming full-fledged states.

The British legacy is largely responsible for the current situation but one cannot rely on this sole explanation to analyse the turmoil in the region. Interestingly, the powerful British “*Divide and Rule*” policy was pursued by successive Indian governments in the Northeast which continues to be isolated from the Indian mainstream.<sup>27</sup> The psychological isolation has become obvious and is today a major constraint for the peaceful integration of the Northeast with the rest of India<sup>28</sup>. Cultural cleavages, economic backwardness, the presence of three powerful and troubled neighbours (China, East Pakistan and Burma), demographic upheavals, criminalisation of politics are other reasons put forward by analysts and Northeast watchers.<sup>29</sup> The perpetuation of an everlasting instability also favours the Centre as well as state officials, who do not encourage the speedy and peaceful solution of the successive ethnic conflicts that have erupted in the region. Most of the sub-nationalism that pre-existed have rapidly gone underground to form a wide network of separatist outfits throughout the Northeast.

### **c. Identity and Armed Struggle in the Northeast**

Since “National Security” is at stake, the situation in the Northeast is shrouded in secrecy and any effort to study it is hampered by restricted access and movement, paucity of data and insufficient knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Discussion with Dr. C. Joshua Thomas, Deputy Director, Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, Shillong, March 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Shreeradha Datta, *Northeast Turmoil: Vital Determinants*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 23, Issue 12, March 2000, pp 2123-2133.

<sup>29</sup> Dinesh Kotwal, *Instability Parameters in Northeastern India*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 24, Issue 1, April 2000, pp 137-149.

<sup>30</sup> K.K. Sinha, *Insurgency in the North-East – An Overview*, in Dipankar Sengupta & Sudhir Kumar Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India – The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2004, pp 26-36.

Nevertheless, this chapter will attempt to identify the numerous insurgencies experienced by the Northeast since the Independence of India with first a special focus on the “security” aspect. The Union Government has always been preoccupied by “Law & Order” issues<sup>31</sup> and obsessed by the possible collapse of the entire Northeast which would have a domino effect. On their side, most of the ever-growing insurgencies mushrooming in the Northeast have quickly adopted a more radical attitude as a response to the increasing repression by the Indian Army (thanks to the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, 1958<sup>32</sup> coupled with the *Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act*, 1987) as well as the internecine clashes that have broken out among them.

### ***The Naga Nationalism – Between Insurgency and Peace Talks***

Known to the outside world as wild and reclusive head-hunters, the Nagas have led the longest and fiercest rebellion against the central government since India’s independence.<sup>33</sup> Embroiled in an eight decade-long struggle for recognition, the Naga insurgency is far from resolved, even though a major cease-fire was concluded in 1997 between the main armed group (NSCN-IM) and the Indian central government.

Comprising almost 40 different tribes (the main ones being the Angamis, Aos, Semas, Maos, Konyak and Thangkhuls), the Nagas are scattered today across the India-Myanmar border and number about 3.5 million.<sup>34</sup> Of Tibeto-Burman origin, they have had very

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<sup>31</sup> Mandavi Mehta, *India’s Turbulent Northeast*, South Asia Monitor, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, No. 35, July 05, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Asian Centre for Human Rights, *An analysis of Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, PUCL Bulletin, March 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Ao, Lanunungsang, *From Phizo to Muivab: the National Question in Northeast India*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> But they are still struggling to adopt a common Naga language and a common script (Roman or Naga). Cf. Imphal Free Press, *Nagas hunt for a common tongue*, March 25, 2003.

few contacts with their neighbours as they have lived for centuries in the remote Patkai and 'Naga' Hills and were deliberately marginalized by the British colonial power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, by desisting from interfering in Naga tribal affairs (even though British missionaries worked assiduously to convert many animist tribes as a result of which the Nagas are now predominantly Christian) and keeping the various communities away from Assam's political affairs, the British created a buffer territory which remained almost unaffected by the Indian nationalist movement in mainland India in the course of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, the Nagas became conscious very early that their identity was definitely distinct from India's and formed a *Naga Club* of intellectuals and notables in 1926. Three years later, in 1929, the *Naga Club* submitted a report to the Simon Commission<sup>35</sup> requesting it to take into account the 100,000 Nagas living in the northeastern region – proud tribes who wanted to regain full sovereignty after the foreseeable withdrawal of the British as they had never been conquered by "Indians". After the Second World War, during which the Naga Hills suffered a great deal,<sup>36</sup> a *Naga Hills District Tribal Council* was created by the last British Deputy Commissioner, Charles Pawsey, for the reconstruction and development of this area, but it was the *Naga National Council* (NNC), formed in 1946, that assumed the leadership of the Naga struggle. Due to internal divisions among the various Naga tribes, the Angami sub-tribal group took the lead and dictated the movement's violent separatist ideology from then on.

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<sup>35</sup> The British government formed a commission in November 1927 to prepare a new draft Constitution for British India (aimed at reviewing the 1919 Government of India Act. It was headed by Sir John Simon, with Clement Attlee, future British Prime Minister (1945-51), as one of its member.

<sup>36</sup> The Commonwealth War Cemeteries in Imphal, Lekhapani and Kohima, among the biggest in the region, are a tragic proof of this suffering.

The Naga insurgency erupted on 14 August, 1947, symbolically declaring the independence of Nagaland on the eve of India's independence. From the very beginning, Angamu Zapu Phizo, the charismatic leader, opposed the Indian Constitution (written between 1946 and 1950) and dealt directly with J. Nehru despite the latter's determined opposition to the Naga leader and his *Naga Federal Government*, a parallel underground political and administrative body supported by an armed wing, the *Naga Federal Army* (NFA), which used many of the WWII weapons left behind by the Allied and Japanese armies in the region. A plebiscite held in two districts on May 16, 1951 gave a 99.9% majority in favour of independence but it was shrewdly put off.<sup>37</sup> The kidnapping and killing of people opposed to the violent uprising increased to become a part of day-to-day life and a model for all future insurgencies in the Northeast.

In 1956, while the rest of India was being administratively restructured, the Naga region was left untouched, sparking off the armed rebellion. When the NFA launched a succession of powerful armed operations against the Indian government, the Indian armed forces were sent to the Naga-dominated areas to crush the uprising. AZ Phizo was then forced to flee the country through East Pakistan where he stayed for four years before settling into a comfortable exile in London (1960).<sup>38</sup>

However, the aggressive struggle led by the Angamis did not meet with approval of the other Naga tribes. "Soft-liners" among the Naga leaders, especially those belonging to the Ao tribes, which were not in favour of independence from India like P. Shilu Ao

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<sup>37</sup> Manan Dwivedi, *The Naga Imbroglia*, in Dipankar Sengupta & Sudhir Kumar Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India – The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2004, pp 103-114 (especially page 107).

<sup>38</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects*, New Delhi, Spectrum Publications, 1998, pp 20-21.



and Dr. Imkongliba Ao decided to start political negotiations with the central government in the early 1960s, inspired by the 1956 administrative reforms in India. A few rounds were needed to reach an agreement which stopped the violence, albeit temporarily, and created a full-fledged Naga state. The Nehru government, after its humiliation by the Chinese who easily entered the *North East Frontier Agency* and the Naga region in October-November 1962, finally settled the issue by agreeing to the creation of a *Nagaland* (granted full statehood without passing through the Union Territory status) with P. Shilu Ao as its first Chief Minister. The Delhi Agreement signed on December 1, 1963 was nevertheless strongly condemned by the Angami-dominated NNC, but the Nagaland state, which had experienced few troubles in the 1960s (even during the first elections to the Union parliament in 1967), settled down to a routine political life.

However, following the affirmation of Indira Gandhi as a powerful Prime Minister and the independence of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1971, the Indian Army launched a succession of counterinsurgency operations in and around Nagaland with the NNC and NFA (still armed) as its main targets. As a consequence, some cadres of these outfits decided on another round of talks with the central government at the peak of the state of emergency declared by Mrs Gandhi. Again, a new agreement was reached in November 1975 in Shillong and led to the surrender of many Naga fighters. But again, Phizo denounced this Shillong Accord from his exile in London and the ultras of the Naga movement continued their struggle, even if it was in a rather erratic manner.

It was only in 1980 that the Naga insurgency regained its strength when an offshoot of the NNC, the *National-Socialist Council of Nagaland* (NSCN), was formed to resume the armed struggle at a time when the neighbouring Assam and Mizoram were too torn apart by widespread protests. It received help from the *Mizo National Front* (MNF, 1966) and also the *Kachin Independence*

*Army* (KIA) in neighbouring Northern Burma, which re-armed and trained the NSCN militants in the early 1980s, before the KIA was taken over by the Indian intelligence,<sup>39</sup> which managed to persuade it to train Kuki and Chin militant outfits to counter the Nagas.<sup>40</sup> The expansion of the strongest Naga outfit was however impeded by internecine rivalries. Indeed, a severe rift occurred in 1988 with the Thangkhum tribe and its followers on one side (under the leadership of Isak Chishi Swu, a Sema Naga, and Thuigaleng Muivah, a Thangkhum Naga) and the Konyak and Homi tribes on the other (with SS Khaplang, a Naga of Burmese Homi origin at their head).

The split became irreversible when the Khaplang NSCN faction (NSCN-K) mercilessly attacked the headquarters of the Isak-Muivah faction (NSCN-IM) and slaughtered more than a hundred of its cadres on April 30, 1988. Reflecting the division between the Nagas of the East (Burma, Eastern Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh) and those of the West and South (Nagaland, Eastern Assam, Manipur), the creation of the two rival factions caused a serious setback to the Naga struggle, which from then on was undermined by a fierce internal competition. The NSCN-K appeared to be the most radical as it was unconditionally opposed to all talks and ready to continue its fight both against the Indian Army and the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army) which resumed counterinsurgency operations in 1988-90 after the advent of a new military junta in Rangoon (1988) and its rearmament by China. The NNC helplessly watched the fierce rivalry between the two factions, more so when the less charismatic Adino Phizo became its President after the death of her father, A.Z. Phizo in 1990.

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma, Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Bangkok, White Lotus Press, 1999, page 405.

<sup>40</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 1999, page 395.

Thus, apart from the bloody internal war, violence was more or less under control in the region and new rounds of negotiations were initiated in the 1990s. Through engagement and dialogue, but without any concrete solution, the conflict has been limited by the Indian government. It is true that the talks have led nowhere since the signature of separate cease-fires with the two groups (with the NSCN-IM in 1997 and with the NSCN-K in 1998), but they have at least succeeded in containing the violence and preventing Nagaland and its neighbours from collapsing, at least for the time being.

Isak Swu and Th. Muivah (a former Political Science student of Guwahati University) first gave a strong politically-motivated impetus to their movement by promoting an ideology inspired by the Christian faith and Mao Tse-tung's doctrine, its main purpose being the creation of a Socialist Independent *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland, five times bigger than the current Nagaland) guided by Christian principles.<sup>41</sup> But this socialist and Christian outlook was soon to be put aside by the movement, which became more focused on sovereignty and controlling the informal economy, given the violent ethnic clashes between the rival Naga tribes as well as between Nagas and Kukis and Manipuris and Assamese ethnic groups.

The Indian government astutely tried to take advantage of this internal power struggle among the Nagas by dealing separately with the two parties and on almost the same conditions. Nevertheless, serious high-level talks began with the Muivah faction only in 1995 (and in 1997 with the Khaplang faction), two decades after the Shillong Accord. The Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991-96) met Swu and Muivah for the first time in Paris in June 1995 and a second landmark meeting took place with Rao's successor, Dewe Gowda (1996-97) in Zurich in February 1997. Finally, I.K. Gujral (1997-

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<sup>41</sup> See the Manifesto on the web: <http://www.angelfire.com/mi/Nagalim/nscn.html>.

98), who succeeded Dewe Gowda, signed the first cease-fire, a gentleman's agreement, with the NSCN-IM in July 1997. Since then, this one-year cease-fire has been extended every year on the same conditions for 12 more months until 2005 (it was renewed for 6 months only in July 2005, the date of writing this paper). Moreover, as a proof of the political consensus among New Delhi's establishment on these Naga talks, Prime Ministers A.B. Vajpayee (1998-2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004-...) continued the dialogue with both the NSCN factions.

In 1998, the nomination of a special envoy (Swaraj Kaushal, former Governor of Mizoram who had earlier facilitated the MNF talks in the mid-1980s, an indication of New Delhi's desire to see Nagaland and Muivah follow the same path as Mizoram and Laldenga), did not bring about any improvement in the quality of the Centre-Naga talks. Meetings were conducted in Zurich (July 1998) and in Amsterdam (September 1998), where some of the exiled Nagas belonging to the IM faction live, and A.B. Vajpayee shook hands with both Swu and Muivah in two other landmark meetings in Paris (September 1998) and in Osaka (December 2001). Yet nothing came out of this negotiation process except for the continuation of the cease-fire. The Nagas have demanded and still demand that the sovereignty of *Nagalim* should be discussed first, but this is inconceivable for Delhi.<sup>42</sup> S. Kaushal, considered to be too close to the Naga leaders and opposed to the continuing stalemate, was replaced in July 1999 by K. Padmanabhaiah, former Union Home Secretary.

But the talks were suspended in January 2000 when, surprisingly, Th. Muivah was arrested at Bangkok International Airport on arrival from Karachi (Pakistan) for travelling on a fake South Korean passport. The fact that he did not speak a word of Korean aroused the suspicion of a zealous Thai immigration officer<sup>43</sup> and

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<sup>42</sup> Frontline, *A deadlocked peace process*, Volume 15, Issue 16, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998.

<sup>43</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *North-east, Nagas and the future of Muivah*, The Rediff Special, New Delhi, February 2000.

Muivah was sent to jail on a charge of illegal entry into a country that had welcomed him on several occasions (Bangkok is still a major base for about a dozen of IM political cadres, including Swu and Muivah). The talks were resumed after the release of the Naga leader in September 2000 and, once again,<sup>44</sup> the cease-fire was extended in July 2001.

This time however, in a bid to break the stalemate, New Delhi announced that the cease-fire was valid “*without any territorial limits*”, i.e. it was to be implemented outside Nagaland, in every Naga-dominated area (also in Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh...).<sup>45</sup> This abrupt decision sparked off waves of demonstrations in the Northeast, especially in Manipur, where the Isak-Muivah faction is far from appreciated by the political establishment.<sup>46</sup> New Delhi's ill-advised strategy of trying to set the ethnic minorities in the Northeast against one another (interestingly by following the British policy of *Divide & Rule*) so antagonised the neighbouring non-Naga peoples (especially the Meiteis of Manipur)<sup>47</sup> that it had to be withdrawn within a few weeks.<sup>48</sup>

After a fruitless round of talks between K. Padmanabhiyah and the Naga leaders in Amsterdam (September 2001), the next meeting between Muivah, Swu and A.B. Vajpayee in Osaka (December 2001) marked a return to the usual (much ado about nothing...).

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<sup>44</sup> Economic and Political Weekly, *Nagaland: Avoidable Lapse*, (Editorial), Bombay, June 30, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Frontline, *Botching up the Naga cease fire*, Volume 18, Issue 14, July 07, 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Frontline, *Short on sensitivity*, Volume 18, Issue 14, July 07, 2001 and Frontline, *Protests and Threats*, Volume 18, Issue 15, July 21, 2001.

<sup>47</sup> The Meitei community is predominant in the Manipur districts claimed by the Nagas and rivalries dating back to the days of the Manipuri kings are still very strong. Frontline, *Truce and violence*, Volume 18, 14, July 07, 2001.

<sup>48</sup> Frontline, *A State of Drift*, Volume 18, Issue 16, August 04, 2001.

But the Nagaland government (under Chief Minister S.C. Jamir) gradually came into the picture with strong claims against the NSCN-IM, particularly against the lifting of the ban on the organisation proposed by the then Deputy Prime Minister of the NDA government, LK Advani and K. Padmanabhaiah.<sup>49</sup> S.C. Jamir (an Ao Naga) has escaped several attempts on his life by NSCN-IM ultras<sup>50</sup> and has been telling the Centre to start talks jointly with both factions (Khaplang and Muivah). The issue remains a thorn in the flesh as neither Delhi nor Swu and Muivah are willing to comply.<sup>51</sup> To break the deadlock, Pu Zoramthanga, a former Mizo militant and assistant to Laldenga who became Mizoram's Chief Minister in 1998, was asked to act as an intermediary in the talks (officially in May 2002,<sup>52</sup> but a first attempt had already been made in November 2000).<sup>53</sup>

As a consequence of the well-conducted talks, both Swu and Muivah were allowed to come back to India. They were first allowed to spend few days in Dimapur (Nagaland) in 2001, but were officially invited by the Vajpayee Government to New Delhi in January 2003. On the January 8, they arrived from Amsterdam in the Indian capital (for the first time since their meeting with Indira Gandhi in 1967) and spent a week meeting officials,<sup>54</sup> including LK Advani (Home Minister), George Fernandes (Defence Minister) and Sonia Gandhi (leader of the Congress-

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<sup>49</sup> The Indian Express, *Vajpayee nods, NSCN ban to go*, November 15, 2002 and also Frontline, *An uncertain round*, Volume 19, Issue 20, October 12, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Frontline, *In no mood for peace*, Volume 16, Issue 27, December 25, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Economic and Political Weekly, *Nagaland: Peace Efforts*, (Editorial), Bombay, December 15, 2001.

<sup>52</sup> The Sangai Express, *Destination Bangkok*, May 12, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> India Abroad News Service, *Mizoram CM meets NSCN-IM leaders to help peace process*, November 16, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> The Sangai Express, *IM cadres bound for Delhi*, January 07, 2003 and see also The Manipur Mail, *NSCN-IM leaders meet Vajpayee*, January 10, 2003.

led opposition).<sup>55</sup> Although all parties agreed that violence had to come to an end, the Naga leaders refused to give up their claims: Muivah was still asking for a Nagalim bringing together all Naga-dominated areas, particularly four districts in Manipur. Indeed, the NSCN-IM now has its main support outside Nagaland. Having lost most of its sympathisers within the state, it has to find help in Manipur (Muivah is a native of the Ukhrul district in Manipur, which is not an area dominated by the Meiteis).<sup>56</sup> As long as Manipur continued to be torn apart by insurgency and under the sway of NSCN-IM's fellow criminal outfits, the status quo suited the IM leaders perfectly.

This led to another phase in the stalemate,<sup>57</sup> soon followed by another round of talks. A.B. Vajpayee paid a landmark visit to Nagaland in late October 2003<sup>58</sup> and six months later the Indian government agreed on an extension of the cease-fire with Khaplang, still following two different tracks in its negotiations with the two outfits. This strategy was followed again in 2004<sup>59</sup> and 2005<sup>60</sup>. In the meantime, both Swu and Muivah were invited to Delhi for another round of talks in December 2004, this time with the new UPA government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.<sup>61</sup> After

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<sup>55</sup> Frontline, *Nagaland: Promise of peace*, Volume 20, Issue 02, January 18, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Waikhom Damodar Singh, *Muivah and the Meiteis*, The Manipur On Line, February 2003 ([www.manipuronline.com/Features/February2003/muivahandmeiteis08\\_2.htm](http://www.manipuronline.com/Features/February2003/muivahandmeiteis08_2.htm)) and Frontline, *Territory tussles*, Volume 20, Issue 04, February 15, 2003.

<sup>57</sup> Frontline, *Deadlock in Naga Talks*, Volume 20, Issue 12, June 07, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Vajpayee visits Nagaland*, IPCS Article No.1211, November 12, 2003.

<sup>59</sup> The Hindustan Times, *Government extends ceasefire with NSCN-K*, April 29, 2004 and BBC News, South Asia, *India rebels extend cease-fire*, July 30, 2004.

<sup>60</sup> The Hindustan Times, *Ceasefire between NSCN-K and Government extended by one year*, April 29, 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Karin Kaasik, *The Naga: Diminishing Gains?*, Cover Story, The Irrawaddy, Chiang Mai, Volume 12, Issue 4, April 2004, also The Hindu, *Manmohan for honourable solution to Naga problem*, December 08, 2004.

a week of moving in Delhi's official circles, the two Naga leaders were flown to Nagaland to meet the Naga leaders. Have they entered the legal fold? It appears that the Centre wants to promote a reconciliation process, but it has not succeeded so far.<sup>62</sup> Swu and Muivah represent a movement which is still powerfully armed and involved in widespread illegal activities, especially outside Nagaland where the NSCN-IM needs a perilous situation to assert its influence.<sup>63</sup> Though the NSCN-IM has stopped frontal military attacks against the Indian Army, it remains firmly committed to a fierce and bloody internecine struggle with its rivals. Peace has not been reached in the region and the Swu-Muivah pair is not capable of bringing peace.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, if the cease-fire agreements with both the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K have proved to be fairly successful, limiting armed violence to internal rivalries or to a low-key war between the Nagas and the Burmese army, no peaceful and definitive end can be expected.<sup>65</sup> Though successive Indian governments have managed to contain the insurgency, they have not been able to resolve the problem.<sup>66</sup> Since the signing of the first Centre-Naga cease-fire in 1997, New Delhi has never been able to go beyond "conflict management" and enter into a spirit of "conflict resolution". And it appears that each party has several interests in maintaining the *status quo*. Neither this type of engagement nor a hammer and tongs policy against the armed outfits

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<sup>62</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *NSCN-IM leadership in Nagaland*, IPCS Article No.1617, January 18, 2005 and The Hindustan Times, *Nagaland: beading for a solution*, December 16, 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Paolienlal Haokip, *Center-NSCN-IM Peace Talks and Manipur's Woes*, IPCS Article No.961, January 31, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> The Sangai Express, *Now that IM is legal...*, December 06, 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Bidhan S. Laishram, *Naga Nationalism: the inward turn of a conflict*, IPCS Article No.1577, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004.

<sup>66</sup> R. Upadhyay, *Naga Insurgency – A confusion of War or Peace!*, New Delhi, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No.1256, February 17, 2005.



(especially through an ineffectual military cooperation between India and Myanmar)<sup>67</sup> has showed any positive results. To solve the issue, much more than bilateral and secretive talks between Delhi and the two Naga supremos is needed to bring to an end an insurgency that has probably claimed almost 200,000 lives in one century.<sup>68</sup> The Naga tribes have always been divided and even the charismatic A.Z. Phizo was not able to unite them. A common goal for the highly nationalistic Nagas, a common attitude on the part of the Indian government towards all Naga outfits and adequate publicity for the issue (especially to win over public opinion in mainland India) are needed in addition to an apparently constructive engagement. In the long run, an economic development programme covering all the Naga peoples (and not only the followers of Isak-Muivah, especially outside of Nagaland) may be a first step towards the solution of this problem.<sup>69</sup> But time might be the only solution to the Naga issue.

### ***The Mizo Insurgency : the model to follow ?***

Mizoram is the only example of a war-torn state that has become peaceful thanks to an agreement between the Centre and the main insurgent leader, who left the jungles to enter the political arena and became the first Chief Minister of the new state. The Mizo region has been dominated by Tibeto-Burman tribal groups who settled in the hills separating Burma from India. The term “Mizo” is generic and it includes many sub-tribal groups related to one another: the Kukis were the first to come to this area while the Lushai are the most recent and also the most important of the “Mizo” migrants, along with the Reangs, the Lakher, the Hmars,

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<sup>67</sup> The Irrawaddy, *Burma Attacks Naga Rebel Camps*, Chiang Mai (On Line Edition), January 06, 2004.

<sup>68</sup> The Irrawaddy, *Naga Struggle Against Tyranny* (Guest Column), Chiang Mai, June 2004, Volume 12, Issue 6.

<sup>69</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Nagaland: Is Economic Sovereignty an Answer?* IPCS Article No.1364, April 15, 2004.

the Pawi (Lai) and the Panei. The Mizo-Lushai community represents more than two thirds of the population of the state which is mainly Christian. Other non-Mizo groups living in the state are the Chakmas, Tripuris, etc.

In the aftermath of Independence, the Mizos persuaded New Delhi and Shillong to set up an administrative *Hill District Council* within the state of Assam. They became conscious of their identity due to the efforts of the *Mizo Common People's Union* (MCPU) formed in April 1946, which became the *Mizo Union* after 1947-48 with a Burmese-led splinter group, the *Union of Mizo Freedom* (the Chins of Burma and the Mizos of India are related). Both groups were engaged in a peaceful struggle to defend their culture and language.

However, a feeling of being neglected by the Indian government at the Centre gradually crept in among Mizo communities. The devastating famine in 1959 brought into the open the rift between the Mizos and mainland India. Indeed, in the summer of 1959, a large-scale famine erupted in the region due to the flowering of bamboo leading to a huge increase in the population of rats who devoured the rice and cereal harvests. In 1960, the *Mizo Cultural Society* (established in 1955) took over the responsibilities of the inefficient central government, incapable of dealing with the crisis. Changing its name to *Mizo National Famine Front* (MNFF), it launched several campaigns to help the remote villages to survive. The urban and youth leaders facilitated the distribution of relief aid and organised the airlift of food supplies to hilly areas. Gaining immense popularity among the tribal population, especially through its charismatic Secretary, Pu Laldenga, the MNFF gave up its social character to become an aggressive political organisation. It dropped the term "Famine" from its name as soon as the famine was over and on October 22, 1961, the *Mizo National Front* (MNF) was officially established.

Its separatist ideology aimed at creating a Greater Mizoram, totally independent of the Indian government was then entrenched in the Mizo public opinion. The most serious disturbances began in 1966, once the MNF became a well-armed organisation thanks to the training programmes organised by the Chins (*Chin Independence Army*, born 1961) in neighbouring Burma and the Kachin rebels (*Kachin Independence Organisation/Army*, 1961), which had both started an insurgency movement against the centralised Buddhist-led Burman government of Rangoon. In fact, a large-scale operation was launched on February 28, 1966 against Indian interests with the MNF (and its armed-wing, the *Mizo National Army*, also financed by the ISI, the Pakistani secret service, reorganised after the 1965 defeat by India) attacking all the government installations in the region and holding Aizawl, the Mizo capital, for eight days with a thousand-strong rebel army. After it was outlawed in 1967, the MNF built up its influence in the remote hills of the area. It found shelter both in Bangladesh and in Burma and strengthened its guerrilla tactics, extending its links as far as Yunnan (especially with the *Communist Party of Burma*).

Nevertheless, the MNF agreed to negotiations, especially when the Indian Army's massive involvement in the Mizo Hills began to severely affect its operational activities.<sup>70</sup> A delegation of the Mizo District Council went to New Delhi in May 1971 and met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. A few months later, both parties came to an agreement in July 1971 on the creation of "Mizoram" having the status of a Union Territory, which became effective on January 21, 1972. The insurgency slowed down as the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, was forced to cooperate with the Indian Army in putting down militancy, according to the 1972 Shimla Agreement. Regular talks began between the central government and the MNF, even though its leaders were still

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<sup>70</sup> Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: Northeast India*, New Delhi, Lancer Publishers, 1996, pp 159-160.

*personae non gratae* in India (Laldenga and his assistant Zoramthanga, who lived in exile in Pakistan between 1972-76, met some Indian Intelligence officers in Geneva in 1975). However, Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980 did not favour a political rapprochement. Pu Laldenga, who had been welcomed back in 1976, was ordered to leave India in 1982 and he settled down in London for two years.

It was only after Indira Gandhi's death and the advent of her son, Rajiv Gandhi, as Prime Minister, that the two decade-long struggle came to an end. The issue was settled after a meeting between Laldenga and Rajiv Gandhi in February 1985 and an agreement was signed in June 1986 granting full statehood to the Union Territory of Mizoram. Laldenga was appointed the first Chief Minister of the new state. The MNF became a regional political party. It gave up its armed struggle putting an end to 20 years of violent fighting. Today, Mizoram is a relatively peaceful state despite the emergence of low-key organisations, more criminal than political,<sup>71</sup> and the excesses committed by neighbouring insurgent groups within the state (Chins, Manipuris, Assamese...).

Besides, the Bru (Reangs) identity issue assumed disturbing proportions in the late 1990s. The predominantly Hindu Reang community (which calls itself "Bru") came to Mizoram in the 1950s from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and is now the second largest community in the state.<sup>72</sup> Only a few thousand Reangs lived in Mizoram in the early 1960s, but today their population in southern Mizoram has reached 85,000 mainly due to forced migrations in this region over the years. In fact, increasingly persecuted by the

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<sup>71</sup> Brigadier T. Sailo, *Politically, the Mizō Insurgency is over (Interview)*, The Indian Express (New Delhi), October 07, 2002.

<sup>72</sup> For further details, Subrata Kumar Dutta, *Uprooted Reang: Strangers in Their Motherland*, New Delhi, Akansha, 2005.

mainly Christian Mizos, who feel they have been “invaded”, and totally excluded from the development schemes in the state (their literacy rate barely exceeds 1%, whereas more than 9 Mizos out of 10 can read and write...), the Reangs of Mizoram fled in large numbers to Tripura in 1997 after several ethnic clashes, causing a great deal of trouble in the region.<sup>73</sup> While the Mizo government claimed that only 10,000 Reangs were originally from Mizoram (though the 1991 Census had registered 31,000 Reangs in the state), 30,000 to 40,000 Reangs reached makeshift camps in Tripura between 1997 and 2001.<sup>74</sup> Defending Reang interests, the *Bru National Union* (BNU, 1994) demanded an *Autonomous District Council* within Mizoram, but negotiations with the state government failed and the first series of clashes erupted in 1996. The movement turned violent with the radicalisation of the young Reang leaders who formed the *Bru National Liberation Front* (BNLF) with help from the neighbouring *National Liberation Front of Tripura* (NLFT, formed in 1989 and having a minority of Reang members). But though the NLFT armed, trained and financed the Reangs outfits, it soon realised that the BNLF, while focusing its struggle against the Mizos and Christians in the region, was trying to get closer to the Indian establishment (Army and intelligence officers). A bloody encounter in July 2000 between the BNLF and NLFT in Bangladesh and the slaughter of 70 BNLF militants by the NLFT in a Bangladesh-based camp led to an irreversible breaking-off of relations.<sup>75</sup> Thereafter, the BNLF having about a hundred cadres and Surajmani Reang as President and Hmunsiamia as Army Commander turned towards Muivah's Nagas and ULFA for help to rebuild a credible military force. After much hesitation, it decided to enter into negotiations with the state government in

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<sup>73</sup> Frontline, *The Reang Refugees*, New Delhi, Volume 15, Issue 15, July 18-31, 1998.

<sup>74</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *Mizoram: Negotiating with Terror, Yet Again*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 15, October 28, 2002.

<sup>75</sup> The Sentinel, *NLFT massacres 70 BNLF cadres in Bangladesh*, Guwahati, July 17, 2000.

2001.<sup>76</sup> Following considerable effort<sup>77</sup> and thirteen rounds and four years, an agreement was reached in April 2005 followed by an aid package of INR 286 million (US\$ 6.5 million).<sup>78</sup> However, the issue is not totally resolved as yet as only the Brus (Reangs) of Mizoram are signatories to the peace accord and the BNLF is still to disarm its troops.<sup>79</sup>

Other groups, though largely peripheral to Mizoram, have a non-negligible nuisance value within the state. The *Chin National Front* (CNF) and its armed wing, the *Chin National Army* (CNA), a 1985-reincarnation of the former *Chin Independence Army* (CIA) which took up arms in 1961, often operates out of Burma, either to flee from military operations conducted by the Burmese army or to find support among the local population. Relations between the Chins and the Mizos, belonging to the same ethnic group but artificially separated by an international border, have deteriorated dramatically over the years, especially after the migration of 30,000 to 40,000 Chins to Mizoram and Manipur following the return to power of the Burmese junta in 1988.<sup>80</sup> The *Zomi Revolutionary Organisation* (ZRO) formed in 1993 to protect the Zomis' ("Zomi" being the literary inversion of "Mizo") interests against the Kukis, mainly in Manipur, as well as the *United National Liberation Front of Manipur* (UNLF-M) have a few bases and some support along the Mizoram-Manipur border.

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<sup>76</sup> Shivaji Mukherjee, *Bru National Liberation Front: Redrawing Faultlines in Mizoram*, IPCS Article No.578, September 17, 2001.

<sup>77</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Bru of Mizoram: Destiny's Children*, IPCS Article No.911, November 17, 2002. See also Sify News, *Mizo Refugees to be taken back: Zoramthanga*, New Delhi, January 24, 2004 and The Assam Tribune, *Centre-Mizo Government urged to resolve Bru Refugees Issue*, December 06, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Outlook India, *An Accord for Peace*, New Delhi, May 03, 2005, which also appears in the South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 42, May 02, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Deccan Herald, *Mizo Government signs peace deal with ultras*, April 27, 2005.

<sup>80</sup> The Irrawaddy, *The Chin and Mizo: Ex-Brothers?* Volume 12, Issue 4, April 2004.

Finally, the Mizoram insurgency issue was a basic issue and solved effectively.<sup>81</sup> The *Mizo National Front* managed to unify almost the entire population of the region under its flag, thanks to the charisma of its leader, Laldenga. The fact that Laldenga is still revered after his death (1990), even though he entered politics after a three decade-long romantic career as a “renegade”, and that his assistant, Zoramthanga followed the same path (he became Minister of Finance in 1987, MNF President in 1990 and eventually Chief Minister of Mizoram in 1998) with the support of the Mizos, illustrates the success of an insurgency that unified many sub-tribal outfits under its banner. Internal rivalries (mainly in the early 1970s) and marginal ethnic insurgencies (except the Reangs) have not destabilized the state to the same extent as in other neighbouring states. The only problem that could tear Mizoram apart now is the overreaction of the state's Christian Mizo community to the affirmation of their identity by some of the smaller tribes. But as long as the “Mizo nationalism” remains flexible, Mizoram will be a model of stability and gradual peace process for the Northeast.

### ***The Assam Movement***

The name ‘*Assam*’ is derived from the T'ai word ‘*Ahom*’ characterising the people of Shan (T'ai or Dai) origin who came from the northeastern part of what is today Burma (Myanmar) around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Ahom Dynasty, which adopted Hinduism, reigned for almost 600 years (1228-1826) over the Brahmaputra Valley and the hilly forests of what became the Assam Province of British India under the Yandabo Treaty which ended the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). One hundred and thirty years of British domination did not bring about much change Assam's contours (except in 1905 with the Partition of Bengal) and it was only in the aftermath of Independence and the Partition

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with officials, Mizoram House, New Delhi, February 02, 2005.

that the heartland of India's Northeast was gradually restructured. Indeed, Assam, the largest state in this region, has been regularly "amputated" since then with some of its districts being granted the status of *Union Territories* or full-fledged states (Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram) to satisfy their various identity claims. Nevertheless, the ethnic issue and, more specifically, the influx of so-called "outsiders" have been at the heart of the insurgency in Assam, not only in post-colonial politics but from the early days of British colonisation.<sup>82</sup>

The continuous flow of immigrants entering Assam (in fact the entire Northeast, but Assam, being the richest state, received the bulk of Bengali, Bihari and Nepali legal migrants in search of work : tea garden workers, muslim peasants, British India government employees<sup>83</sup>) triggered off an increasing opposition from the Assamese intellectual elite. A wide peaceful agitation started in 1960, spearheaded by few assamese students from Gauhati University (the first University created in the Northeast in 1948). Again in 1972, after the administrative reorganisation of the Northeast, the mass movement grew with the increasingly violent rejection of the illegal migrants that have recently come into Assam.<sup>84</sup> Then, in July 1979, the *All Assam Students' Union* (AASU, born in 1972), fully backed by a senior socio-political organisation, the *All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* (AAGSP, a common-platform), launched a widespread campaign which rapidly turned violent.

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Hiren Gohain, Guwahati, March 2003. Hiren Gohain, a well known Assamese intellectual, is the author of the acclaimed *Assam: a burning question*, Guwahati, Spectrum Publications, 1985.

<sup>83</sup> Jayanta Kumar Gogoi, *The Migration Problem in Assam – An Analysis*, in Alokesh Barua (Ed.), *India's North-East : Developmental Issues in an Historical Perspective*, CSH-Manohar, New Delhi, 2005, pp 355-366.

<sup>84</sup> Dinesh Kotwal, *The contours of Assam insurgency*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 24, Issue 12, March 2001, pp 2219-2233 and Dinesh Kotwal, *The Insurgency in Assam: the demographic dimensions*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 25, Issue 2, May 2001, pp 313-324.



The “Assam Movement”<sup>85</sup> started in order to stop the illegal migrant to participate in Assam’s electoral process. But, benefiting from the large support of all sections of the Assamese Society<sup>86</sup>, from intellectuals to labourers and civil servants, it soon became a wider agitation protesting against the demographic and economic changes in the region and demanding the detection and deportation of all “foreigners” from Assam. As a result, the Indian government declared the *President’s Rule* in Assam in December 1979 (and three more times between 1979 and 1983). The “Assam Movement” lasted six years (1979-85) until an accord was reached between the central government (under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, who inaugurated a new era of negotiations with many rebels in the Northeast) and the main leaders of the Assamese middle-class who started the agitation.<sup>87</sup> With the *Assam Accord* of August 1985, the AAGSP legally entered the political arena (changing its name to *Ahom Gana Parishad*, AGP) and contested and won the 1985 state elections.<sup>88</sup> However, some radical elements quickly distanced themselves from the mainstream of the agitation.

On April 7, 1979, few weeks before the start of the 1979 Assam Movement, was born the *United Liberation Front of Asom* (ULFA) with a clear-cut revolutionary programme aimed at liberating Assam “*through armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign independent Assam*”.<sup>89</sup> With the ULFA transforming the

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<sup>85</sup> See Monirul Hussain’s writings, especially Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Movement*, New Delhi, South Asia Books, 1993, 328p.

<sup>86</sup> Udayon Misra, *The periphery strikes back : challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, IAS Publications, Shimla, 2000, page 132.

<sup>87</sup> Frontline, *Northeastern Challenges*, Volume 21, Issue 08, April 10, 2004.

<sup>88</sup> B.G. Verghese, *India’s Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers, 1996.

<sup>89</sup> See one of the parallel Homepages of the ULFA on the web at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/ulfa.htm>.

socio-political agitation into a large-scale insurgency, Assam entered the “path of separatism”. The ULFA, with its fast increasing strength, launched violent attacks not only against “foreigners” but also against mainland India’s interests. Thus the Bengalis and Nepalis were not the sole targets, but Hindi-speakers, government officials, civil servants and armed forces increasingly became the victims of ULFA’s wrath.<sup>90</sup>

Under the leadership of Paresh Baruah, Anup Chetia (in custody in Dhaka since 1997), Arabinda Rajkhowa and Pradeep Gogoi, ULFA became one of the largest and most powerful insurgent outfits in the entire region. Having embarked on a massive terrorisation campaign, ULFA soon dropped its former companions in the AASU to pursue its own separatist agenda (Unity, Revolution, Liberation: *Aikya, Biplab, Mukti*), going beyond the anti-foreigner movement.<sup>91</sup> Openly fighting against India’s central government in a large-scale guerrilla war, it reportedly received help and training from the *Inter Services Intelligence* (ISI, Pakistan’s Secret Service), neighbouring Naga insurgents (NSCN) and the Burmese Kachins (KIA who have been training ULFA cadres from 1986 for a fee of INR 100,000 per head). By the mid-1980s, ULFA’s strength had reached 3,000 to 4,000 hardcore militants, supported by few thousands of sympathisers won over by the rosy prospects promised by the outfit. Many of them participated in the “Nellie Massacre” (Nellie being a small town 70 km from Guwahati) in February 1983 when 1,200 people were butchered on racial grounds.

New Delhi responded severely to the ULFA insurgency and launched several military operations against the outfit and its supporters, trying to flush the militants out of their jungle camps

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<sup>90</sup> As observed in two recent articles: Frontline, *Outrage in Assam and Targeting ‘outsiders’*, Volume 20, Issue 25, December 06, 2003.

<sup>91</sup> For further analysis, see Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999.

and curb their uncontrolled lawless activities. The counter-insurgency Operations Bajrang (November 1990), Rhino I (September 1991) and Rhino II (March 1992) weakened ULFA's capabilities, but without threatening its base. Two years after the launch of these military operations, 15 camps had been officially destroyed, 2,500 militants arrested and an amount of INR 50 million recovered in cash. But interestingly, the hardcore group survived the imprisonment of many of its leaders as well as the surrender of thousands of its cadres. Operation Golden Bird, conducted with the help of the Burmese Army (*Tatmadaw*) in 1995 (as well as other minor Indo-Burmese military operations in 2000, 2001 and 2004) did not produce the expected results due both to a lack of efficiency and the deliberate withdrawal of the *Tatmadaw* in July 1995 (after India conferred the *Nehru Award for International Understanding* the Burmese opposition leader).<sup>92</sup> The Bhutan crackdown in December 2003 proved to be far more successful, with all ULFA camps on Bhutanese soil being destroyed. But the insurgent outfit cunningly moved its bases wherever it could find sympathy and shelter: Meghalaya's Garo Hills, Arunachal Pradesh's forests, Bangladesh, the Naga Hill Tracts of Myanmar and even China while the districts of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh remained its stronghold. Operation All Clear in Bhutan might have reduced its strength by half (a 1,200 strong army in early 2004), but the recruitment campaign it has launched since then appears to be quite efficient. Indeed, each trained soldier receives INR 2,000 per month in addition to food and shelter and can easily become a part of the parallel economy set up by the militant outfit.

ULFA has always refused to come to terms with the Indian government unless the latter agrees to put the sovereignty of Assam on its agenda. As a consequence, negotiations started only after

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<sup>92</sup> G. Parthasarathy (former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar 1992-1995), *Isolated Myanmar*, Rediff.com Column, November 23, 2000.

two decades of fighting in the wake of the Indian Army's military successes (for instance, the arrest of Anup Chetia, General Secretary, in 1997 in Bangladesh and Pradeep Gogoi, Vice-Chairman, in April 1998).<sup>93</sup> The first serious round of peace talks was initiated in 1998 in New Delhi by the new BJP-led government which offered a rehabilitation programme to ULFA cadres willing to surrender. In fact, the first such scheme had been proposed in 1992 by the Congress (I) government at the Centre and had led to the first wave of surrenders (these militants were nicknamed SULFAs or *Surrendered ULFAs*). But most of the rehabilitated insurgents soon returned underground. The 1998 package for peace proposed that each SULFA be given a loan of INR 150,000 to 250,000 (depending on his position) to start a new life. A few thousand militants surrendered their weapons by the end of the 1990s (more than 800 were even given government jobs to tackle the unemployment factor responsible for their recruitment). But the SULFAs did not really enter the mainstream as most of them were used in counter-insurgency operations.<sup>94</sup> This tactic of using surrendered insurgents against their former associates, since they knew their hideouts and other secrets, proved to be a success to some extent. New Delhi's insurgency and counter-insurgency policy in Assam was often rash and laced restraint and, consequently, impeded the peaceful solution of the conflict.

New antagonisms that have surfaced are not likely to lead to a solution as the Assamese youth finds itself caught between ULFA, which still has the power to attract the young,<sup>95</sup> and the "legal mainstream" offering vast "illegal" opportunities to which the government tends to turn a blind eye. Moreover, since the economic

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<sup>93</sup> The Indian Express, *ULFA's Top Leader Gogoi in Police Net*, April 10, 1998.

<sup>94</sup> Faultlines, *SULFA: Terror by Another Name*, Volume 9, Article 1, July 2001, pp 1-37.

<sup>95</sup> R. Upadhyay, *United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA): A Deviated Movement?* South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No.1307, March 03, 2005.

development spurred by the liberalisation launched in 1991 by the Narasimha Rao government at the Centre has not boosted Assam's economy and trade, poverty and illegal migration have created a fertile breeding ground for recruits for ULFA.<sup>96</sup> The negotiations proposed by New Delhi in 1998 made no concrete advances.<sup>97</sup> Despite the fact that Paresh Baruah (military commander of the ULFA) still stands firm on the sovereignty issue,<sup>98</sup> another call for the launch of a round of negotiations was initiated with Assam's new Tarun Gogoi government that won the state elections in May 2001.<sup>99</sup> But the proposals came up against another roadblock when ULFA proposed a referendum on the independence of Assam,<sup>100</sup> thus dismissing the possibility of a breakthrough and this remains a major bone of contention.<sup>101</sup> Since then the tripartite relation (between the central government in New Delhi, the state government in Dispur and ULFA) have seen many ups and downs. Paresh Baruah proposed in December 2003 that a third party (a non-Indian nation) should be involved as a mediator in future negotiations, but no decision was reached. ULFA, in fact, suffered a major setback following the military operations in Bhutan and was trying to reorganise its troops when the alleged enmity between its two main leaders, Baruah and Rajkhowa, came into the open.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Dilip Gogoi, *Quest for Swadhin Asom: explaining insurgency and role of the State in Assam*, in Dipankar Sengupta & Sudhir Kumar Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India – The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2004, pp 37-57 (esp. page 51).

<sup>97</sup> Frontline, *In no mood for peace*, Volume 16, Issue 27, December 25, 1999.

<sup>98</sup> Rediff.com News, *ULFA Chief Baruah wants talks to cover Independence*, January 04, 2001.

<sup>99</sup> Frontline, *A Peace Initiative*, Volume 18, Issue 26, December 22, 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Peace Illusion in Assam*, IPCS Article No.666, December 16, 2001 and later, Bidhan S. Laishram, *ULFA's Self-Denial: The Referendum Rhetoric*, IPCS Article No.1388, May 13, 2004.

<sup>101</sup> Subir Bhaumik, *Assam Rebels Say Talks Conditional*, BBC News, South Asia, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001, and The Deccan Herald, *ULFA refuses to withdraw pre-conditions for talks*, April 09, 2002.

<sup>102</sup> Frontline, *A ULFA Manoeuvre*, Volume 21, Issue 01, January 03, 2004 and Frontline, *Crackdown in Bhutan*, ibid.

The advent of the new Congress(I)-led government in New Delhi in May 2004 and the appointment of Manmohan Singh (who has been a Rajya Sabha MP from Assam since 1991) as Prime Minister of India inaugurated a new era of ULFA-Delhi relations. In November 2004, ULFA sent a peace message to Manmohan Singh, who, in turn, during a visit to Assam for flagging off of the India-ASEAN Car Rally, declared that he was willing to accept it only if ULFA was ready to give up violence.<sup>103</sup> Ultimately, even though ULFA rejected the Prime Minister's offer, New Delhi managed a breakthrough by offering to discuss the sacrosanct issue of Assam's sovereignty and has since then consulted many legal experts and Northeast scholars.<sup>104</sup> But ULFA is still on the run and is far from joining the mainstream like other militant organisations (for instance, like the *Mizoram National Front* in 1986), thanks to huge financial support, external backing and lack of constructive engagement on the part of the government. As a proof of its nuisance capacity, the US government added the outfit to its international "terror list" (Other Selected Foreign Terrorist Organisations) in April 2005.<sup>105</sup>

A second stream of radical insurgency appeared in Assam with the emergence of the Bodo movement<sup>106</sup>. The Bodos, a Tibeto-Burman tribal sub-group, settled in the area between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Himalayas (North-West of Assam) long before the Ahoms invaded the region and they represent today an ethnic minority of about one million people. Fearing an increasing neglect of the Bodo

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<sup>103</sup> The Telegraph, *ULFA Seeks Signed Invitation*, November 19, 2004 and BBC News, South Asia, *India PM courts North-East rebels*, November 21, 2004.

<sup>104</sup> The Telegraph, *Delhi Dilemma on ULFA Talks*, February 21, 2005 and The Hindu, *Manmohan's assurance on implementation of Assam Accord*, May 06, 2005.

<sup>105</sup> The Hindustan Times, *US names Al-Mansoorian, ULFA, CPI-Maoist as terrorist outfits*, April 28, 2005 and The Indian Express, *ULFA, CPI-Maoist in US terror list*, April 28, 2005. Earlier, The Sentinel, *US confirms ISI band in NE extremist violence*, March 11, 2002.

<sup>106</sup> George Sudhir Jacob, *The Bodo Movement in Assam : Unrest to Accord*, Asian Survey, Volume 34, Issue 10, October 1994, pp 878-892.

aboriginal culture and language, a few Bodo students and intellectuals formed the *All Bodo Students' Union* (ABSU) in Kokrajhar in 1967, but it was only after the explosion of the ideological *Assam Movement* (1979-85) that the Bodo agitation was triggered off. Its main concern being the defence of Bodo interests against the majority population of “foreigners” colonising the Bodo-inhabited areas, the movement rapidly followed the Assam model. Though the Bengalis were reviled as “outsiders”, as in the rest of Assam, the Hindu Assamese too were the target of Bodo animosity. The first step was the rejection of the Assamese script for the Bodo language which was written from then on in the Devanagari script (descending from the Brahmi script and used to write Sanskrit, Hindi...). But among the Bodos themselves, this decision (taken under pressure from New Delhi's political and intellectual establishment) is still being debated, particularly within the revered *Bodo Literary Society*.<sup>107</sup>

By the mid-1980s, under the aegis of *Bodofa* Upendranath Brahma (the “father of Bodoland”) the movement turned radical with the establishment of the *Bodo Security Force* (BSF) in October 1986. Violent actions against Indian police personnel as well as Assamese-speaking political leaders were launched by the BSF while the armed-wing of the ABSU, the *Bodo Volunteers Force* (BVF), simultaneously started a wide-ranging insurgency campaign marked from the very beginning by internecine struggles between the two Bodo outfits. Both were trained and helped by NSCN-IM (after 1989) and the neighbouring ULFA (paradoxically a comrade-in-arms but not in ideology, as the Bodos are opposed not only Bengalis but also the Assamese who are defended by ULFA). Adroitly, the Indian government tried to make the most of this division between the BSF and BVF to reach a peace accord in 1993 with one of the two (BVF) while still militarily fighting the

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<sup>107</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage*, *ibid.*, pp 38-42.

other (BSF). The *Bodo Accord* of February 1993 created a *Bodo Autonomous Council* (BAC), but the administrative body's territorial jurisdiction was scattered as most of the townships are not contiguous.<sup>108</sup> Anyway, the BVF laid down its weapons and abandoned its intimidation and extortion policies to the satisfaction of New Delhi.

Nonetheless, neither the BSF nor some radical elements of the BVF accepted the 1993 Agreement and continued their armed rebellion. In 1994, in a major reshuffle, the BSF was renamed *National Democratic Front of Bodoland* (NDFB) and grew stronger by the day with the help of ULFA and, presumably from 1996, the rising Maoist insurgency in Nepal. By 2003, the NDFB boasted of more than 3,500 cadres (out of which 1,500 were fully trained and armed). Its arch-rival the BVF, officially dissolved by the Bodo Accord, re-emerged in 1996 under a new name, the *Bodo Liberation Tiger Front* (BLTF or BLT) with Prem Singh Brahma as its supremo. Old rivals in new bottles, the BLT and the NDFB have been engaged ever since in a destructive struggle for influence even though they have overlapping interests.<sup>109</sup>

While the NDFB sticks to its demand for an independent Bodoland, the BLT is content with its claim for an autonomous Bodoland state within the Indian Union and just wants the BAC's prerogatives and jurisdiction to be redefined. As a consequence, it gained favour with New Delhi and the latter agreed to a cease-fire agreement with it in March 2000 after 4 years of conflict. At least 2,500 Tigers gave up arms between 2000 and 2003.<sup>110</sup> Besides, the BAC was dissolved and temporarily replaced by a monitoring committee

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<sup>108</sup> See the texts of the agreement reproduced by the Northeast Sun, *Bodo Accord then, Settlement now*, March 1-14, 2003 (pp 9-11).

<sup>109</sup> Rediff.com, *Bodo group war to turn bloodier*, January 17, 2001.

<sup>110</sup> After the rebellion had claimed at least 1,500 lives. See Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Bodo Settlement: Accord for Discord?* South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 31, February 17, 2003.



consisting of some Assamese MLAs.<sup>111</sup> Three years of negotiations were needed to reshape the administrative structure of the BAC which, in 2003, became the *Bodo Territorial Council* (BTC, covering four contiguous districts of Assam),<sup>112</sup> with the former Commander-in-Chief of the BLT as its Chief Executive Member.<sup>113</sup> Naturally, the arch-rival NDFB condemned the new scheme accepted by the BLT and continued its open armed conflict while its leader Ranjan Daimari pursued his demand for a socialist, independent and separate Bodo state, and not merely an autonomous one, free from outside presence and exploitation (from mainland India or Assam). Its motto interestingly is the French motto: (*Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*), but far from following this philosophy, it launched a violent campaign of ethnic cleansing (especially against the Santhals, a nomadic Dravidian tribe) and religious persecution (the NDFB being mostly Christian and fighting for the adoption of the Roman script for the Bodo language).<sup>114</sup> But its leadership suffered a huge blow between 2002 and 2004, particularly during the military crackdown in Bhutan (December 2003).<sup>115</sup> Waves of arrests, internecine killings and surrenders have recently weakened the movement which may not have more than a thousand militants in 2005.

The aggressive strategy of the Indian government, adopted under pressure from the Indian Army, has borne fruit. Making the most of the BLTF-NDFB rift by choosing two ways of dealing with the insurgents (the soft option involving bargaining talks with the BLT

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<sup>111</sup> Frontline, *The Bodo Question*, Volume 19, Issue 15, July 20, 2002.

<sup>112</sup> Frontline, *Territories of Fear*, Volume 20, Issue 24, November 22, 2003.

<sup>113</sup> The Hindu, *Bodoland Council sworn in*, December 08, 2003 and also The Telegraph, *Council in Business*, December 09, 2003.

<sup>114</sup> Monirul Hussain, *State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the North-East*, Economic and Political Weekly, December 16, 2000, pages 4519-4523.

<sup>115</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *NDFB: Losing Leaders, Losing Muscle*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 25, January 06, 2003.

and the hard option of a military response to the NDFB), the central government managed to succeed on both counts. As a result of this strategy, not only did the BLTF return to the mainstream but the NDFB was considerably weakened – though not totally crushed. Indeed, New Delhi’s delay in starting peace negotiations with the latter could be considered as an illustration of the Indian government’s over-confidence.<sup>116</sup> Urged by the feeling since 2004 that the NDFB was about to fall to its knees,<sup>117</sup> government officials and Indian Army circles appear to have been ready to use the same counterinsurgency measures as those used against ULFA, thanks to the surrendered-turned-counterinsurgent SULFA. The BLT could certainly be used as a counterweight to crush the NDFB once and for all.<sup>118</sup> Besides, the latter has lost its popular support and its hit-and-run operations are increasingly criticised even though it still tries to engage in visible social activities such as ecology and development programmes (especially as far as the Manas Reserve is concerned). Thus, the Bodo identity struggle has globally slowed down, both because of the 2003 Accord and the military crackdown on ultra outfits. But the issue is far from resolved, especially as long as the Indian government and the NDFB do not enter into serious peace talks.<sup>119</sup>

### ***Manipur – Between Ethnic Rivalries and Revolutionary Ideals***

Once a powerful hilly kingdom, the tiny state of Manipur (“*Land of Jewels*”) has been experiencing for the last four decades the most complex insurgency in the Northeast. Like other rebellions which have torn the region since Independence, insurgency movements in Manipur have followed the lines of ethnicity. Tribal

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<sup>116</sup> The Telegraph, *NDFB mulls truce pullout*, February 19, 2005.

<sup>117</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *NDFB: Claiming Murders, Calling Truce*, Volume 3, Issue 13, October 11, 2004.

<sup>118</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *NDFB: Talking for a Truce, then what?*, IPCS Article No.1555, November 13, 2004 and Bidhan S. Laishram, *Peace with NDFB: Remnants of an ill Diagnosis*, IPCS Article No.1658, February 28, 2005.

<sup>119</sup> Hopes were aroused with the preliminary talks in May 2005.

groups struggling for recognition and/or secession from the Union of India as well as ethnic groups violently fighting against one another are a part of everyday life. Over the years, Manipur has become the most eloquent illustration of inter-ethnic fighting between minorities which has turned into a settling of scores between various criminal groups.

Manipur's population (2.38 million according to the 2001 Census) is divided in three main ethnic groups. The Meitei community (or the Manipuris, representing slightly more than 50% of the population) occupies only 10% of Manipur's territory (mainly the Imphal Valley), whereas the hills (90% of the territory) are inhabited by two main tribal groups: the Nagas/Maos/Zeliangs (25% in the north and west of the state) and the Chin/Kiku/Mizo group (15%, in the south and east), both comprising mainly Christians. There are in addition the Muslim Pangals (7-8%) affiliated to the Meiteis who adopted Vaishnavite Hinduism about 400 years ago. Since 1960, the indigenous Meiteis (officially classified as a non-tribal community) cannot buy and own any land in the hills dominated by Scheduled Tribes (ST), which is one issue out of many that has crystallised the wrath and frustration of the Meitei people who once ruled the powerful Manipuri kingdom.<sup>120</sup> Thus the division between the Meiteis and the others tribes became quite obvious: after Manipur was given the status of a Union Territory in 1956 (it forcibly joined the Union of India on October 15, 1949)<sup>121</sup>, the Meiteis, feeling hemmed in by Christianised tribes wanting to secede, agitated for a complete merger with mainland "Hindu" India.

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<sup>120</sup> The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960. Sanatomba Kangujam, *An analytical perspective of Manipur's territorial question*, (Essay) The Sangai Express, May 13, 2003.

<sup>121</sup> Two years after India's Independence. For a recapitulation of Manipur's merger with the Union: Binalakshmi Nepram, *South Asia's Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, page 75.

Many agendas were thus at stake when the insurgency arose in the region: secession from mainland India, recognition of tribal identities, frustration and a feeling of neglect. Further, a revival of left-oriented ideology, a “moral campaign” and the absence of a state fuelled an uncontrollable insurgency in Manipur. In November 1964, the *United National Liberation Front* (UNLF) was the first militant outfit to be formed. Headed by Samarendra Singh (a socialist-inspired ultra close to the Naga leader S.S. Khaplang) who was killed in June 2001,<sup>122</sup> it draws its main support from the area around the Imphal Valley and the North Cachar Hills where it also has its bases. Raj Kumar Meghen replaced the late S. Singh in 2001 and now commands 1,500 UNLF-Meghen cadres involved in many parallel activities (extortion, robbery and drug smuggling), in close collaboration with ULFA.

Soon after its creation, a splinter group came into being in December 1968 under a rival Meitei leader, Oinam Sudhir Kumar: the *Revolutionary Government of Manipur* (RGM), an outfit acting like a government-in-exile based in Sylhet (East Pakistan/Bangladesh). Both groups were committed to a separatist struggle to establish a socialist sovereign Manipur, but had to face harsh repression from the Indian armed forces and suffered a great setback in 1971 when the Indian Army crushed the Pakistani forces during the “*Bangladesh Liberation War*”, as well as many Manipuri and Mizo rebels. Almost silenced, the Meitei insurgent outfits saw Manipur being granted full-fledged statehood in January 1972 without reacting in any way.

Nevertheless, the 1972 politico-administrative reforms did not have a positive outcome apart from a few declarations of amnesty for insurgent ultras. Thus the rebellion continued with support from the neighbouring Assam Movement (1979 onwards) and the rise of Naga rebels which encouraged many outfits in the region. Since

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<sup>122</sup> The Hindustan Times, *The United National Liberation Front of Manipur*, July 17, 2004.

most of them were influenced by a leftist ideology and a secessionist strategy for *Kangleipak* (voluntarily using the historic name of Manipur), many Manipuri groups came into being in the late 1970s.

The *People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak* (PREPAK) was founded in 1977 by R.K. Tulachandra, who was killed in an ambush by Indian security forces in November 1985. Launching a "social reformation campaign" aimed at inculcating socialist ideals in Manipur and improving the morals of the population (by forcing prohibition of alcohol and drugs, banning Hindi movies and expounding philosophy through various booklets and its monthly publication, *Literature*), the PREPAK probably has on its rolls at present around 300 to 400 fighters<sup>123</sup> (the *Red Army* of the PREPAK), based in various camps in Manipur (Chandel district), North Tripura, Myanmar (along with the NSCN-K) and Bangladesh. In 2004-05, it experienced severe internal strife which may result in the emergence of two opposing factions.<sup>124</sup>

In 1978, N. Bhisheswar, an admirer of Mao and a former UNLF cadre arrested in 1971, formed the *People's Liberation Army of Manipur* (PLA), inspired by the People's Republic of China where he had been trained in 1975-76. Interestingly, the PLA claimed to be a trans-tribal organisation, which is quite rare in the Northeast. In an effort to set aside ethnic divergences and focus on revolutionary objectives, the PLA with its political wing the *Revolutionary People's Front* (RPF, created in 1979 and having its bases in the Sajik Tampak and Nayang districts of Manipur) struggles for the unification of the Meitei-Naga-Kuki tribes into a separate socialist state based on ethnic parity. It has constituted a government-in-exile (in Bangladesh) with a dozen ministers. It regularly calls

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<sup>123</sup> 200 according to the SATP, 500 according to the rebels themselves... sources: SATP (<http://www.satp.org>), and IPCS (<http://www.ipcs.org>).

<sup>124</sup> The Kangle On-line, *KYKL for peaceful end to PREPAK internal strife*, January 17, 2005.

for a ban on liquor and pornography, the killing of drug addicts and rapists and drew attention to the danger of an HIV-AIDS pandemic as far back as the mid-1990s. Today, it is a powerful force (with 1,000 to 1,500 militants, each family in Manipur having a member close – or forced to be close – to the PLA militancy), and has established a strong economic empire through the taxation of goods coming into the state or going out, rackets involving civil servants and businessmen, kidnapping for ransom, and bomb attacks.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, the support given by the Myanmar government in the early 1990s seems to have stopped and the destruction of a temporary PLA headquarters in Behang (Manipur) illustrates the new cooperative attitude of the Burmese regime.<sup>126</sup>

In 1980, three years after the founding of the PREPAK, the birth of an offshoot, the *Kangleipak Communist Party* (KCP), added another socialist-oriented armed outfit to the regional scene. More of a political than a military outfit, it has nevertheless conducted many underground operations (abductions, extortion, taxation...)<sup>127</sup> recently, besides its regular political activities (calls for *bandh*, boycott, meetings...)<sup>128</sup> It suffered a major blow in May 2005 with the death of one of its local commanders-in-chief.<sup>129</sup>

As a consequence of the growing agitation in the early 1980s (in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur), the Indira Gandhi government resorted to harsh measures: the Indian Army was given a free hand to crack down on the insurgents. The various counter-insurgency

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<sup>125</sup> The current Manipur Chief Minister, Ibobi Singh, well known for his opposition to any talks with the insurgents, escaped many attempts on his life by the PLA. Praveen Kumar, *Manipur: insurgent show of force*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 2, July 28, 2003.

<sup>126</sup> The Assam Tribune, *PLA GHQ at Manipur-Myanmar border busted*, November 10, 2004.

<sup>127</sup> The Telegraph, *Manipur cops kill rebels, rescue boy*, May 11, 2005 and The Sangai Express, *KCP's death threat on MLAs over Mayek issue*, April 18, 2005.

<sup>128</sup> The Hindu, *Strike hits normal life in Manipur*, April 12, 2005.

<sup>129</sup> Imphal Free Press, *Four KCP cadres killed in Manipur*, May 30, 2005.

operations in Manipur successfully crushed the militants and many Meitei leaders were killed or jailed (PLA head, Bhisheswar, was arrested in 1981, his successor, Thoundam Kunjabehari was gunned down in 1982, the PREPAK chairman was killed in 1985...).

The declining movement got yet another boost in 1988-89 thanks to the internal turmoil in Burma. Many dormant non-Burman insurgent outfits on the periphery of Burma got carried away by the August 1988 pro-democracy uprising in Rangoon. Thus awakened, the Kachins (KIO/A), the Chins (CNF/A), the Arakanese (NUPA, ALA) and the Nagas (NSCN-K) took up insurgency once again in Western Burma against the new Burmese junta (SLORC) that had seized power through another coup in September 1988. Many Burmese students as well Chin and Kachin people fled across the western jungles of Burma to seek shelter in Northeast India, particularly in Manipur where refugee camps were set up. Making the most of the dramatic and confused events (New Delhi having declared an open-door policy towards Burmese refugees), Manipuri, Naga and Kuki insurgencies re-established very close links with their Burmese counterparts. The international border between Manipur and the Sagaing division witnessed a revival of arms smuggling and drug trafficking, especially in and around Moreh-Tamu, the border checkpoint in Manipur.

In 1989, the KCP, PREPAK and the PLA (RPF) formed a joint political Meitei organisation (the *Revolutionary Joint Committee* - RJC) seeking external support. Consequently, the Assamese ULFA and the Manipuri UNLF, on the Indian side, and the Naga NSCN-K on the Burmese side joined forces to form the *Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front* (IBRF) in May 1990 which was joined a year later by the *Kuki National Army* (KNA). The United Front conducted operations both against Indian and Burmese troops, the Northeast outfits easily finding shelter in remote hilly areas of Burma (which became Myanmar in 1989). Nonetheless, the IBRF split soon due to internal rivalries and also due to the reinforcement

of the *Tatmadaw* which launched vast military offensives with the new equipment provided by China in 1988-90, but the RJC restructured itself in May 1991.

In the 1990s, following the disturbances in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura, insurgency in Manipur also turned against “outsiders”. While the Meitei-Naga-Kuki unification was initially directed against “India’s neo-colonialism”, it soon started targeting others “foreigners” or “*Mayangs*” such as the Pangals, who are actually Muslim Meiteis (7-8% of Manipur’s total population); this became another goal of the militants in the state<sup>130</sup> who unleashed a wave of pogroms and riots. The harassed Muslim population had to constantly face the wrath of armed groups blinded by their insurgent mindset, but they too fought back by forming movements supported by the Pakistan and Bangladeshi intelligence services (such as the *Islamic Revolutionary Front* - IRF or the *Islamic National Front* - INF). Consequently, the fight against outsiders added another dimension to Manipur’s distress.

The internal wars amongst the armed outfits grew bloodier when the three main ethnic groups of the region (Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis) entered into a fierce conflict for gaining power in the late 1990s.<sup>131</sup> The Kukis (close to the neighbouring Indian Mizos and Burmese Chins), who had developed a minority complex, took up arms to defend their rights, especially against the Nagas, the other dominant tribal group of the region. In the past, Manipuri kings (like the British) had often used the Kuki tribes as a buffer force against the dreaded Naga head-hunters. In 1988, The *Kuki National Front* (KNF) was set up by Ranco Thangboi Kuki, demanding a Kukiland carved out of the Naga and Meitei areas.

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<sup>130</sup> R. Upadhyay, *Manipur – In a strange whirlpool of cross-current insurgency*, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No.1210, January 03, 2005.

<sup>131</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Manipur: need to bridge the Valley and the Hills*, IPCS Article No.1187, October 23, 2003.



Trained and armed by the Burmese KIA and funded by Indian intelligence (in 1989-90, the Indian Intelligence – RAW – was particularly interested in using the Kukis as a counter-insurgency force against the Thangkul Nagas of I. Swu and T. Muivah), it was soon joined by a parallel Kuki force, the *Kuki National Army* (KNA, an armed branch of the *Kuki National Organisation* founded in 1991 by Suvitulon Haokip), which joined the IBRF and established links with ULFA and UNLF, whereas the KNF appeared to remain loyal to RAW.

The Kuki-Naga conflict has been one of the bloodiest and the most merciless conflicts in the region. In 1992, thousands of slaughtered villagers were left behind in the Moreh-Tamu area after clashes between the Kuki outfits helped by the UNLF (opposed to Muivah and close to the Khaplang Naga faction) and the NSCN-IM, which wants to carve out of Manipur a Naga-dominated territory, against the Meiteis and the Kukis. Many bloodbaths followed, also between Kukis and Paites (one thousand people murdered in 1997-98 despite an agreement signed in 1998 between KNF and Paite leaders), and against the Karbis in Assam.<sup>132</sup>

Furthermore, conflicts between Nagas and Meiteis have been as ruthless as the savage clashes between Kukis and Nagas. The fact that the Muivah faction of the Naga rebels has constantly tried to carve out of Manipur the Naga-dominated territories in the northern hills, where Th. Muivah himself was born (Ukhrul district has a Thangkul Naga majority), brought the Meitei community together and their anger erupted in 1956, when A.Z. Phizo, the charismatic leader of the Naga rebellion went underground in the Meitei Hills before crossing over to East Pakistan (moreover, the Meitei soldiers in the Manipuri Rifles participated enthusiastically in hunting

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<sup>132</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Assam: Karbi-Kuki Clashes*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 37, March 29, 2004.

down the Naga fighters).<sup>133</sup> The Indian government's decision in June 2001 to extend the cease-fire with the NSCN-IM outside Nagaland sparked off a strong reaction among the Meitei and Pangal communities.<sup>134</sup> With the talks limited to a bilateral dialogue between New Delhi and the Isak-Muivah Naga faction, options to resolve the Naga/Meitei issue have narrowed down as the Meitei/Manipuri have developed a strong feeling of negative discrimination.<sup>135</sup>

### ***Tripura – Tribal Fracture and Terror***

Tripura, the third smallest state of the Indian Union tucked away in the northeastern hills, was a prosperous independent kingdom for many centuries. The tribal kings (*Manikya*) once governed from the ancient capital of Rangamati before shifting to Agartala in the nineteenth century. Confronted with growing social unrest following the emergence of the *Ganamukti Parishad*, a movement that threatened the monarchic rule, the last king (1923-1947) came to an agreement with the British authorities as well as the Indian nationalist movement for Tripura's admission to the new Union of India. Coming into effect from October 15, 1949 and parallel to the developments in Manipur, the agreement merged the former Tripuri kingdom with the state of Assam. In 1956, Tripura legally broke away from Assam to become a Union Territory and finally a full-fledged state in January 1972 following a reorganisation based on ethnic divisions. Today, the tiny state covers an area of only 10,492 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 3.1 million, but it has become one of the hot spots of ethnic clashes in the region.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Waikhom Damodar Singh, *Muivah and the Meiteis*, The Manipur On Line, February 2003 ([www.manipuronline.com/Features/February2003/muivahandmeiteis08\\_2.htm](http://www.manipuronline.com/Features/February2003/muivahandmeiteis08_2.htm)).

<sup>134</sup> Brigadier S.P. Singh, *Violence in Manipur: what went wrong*, IPCS Article No.565, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003.

<sup>135</sup> Frontline, *Territory tussles*, Volume 20, Issue 04, February 15, 2003 and E.N. Rammohan, *Manipur: a degenerated insurgency*, Faultlines, Volume 11, article 1, 2002.

<sup>136</sup> Frontline, *A violent agenda*, Volume 19, Issue 03, February 02, 2002.

Although on the eve of India's independence a majority of Tripura's population was tribal (51% according to the 1941 census), today Tripura is known to be the only Indian state where the former ethnic majority has gradually lost its influence to be finally outnumbered by outsiders. Over the years, a growing number of Bengali migrants (as well as Hindi-speaking civil servants and, to a lesser extent, members of the armed forces) have settled in Tripura, fleeing politico-religious discrimination and economic backwardness in the erstwhile East Pakistan (1947-1971) and later Bangladesh (from 1971 onwards). The Bengalis soon gained ascendancy as the new ruling community to the detriment of the tribal groups who were driven back to the hilly areas of the state. They seized both economic and political power in the region and took full advantage of Tripura's geographical position, an area almost completely surrounded by Bangladesh with which it shared 84% of its borders sharing the remaining 6 % with Assam and 10% with Mizoram. These Bengalis migrants, besides imposing the Bengali language as the official language of the state, with *Kokborok* (the lingua franca of the principal tribes) being pushed into the background, represented in 2001 almost 70% of Tripura's population, while the main tribes (Tripuris, Debbamar, Reangs, Jamatias... out of the 19 officially recognised Scheduled Tribes of the state) hardly numbered one million.

The overwhelming presence of "foreigners", who took control of the state's institutions and economic activities, is at the root of Tripura's socio-political turmoil.<sup>137</sup> Besides, the political parties, generally aligned to either one or the other antagonist (Communist forces trying to get a foothold in tribal areas, the Congress first supportive of the Bengali community and then changing sides to forge an alliance with separatist groups...), several insurgents outfits extremely frustrated by the fact that they were made out to be

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<sup>137</sup> K.S. Subramanian, *Tribal Insurgency and Rural Development in Tripura*, New Delhi, Economic and Political Weekly Commentary, February 26, 2000.

“foreigners” in their own land by outsiders went underground to remedy the situation in their own way through an armed struggle.<sup>138</sup>

This demographic upheaval began as far back as the early 1950s, when some tribal outfits were formed to curb this propensity. Thus the *Seng Krank*, created in 1947, outlawed in 1951 and then transformed into the *Paharia Union*, brought together several tribes armed with archaic small weapons, who harassed East Pakistani refugees along the border. Between 1947 and 1971,<sup>139</sup> an estimated 600,000 migrants (or refugees) crossed into Tripura (which had a population of less than 1.5 million in 1971); this influx was viewed as tragic by the helpless Indian government and its ally at the state level (even the Congress Party was least concerned by tribal sensitivities). Another militant organisation, the *Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* (TUJS, an organisation which governed the state later between 1988 and 1993) formed in 1967, was political rather than extremist. It demanded the creation of an autonomous district under the Sixth Schedule of India’s Constitution. But due to the Centre’s inability to tackle the issue combined with the general social unrest in the Northeast at the end of the 1970s (particularly the Assam Movement between 1979 and 85), the tribal outfits toughened their positions and strategies.

In 1978, an outfit called the *Tripura National Volunteers* (TNV) was created by Bijoy Hranghkawal, a former member of the TUJS (the TNV is considered to be the armed wing of the TUJS). Financed and trained by Laldenga’s *Mizo National Front* (MNF), the TNV soon became the leading armed group intent on reviving tribal culture. The June 1988 riots in Tripura (1300 dead of which 700 in just one day, June 7, almost all of whom were Bengalis),<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Anindita Dasgupta, *Tripura’s Brutal Cul de Sac*, Kathmandu, Himal South Asian (Kathmandu), Volume 14, Issue 12, December 2001.

<sup>139</sup> B.G. Verghese, *India’s North East Resurgent*, New Delhi, Konarak Publishers, 1996, page 171.

<sup>140</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects*, New Delhi, Spectrum Publications, 1998, pp 54-55.

in which the TNV took an active part, were seen as a mere ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, when Laldenga and his MNF entered the legal fold and dropped their armed struggle against New Delhi in 1986, the TNV lost a precious ally and was forced to come to an agreement with the Indian government to put an end to the political unrest. After the 1988 elections (lost by the outgoing CPI-M and won by the *Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura*), an inconsistent agreement was reached in August 1988 rewriting the role and the prerogatives of the *Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council* (which was first proposed in 1979 and came into force in 1985). The TNV and some of the smaller militant outfits close to it agreed to lay down their weapons.

However, most of the junior militants were dissatisfied with the agreement which did not stop the migratory flow into Tripura which was to become a general trend. New separatist outfits born out of the ashes of the TNV continued to demand the expulsion of the post-1951 settlers in Tripura.<sup>141</sup> Thus, the former Vice-President of the TNV, Dhananjay Reang, formed the *National Liberation Front of Tripura* (NLFT) in March 1989. Comprised mainly of the Debbamar (40%) and Jamatia (30%) ethnic groups, the NLFT struggles against the central government as well as the Bengali ruling community. It militates against the Bengali tongue as Tripura's official language and demands the revival of the *Kokborok* language (initially it insisted on the Roman script but has recently agreed to the use of the Bengali script) and has established links with other insurgent groups in the region (Nagas of the NSCN-IM, Manipuris of the KYKL and Bodos of the NDFB), thus militarising its activities. It has its headquarters in Bangladesh's Khagrachari district with a couple of dozen training camps and bases in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But affected by internal rivalries like all other outfits in the region, it soon split

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<sup>141</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *Tripura: In the Rebels' Firing Line*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 05, August 18, 2003.

into several factions, the two biggest being the Debbamar faction (the stronger one with an estimated strength of 500-600 armed men) and the Nayanbasi faction (with 200-300 cadres). Besides, 90% of the NLFT are Christians, which adds a religious colour to the imbroglio since the Bengali migrants are mainly Muslim. In 2004, some of the NLFT leaders (Nayanbasi faction) decided to enter into a cease-fire agreement with the Indian Army.<sup>142</sup> Since then, even though there is no response from government circles, fighting has slowed down but not the social unrest fuelled by NLFT ideology.<sup>143</sup>

A second outfit, also an offshoot of the TNV, is the *All Tripura Tiger Force* (ATTF), created in July 1990 (in 1992, the Central Committee of the ATTF chose to change the second T of the acronym from the original 'Tribal' to 'Tiger', inspired by the Sri Lankan LTTE). Much bigger than the NLFT, it soon created a climate of terror in the state by launching a series of operations involving abduction, murder, harassment and extortion targeting the Bengali community.<sup>144</sup> Like the NLFT, it keeps asking for the deportation of post-1950s settlers, the restoration of land to the original inhabitants and the recognition of the *Kokborok* language. It too has its headquarters on Bangladeshi territory (Taraban district). But unlike its twin outfit, it is mainly dominated by Hindus (90%) and by the Debbamar (70%) and Reang ethnicities. It has also established military connections with groups struggling against NLFT's allies such as Nagas of the Khaplang faction, ULFA, PREPAK, PLA and UNLF of Manipur.<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, it suffered

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<sup>142</sup> Outlook India, *NLFT-Centre announce ceasefire, peace talks soon*, New Delhi, April 15, 2004 and M. Amarjeet Singh, *Tripura on its Brink: Nayanbasi Jamatia's Violence Threat*, IPCS Article No.1638, February 08, 2005.

<sup>143</sup> Mahadev Chakravarti, *Tripura ADC Election, 2000: Terror Tactics Win*, Economic and Political Weekly Commentary, July 22, 2000.

<sup>144</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *Terror Strikes in Tripura*, IPCS Article No.879, September 26, 2002.

<sup>145</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Running Guns in India's Northeast*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 17, November 11, 2002.

a severe setback in 1994 when 1,600 of its cadres surrendered to the Indian Army (in exchange of an amnesty). Ten years later, even though it was still considered the main troublemaker in the state, its leaders proposed a peace agreement to the central government (April 2004), a proposal which has not made any progress so far.<sup>146</sup>

In response, some Bengali outfits were set up to launch a counter-offensive against the Tripuri tribal militants. For instance, the *United Bengali Liberation Front* (UBLF) was formed in October 1999 overtly to protect the Bengali population with the help of arms. Finding sympathy across the Bangladeshi border and also among the business communities in Kolkata and Guwahati, the UBLF, together with some smaller groups like the *Bengali Tiger Force* or the *Amra Bengali* (“We Are Bengali”), tried to counter the NLFT and ATTF attacks and crack down on their networks.<sup>147</sup> But with little help and given the fact that New Delhi too was strongly opposed to it, it is not active currently, except for occasional skirmishes.

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<sup>146</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Tripura: Insurgency on the Back Foot*, IPCS Article No.1394, May 27, 2004.

<sup>147</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage – Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2000, page 175.

## **II. The Degeneration of Sub-Nationalism and the criminalisation of Insurgency in the Northeast**

As we have seen, most of the insurgent movements of the Northeast have had so far a common genesis. A sub-nationalism based on tribal/ethnic identities and rejection of “outsiders”, coupled to colonial patterns, post-colonial mis-governance and abuses from the Central government gave rise to separatism in the region. But if the causes still remain the same today, the evolution of the separatist struggle into a steady degeneration has deeply altered the way it is perceived by the population (both inside and outside of the Northeast). The various insurgent groups (beginning with the Nagas, Mizos and Assamese) first rose thanks to an admiring population which gave assistance and moral support to them. Through an intelligent propaganda aimed at stigmatising the enemy (mainly the Indian authorities) and a well-organised and targeted violence have first created a “Robin Hood Syndrome” in the Northeast, with the guerrillas defending the weak against the rich and powerful, the smaller ethnicities against to dominant ones. But with the passing of time, indiscriminate terror spread and further degenerated as the local people became also targets of the waves of violence, which is part of the militants’ strategy to prove the failure of the State to provide security.

Moreover, individualised interests, attraction for easy money of the youngest as well as ambitions of exiled leaders (Muivah in Bangkok, Laldenga or Phizo in London...) have hindered the perpetuation of the “noble” image of insurgency in the Northeast. The proliferation of splinter outfits (for example, the NNC, NSCN and then NSCN-IM vs. NSCN-K as far as the Nagas are concerned) is a perfect illustration of this new trend. After years of guerrillas in the jungles and harsh struggle against the protracted counter-insurgency operations of the Indian Army, the situation dragged



on. The growing frustration and ineffectiveness of the insurgency (none of them gained what was claimed at the beginning, apart from the Mizos) radicalised many militants. Other means were found and other objectives were sought.

Years of insurgency have deeply affected the socio-economic picture of the Northeast. In front of the bleak development perspectives (high unemployment and economic backwardness in spite of a high literacy rate and considerable natural resources), many ultras opportunistically turned criminal to establish parallel and underground economic networks. Control for economic power and trafficking routes (drug and arms, but also legal goods smuggling and extortion) is now the main objective of most of the rebellions. Having built up strong illicit financial assets, those groups have then heavily invested in the Northeast legal (formal) economy : transportation, hotels, trade companies, travel agencies... money laundering and extortion, almost institutionalised, are big business in the region, moreover when it is coupled with the wide corruption of the political elite. It thus will be more and more difficult in the near future to break this vicious circle, especially with militant ultras clearly distinguishing themselves from the main legal stream nevertheless dominated by democratically elected native rulers.

#### **a. The Nagas : Godfathers of the Northeast ?**

The NSCN-IM, along with ULFA, has become by far the largest insurgent outfit in the entire region, gaining “respect” among the ethnic insurrections and criminal outfits thanks to its huge criminal empire entirely oriented towards the achievement of the Council’s nationalistic objectives. Acting as the “Godfather” of many “terrorist” groups, it has trained and armed many groups of the region, such as the ULFA, NDFB, NLFT, KYKL and other smaller outfits. With Isak Swu as Chairman and Th. Muivah as General Secretary (both since 1988), the NSCN-IM boasted in 2005 of having 3,000 to 4,000 armed men (with at least one organised brigade and six well

structured battalions) who, even though they have suspended their open hostilities against the Indian Army since the 1997 cease-fire, have not given up their weapons and are still struggling against rival groups in the region like the NSCN-K or the ULFA. The headquarters of the IM faction are in a camp near Dimapur (*Nagaland*) and its official annual budget is around INR 200 million (US\$ 45 million) but could amount for INR 500 million (US\$ 105 million).

Indeed, the NSCN-IM has managed to build a strong parallel economy in the areas under its control and drug trafficking has become the main source of funds for the group while the outsourcing of many activities like extortion, abduction, arms smuggling and robbery to various ultra outfits created by NSCN-IM itself outside Nagaland is now an increasingly lucrative business.<sup>148</sup> Used as mere pawns by their patron, these militants groups are basically criminal groups without any political ideology.<sup>149</sup> The dynamics of extortion have grown up to such an extent that even the local population, though previously supportive of those groups, began to express steadily anger and despair. For instance in August 2003, in Mokokchung district (Nagaland) where every household has to pay a INR 120 to 150<sup>150</sup> to both the NSCN-K and NSCN-IM as “army collection” and “house tax”, two Khaplang militants were lynched by the population after having killed a student protesting against their activities. Hundreds of rackets, revolutionary taxes or voluntary contributions are reported every year, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. Thousands are at the same time silenced. Government employees, businessmen, intellectuals are the main targets, especially if their wages or gains are publicly known (the NSCN-IM then levy a 25% tax on every

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<sup>148</sup> For more details of NSCN's activities in the 1980s and 1990s, see H.K. Barpujari, *India's Northeast*, Ibid., especially Chapter Seven, pp 107-118.

<sup>149</sup> Binalakshmi Nepram, *South Asia's Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, pp 90-91.

<sup>150</sup> Around 3-4 US\$.

gain made<sup>151</sup>). Each truck driving on the National Highway 39 between Kohima and Dimapur (a stretch which is supposed to be part of the TransAsia Highway from Istanbul to Singapore...), or further around Imphal, has to pay a INR 500-1700 tax (depending on the size and goods) to the NSCN-IM which controls the area. Through extortion (labelled as “legal tax” or “patriotic tax”), the Muivah faction might earn several million rupees each year.

The socialist and Christian outlook once promoted by the Nagas was soon to be put aside by the ultra movement, which became more focused on sovereignty and controlling the informal economy, given the violent ethnic clashes between the rival Naga tribes as well as between Nagas and Kukis and Manipuris and Assamese ethnic groups. These internecine wars, which continue to plague the Naga movement, are among the most merciless in the Northeast and a terrible impediment to peace. The war between Isak-Muivah and Khaplang, who has established his stronghold in the Naga Hills of Burma (Myanmar) with more than one thousand loyal armed supporters (mainly Homi, Konyak tribes), has stood in the way of the peaceful resolution of the Naga problem. Khaplang too runs a parallel government (*Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland*) for Eastern Nagaland, which interestingly has almost the same frontiers as the *Nagalim* claimed by the Muivah faction, with the help of Kitovi Zhimomi (General Secretary of NSCN-K) and Akaho Asumi (Publicity Secretary), both also leading home bases in Burma/Myanmar's Sagaing Division. But while Swu and Muivah have lived in voluntary exile for more than 30 years (first in Europe and later in Thailand), Khaplang has led his fight from his Burmese stronghold, rarely leaving it.

The ULFA, after years of joint criminal actions, rapidly became one of the deadliest opponent to the NSCN-IM. Despite having

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<sup>151</sup> Sashinungla, *Nagaland : the Dynamics of Extortion*, SAIR, Volume 2, Issue 22, December 15, 2003.

been trained by the *Kachin Independence Army* (from 1986) thanks to the mediation of the then unified NSCN, the ULFA came closer to the Khaplang faction after 1988-89. In 1990, it took part to the *Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front* (IBRF) along with the NSCN-K, the CNF, the UNLF and the KNF and competed with the NSCN-IM extortion and drug activities. The fact that the NSCN-IM claimed parts of Assam for its Greater Nagaland (*Nagalim*) unleashed waves of bloody reactions from the ULFA which warned the Naga rebels against any expansionism towards the Bhrmaputra Valley. In May 1998, it even published an official warning to the NSCN-IM leaders if they “tried to meddle with the territorial integrity and political sovereignty” of the people of Assam, following the assassination of ULFA’s Finance Secretary’s brother by the Nagas.<sup>152</sup>

Also, the successive military commanders based in the Northeast began to complain that despite the agreement reached between the Centre and the Nagas, neither the NSCN-IM, nor the NSCN-K, nor their puppet outfits in Manipur or Tripura, have surrendered their weapons. Quite the contrary, huge stockpiles of light arms (AK-type rifles, rocket launchers, explosives...) have been amassed in Naga-dominated strongholds, threatening the long-term security of the region. The Union and state governments have tried to raise the issue, but all the outfits stand firm. Moreover, it appears that the Nagas are still trying to modernize and increase their weaponry, while only few seizures by the Indian police or armed forces come to reduce the trend<sup>153</sup>.

They have always found across the Indo-Burma border some assistance in arm trafficking. The Karens (*Karen National Union*), fighting against the Burmese Central government since 1947, have

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<sup>152</sup> The Sentinel, *Don't Infringe on Assam's Territory : ULFA to NSCN(IM)*, May 15, 1998.

<sup>153</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Running Guns in India's Northeast*, SAIR, 2002, op. cit..

been one of the main underground go-between between the Indochina weapon market and the Northeast insurgent outfits, as well as the Tamil Tigers (LTTE, controlling many sea routes in the Indian Ocean) and the *Communist Party of Burma* (stationed in Yunnan). More and more, the NSCN-IM seems to have ventured into the Chinese illegal arm bazaar (created by few corrupted Chinese officers, especially in the South West province of Yunnan and Tibet). The seizure of the largest-ever consignment of illegal arms and ammunition by the Bangladesh authorities in April 2004 confirmed that trend. Thousands of Korean and Chinese weapons and explosives about to be dispatched in Bangladesh and in the Northeast were discovered in the port of Chittagong. Reportedly, the NSCN-IM was one of the main broker of the consignment which originated from Hong Kong via Singapore, and might have been dealt in Kunming (the Nagas having a liaison there) or in Manila (through the NSCN-IM Chief Procurement Officer, Anthony Shimray, based in the Philippines).<sup>154</sup> The question is to know why the Naga movement is still believed to prefer keeping its arsenal despite the gradual peace process. It appears that both Muivah and Swu are not any more as respected as they were at home. A younger generation of Naga ultras (within Nagaland, as the NSCN-IM main support is to be found outside, especially in Manipur) seems to develop a counter force growing more and more independently from the old leaders, a younger generation which has benefited from the criminal activities organised in the region and has no interest in any peaceful resolution of the conflict. As insurgency now fuels criminality, and criminality enriches insurgent outfits, there is no reason to halt this vicious circle in Nagaland.

## **b. ULFA and its Henchmen**

Along with the Naga rebels which enter the armed struggle three decades before them, the Assamese ultras of the ULFA (*United*

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<sup>154</sup> Anthony Davis, *New Details Emerge on Bangladesh Arms' Haul*, Jane's Intelligence Review (JIR), September 2004.

*Liberation Front of Asom*) became the second deadliest and most powerful insurgent outfits in the entire region. Getting more and more criminalised with the passage of time, it has too based its power on a huge financial empire sustained by extortion, individual rackets, robbery, parallel taxation and drug and arms trafficking. Easy money has become one of the major concerns of the insurgent group. By issuing simple threats to businessmen, taking punitive action against notables and testing its strength against politicians,<sup>155</sup> ULFA (as well as many other Northeastern militants groups), have managed to build a colossal economic empire with extortion at its core.<sup>156</sup>

Hit-and-run operations all over Assam, often with the connivance of its allies (ANVC of Meghalaya, NSCN-IM, which was its mentor at the beginning and is now its fiercest enemy, as well as others), as also in other states, enables ULFA to control many of the trafficking routes in the area.<sup>157</sup> The degeneration of the outfit, now devoid of any cultural ideology, into a purely terrorist group, led even the United States government to add it to its endless list of terrorist organisations in 2004.<sup>158</sup> The “*Robin Hood*” image it had gained in the 1980s has vanished now as it only seeks to enrich itself. Reduced to mere criminals, ULFA ultras are responsible for approximately 200 deaths per year (mainly security forces and internal conflicts). Abductions are a common tool either to get money or to satisfy a claim : 97 high-level and rich persons were kidnapped in 2002, 175 in 2003<sup>159</sup>. Even the publication “*Freedom*”

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<sup>155</sup> Anindita Dasgupta, *Political Violence in Assam*, IPCS Article No.470, 26 February 2001.

<sup>156</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1994, pp 185-186.

<sup>157</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Assam: ULFA's Routes of Terror*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 08, September 09, 2002.

<sup>158</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *Will ULFA Wilt Under US Heat?* IPCS Article No. 1737, May 10, 2005.

<sup>159</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Assam : Abductions : a challenge to peace*, SAIR, Volume 2, Issue 47, June 07, 2004.

(*Swadhinata*), its mouthpiece, has cut down its criticism against “outsiders”, tacitly admitting that migrant workers can also be useful to the state’s economy.<sup>160</sup> Yet, despite losing most of its influence with other rival outfits,<sup>161</sup> it still has a strong nuisance value and has been able to rebuild its network and bases after the crackdown by Bhutan in 2003.<sup>162</sup>

The Surrender-ULFA (SULFA) created by the negotiated 1998 package also entered the stream of illegal activities in Assam. Indeed, most of the government rehabilitated insurgents soon returned underground. If a few thousand militants surrendered their weapons by the end of the 1990s, the SULFAs did not really enter the mainstream as most of them were used in counter-insurgency operations.<sup>163</sup> This tactic of using surrendered insurgents against their former associates, since they knew their hideouts and other secrets, proved to be a success to some extent. New Delhi’s insurgency and counter-insurgency policy in Assam was often rash and laced restraint and, consequently, impeded the peaceful solution of the conflict.

Indeed, this strategy often slipped out of the Indian government’s control (not always voluntarily). The SULFAs too have become a bunch of thugs involved in illegal activities, extortion and smuggling and the loans granted to them under the 1998 scheme were used to feed the parallel economy (and were never returned in most cases). Even though most of the rehabilitated militants may have maintained a low profile since their surrender,<sup>164</sup> many of them participate in both counter-insurgency measures

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<sup>160</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Negotiating with Terror: The Case of ULFA*, IPCS Article No. 595, October 7, 2001.

<sup>161</sup> The Assam Tribune, *ULFA running out of allies*, January 24, 2005.

<sup>162</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *ULFA: Defying Prophecies of Doom*, IPCS Article No. 1698, April 15, 2005.

<sup>163</sup> Faultlines, *SULFA: Terror by Another Name*, Volume 9, Article 1, July 2001, pp 1-37.

<sup>164</sup> Tehelka, *For Them, Life's a Dead-End*, Volume 2, Issue 7, February 19, 2005.

(intimidation, spying and killing) and in the underground economy. Also, SULFA is reportedly playing Godfather and controlling even legal economic activities like the coal and transportation sectors in Assam thanks to its connections in the state government.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, an interesting parallel could be drawn with Burma (Myanmar) torn apart by a five decade long ethnic insurgency. The new junta that came to power in 1988 (the Burman-dominated SLORC-SPDC) managed to sign 17 peace deals with some ethnic minorities (Was, Kokaungs, Kachins, Palaungs, Mons...). It has also managed to recruit elements from the remaining armed opponents (Karens, Karennis...) to be used against their former colleagues. For instance, the *Democratic Karen Buddhist Army* (DKBA), made up of Karen Buddhist fighters, has been fighting along with the SLORC-SPDC, the Christian-dominated *Karen National Union* (KNU) since 1994. Besides, the DKBA is well known for its parallel activities aimed at financing this proxy war (drug trafficking, car smuggling with Thailand...) tacitly condoned by the Burmese military regime.

However, the messy situation (both in Burma and in the Northeast) remains a potential threat to the stability of the region. New antagonisms that have surfaced are not likely to lead to a solution as the Assamese youth finds itself caught between ULFA, which still has the power to attract the young,<sup>166</sup> and the “legal mainstream” offering vast “illegal” opportunities to which the government tends to turn a blind eye. Moreover, since the economic development spurred by the liberalisation launched in 1991 by the Narasimha Rao government at the Centre has not boosted Assam’s economy and trade, poverty

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<sup>165</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Surrendered Militants in the Northeast: Outlived Utilities*, IPCS Article No. 789, July 08, 2002.

<sup>166</sup> R. Upadhyay, *United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA): A Deviated Movement?* South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No.1307, March 03, 2005.



and illegal migration have created a fertile breeding ground for recruits for ULFA.<sup>167</sup>

Other militant groups have surfed on the insurgency wave in Assam, first through the agitation created by the Assam Movement in the early 1980s, then through the criminal dynamics of the 1990s.

The *United People's Democratic Solidarity* (UPDS), a Karbi outfit born out of the merger of the *Karbi National Volunteers* (KNV, formed in the 1980s) and the *Karbi People's Front* (KPF) in 1999, demands the recognition of the Karbi identity (a hill tribe from Lower Assam).<sup>168</sup> It worked closely with the NSCN-IM and the NDFB in the early stages, but reduced its activities in 2002 when it started a negotiation process with New Delhi (with some ultras inevitably refusing to join it and splitting off...)<sup>169</sup> Besides, it is tragically involved in ethnic clashes with other small tribes of the region (South Assam bordering Nagaland), notably the Kukis and the Dimasas.<sup>170</sup>

On its side, the Dimasa ethnic group, headed by the *Dima Halim Daoga* (DHD), a remnant of the *Dimasa National Security Force* (DNSF which gave up its armed struggle in 1995), is fighting for a Dimaland (*Dimaraji*) in the remote North Cachar Hills. Helped by the Muivah faction of the Nagas elated at the idea of having another pawn outside Nagaland, it nevertheless concluded a cease-fire in January 2003 (which has been regularly extended).<sup>171</sup> Its

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<sup>167</sup> Dilip Gogoi, *Quest for Swadhin Asom: explaining insurgency and role of the State in Assam*, in Dipankar Sengupta & Sudhir Kumar Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India – The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2004, pp 37-57 (esp. page 51).

<sup>168</sup> Frontline, *Reinventing Identities*, Volume 21, Issue 11, May 22, 2004.

<sup>169</sup> Frontline, *In the Mood for Talks*, Volume 20, Issue 01, January 18, 2003.

<sup>170</sup> The Hindu, *500 Hmar tribals flee to Manipur*, April 14, 2003.

<sup>171</sup> The Hindu, *Truce Extended*, December 29, 2004.

position has been weakened by a growing disagreement with its former mentor, the NSCN-IM who wanted to include *Dimaland* in its *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland).<sup>172</sup>

The *Katamapur Liberation Organisation* (KLO), founded in 1995, has always preferred to work with ULFA. Located in the area adjoining one of ULFA's stronghold in Western Assam, it had a strategic value for the powerful Assamese outfit which, by financing and training the KLO, intended to get a foothold in the areas under its control in the northern part of West Bengal and in Lower Assam (so as to be able to cross easily into Bhutan). The Katamapur state claimed for the Koch'Rajbonghi ethnic sub-group by the KLO covers four districts of Assam and six of Bengal. But the arrest of its Chairman in 1999 constituted a serious setback for the organisation which now concentrates on its extortion business. Because of its network, it is reported to have been hired by ULFA militants to carry out operations after the Bhutan crackdown in December 2003.<sup>173</sup>

The *H'mar People's Convention* (HPC), representing the interests of the tiny H'mar community (comprising of less than 15,000 persons tucked away in Southern Mizoram), also established its bases in Southern Assam<sup>174</sup> and is currently working with the BNLf (Mizoram) and the PLA (Manipur). However, it is only demanding an autonomous status.<sup>175</sup>

Other small groups were formed only to defend themselves against ethnic cleansing perpetuated by more powerful xenophobic outfits:

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<sup>172</sup> The Northeast Sun, *Cachar cries for peace*, April 15-30, 2003.

<sup>173</sup> Frontline, *A ruthless hit squad*, Volume 21, Issue 01, January 03, 2004.

<sup>174</sup> Rediff.com, *22 villagers killed in Assam*, April 04, 2003.

<sup>175</sup> North East News Agency, *Will terrorism surface in Mizoram again?* Volume 1, Issue 44-45, April 7-21, 1999.

the *Bengali Tiger Force* (since Bengalis were the main scapegoats in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura), the *Gurkhas Tiger Force* (for protecting the large Nepali-Gurkha community's economic assets scattered in India's Northeast) and the *Adivasi Security Force* (having a revolutionary socialist ideology set up for protecting the aboriginal peoples of the region).

Finally, Islamic militancy too has reached India's Northeast. Even though very little is known about them, Islamic militants influenced by Bangladesh's internal turmoil and the Pakistani Secret Services (ISI) have mushroomed in this area.<sup>176</sup> Of the 15-odd Islamic outfits, the *Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam* (MULTA), formed in 1993, appears to be the most motivated and credible. Also demanding a separate state (comprising of the five Muslim-dominated districts of Assam) and aiming to protect the Muslims of Assam, it is part of the *All Muslim Liberation Forum of Assam* (AMULFA) and may have some links with the NSCN-IM. But its main supporters remain Pakistan and Bangladesh where it has its bases (down in Cox's Bazar).<sup>177</sup>

### **c. Arunachal Pradesh : corruption of the Dawn-lit Mountains ?**

Though it is one of the two areas disputed by India and China (the other being the Aksai Chin in the Kashmir region), Arunachal Pradesh was till recently the most peaceful part of India's Northeast as far as internal insurgencies are concerned. Between its creation in 1972 as a Union Territory and its transformation into a full-fledged state in 1987, it experienced very few internal tensions. But gradually, the "*Land of the Dawn-lit Mountains*" became affected by the region's turmoil with the neighbouring Naga and Assamese rebellions spreading northwards. Indeed, since the late

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<sup>176</sup> The Sentinel, *ISI-sponsored outfits training up MULTA in Bangladesh*, May 18, 2003.

<sup>177</sup> For more details, see Jaideep Saikia's well documented book, *Islamist Militancy in Northeast India*, New Delhi, Vision Books, 2004, 224p.

eighties, militant movements in the neighbouring states of Assam and Nagaland have begun to openly use the remote hills and high mountains of Arunachal Pradesh both as a base and a corridor.

While the western part of the state near the Kingdom of Bhutan has often been used as a shelter by groups like Assam's *United Liberation Front of Asom* (ULFA) and, more recently, the Bodos (NDFB and BLT), the eastern part has become one of the most effective transit routes to Burma (Myanmar) and a huge source for extortion, illegal trade and recruitment. The tiny Tirap and Changlang districts, lying between Nagaland and the northwestern corner of the Burmese Sagaing Division, are the main gateway to Burma. This is where the famous *Ledo Road* (or *Stillwell Road*), which was once the main historic link between Assam and the Chinese Province of Yunnan further east, begins. While its starting point is in Assam (the town of Ledo), the road passes through Arunachal Pradesh until it reaches the Paunglaw Pass (formerly known as the *Hell's Pass*) at the Burmese border.<sup>178</sup> The Tirap and Changlang districts have faced greater instability with the increasing criminalisation of Naga and Assamese outfits.<sup>179</sup> Being an old stronghold of the Burmese faction of the Naga insurgency (NSCN-K),<sup>180</sup> these areas became embroiled in the rivalry between S.S. Khaplang and Th. Muivah (NSCN-IM) to gain control of the drug and arms routes. Moreover, the ULFA, which has one of its main centres in Assam's Tinsukia region (where Ledo lies), has

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<sup>178</sup> As a result, a permit is required from the Indian government to go to this Indo-Burmese check-point. While travelling is free within Assam, visits to Arunachal Pradesh need an Inner Line Permit (for Indian Nationals) or a Protected Area Permit (for Foreign Nationals). Hence to travel along the 40km long stretch of the Ledo Road in Arunachal Pradesh it is necessary to obtain a special permit from New Delhi. Personal Fieldwork in Assam (Ledo, Margherita and Lekhapani), March 2003.

<sup>179</sup> The Assam Tribune, *Insurgency on the Rise in Arunachal Pradesh*, Guwahati, April 03, 2002. See also Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Growing Tentacles of Insurgency in Arunachal Pradesh*, IPCS Article No. 783, July 03, 2002.

<sup>180</sup> The Hindu, *Crime and Punishment in Arunachal Pradesh*, October 12, 2002.

also used Eastern Arunachal as a safe zone to hide its training camps and to squeeze the local population.<sup>181</sup>

In addition to the incursion of older and “external” insurgencies into Arunachal Pradesh,<sup>182</sup> there was a spurt in internal separatist dynamics and the Arunachalese identity struggle. According to the 2001 Census, Arunachal Pradesh has a population of only 1.1 million of which only 65% are “local” tribes and communities (about a hundred) having different creeds and languages but with a common Tibeto-Burmese identity. The main tribes are the Adis (who have controlled the state politically since its creation), the Mishis and the Monpas. One of the best known indigenous outfits to have turned violent is the *Arunachal Dragon Force* (ADF), officially fighting in eastern Arunachal Pradesh against the domination of the Adi tribe. But most of the militant groups in the state have directed their struggle against the non-indigenous population, the representatives of the Indian government and immigrants in particular.

Indeed, 35% of the 1.1 million Arunachalese include a large number of immigrants from mainland India (Hindi and Bengali speakers mostly), Assam, Nagaland and even Bangladesh. The Buddhist Chakma community, a Mongoloid tribe having its origins in the *Chittagong Hill Tracts* (CHT, southeast of Bangladesh) and thus heavily influenced by Bengali culture and language, had to face strong discrimination from the then East Pakistan government (1947-71). In 1964-65, 100,000 Chakmas were forcibly displaced to the neighbouring India and 35,000 of them found shelter in Arunachal Pradesh (which was still known as the *North Eastern Frontier Agency*), the area the most under Buddhist influence in the Northeast. Thirty years later, about 65,000 Chakmas were living

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<sup>181</sup> Rediff.com, *NSCN-IM helping rebel groups in Arunachal Pradesh*, Guwahati, August 06, 2001.

<sup>182</sup> The Hindustan Times, *Coping with refugees*, December 16, 2004.

in the state with a legal identity status granted by the Indian government (they have been thus given Indian citizenship and the right to vote). But social conflicts began to grow between the indigenous people and these “external elements” (even though Buddhist) threatening the Arunachalese.<sup>183</sup>

In 1980, the Chakmas (as well as the Hajongs, a Hindu tribe of Bangladesh, also displaced in the 1960s) were officially banned from state government jobs. In the 1990s, the refugee camps set up three decades before were gradually dismantled.<sup>184</sup> The *All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union* (AAPSU) even launched a strong racist campaign (*Quit Arunachal Pradesh*) against the Chakmas and Hajongs with a series of demonstrations, economic blockades and sporadic acts of violence. The ADF (also known as the *East India Liberation Front* – EILF together with a few other outfits who joined their camp) firmly supported the AAPSU's campaign by using violence against these communities who have been increasingly trying to smuggle arms from Bangladesh into Arunachal Pradesh to defend themselves by military means.<sup>185</sup>

However, the *Arunachal Dragon Force* (ADF or EILF) is the only insurgent outfit capable of posing a security threat in the region, the other being too minor. Officially formed in 1996 by Chaw Nawmee Namsoon,<sup>186</sup> the ADF has launched a struggle to rebuild a state that existed in pre-British times (the *Teola* country) for the local tribes

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<sup>183</sup> M. Amarjeet Singh, *Arunachal Pradesh: the Chakma-Hajong Refugee Crisis*, IPCS Article No. 1687, March 30, 2005.

<sup>184</sup> South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, *Chakmas and Hajongs denied their rightful place in Arunachal Pradesh*, HRF/42/01, New Delhi, August 06, 2001.

<sup>185</sup> Paolienlal Haokip, *Refugees and Security: the Cases of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram*, IPCS Article No.1157, September 19, 2003.

<sup>186</sup> Or Chownomee Namchumoo, who was captured during Operation All Clear in Bhutan on December 20, 2003. Frontline, *The view from New Delhi*, Volume 21, Issue 01, January 03, 2004.

of T'ai origin (essentially T'ai-Khamtis) of Arunachal Pradesh, Tibet and the Kachin state (Burma). Its main force (currently only 50-100 armed cadres, but having connections with the ULFA and, interestingly, both factions of the NSCN) operates from the Lohit, Dibang (Arunachal) and Tinsukia (Assam) districts. Some reports claim that the ADF was trained by ULFA cadres in Bhutan prior to the December 2003 crackdown (see further). Just to be named, two smaller groups, also with some Naga and ULFA connections, the *National Liberation Front of Arunachal* (NLFA), with its armed branch, the NLAA (A for Army), and the *United People's Volunteers of Arunachal* (UPVA) also operate in the eastern part of the state, but without creating much trouble. In all then, even if Arunachal Pradesh has not yet been through the waves of criminality its neighbours have experienced, it has deeply been affected by the Naga and Assamese turmoil. It appears now that the remote state is on the verge of being corrupted too, by the degeneration of those nationalism (and not by any strong Arunachalese separatism as the Arunachalese identity needs would easily be met).

#### **d. Manipur : Insurgency as a Way of Life**

Manipur might be the best example of an ethnically torn-out state that has slipped into criminality and indiscriminate violence. It faces today a dozen a dreadful insurgencies that have more or less dropped their separatist ideology (if they ever had any) to concentrate on pure criminal activities and terror discourses. Five armed outfits fell under the POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act), thus labelled as "terrorist organizations" : The KCP, the PLA, the PREPAK, the UNLF-M and the KYKL.

Currently, the most dreadful of all, the *Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup* (KYKL), is the perfect example of criminalised outfit following an irrational ideology. It was born in January 1994 as a splinter group of the three main Meitei groups by uniting their dissidents. The KYKL brought together the UNLF-Oken faction, the KCP-

Ibo Pishah faction and the PREPAK-Meiraba faction into a single political and military organisation, which claimed to be the guarantor of the Manipuri Revolution. Convinced that the former socialist Meitei armed militants had lost their original motivation, they proposed to “*Save the Revolution Movement in Manipur*” (the exact translation of K-Y-K-L) and launched a virulent moral campaign in the state.<sup>187</sup> Supported by the NSCN-IM which has trained and armed 200 to 300 ultras (Muivah was close to Oken who broke away from the UNLF which was close to the NSCN-K), the KYKL, whose activities are financed by taxation and extortion, has gunned down many people and is responsible for a large number abductions and mutilations since 1994.<sup>188</sup> Having a lot of sympathisers, especially among the youth, it claims to safeguard the people from corruption, bribery, cheating, misbehaviour and addiction.<sup>189</sup>

On December 13, 2004, the Vice-Chancellor of *Manipur University*, Pr. N. Bijoy Singh and the Registrar, Dr. R.K. Ranjan Singh, were kidnapped by KYKL militants wanting to “punish” them for not having followed the rules while appointing a reportedly ‘corrupted’ junior official of the University.<sup>190</sup> Five days later, they were both released with a bullet in the left leg as a punishment.<sup>191</sup> Since its creation in 1980, the *Manipur University* has been the target of many insurgents groups, both

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<sup>187</sup> The Sangai Express, *KYKL gives thought on politics of revolution*, April 25, 2005.

<sup>188</sup> The Sangai Express, *KYKL to embark on a new tax policy*, April, 25, 2005.

<sup>189</sup> The Times of India, *N-E outfit on death sentence spree*, April 26, 2005 and Wasbir Hussain, *Manipur: rebels as moral police*, IPCS Article No.1667, March 10, 2005.

<sup>190</sup> Author’s meetings with Pr. N. Bijoy Singh and Ranjan Singh, Imphal, March 2005. For more details see The Deccan Herald, *Manipur ultras ‘punish’ varsity VC, registrar*, December 19, 2004. Also, Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Manipur: Rampaging militants, mute State*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 26, January 10, 2005.

<sup>191</sup> The Assam Tribune, *Manipur varsity VC, Registrar released*, December 19, 2004 and Rediff.com, *Abducted Manipur officials released*, December 18, 2004.



because it is a vast breeding ground for recruitment of militants as well as an easy prey with frustrated students trying to escape from the exasperating conditions of insurgency in Manipur.<sup>192</sup> The latest outfit came to light in 2005, when it ignominiously burnt down the Manipur State Central Library destroying more than 145,000 books including old manuscripts. The dreadful act was committed to create awareness among the public and to draw attention to the campaign launched by the *Meitei Erol Eyek Loinshillon Apunba Lup* (MEELAL – *United Forum for Safeguarding Manipuri Script and Language*) to ban the Bengali script and replace it with the indigenous Meitei Mayek script for the Manipuri written language.<sup>193</sup>

Today, Manipur is the most disturbed state in the Northeast with thousands of armed ultras.<sup>194</sup> In a constant state of siege, it has become the focus of all the frustration of India's Northeast: the struggle for recognition, fratricidal ethnic clashes, a lawless morality campaign, criminal activities... Besides, with the state and Union governments increasingly relying on military options,<sup>195</sup> unspeakable excesses have become legion. The rape and death of Thangjam Manorama Devi, a 32 year-old woman and former PLA cadre arrested by the Assam Rifles in July

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<sup>192</sup> Between March 14-19, 2005, the author was invited to give a series of lectures on India-Myanmar relations at Manipur University (<http://www.cgretcau.com/seminars.htm>). Various meetings with professors, scholars and students, as well as with the convalescent Vice-Chancellor (N. Bijoy Singh) and Registrar (R.K. Ranjan Singh) brought to light this frustration and terror-infested daily life.

<sup>193</sup> Despite the fact that the Manipuri language was recognised as an official language of India by the Union government in 1992. Outlook India, *An incendiary script*, April 26, 2005.

<sup>194</sup> 19,590 in 2001 according to Indian intelligence reports, quoted by Phanjoubam Tarabot, *Bleeding Manipur*, New Delhi, Har Anand Publications, 2003, page 178. See also Wasbir Hussain, *Manipur : Rebels in Top Gear*, SAIR, Volume 2, Issue 32, February 23, 2004.

<sup>195</sup> The author was allowed to travel to Manipur (March 13-20, 2005), but confined to the Imphal Greater Municipality area by the *Protected Area Permit* granted by the central government. Imphal was by that time strongly marked by the overwhelming presence of security forces criss-crossing the streets of the capital, daily hit by strikes and demonstrations.

2004,<sup>196</sup> illustrates New Delhi's complete failure to understand the political situation in Manipur.<sup>197</sup> The event sparked off an instant uprising among the Manipuri population and these demonstrations were ruthlessly repressed by the Indian security forces.<sup>198</sup> The complete mismanagement of the crisis by the Manmohan Singh government in distant New Delhi further infuriated the population tired of repeated atrocities.<sup>199</sup>

The highly praised decision to hand over the historic Kangla Fort (Imphal) to the Manipur state government on November 20, 2004 after 113 years in the hands of the British and then the Indian government (through the Assam Rifles) did not pacify the region.<sup>200</sup> With local NGOs close to some insurgent groups, MLAs in collusion with others, intellectuals targeted, businessmen involved in rackets and the Union government's totally ill-timed and off-the-mark declarations,<sup>201</sup> Manipur became the poorest relation of India, with the highest number of HIV-AIDS-related cases in the whole country,<sup>202</sup> appalling economic backwardness and social

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<sup>196</sup> B. Raman, *Manipur: the looming implosion*, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No.1082, August 09, 2004.

<sup>197</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *Manipur: impeding collapse of governance*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 4, August 09, 2004.

<sup>198</sup> The tough methods used by the state police and the Indian Army were filmed and widely publicised in the country. See the cover story of Frontline, *Manipur on Fire*, Volume 21, Issue 18, August 28, 2004, and all the related articles as well as The Sangai Express, *Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958*, by M. Dhaneshwar Singh, August 10, 2004..

<sup>199</sup> The Union Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, paid a meaningless and incoherent visit to Imphal in September 2004, showing a lack of knowledge about the crisis: Pradip Phanjoubam, *Manipur: mismanaged crisis*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 9, September 13, 2004.

<sup>200</sup> The Sangai Express, *After 113 yrs, Kangla's gate thrown open to people of Manipur*, November 20, 2004 and The Hindu, *Manmohan reaches out to Manipuris*, November 21, 2004. Also : Frontline, *Rediscovering a Heritage*, Volume 22, Issue 18, August 27, 2005.

<sup>201</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Manipur: Terrorist diktats rule*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 35, March 14, 2005.

<sup>202</sup> Pr. Brajachand Singh, *Drug Abuse and AIDS Menace in Manipur*, in Gopalakrishnan & al. (Ed.), *Constraints in Development of Manipur*, New Delhi, Rengency Publications, 2001, pp 66-75.

distress and a constant state of insecurity.<sup>203</sup> “*Insurgency is a part of our life!*” a MU Professor said casually.<sup>204</sup> A despairingly true observation.

### **e. Enters Meghalaya and Tripura : New Dynamics of Criminality**

Since it became an autonomous state (1970) and then a full-fledged state (1972), Meghalaya was one of the less troubled of the “Seven Sisters”. Carved out of Assam after a non-violent political movement that lasted several years, the “*Abode of the Clouds*” has experienced increasing instability since the late 1980s. The state consists of three main ethnic groups: the Garos, who have a Tibeto-Burman background and represent 33% of Meghalaya’s population (western hills), the Khasis (or Mon-Khmers of Central Meghalaya who account for 40% of the population) and the Jaintias (also Mon-Khmer but from Eastern Meghalaya who form 10% of the population). An economically powerful non-tribal population (Punjabis, Bengalis and Nepalis) has also settled down in the state over the years.

Besides, 70% of the 2.3 million people (2001 census) are Christians. Like Assam and Tripura, Meghalaya has experienced a substantial demographic and economic transformation with Bengali and Nepali workers entering the state, much to the discontent of the local tribal population. But the political agitation really exploded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the early stages, only the influential *Khasi Students’ Union* (KSU) held demonstrations and fuelled social unrest along with the *Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People* (FKJGP), while the rest of the Northeast started a general political protest movement (1978-80). A second source of instability within Meghalaya, like everywhere

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<sup>203</sup> Rani Pathak, *Manipur: law versus outlaws*, IPCS Article n°1453, August 06, 2004.

<sup>204</sup> Various meetings, Manipur University, Imphal, March 2005.

else in the Northeast, was the criminalisation of the new-born militants groups in a situation of economic backwardness and due to their relations among themselves.

The first militant outfit, which proved to be a powerful agitator, was formed by Vincent A. Sangma in September 1989. Called the *Hynniewtrep A'chik Liberation Council* (HALC), it swiftly forged a huge extortion empire in order to build a strong well-armed militant group with help from the neighbouring NSCN-IM, which in return reaped the benefits of the parallel economy created by the separatist outfit (smuggling of counterfeit currency, extortion...).<sup>205</sup> However, once again, internal rivalries led to a split in the HALC in 1992 with the creation of two new outfits: the *Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council* (HNLC) and the *A'chik Liberation Matgrik Army* (ALMA), now rivals because the predominantly Khasi (with some Jaintias elements) HNLC is strongly opposed to the Garo-dominated ALMA. Officially, the HNLC declared that it was fighting for a “*Bri Hynniewtrep*”, a tribal Khasi sovereign homeland, free from foreign influence (i.e. Bengali, Nepali and “neo-colonialist” Hindi-speakers from mainland India) and, at the same time, from the political domination of the Garos. Its chairman, Julius K. Dorphang, who is close to Muivah (nonetheless, the NSCN-IM has maintained its links with both the new outfits...), has reportedly set up a secure base in Bangladesh. On its side, the ALMA, clearly a Garo outfit, continued to struggle with its powerful rival until its eventual collapse in October 1994 when most of its leaders surrendered to government forces.

However, a year later, the NSCN-IM organised a spectacular jailbreak from the Shillong prison to free a group of Naga militants along with some former ALMA Garo cadres. In December 1995, under the

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<sup>205</sup> Sashinungla, *Meghalaya: Extortion Dynamics*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 40, April 19, 2004.

leadership of Vincent Momin, they formed out of the ashes of the ALMA the *A'chik National Volunteers Council* (ANVC), which is today the main opponent of HNLC and demands the creation of a 'Garoland' carved out of Meghalaya and Assam. With a military strength of 250 cadres, the ANVC has established close links with ULFA and the NDFB, particularly since December 2003 when the crackdown on Assamese and Bodo rebels in Bhutan forced the terrorist groups to relocate their camps. Apparently, the Garo Hills controlled by the ANVC were about to become a new safe heaven for those militants, which was not the case earlier as the ANVC had asked the NFBD to withdraw from Meghalaya in April 2003 after clashes between the rivals.<sup>206</sup> Besides, according to Indian intelligence sources, the ANVC may have set up three camps on Bangladeshi soil where its two principal leaders (Dilash R. Marak, Chairman, and Vincent Momin, Army Commander) easily found shelter.

After 1995, both the HNLC and ANVC launched a widespread extortion campaign, harassing not only businessmen but also members of rival tribes, government and army officials as well as immigrant workers. As every effort to settle the issue between the state and the rebels failed, the Church tried to get involved in the conflict. The *Shillong Khasi Jaintia Church Leaders' Forum* proposed to act as a mediator but the negotiations were quickly brought to an end by the HNLC.<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless, the ANVC accepted the idea and this led to several other mediation efforts (for instance, the Mizoram Chief Minister and the Director of the Intelligence Bureau in New Delhi who both met ANVC leaders in Bangkok in January 2003). A cease-fire was finally reached in July 2004.<sup>208</sup> But the instability persists since some

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<sup>206</sup> The Northeast Sun, *ANVC-NDFB Break-Off!* April 15-30, 2003.

<sup>207</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Meghalaya, a Victim of Insolent Insurgencies*, IPCS Article No.856, September 12, 2002.

<sup>208</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *Meghalaya - Truce on Track*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 2, July 26, 2004.

younger cadres of the ANVC as well as the HNLC continue their extortion and smuggling activities and the numerous changes of government in Shillong have slowed down the reconciliation process.<sup>209</sup> These constant frustrations gave rise to the birth of many smaller militant outfits attracted by the prospect of making easy money without having a clear-cut ideology.

The *Retrieval Indigenous Unified Front* (RIUF), bringing together Khasi and Bodo militants, is one such outfit. Linked to the NDFB which helped in its creation, it has set up another parallel sub-economy in the northern part of Meghalaya, as well as the *North-East Red Army* (NERA), hidden in the Khasi Hills. But the death of its Commander in 2001 interrupted its activities. However, it was probably reborn under a new name: *Hynniewtrep National Special Red Army* (HNSRA). Indeed, this small armed group became public in July 2004 when it announced that it would militarily oppose the setting up of Indian firms in Meghalaya (especially to prospect for uranium with the *Uranium Corporation of India Ltd* as its main target). It also regularly calls for a total *bandh* in the state. Other tiny militant outfits that benefit by the situation are the *People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya* (PLF-M, formed by rehabilitated ALMA fighters disillusioned after the 1995 events but weakened by the killing of their leader by rival ANVC rebels in 2002), the *United A'chik National Front* (UANF, which might possibly be a resurgence of the PLF-M in the Garo Hills), the *P'nar Liberation Army* (PnLA, fighting for the Jaintia identity)<sup>210</sup> and the *Hajong United Liberation Army* (HULA, created with the support of the NDFB).

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<sup>209</sup> Frontline, *Once more in Meghalaya*, Volume 18, Issue 26, December 22, 2001.

<sup>210</sup> The Assam Tribune, *The Khasi-Pnar and Karbi conflict*, January 29, 2004.

Although Meghalaya once appeared to be the safest and most developed region of the Northeast,<sup>211</sup> with tourism contributing to the state's growth (as neither Indian nor foreign nationals need a permit to enter and visit the state), it is now controlled by several criminal outfits running parallel economies<sup>212</sup> and increasingly destabilising the area because of their connections with neighbouring militant groups (ULFA, NSCN-IM and NDFB) as well as with Bangladesh, on which they heavily rely (benefiting from the borders). As the military operations launched by the Indian Army (Operation Birdie in 1997 and Operation All Clear in 2003) have proved to be unsuccessful, the State might too entered a long period of destabilization.

Tripura also became a seat of criminality. Both the *All Tripura Tiger Force* (ATTF, created in 1990) and the *National Liberation Front of Tripura* (NLFT, formed in 1989), soon created a climate of terror in the state. Losing credibility and support from the local population (despite their approval of the "anti-foreigner" stance promoted), they had to find parallel source of 'income' and thus launched a series of operations involving abduction, murder, harassment and extortion in cities as well as in rural areas. Both have established underground military connections with groups struggling too against the Indian authorities such as the Nagas (the Khaplang faction for the ATTF), the ULFA, the PREPAK, the PLA and UNLF of Manipur.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> R. Gopalakrishnan & al., *Voluntary Organisations and Sustainable Rural Development in Meghalaya*, New Delhi, Regency Publications, 2001, 54p. Discussion of the author with R. Gopalakrishnan, Professor of Political Geography, *North-East Hills University* (NEHU), Shillong, March 2003.

<sup>212</sup> Outlook India, *Meghalaya: Pay Up or Else...*, New Delhi, April 19, 2004, and The Telegraph, *Shillong Traders under Scanner for Militant Link*, Calcutta, October 25, 2004.

<sup>213</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Running Guns in India's Northeast*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 17, November 11, 2002.

Interestingly, pornography has become a great source of finance for the Tripuri outfits. While other criminal groups in Manipur or Nagaland (KYKL for instance) violent denounce pornography as threat to local culture and society, both the ATTF and NLFT are promoting and using it as a tool in their propaganda. In August 2005, movies involving NLFT cadres were unearthed by local journalists.<sup>214</sup> The tribal separatists have been forcing women (abducted or even female members of the outfit) to act in porn movies shot in the jungles or even in Agartala, Tripura's capital. Dubbed in Hindi, Burmese, Thai and even Japanese, many of these films are sold in mainland India (along with "blue movies" in Palika Bazaar in CP, New Delhi, for instance) and abroad.<sup>215</sup> Raising funds through porn has nevertheless been cantoned to Tripura as elsewhere in the Northeast, porn actor/actress, producers or even watchers are often shot in the legs by militants who usually oppose it.<sup>216</sup> Besides, a wide women trafficking network has been set-up by those insurgent groups between India's Northeast and Thailand (via Burma), many Tripuri and Mizo girls working in Beauty parlour and gogo-bars in Thailand (especially along the Myanmar border)<sup>217</sup>.

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<sup>214</sup> The Hindustan Times, *Tripura rebels use porn to raise funds !*, August 29, 2005.

<sup>215</sup> The Pioneer, *Tripura ultras are new porn kings*, New Delhi, August 29, 2005. Also The Hindustan Times, *Militants mint money by making porn films*, September 10, 2005.

<sup>216</sup> BBC News, *India rebels 'making porn films'*, Calcutta, August 27, 2005.

<sup>217</sup> Anand Kumar, *Tripura : militancy degenerates further*, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper n° 1564, October 04, 2005.



## **Instability at the Gate : India's Troubled Northeast**

### **III . External Connections – Patrons, Troublemakers and Thugs between Assistance and Nuisance**

None of the ethnic insurgency that have risen in the Northeast remained completely self-sufficient and/or isolated. Not only they have built-up intra-regional networks but also developed external linkages in order to sustain their struggle. For the smaller outfits, the support of the oldest and strongest rebellions (Nagas, Mizos, ULFA...) was not enough : finding shelter and fundings across borders became necessary. For more than half a century the external factor has been integral part of the instability despite all the efforts made by the Indian central government not to globalise the issue. Many transnational connections have undermined the management of all the successive crisis of the Northeast and fuelled the ethnic rebellions, but three main aspects of them could be pointed out : the state-sponsored connections, the arms & drugs trafficking and the refugees/migrants flows.

Indeed, many ethnic insurgencies have been state-sponsored : aimed at destabilising India from the inside by conducting a kind of “proxy-war”, some regional powers have deliberately financed, supported and equipped Northeastern guerrillas. China first provided technical and ideological support to the Nagas. After the 1965 War, Pakistan too became more and more involved in the Northeast, beside its strategy in India’s Jammu & Kashmir.

Then, with the increasing criminalisation of the Northeast insurgencies, trafficking has been one of the main source of income of the separatists outfits. Smuggling of weapons and drugs across Burma and Bangladesh borders yield huge profits. Some of the rebels even managed to enhance their capacities by establishing occasional links with other ethnic insurgencies (Kachin, Karens...) or international criminal groups (LTTE, Chinese mafias) and benefiting from their globalized networks.

Lastly, illegal/legal migrations and refugee flows deeply transformed the demographic picture of the Northeast, leading to more civil unrest and opposition. Chin or Rohingyas (Muslim from Arakan) refugees fleeing Burma, Nepali or Bangladeshi economic migrant flooding Assam, Tripura or Meghalaya, human trafficking and extreme poverty have plagued the region.

Aware of the internationalisation of the North-East issue, the successive Indian governments gradually began to include it in India's Regional Policy. While dealing with its neighbours on international issues, India tried to brought in the Northeast instability. Nevertheless, the way New Delhi has been dealing with them has not proved to be that efficient. After years of support, China dropped its involvement in the Northeast in the late 1970s, much to the delight of India. But apparently since the early 2000s, some sino-northeastern linkages have been revived, both India and China failing to address the bone of contention. As far as Pakistan and Bangladesh are concerned, the dialogue of the deaf has never got over, all parties standing firm, most of the time denying while turning a blind eye or exaggerating. Finally, as far as Burma (Myanmar) is concerned, a clumsy policy has been conducted by India, too many expectations being waited from the Burmese Junta by the Indian government and army.

### **a. China – the Old Patron**

On October 2, 1949, the birth of the *People's Republic of China* (PRC) under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung changed the geopolitics of Asia. As a demographic giant (350 million Chinese in 1949) and a powerful nation basking in the glow of its victory against Japan (1945) and the *Kuomintang* nationalist forces of Chang Kai-shek (KMT, 1949), the PRC asserted itself as a new world leader who could not be ignored in international affairs. After having ensured the success of the Communist Revolution in the country (with remaining KMT troops only in Formosa/Taiwan,

Yunnan and Northern Burma), Mao Tse-tung set out to put into effect his great design for China's future. Though the fifth permanent seat in the UN Security Council was given to Taipei and not Beijing, China and its Maoist ideology began to carry weight in the regional arena. During international gatherings such as the New Delhi Conferences (1947 and 1949) or the Bandung Conference (1955), the PRC established itself firmly as a "Third World" leader least inclined to tolerate any regional rival desirous of propagating its own ideological model.

Apart from Tibet, the remaining KMT forces in Yunnan and in the region which would soon be known as the Golden Triangle (Burma-Laos-Thailand) posed the most concrete threat to Beijing on its southern flank in the early 1950s. Due to a UN intervention in 1953 and the development of closer relations between Zhou En-Lai and U Nu, Burma's first Prime Minister, the issue was finally settled thanks to the arrival of the Burmese Army (*Tatmadaw*) in Rangoon to support a caretaker government (1958-60). Military skirmishes along the Sino-Burmese border stopped and the problem of the demarcation of the official 2,171 km border was officially resolved on July 28, 1960 with the signature of the Sino-Burmese Treaty. At the same time, a border settlement was also reached between Beijing and Kathmandu (March 1960) and Nepal, sandwiched between China and India, agreed to remain "neutral". Relations with Jawaharlal Nehru's India (1947-1964) had become rather tense. After a first decade of "*Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai*"<sup>218</sup> marking the pragmatic relationship between the two nascent Asian giants, things turned sour. China increasingly began to promote the spread of Maoist revolutionary principles across the world, not only in Asia, but also in Africa in the process of decolonisation, in European countries facing their first disillusionment with the Soviet regime (Budapest, 1956) and in Latin America. Launching

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<sup>218</sup> "*Indians and Chinese are brothers*" in Hindi.

an ideological campaign and helping all political parties and underground outfits that claimed to follow a Maoist type of ideology, China established itself as a major patron of revolutionary insurgencies and political rebellions across the world. Apart from giving strong political support, Beijing also provided various kinds of financial aid, technical assistance, guerrilla warfare training and military help to many rebels in Asia, and increasingly in India. In return for direct grants and long-term “free” assistance from the Chinese Government and its powerful army (*People's Liberation Army of China* - PLAC), the insurgent groups agreed to promote communist (Maoist) principles and fight for them, support the PRC in its “One China Policy” against Taiwan and oppose the influence of any other power, especially the United States and the USSR, after the rift between Beijing and Moscow (1959). By supporting various Maoist separatist groups, the PRC intended to checkmate the presence of Western “imperialism” and the thrust of Soviet “revisionism” in Asia and also contain the rise of Nehruvian India by defending its southern borders.<sup>219</sup>

Restricting India to South Asia and preventing it from expanding beyond its natural borders (the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean), has been China's firm policy. Firstly, the Sino-Indian borders had not been settled after the birth of the two states. While India stuck to the British demarcation (the 1896 Durand Line in the Western sector and the 1914 McMahon Line in the Eastern sector), China has always refused to accept it. To defuse tension and pursue its credo of friendship in the early 1950s, India recognised Tibet as integral part of the PRC even after the Chinese invasion and the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. The India-China “blitzkrieg” of October-November 1962 further widened the gap between the two countries with China still claiming the *North East Frontier Agency* (NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh) after the PLAC

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<sup>219</sup> Kshitij Prabha, *Terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy*, Indian Defence Review, Volume 15, Issue 1, January 2000, pp 69-74.

troops arrogantly withdrew from the area and from Assam a few days after the invasion.<sup>220</sup>

As far as India's Northeast was concerned, the help China provided to underground groups in the 1950s and 1960s was definitely increased to undermine the region's fragile ethnic framework and destabilise the openly pro-Soviet India. Keeping India busy with rising insurgencies in the Northeast would enable China to have at its disposal a valuable bargaining chip against any Indian move in favour of Tibet's struggle for autonomy. New Delhi, obsessed by the problem of security along the Mac Mahon Line, has suffered since then from a deep inferiority complex towards China which was delighted to wield its influence in areas where the USSR and India are helpless (Northeast India, Northern Burma, Tibet...).

Besides, China's experience in guerrilla warfare became a greater attraction for movements in the Northeast than the concept of "People's War" and Maoist philosophy in general. The Nagas, the first ethnic minority to start a strong separatist struggle against the Indian government, were much inspired by Chinese military strategies in jungle warfare. Indeed, Beijing became the main patron of the *National Naga Council* (NNC). But China remained more of a financial, military and political godfather rather than an ideological patron and the NNC soon adopted a nationalistic socialist-type of philosophy quite different from Maoism. But, being desperately in need of strong economic and military support to avoid being dependent only on the secret services of India's archrival, Pakistan (ISI, which was taking more and more interest in them), the NNC turned to China, which openly welcomed Nagas leaders and even organised a meeting between A.G. Phizo and others Nagas ethnic chiefs in Beijing in the early 1960s.<sup>221</sup> However, the Nagas remained

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<sup>220</sup> For an in-depth analysis, see Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, Random House, London, 2000.

<sup>221</sup> While Phizo was in exile in London. See Dinesh Kotwal, *The Naga Insurgency – The Past and the Future*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 24, Issue 4, July 2000, pp 751-770.

largely inactive during the Chinese invasion of NEFA and Assam in October 1962 and did not take advantage of the Indian Army's defeat, which they could have done with the support of the Chinese PLA.

Underground relations between the Nagas and the PRC grew stronger with the launch of Mao's *Cultural Revolution* (1966-68). As a powerful ideological movement which touched every society across the world, the *Cultural Revolution* deeply affected China's relations with its southern neighbours. Burma, under the military dictatorship of General Ne Win (1962-1988), was going through a tragic phase of total political and ethnic unrest. The Kachin insurgency erupted in 1961 to become one of the strongest in the region controlling the northwestern part of Burma, linking India with China. The armed Kachin groups (especially the *Kachin Independence Army*, KIA), first armed thanks to connections dating from WWII with KMT troops based in the Shan state and in Northern Thailand, surprisingly became tacit allies of the *Communist Party of Burma* (CPB - White Flag) which formed the spearhead of the Maoist Revolution in Burma as far back as 1967. The KIA served then as the main supplier of arms (from the CPB) and trainer of the Naga (NNC and FNA) and Mizo (MNF) rebels. In 1966, a 130-strong group of Naga militants led by Thuivaleng Muivah and Thinoselie Medon Keyho made a 3-month trek from Nagaland (which was created in 1963) to Yunnan through the Kachin jungles with the help of the KIA. The expedition, organised and financed by Chinese diplomats in the PRC consulate in Dhaka (East Pakistan), reached Kunming on January 27, 1967. It was then divided into two groups – the one led by T.M. Keyho underwent military training in Yunnan while the other smaller group led by Muivah went directly to Beijing to undergo political training. Th. Muivah became thus the first Naga representative in China while his colleagues, Chisi Swu and Moure Angami (who later formed the NSCN with him in 1980) along with a few dozens other Naga militants, joined him in 1968 following the same route through KIA and CPB-controlled areas. These expeditions under

the aegis of the Chinese government soon came to the knowledge of Indian and Burmese intelligence. As a consequence, a skilfully constructed rapprochement between Indira Gandhi and General Ne Win took place in March 1968, with both India and Burma agreeing to share information and cooperate in counter-insurgency operations in Naga areas as both the states were concerned by the latter's separatist claims.

Chinese support and financial help to the Mizos contributed to the further deterioration of relations between Delhi and Beijing. Chinese intelligence agencies helped Laldenga and his assistant, Zoramthanga to come to China for training and funds once the *Mizo National Front* (MNF) took up the cause of separatism in the Lushai Hills in the late 1960s. Helped by the KIA and the Burmese Chins, the MNF acquired weaponry from Beijing and the CPB.

Later, in the 1970s, the Manipuri rebel outfits, which on their turn rose against India's central government, openly adopted a Maoist-oriented ideology. Their names reflected the tendency: the *Revolutionary Government of Manipur* (RGM, 1968), the *People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak* (PREPAK, 1977) and above all, the *People's Liberation Army of Manipur* (PLA, 1978, with its political wing the *Revolutionary People's Front* – RPF, created in 1979). Along with 18 cadres, N. Bhisheshwar, a Meitei, who was an admirer of Mao Tse-tung's struggle, went to Tibet through Bhutan in 1975-76. They all received an intensive ideological and military training in Lhasa before returning clandestinely to Northeast India to found the *People's Liberation Army* (PLA, exactly the same acronym of the Chinese Army) with Chinese support in 1978.

Nonetheless, internal upheavals in China changed the Chinese strategy aimed at undermining the region. In 1976, both Mao Tse-tung and Zhou En-Lai were dead and two years later, China's new



strongman, Deng Xiaoping, committed his country to a powerful programme of economic reforms. Aimed at developing the country at a rapid pace, these reforms brought about a decrease in financial support to rebel groups across the world as well as the establishment of peace on the PRC's borders. As a consequence, help and political support to Northeastern separatist and revolutionary groups was considerably reduced. During a landmark visit by A.B. Vajpayee, India's External Affairs Minister (1977-80), to China in February 1979, Beijing gave the Indian government an assurance that the PRC would stop its support to insurgent groups in India.<sup>222</sup> However, the global policy of containment of India by China was not completely given up as Bangladesh and Pakistan remained strong allies of Beijing. Nonetheless, China's involvement in India's Northeast obviously slowed down in the 1980s and 1990s.

As a matter of fact, both India and China, who were much more interested in economic growth, decided to set aside their political and diplomatic disagreements (the border dispute, support to insurgency, the Tibet issue, etc.) to improve their bilateral trade. Six border checkpoints were thus opened, including the latest one in 2004 (Nathu La Pass) in the former kingdom of Sikkim (a state of the Indian Union since 1975), which was then officially recognised by Beijing. But if pragmatism ruled the Sino-Indian economic partnership, some fringe groups in the intelligence services and/or in both the armies still distrust one another. Seemingly, China revived its connections with some insurgent and criminal outfits in India's Northeast during the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Some young Naga cadres have reportedly established new contacts with the Yunnanese Military Intelligence.<sup>223</sup> Since 2000, Naga liaison officers of the NSCN Muivah faction have been based in Kunming as well

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<sup>222</sup> Which was confirmed when AB Vajpayee paid another official visit to Beijing as India's Prime Minister in June 2003.

<sup>223</sup> The Hindustan Times, *NSCN-IM trying to revive China link*, December 10, 2000.

as in Lhasa,<sup>224</sup> to facilitate relations between the PLA and the NSCN-IM which agreed on a cease-fire with the Indian government but refused to surrender its arsenal. Quite the contrary, it is very likely that the NSCN-IM is modernizing its weaponry with the help of Chinese military officers.<sup>225</sup>

ULFA, the most fearsome Assamese rebel outfit, too was in close contact with China, especially in the 1990s. In 1993, some ULFA cadres reportedly crossed into China via Bhutan to negotiate the purchase of light weapons which may have been delivered by a Chinese trawler off the Bangladesh coast (Cox's Bazar) in early 1995. Similarly, the delivery of arms under a contract negotiated in 1997 took place two years later in one of the ULFA camps in Bhutan.<sup>226</sup> This close military interaction between China and ULFA, revealed by Surrender-ULFA cadres, was disclosed by the then Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, I.D. Swami in 2001.<sup>227</sup> Since then, there have been no reports regarding the continuation of this embarrassing relationship for which a few Chinese intelligence officers may be responsible, except the huge Chittagong arms haul of April 2004. The biggest-ever weapons seizure in Bangladesh showed light onto these probable renewed connections as the shipment (1790 assault rifles, 25.000 hand grenades, 1.1 million ammunition...)<sup>228</sup> might have originated from Hong Kong where a Chinese agent might have complete the deal with the NSCN-IM and ULFA (despite their rivalry).<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> P.V. Ramana, *'Networking' the Northeast – Partners in Terror*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 11, 2002.

<sup>225</sup> The Daily Pioneer, *NSCN ultras negotiate arms deal in China*, October 31, 2000.

<sup>226</sup> The Sentinel, *ULFA procuring arms from China govt*, December 14, 2001.

<sup>227</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Securing the North-East*, Bharat Rakshak Monitor, Volume 4, Issue 4, January-February 2002.

<sup>228</sup> Frontline, *A Deadly Cargo*, Volume 21, Issue 10, May 08, 2004.

<sup>229</sup> Anthony Davis, *New Details Emerge on Bangladesh Arms' Haul*, Jane's Intelligence Review, September 2004. Also, Subir Bhaumik, *Guns, Drugs and Rebels*, India Seminar, New Delhi, Issue 550, June 2005.

China's renewed involvement could have been tested in the Himalayas, but even though in the aftermath of the military crackdown in Bhutan (December 2003) ULFA attempted to find shelter and support in Tibet,<sup>230</sup> there have been no notable signs of a Chinese collaboration, except for a certain amount of tolerance towards the activities of the *Arunachal Dragon Force* in the Tibetan highlands.

But China has long been a part of the turmoil in the Northeast.<sup>231</sup> After being the principal patron from the 1950 to the 1970s, it seems to have maintained its links with some insurgent groups. It has welcomed ethnic leaders, trained separatist cadres and financed many militant groups, sometimes even those without any ideological connection. Nevertheless, China's interests in keeping an eye on this troubled region are understandable,<sup>232</sup> as also the decrease in the support provided to these insurgencies. A growing and profitable trade depends on stability in the region and Beijing appears to be much more keen on maintaining peace in this border one between India, Burma and China to bolster economic cooperation than on fuelling separatism. Spreading communism in the Northeast is no longer China's motto. Therefore, while continuing to remind India that it can seriously threaten stability in the Northeast, China has decided to keep a low profile as far as Indian insurgencies are concerned and has given up its active hostility to adopt a more "passive hostility" (S. Datta).<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> AFP, *Indian rebels fleeing Bhutan ask China for safe passage*, December 29, 2003; and Frontline, *An ULFA Maneuvre*, Volume 21, Issue 01, January 03, 2004.

<sup>231</sup> South Asia Monitor, *India's turbulent Northeast*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (Washington DC), Number 35, July 5, 2001.

<sup>232</sup> Subhash Kapila, *China's Intelligence Agency Operations in India*, IPCS Article No.499, May 25, 2001.

<sup>233</sup> Sreeratha Datta, *Security of India's Northeast – External Linkages*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 24, Issue 08, November 2000, pp 1495-1516.

## **b. Pakistan – ISI, the Troublemaker, and Growing Islamic Militancy**

Since Independence, India and Pakistan have been labelled as arch-rivals. After three wars (1947-48, 1965, 1971) and many dangerous escalations (1999 and 2002 being the most recent), the two neighbours have been entrenched in a fierce rivalry which has taken various forms. As far as India's Northeast is concerned, India saw it being almost cut off from its mainland by an openly hostile East Pakistan after the Partition in 1947. The Pakistani Intelligence (*Inter-Services Intelligence* – ISI), set up in 1948 by a British Officer, has turned out to be the main source of annoyance in India's security policy.<sup>234</sup> After trying to arouse the Muslim population that had stayed back in India against the Indian government, the ISI began to think of taking advantage of the incipient troubles in the Northeast.<sup>235</sup>

Despite being predominantly Christian, the Nagas were the first to be approached by Pakistani Intelligence. In the 1950s, the NNC led by A.Z. Phizo received substantial financial support and technical assistance both from China and Pakistan. However, the help given by the ISI was aimed only at enhancing the nuisance value of the Nagas and did not come up to the expectations of the Naga separatists. Obviously, Pakistan has never been sympathetic towards any ethnic cause in India's Northeast, but the ISI was certainly keen to support any separatist force which could prove to be a great nuisance to the Indian government. Phizo himself was welcomed in East Pakistan when the Naga insurgency turned violent in December 1956 and the ISI took great pains to organise his flight through the *Chittagong Hill Tracts* to Dhaka.

However, when Phizo realised that the Pakistani government was definitely not willing to promote the Naga cause at the international

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<sup>234</sup> For an Indian analysis of the ISI structure and activities: B. Raman, *Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)*, India Intelligence Review, Volume 16, Issue 3, August 31, 2001.

<sup>235</sup> Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgency in North-East*, Aakrosh, Volume 1, Issue 1, October 1998.

level, especially at the United Nations, the Naga leader decided to settle down in the United Kingdom so as to get more support from his London base. Even then the ISI did not abandon him completely and took care of his secret 'transfer' from Karachi to London via Zurich in March 1960 and subsequently kept in touch with the NNC and its armed-wing, the FNA, by continuing to arm and train its cadres in East Pakistan. A series of training camps conducted by the ISI were reported in 1962 in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Naga ultras attending these camps came there through Burma's Chin state, which was in a troubled state due to the growing struggle between the Burmese Army (which came to power through a coup in March 1962) and the *Chin Independence Army* which allowed the Naga insurgents to cross the areas under its control.<sup>236</sup>

At the same time, the Mizo insurgency too had acquired a considerable nuisance value. As one would expect, the ISI made an attempt to contact its leaders. Pu Laldenga, the founder of the *Mizo National Front* (MNF), was thus approached by a Bengali Officer of the ISI, Captain Ershad (who would later become Bangladesh's military ruler from 1982 to 1990), the main liaison officer between the two organisations.<sup>237</sup> When the Mizo insurgency really erupted in 1966, the MNF found support and shelter in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, posted its own liaison officers in Dhaka and Chittagong and continued its struggle from East Pakistan.

The India-China War (1962) and the second India-Pakistan War of 1965 led to the reinforcement of the ISI's strategy in the Northeast. Not only did the China-Pakistan link start becoming obvious in the Northeast (as Beijing still laid claim to 90% of the territory in

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<sup>236</sup> Anil Bhat, *ISI Eastwards: brewing border boil-ups*, The Sangai Express, Features Story, May 31, 2003.

<sup>237</sup> Krishnan Gopal, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh and its role in the Northeast Insurgency*, in D. Sengupta & S.K.Singh (Ed.), *Insurgency in North-East India - The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, pp 171-198, (page 182).

NEFA and supported the Nagas and Mizos in coordination with the ISI in East Pakistan) but the complete failure of the ISI in 1965 led the Pakistani intelligence to reframe its underground strategy in India and pursue much more actively the various subversive operations in the Northeast.

But in 1971, the third India-Pakistan War, or Bangladesh Liberation War, led to the creation of Bangladesh out of the ashes of the erstwhile East Pakistan. Deprived of its outposts on India's northeastern border, Pakistan reduced its support to the Naga and Mizo insurgents. Moreover, the Bangladeshi government willingly helped the Indian Army in its first crackdown on the separatist outfits. In December 1971, Laldenga managed to escape from East Pakistan in the nick of time and flee through Burma's Arakan state to Rangoon where he was helped by the Pakistani Embassy. Then he spent four years in Karachi (1972-76) under the protection of the ISI. The MNF-ISI links were affirmed when the Indian Army raided MNF camps in Chittagong district and found ISI papers and propaganda there.<sup>238</sup>

While Bangladesh's new ruler, Mujibur Rahman (1971-75) who was close to India, was in power, the Northeast insurgents saw Pakistani support in the region dwindle. The stoppage of Chinese patronage in the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping chose to focus China's policy on economic development and peaceful relations with its neighbours, further isolated the Northeastern separatists. But the rise of another identity struggle in 1979 (Assam Movement) which was later joined by a throng of aggressive and well organised separatist outfits, brought the Pakistanis back into the region.

The ISI restarted its activities in India's Northeast with a clear-cut strategy towards the end of the 1970s. Now that Bangladesh was a

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<sup>238</sup> B. Raman, *Pakistan and Terrorism: the Evidence*, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No.390, January 08, 2002.

third party, the ISI tried to reactivate its former Bengali connections through the newly born *Directorate General of Forces Intelligence* (DGFI, the Bangladeshi intelligence services) through a base near the Indian border and another one in the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka. Supporting the Indian insurgents technically and financially, supplying them with weapons and explosives and arranging transport, visas and shelter for their cadres was still very much a part of ISI's strategy.<sup>239</sup> The main objective was still to cut off the Northeast from India's mainland and make sure that India was surrounded on all sides by forces friendly to Pakistan.<sup>240</sup>

ULFA, which was formed in 1979, became the main beneficiary of ISI's powerful machinery in the region. Despite its violent anti-foreigner stance, ULFA, a strong opponent of the Bengali community, first contacted the ISI through the Bangladesh High Commission in Pakistan (and not through the DGFI or the Bangladeshi *Jamaat-e-Islamiya*, close to the ISI). But it was only in the early 1990s that the ISI developed a strong connection with ULFA and its main leaders, Paresh Baruah (Commander-in-Chief), Hirakjyoti Mahanta (Deputy Commander), Pradeep Gogoi (Vice President) and Arup Chetia (General Secretary) were welcomed in 1990 for intensive training (in guerrilla tactics, explosive and bombing strategies, intelligence, disinformation and propaganda...) in a Pakistani military camp in Peshawar near the Afghan border.<sup>241</sup>

ULFA's Pakistani-Afghan connection continues to this day. A *Volcano Unit* of the Assamese outfit, specialised in explosives,<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Jaideep Saikia, *The ISI reaches East: Anatomy of a Conspiracy*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 6, August 2000, pp 61-78.

<sup>240</sup> Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: Northeast India*, New Delhi, Lancer Publishers, 1996, page 32.

<sup>241</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1994, pp 171-175.

<sup>242</sup> Regarding the training of several ULFA cadres in Pakistan in 2003 in the use of Programmable Time Devices, see The Assam Tribune, *ULFA trained in Pak to handle PTD*, January 31, 2005.

was formed and trained by the ISI, Pakistani soldiers and Mujahideen in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas.<sup>243</sup> As the principal supplier of arms and counterfeit currency to ULFA,<sup>244</sup> the ISI further strengthened its support after the India-Myanmar *Golden Bird* counter-insurgency operation (1995) proved to be a severe setback for the ULFA leadership, which was deprived from then on of the benefit of the Burmese Military's cooperation.<sup>245</sup>

Also, ISI assistance to ULFA and other insurgent groups in the Northeast became more obvious after Pakistan's failure in Kargil (1999). In August 1999, four ISI agents were caught in a hotel in Guwahati (Assam). Apparently, they were about to bring RDX explosives into Assam from Bangladesh.<sup>246</sup> The arrest of Arup Chetia in Bangladesh (1997) as well as the surrender of another prominent ULFA cadre, "Captain" Lohit Deurisaid (2000) had brought the ISI nexus into the open. Deurisaid publicly admitted that ULFA had received funds from various ISI agents and had reached an agreement with Chinese Army officials through the ISI for arms supplies.<sup>247</sup> In 2000, a startling report from the Assam Chief Minister's Office<sup>248</sup> gave details of ISI-Assam links through the misuse of Islamic Madrassas, the taxation of Assamese people, the repatriation of funds for ISI operations as well as propaganda material. In 2003, an ULFA cache was busted by the Indian Police

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<sup>243</sup> The Sentinel, *Will the US chips be down on NE ultras too?* September 20, 2001. Also in K.P.S. Gill's *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, (at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist\\_outfits/ulfa.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/ulfa.htm)).

<sup>244</sup> The Assam Tribune, *ISI pumping counterfeit currencies into State*, February 25, 2000.

<sup>245</sup> B.G. Verghese, *India's North East Resurgent*, New Delhi, Konarak Publishers, 1996, pp 59-60.

<sup>246</sup> Rediff.com, *ISI agents' interrogation reveals comprehensive game plan*, August 16, 1999. The Hindustan Times, *ISI agents' arrests: volatile grist for poll campaigns*, August 12, 1999.

<sup>247</sup> The Sentinel, *ULFA leaders have become puppets of ISI*, August 14, 2000.

<sup>248</sup> *ISI Activities in Assam*, Statement laid on the table of the House of Assam Legislative Assembly, under item No. 12, dated 6.4.2000, by Shri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, Chief Minister of Assam.



in Meghalaya and some RDX, AK-56 rifles and, what is even more interesting, some “Taliban” rockets were found, providing additional proof of the connection.<sup>249</sup>

It was also reported that from 1997 the ISI had been providing help to the NLFT,<sup>250</sup> as well as the PLA of Manipur and the NDFB. The NDFB head, Ranjan Daimary, was caught in January 2000 by the Bangladeshi Police while flying from Dhaka to Pakistan with a fake Bangladeshi passport (he was nevertheless released after 5 days – not to be deterred, he was rearrested for the same reason in May 2000, but released once again few days later).<sup>251</sup> It is also likely that Bodo ultras (NDFB) attended training programmes in Pakistan.<sup>252</sup> The KLO also received obvious support and supplies of explosives to conduct bomb attacks in the strategic Siliguri neck.

On their side, the Naga insurgents never broke off their relations with the ISI. After the rift between the ‘Indian’ and ‘Burmese’ Nagas in 1988, the Swu-Muivah faction (NSCN-IM) strengthened its partnership with Pakistan, although the Khaplang faction broke away (SS Khaplang himself met ISI officials in Dhaka in 1996, apparently to turn down another offer).<sup>253</sup> Isak Swu was spotted in Pakistan with a Bangladeshi passport in April 1990.<sup>254</sup> Th. Muivah was arrested in January 2000 at the Bangkok International

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<sup>249</sup> Press Trust of India, *Police seize Taliban arms from ULFA hideout*, April 12, 2003.

<sup>250</sup> Tripura's Chief Minister publicly denounced the nexus claiming that the NLFT leaders regularly meet ISI operatives. The Assam Tribune, *Sarkar concerned over ISI abetted Tripura militancy*, March 26, 2003.

<sup>251</sup> The Assam Tribune, *NDFB Chief let off near Dhaka*, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000 and Rediff.com, *India suspects Bangladeshi officials of helping insurgents*, July 14, 2000.

<sup>252</sup> The Asian Age, *Bodo militants' link to ISI unearthed*, January 15, 2003.

<sup>253</sup> The Telegraph, *Khaplang: olive branch to Muivah tribe*, February 05, 2003.

<sup>254</sup> P.G. Rajamohan, *Fundamentalism and the ISI in the Northeast Insurgency*, IPCS Article No. 1090, August 11, 2003.

Airport on arrival from Karachi for travelling on a fake South Korean passport. According to various intelligence sources, Muivah was invited to Pakistan in early January to meet Lt-Gen. Gulam Ahmed, then the head of the ISI, probably to conclude an arms deal.<sup>255</sup>

The ISI thus made every effort to coordinate various insurgent groups in the Northeast, especially those having different ideologies and strategies, followers and targets, underground activities and international support. With a common propaganda about India's colonial domination and aggressive policy in the Northeast (as well as in Kashmir), Pakistan managed to woo to its side some of the most dreaded outfits in the region. In spite of being non-Muslim outfits (the Mizos and Nagas were openly Christian) and even fighting against the Muslim population in their area (ULFA and NLFT against the Muslim Bengalis), some Northeastern ultras were brought together under the aegis of the ISI which actively (and logically, if we are to consider India and Pakistan as arch-rivals) promotes terrorist action against Indian interests.<sup>256</sup> By 'outsourcing' this terrorist activity ("state-sponsored terrorism") to mushrooming insurgencies, the ISI and Pakistan have managed to acquire considerable influence and pose a threat to the Northeast.<sup>257</sup> Acting as a coordinator between militant groups (sometimes bitter enemies like the ULFA, NSCN-IM and PLA), the ISI got even better results than in Kashmir where it uses only Islamic ultras.

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<sup>255</sup> Bertil Lintner, *NSCN leader T. Muivah's imprisonment may split the militant outfit*, The Week Magazine, New Delhi, March 05, 2000.

<sup>256</sup> P.V. Ramana, *'Networking' the Northeast – Partners in Terror*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 11, 2002.

<sup>257</sup> Savita Pande, *Pakistan's ISI activities in Bangladesh and India's North-East*, in D. Sengupta & S.K. Singh (Ed.), *Insurgency in North-East India - The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, pp 253-271.

The Pakistani Intelligence, sometimes with the help of fringe elements in Bangladeshi intelligence, has built up a financial network through Muslim banks, businesses (travel agencies, factories...) in Dhaka, Kolkata, Guwahati and even Siliguri and in collaboration with many NGOs and Islamic associations, madrassas and local establishments favourable to its cause.<sup>258</sup> Indeed, the Islamic trend followed by the ISI and its pawns in the Northeast has been growing, notably after the Ayodhya crisis in 1992 and the Bombay bombings the following year.<sup>259</sup>

Assam has the largest Muslim population in the Northeast, but Tripura, which is almost surrounded by Bangladesh, has seen a growing number of Bengali Muslims migrate into the state, changing the demographic balance in the region.<sup>260</sup> Like the Christian ethnic groups in the hills, the Muslims too feel that they are being discriminated against by Hindus and Hindi-speakers. Making the most of this growing wave of discontent, the ISI helped to create militant outfits which began with a religious struggle.

In 1996, the *Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam* (MULTA) were the first to be promoted as a spearhead of the Islamic *jihad* in the Northeast, *jihad* which earlier had no leverage with the local Muslim population. Today, the MULTA is one of the 14 Islamic militant outfits listed in the region by India.<sup>261</sup> Controlling the Dhubri district of Assam (at least 6 out of 23 districts in Assam are

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<sup>258</sup> Sultan Shahin, *Pakistan shifts proxy war to India's East*, Asia Times (Hong Kong), February 06, 2002.

<sup>259</sup> Anil Bhatt, *ISI's Eastward Operations – Old Links in North-East India and New Ones in South-East Asia*, in D. Sengupta & S.K. Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India - The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, pp 233-252. Anil Bhatt is a former spokesman of the Indian Defence Ministry. His views are therefore likely to be biased.

<sup>260</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *The Muslim Factor in Assam Politics*, IPCS Article No.1695, April 13, 2005.

<sup>261</sup> Anil Bhat, *Pakistan and ISI's Eastward Operations*, The Sangai Express, Features Story, January 26, 2003.

dominated by Muslims), the MULTA has been close to the NSCN-IM which trained some of the Tiger cadres in its camps. Some MULTA ultras received training at the *Qawa Islamic Institute of Islamabad* in Pakistan as well as in some Taliban training centres near Peshawar until they were chased away when FBI-CIA operations started in September 2001. The *Harkat Ul-Mujahideen*, a dreaded Islamic organisation, trained some Assamese Muslims in Assam, in the use of explosive devices, as admitted by some jailed militants<sup>262</sup> like those of the *Saddam Bahini* (created by ISI officers in the Barak Valley in Assam in 1994).<sup>263</sup>

Two other groups in Manipur, the *Islamic Force No.786-Islam* and the *Islamic Revolutionary Army of Manipur* (IRAM), have reportedly been financed by the ISI<sup>264</sup> which, under the umbrella of the *All Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam* (AMULFA) and the so-called *United Front of the Seven Sisters* (UFSS), coordinates their financial and information activities. In Bangladesh, again with the help of ISI agents, the *Harkat Ul-jehad-al-Islamii* (set up in 1992 with financial support from Ossama Bin Laden's network and which is reported to have established its base in Bangladesh in 2000) has been accused of maintaining ULFA camps in the Muslim-dominated areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>265</sup>

Despite the obvious objective of carving out a Muslim-dominated zone in the Northeast severed from mainland India pursued by some ISI strategists,<sup>266</sup> Pakistani intelligence activities have so far

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<sup>262</sup> The Northeast Sun, *Exposing the ISI-ULFA nexus*, Volume 5, Issue 18, April 15, 2001.

<sup>263</sup> Onkareshvar Pandey, *ISI and New Wave of Islamic Militancy in the N.E.*, Dialogue, Volume 3, No. 3, January-March 2002.

<sup>264</sup> Onkareshvar Pandey, *ISI and New Wave...*, *ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> The Bangladesh Observer, *HUJaI in Bangladesh*, August 28, 2004.

<sup>266</sup> The Pioneer, *ISI blueprint to form Muslim State in the N-E*, August 29, 1999.

been more or less contained by India. Indeed, Indian intelligence is fully aware of many of ISI's activities in the Northeast, in West Bengal and even inside Bangladesh. The RAW has a widespread and powerful network of information and counter-information throughout the region. If India has been accusing the Pakistani High Commission in Dhaka of being one of the main centres of ISI operations,<sup>267</sup> the Indian High Commission in the Bangladeshi capital also has a wide intelligence network capable of conducting counter-espionage activities even more efficiently.<sup>268</sup> It is possible that the Islamic threat in the Northeast (though not in Bangladesh) has been exaggerated by RAW agents as well as western intelligence agencies, frightened by the so-called Islamic wave let loose by Bangladeshi Islamic parties, Burma's Muslim Rohingyas and ISI agents in Bengal.<sup>269</sup> Thus, if it is true that Pakistani agents are present in the Northeast, it is also true that Indian intelligence knows where to find them and is able to more or less contain ISI's potential as a troublemaker.

Relations between the ISI and Northeastern militants are not just opportunistic, but very realistic.<sup>270</sup> Stirring up internal troubles behind the enemy lines through insurgent groups having the same adversary is definitely a good strategy. But as far as the Northeast is concerned, despite the growing tentacles of Islamic militancy, it is totally false to think that the ISI and other Islamic-oriented agencies control the Northeastern groups or even dictate their policy, attitude and actions. Most of them are far from being ISI puppets and remain politically independent. It was easy for Pakistani intelligence to come in and take advantage of the situation

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<sup>267</sup> The Indian Express, *Assam accuses Pakistan High Commission of helping ULFA*, March 15, 2000.

<sup>268</sup> The Statesman, *Covert Attack*, March 15, 2003.

<sup>269</sup> Especially those posted in Dhaka, various interviews conducted by the author, Dhaka, March 2004.

<sup>270</sup> The Sentinel, *The ISI factor*, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

in areas that were already troubled: in fact, they were just “*fishing in already troubled waters*” (Samir Kumar Das).<sup>271</sup> But though the Nagas, ULFA and other ethnic groups do share information, exchange arms, drugs and money with the ISI for pragmatic purposes, they are far from being its pawns. If we set aside the case of MULTA, it becomes evident that the ISI nexus with the Northeastern outfits is purely opportunistic and devoid of any ideological base (which would be more dangerous). It is the same in the case of the Nepali Maoists and the Bodos,<sup>272</sup> also suspected of receiving support from the ISI. In fact, Islamabad had even asked Bhutan for permission in 2004 to open an embassy in Thimphu to New Delhi’s great displeasure, the latter being very suspicious of Pakistan’s future activities in Bhutan.

### **c. Bangladesh – Migratory Flows and Insurgent Bases**

When Bangladesh was born out of East Pakistan after the “War of Liberation” in 1971, India found in its new neighbour a friendly state, thereby changing the strategic equation in the region. Indian intelligence had provided extensive support to Mujibur Rahman’s forces against the Karachi government during the war and the Northeast had been used as a base for military operations conducted by the Indian armed forces in East Pakistan. Once Bangladesh became independent, the Pakistani Army and the ISI were driven out of the country and most of the Northeastern ethnic insurgents had to take refuge in Burma, seeking support from the Chins, Kachins and the CPB, until Chinese intelligence, in close cooperation with the Pakistanis, openly became their principal patron. However in 1975, the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, the first President of Bangladesh, changed the political picture as

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<sup>271</sup> Samir Kumar Das, *ULFA – A political analysis*, New Delhi, Ajanta Publications, 1994, page 45.

<sup>272</sup> A.K. Verma, *Reading through the Pakistani mists*, South Asia Analysis Paper No.740, July 18, 2003.

the new Bangladeshi ruling class adopted a much more hostile attitude towards the giant Indian neighbour.

Thanks to the counterinsurgency operations conducted during the third India-Pakistan war in 1970-72, Indian intelligence (RAW) had been able to find a foothold in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and flush the Mizos rebels out of the remote mountains. Moreover, RAW participated in the creation of a Buddhist armed force recruited among the Chakma community (followers of Mahayana Buddhism numbering about 350,000 in the CHT, but discriminated against by the Bengali Muslim majority). Formed in 1973 and later trained by RAW agents in Tripura,<sup>273</sup> the *Shanti Bahini* (ironically called the “Peace Army”) took up arms in 1976 when the Dhaka government started taking repressive measures against the Chakmas. Supported by India, the 2000 odd militants fought against Bengali interests in the CHT but suffered a setback in 1983 when an internal strife led to the gunning down of their leader. A massive surrender in 1985 revealed many RAW links in the Bangladeshi government, which further alienated Dhaka from New Delhi.

In the face of RAW's interference in Bangladesh's internal politics, Dhaka's military government, especially General Ershad's junta (1982-1990, Ershad himself having close relations with Laldenga and the Mizos), adopted the same lax attitude towards the growing number of insurgents from India's Northeastern states taking shelter on Bangladeshi soil. The Bangladeshi Army even turned a blind eye towards the trafficking routes used by these militant outfits through the Meghalaya Hills, the Cachar and Barak Valleys and the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>274</sup> This unhindered support and non-

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<sup>273</sup> And also in the military academies in Dehra Dun, cf. Binalakshmi Nepram, *South Asia's Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, page 153.

<sup>274</sup> See the book by the renowned Assamese journalist and writer Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage – Border crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2000.

interventionist stance on the part of the Bangladeshi government was further accentuated after the Bajrang (1990) and Rhino (1991) operations organised by the Indian armed forces in the Northeast, when most of the ULFA and NSCN troops crossed into Myanmar and Bangladesh for refuge.

Indeed, Bangladesh's position has always been quite ambiguous. Feeling hemmed in by an enormous neighbour considered as an unwanted Big Brother, Bangladesh is very suspicious of India's excessively patronising position, explained nevertheless by the increasing ties between Bangladesh and China, the underground activities of the ISI to revive old networks and the proven presence of Northeast militant camps on Bangladeshi territory.<sup>275</sup> In 2004, the Indian government sent Bangladesh an umpteenth report listing more than 150 "terrorist" camps in Bangladesh as well as 191 names of "terrorists" wanted by New Delhi.<sup>276</sup> Dhaka, following its usual elusive policy, responded by publishing a list of 37 India-supported Bangladeshis opposed to the government.<sup>277</sup>

Indeed, many ultra outfits have crossed the 4,096 km-long porous border and found shelter in the CHT or near the Meghalaya and Tripura borders. ULFA has established a network of support and shelters in Bangladesh since 1989, having set up by then 13 to 14 training camps. After the Bajrang and Rhino military operations, the outfit was forced to tone down its vociferous opposition to Bengalis living in Assam in order to take advantage of Bangladesh's passive attitude. As a matter of fact, ULFA had to flirt with (euphemism for bribe) Bangladeshis officials and Muslim organisations in order to build those camps (especially in the Sylhet area), most of them maintained and run by Bangladeshis and not

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<sup>275</sup> The Assam Tribune, *NE militant Camps exist in Bangla*, April 12, 2004.

<sup>276</sup> The Assam Tribune, *NE Ultras in Bangla – BSF to submit fresh list of over 150 camps*, January 06, 2004. And six months earlier, The Assam Tribune, *India seeks closure of 155 ultra camps in Bangladesh*, May 12, 2003.

<sup>277</sup> The Assam Tribune, *90 ultra camps in India: BDR chief*, January 06, 2004.



Assamese (or by Assamese who had converted to Islam and taken up Muslim names).<sup>278</sup> Besides, the militant outfit financed the running of those bases through Bangladeshi or Kolkata-based commercial establishments (stores, banks, travel agencies, etc.). ULFA reportedly welcomes in its camps members of other more or less allied outfits such as the UBLF (which has the advantage of having the sympathy of the Bangladeshis).

In December 1997, Arup Chetia (ULFA General Secretary) was arrested along with two colleagues (Laxmi Prasad and Babul Sharma) by the Bangladeshi Police for carrying false identity papers and illegal stay and imprisoned in Dhaka Central Jail. However, Bangladesh has refused to sign an agreement with India for extraditing militants.<sup>279</sup> Paresh Baruah (ULFA Commander-in-Chief) divides his time between Karachi and Dhaka, where he stayed during the rule of the *Bangladesh National Party* (BNP of Khaleda Zia, 1991-1996) before being harassed by the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001). The return to power of the nationalist Begum Khaleda Zia in 2001 has further widened the rift between India and Bangladesh. Even the NLFT, the second largest Indian insurgent group present in Bangladesh, admitted through its spokesman that the Zia government's comeback in 2001 was synonymous for them with freedom of movement.<sup>280</sup>

Indeed, in 2004, the Tripuri outfit reportedly still had between 18 and 21 training camps in Bangladesh with headquarters at Sajak (Khagrachari District) and major bases in the Comilla, Sylhet, Maulavi Bazaar and Chittagong areas.<sup>281</sup> Similarly, 70% of ATTF

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<sup>278</sup> The Assam Tribune, *ULFA forging ties with Islamic outfits*, January 04, 2005.

<sup>279</sup> The Assam Tribune, *Bangla rules out Chetia's extradition*, April 03, 2004.

<sup>280</sup> Asia Times, *Bangladesh in a bind over Indian rebels*, October 05, 2001.

<sup>281</sup> According to some RAW reports listed by the South Asia Terrorism Portal at [http://www.satp/satporg/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist\\_outfits/nlft.htm](http://www.satp/satporg/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist_outfits/nlft.htm), or 18 according to other Intelligence sources in 2000, cf. Frontline, *Terrorism in Tripura*, Volume 17, Issue 12, June 10, 2000.

cadres live in Bangladesh including the outfit's leader (Debbama) with headquarters located at Taraban in the CHT. In 2003, the Chief Minister of Tripura claimed that the ATTF had 16 bases on Bangladeshi territory.<sup>282</sup> Both the ATTF and the NLFT probably have about 1,500 armed men in the country.<sup>283</sup> The PLA of Manipur, which formed a government in exile in 1989 (the *Revolutionary People's Front* with Irengbam Chaoren as President), runs this political establishment from Sylhet district where 5 PLA training camps are hidden in the jungles. The PREPAK, the BNLF (the fatal internecine clashes of 2000 occurred in Bangladesh and not in Mizoram) and the *Zomi Revolutionary Organisation* are all reported to have a couple of bases in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, even though it is much easier for them to operate from Myanmar. As for the HNLC and ANVC of Meghalaya, it is much more convenient for them to sneak southwards into Bangladesh to escape from the counter-insurgency operations of the Indian Police. The ISI has also helped to finance the HNLC with counterfeit Indian currency smuggled into Meghalaya through Bangladesh. On their side, the UNLF-M ultras also benefit from various camps as they enjoy one of the longest relationships with the ISI (dating back to 1969 and they even supported the Pakistan Army in 1971), but they have suffered from this closeness as the BDFI is very suspicious of them. Lastly, some Muslim outfits have also established very good connections with the local Bangladesh Army personnel or with the DGFI, the more important among them being the *Islamic Revolutionary Front of Manipur* (created in 1996, through the ISI),<sup>284</sup> the MULTA (closely linked to the *Jamaat-e*

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<sup>282</sup> Also according to KPS Gill's South Asia Terrorism Portal at [http://www.satp/satporg/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist\\_outfits/attf.htm](http://www.satp/satporg/countries/india/states/tripura/terrorist_outfits/attf.htm).

<sup>283</sup> The BDFI publicly denied any links with them; cf. Bibhu Prasad Routray, *Managing the Tripura-Bangladesh Border: Issues and Challenges*, IPCS Article No.1062, June 18, 2003.

<sup>284</sup> Nirmal Jindal, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh: Implications on India's Security*, in D. Sengupta & S.K. Singh (Ed.), *Insurgency in North-East India - The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, pp 199-214.

*Islamiya*, which is a part of the ruling coalition in Dhaka since 2001) or, even more oddly and quite erratically, the Muslim Arakanese and Rohingyas of Western Myanmar.

Thus Bangladesh has become a lead actor (not always passive) on the Northeast insurgency stage.<sup>285</sup> Apart from training camps and tacit support (depending on the government in power in Dhaka and its control over local authorities in the border areas) to insurgent groups, arms trafficking has been one of the main issues responsible for worsening bilateral relations and affecting the entire region stretching from Southeast Asia to China and Sri Lanka.<sup>286</sup> With the passage of time, the southeastern region of Bangladesh (Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts) has become the largest weapons "supermarket" of the Indo-Burmese region.<sup>287</sup> The stretch of coast running from Chittagong to Teknaf on the Myanmar border provides a wide and uncontrollable access for smugglers. Many legally-traded Chinese, Thai and Burmese goods are brought from Myanmar into Bangladesh across the Naf River without any checking at Teknaf, a tiny bustling smugglers' town at the southernmost point of Bangladesh. Cox's Bazar, another busy commercial port now under the influence of a radical Islamic wave, has become the major hub for arms smuggling in the region. Coming from Indochina, through Thailand (Ranong and Phuket provinces) and Myanmar (Arakan and Tenasserim coasts) and then flooding India's Northeast, AK rifles, M-16 type of weapons and ammunitions, Chinese hand-grenades, Cambodian and Vietnamese landmines, pistols and even rockets enter Bangladesh through the Cox's Bazar "weapons market".

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<sup>285</sup> Praveen Kumar, *Bangladesh as India's Internal Security Concern*, IPCS Article No.1255, December 18, 2003.

<sup>286</sup> Anil Kamboj, *Bangladesh factor affecting insurgency in North-East*, IPCS Article No.1733, May 07, 2005.

<sup>287</sup> Commodore Vijay Sakhuja, *Bangladesh: Of Terrorists, Gun Runners and Pirates*, IPCS Article No.1028, May 06, 2003.

Many Northeastern outfits have established themselves as the main traffickers, especially after the Sri Lankan LTTE began to slow down its underground trade in the Bay of Bengal from 2000-01. Most of the ULFA camps in Bangladesh act as hub for arms between Cox's Bazar and Assam, the traditional route through the Cachar district being now replaced by new clandestine routes through the Garo Hills where ULFA's allies serve as couriers. Even though the NSCN-IM has fewer camps in Bangladesh as compared to other Northeastern militant groups, it plays a much larger role in the trafficking. Ordering and controlling a large number of shipments, it has a financial hold over smuggling operations thanks to its numerous bank accounts in Bangladesh, which it cannot use in Myanmar due to the inadequacy of the Burmese financial sector. In April 2004, a huge arms haul was made by the Bangladesh Police in Chittagong. It is suspected that ULFA and NSCN-IM were the main sponsors, much to the concern of Indian intelligence.<sup>288</sup>

The response of the Bangladeshi government, irritated by India's overweening presence in and around the country, has always been evasive, sometimes going as far as entirely denying any link or turning a "blind eye" to the accusations.<sup>289</sup> However, the Khaleda Zia government, more annoyed by the illegal flow of arms from the Southeast of Bangladesh than by India's concerns, launched in October 2002 a police operation (*Clean Heart Operation*) aimed at busting the arms racket and blocking the various trafficking routes, especially the ones from Burma.<sup>290</sup> Not only weapons, military and guerrilla equipment, propaganda material and huge amounts of money (foreign currency, counterfeit Indian currency...)

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<sup>288</sup> See Jane's Intelligence Review, *New Details Emerge on Bangladesh Arms' Haul*, September 2004. and also The Times of India, *Intelligence worried over arms haul*, April 18, 2004.

<sup>289</sup> Jay Malkani, *Bangladesh – Descent into the Maelstrom*, Bharat Rakshak Monitor, Volume 5, Issue 6, May-June 2003. This paper written by an Indian specialist is fairly biased and claims that Bangladesh is entirely responsible.

<sup>290</sup> P.G. Rajamohan, *Operation Clean Heart: Bangladesh's National War against Terror*, IPCS Article No.931, December 23, 2002.

were seized,<sup>291</sup> but also many “criminals”, “smugglers” and so-called “terrorists” were captured and jailed.

A few ATTF, NLFT and ULFA camps were busted during this operation. But above all, it was an opportunity for the Bangladesh Police and Border Forces to regain control over the Rohingya community (Bengali-Arakanese Muslims spread on both sides of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border and persecuted by both the Bangladeshi government, unwilling to put up with the recurrent massive influx of refugees, and the Myanmar junta, harassing the stateless Rohingyas not recognized as citizens of Myanmar).<sup>292</sup> Today, some 19,000 Rohingyas are languishing in the two remaining UNHCR camps while Operation *Clean Heart* has led to the creation of a huge slum in the middle of Teknaf holding more than 5,000 Rohingyas, who continue to actively participate in all the smuggling activities between Teknaf and the Maungdaw township in Myanmar, much to the displeasure of the local authorities.<sup>293</sup>

To conclude, it must be admitted that Bangladesh is partly responsible, intentionally or not, for the instability in India's Northeast. Most of the Northeastern insurgent outfits have a liaison office in Dhaka and sometimes in Chittagong or Sylhet. The Bangladesh government, intelligence services and local authorities are more or less aware of the situation, but they cannot really do very much, especially since bilateral relations between New Delhi and Dhaka have recently seen more downs than ups.<sup>294</sup> It is true

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<sup>291</sup> Anand Kumar, *Small arms and lawlessness in Bangladesh*, IPCS Article No.1071, June 28, 2003.

<sup>292</sup> Interviews with the Head of the UNHCR Sub-Office as well as *Bangladesh Red Crescent Society* officials, Cox's Bazar, March 2004. Also consulted: Columba O'Dowd, *Concern International* Country Director, Dhaka, March 2004.

<sup>293</sup> Personal fieldwork in Teknaf, March 2004.

<sup>294</sup> D. Gopal, *Role of Bangladesh in Insurgency in the North-East*, in D. Sengupta & S.K. Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India: The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, pp 13-25.

that ISI activities are more difficult to control within Bangladesh.<sup>295</sup> But besides, India has exaggerated the stakes because it is in its interest to do so and actually, India is very well informed and more involved in Bangladesh than it is willing to admit.

The creation of the *Shanti Bahini* and the armed rebellion instigated by RAW in the 1970s and 80s are illustrations of this trend. Even though the Indian central government facilitated a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1997 (with an accord between Sheikh Hasina and I.K. Gujral), an offshoot of the *Shanti Bahini* emerged in the late 1990s to continue the *Jumma Insurgency*, despite the official ban on the organisation.<sup>296</sup> The fact that this armed splinter group attempted to gun down Paresh Baruah, ULFA's Chief Commander and a fierce opponent of RAW, was a disturbing coincidence.<sup>297</sup> Indian Intelligence is perfectly capable of making full use of its infiltration network in Bangladesh<sup>298</sup> in spite of crying wolf.<sup>299</sup>

As long as India and Bangladesh are not prepared to establish a mature bilateral relationship with India giving up its patronizing attitude and Bangladesh stopping its denial policy, Bangladesh will remain a thorn in New Delhi's flesh as far as the situation in the Northeast is concerned. Unfortunately, all Indo-Bangladesh political issues are all inter-linked: the water

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<sup>295</sup> Subhash Kapila, *Bangladesh emerges as alternative base for Pakistan's Proxy War against India*, South Asia Analysis Group Paper No.997, May 11, 2004.

<sup>296</sup> For further information on the "Jumma Insurgency" see Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism: the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, Dhaka, University Press, 1997 and Raja Devashish Roy (Ed.), *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk*, Dhaka, Society for Environment and Human Development, 2000.

<sup>297</sup> Rediff.com, *ULFA chief Baruah was attacked by Shanti Bahini faction, reports daily*, December 26, 2000.

<sup>298</sup> Interviews with officials of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka and Chittagong, March 2004.

<sup>299</sup> Interview with Enayetullah Khan, Editor of Holiday Weekly Magazine and New Age Daily and former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China and Burma, Dhaka, March 2004.

dispute, the India-Myanmar pipeline, illegal migrations, religious fundamentalism (both Hindu and Islamic) and Northeastern insurgencies.<sup>300</sup> The migration issue is indeed the most threatening insofar as it affects the region's economic development. Thousands of Bangladeshis cross into India (mainly Assam and West Bengal) every year to find better jobs, eliciting a strong xenophobic reaction among the local population. If economic opportunities were created within Bangladesh, with less corruption and a real crackdown on smuggling, illegal migration would stop.<sup>301</sup> But India, despite its claim that 15 to 20 million Bengalis are living illegally in the Northeast, in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, benefits enormously from the cheap labour force they provide. Most of the time, these Bengali migrants are also given voting rights and constitute a huge vote bank which is taken into account by Indian politicians. Consequently, India and Bangladesh must build a sensible partnership to tackle these issues<sup>302</sup> without waiting for external help.<sup>303</sup>

#### **d. Burma (Myanmar)<sup>304</sup> – the Burmese Connection**

India and Burma share a 1,643 km long border running from the Himalayan heights of the Hkakabo Razi, the highest Southeast

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<sup>300</sup> The Daily Star, *India giving wrong signals: Kuldip Nayar*, Dhaka, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003 - (Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian journalist).

<sup>301</sup> S.K. Singh & A. Kumar, *Revival of Islamic Forces in Bangladesh and its Impact on the North-East Insurgency*, in D. Sengupta & S.K. Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India: The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, pp 215-232.

<sup>302</sup> Interview with Kamal Uddin Siddiqui, Principal Secretary of Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister's Office, Dhaka, March 2004.

<sup>303</sup> From the US, for instance, as Sultan Shahin hopes in *A new dimension in India's northeast woes*, Asia Times, Hong Kong, October 23, 2004.

<sup>304</sup> "Burma" was renamed "Myanmar" by the Burmese Military regime in 1989. In order to loosen up the reading and without any political connotation, the term "Myanmar" will be used when specifically referring to the current government (SPDC) while "Burma" will be used when speaking about the country in general or in an historical or cultural perspective.

Asian peak (5,881 m) located in the extreme north of Burma's Kachin state, to the Kaladan River flowing through India's Mizo Hills and the Chin and Arakan (Rakhine) states of Burma into the Bay of Bengal. Four Indian states (Arunachal Pradesh, - 520 km, Nagaland - 215 km, Manipur - 398 km and Mizoram - 510 km) border two Burmese states (Chin and Kachin) and one Division (Sagaing Division with a Burman – *bama'r* – majority).

However, the official demarcation of the Indo-Burmese boundary has never hindered the mobility of the people in this region turning it into a meeting ground of cultures, ethnicities and rivalries. While the Kumon and Patkai mountains as well as the Arakan range between Bangladesh and Burma, may constitute a natural border separating South Asia (Brahmaputra and Ganges Valleys) from Burma and the rest of Asia (Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong Valleys), they definitely do not constitute a barrier for ethnic mobility. Both India and Burma are perfectly aware of these cultural, economical and political interconnections in the area,<sup>305</sup> but the mismanagement of the complex situation by successive governments and armies has alienated the region worn down by the harsh military regime in Burma and the Indian government's obsession with security and unity.

The close and friendly relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, the first Prime Ministers of India (1947-64) and Burma (1948-58 and 1960-62), contributed a lot to the improvement of relations between the two neighbours in the 1950s. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the attitude and polity of *Bogyoke* Aung San, the father of Burma's Independence, did not augur a close Indo-Burmese relationship. The repatriation from Burma in 1947-48 of thousands of Indians (brought in by the British and who had predominantly fought on their side during the Second World War)

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<sup>305</sup> For further details, see Renaud Egreteau, *Wooing the Generals – India's New Burma Policy*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, 234p.



and the polite antithesis between the nationalistic positions of J. Nehru and Aung San did not bode well for India-Burma relations. But the assassination of Aung San (July 19, 1947) and his replacement by U Nu, a fervent Buddhist, changed the picture. Thanks to the Nehru-Nu friendship, New Delhi gave financial and military aid to the Rangoon government undermined by a strong communist insurrection (led by the *Communist Party of Burma - CPB*) as well as the rise of the Karen rebellion in the East (*Karen National Union - KNU*).

Nehru and U Nu settled without delay the issue of people of Indian origin living in Burma. Despite the Independence, a rich Indian community had stayed on in Burma in 1948 (about 700,000 persons) and, as Nehru himself said, they had no choice but to adopt Burmese nationality or return to India.<sup>306</sup> The two Prime Ministers, both great admirers of India's Emperor Ashoka (269-219 BC), made official their fraternal relations inspired by the ideals of the pacifist Buddhist tradition through the "*Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship*" (largely based on Kant's philosophy) on July 7, 1951. Two years later, the border issue left half-solved by the British was also settled with the signature of the first border agreement in Imphal (Manipur District) in March 1953.

In the early 1960s, while U Nu was facing increasing internal difficulties, the Indo-Burma relationship was facilitated by Aung San's widow, Daw Khin Kyi, then posted as the Burmese Ambassador to New Delhi (1960-67). Nevertheless, the advent of military rule under General Ne Win in Burma (March 1962) set up a "bamboo curtain" around the country which decided to live in complete autarchic isolation. The 1,643 km long border was sealed off and the Indian Northeast officially cut off from the western

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<sup>306</sup> As quoted during a press conference held in Rangoon on June 20, 1950. He advised Indians to "act as envoys and work for the land they live in", cf. Uma Shankar Singh, *Burma and India (1948-1962). A Study in the Foreign Policies of Burma and India and Burma's policy towards India*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1979, pp 60-61.

part of Burma which was torn apart by violent insurgencies (CPB since 1948 and then the *Kachin Independence Army* – KIA, and *Chin Independence Army* – CIA, since 1961).

Moreover, the xenophobic policies adopted by the paranoid General Ne Win directly targeting “foreign” communities led to the flight of thousands of Indians in 1962-63. A large number of Tamils, Chettiars, Bengalis and Biharis who had stayed on in Burma after 1948 fled the country leaving all their possessions behind. A strong resentment against the seizure of Indian properties and financial assets by the Burmese junta is perceptible even today. Indians connected to the Northeast were however differently affected. A strong Manipuri community (which was brought back by General Maha Bandoola after his incursion into Manipur in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century) lived in some cities in the Irrawaddy Valley (from Bhamo and even Ruili to Mandalay and Prome). Furthermore, on both sides of the Indo-Burmese border, insurgent groups began to establish strong financial, sympathy and military links to fight either against the new government of the Burmese Army or the Indian government obsessed by security issues after the 1962 India-China War and the second India-Pakistan War of 1965.

The Nagas and the Kachins, the two strongest and most feared insurgent armies of the region drew closer as brothers-in-arms. Led by A.Z. Phizo, the Nagas (*National Naga Council* – NNC) set up training camps in Burma soon after the 1956 crackdown forced them to flee Indian territory. Benefiting from the presence of ‘Burmese’ Nagas (belonging to the Homi and Konyak tribes), the ‘Indian’ Nagas (mainly belonging to the Thangkhum, Sema and Angami tribes) set up a powerful base in the remote Somra Hills (facing Manipur District) as well in Singkaling Hkamti and near Noklak, a little village known to have been the headquarters of the *Naga Federal Army* in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>307</sup> But, the ‘Burmese’

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<sup>307</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, 1999, page 489.

Nagas began to develop different policies and attitudes towards their neighbours in 1972 when the Eastern NNC under the leadership of S.S. Khaplang and Tungbo first took a position against Phizo's hegemonic conduct. Despite joining the newly formed NSCN (a splinter group of the NNC led by Muivah and Swu from 1980, trying to gather some "Indian" and "Burmese" Nagas), the ENNC has ever since been the sole master of the area adjoining the Paungsaw Pass, the Indo-Burmese check-point on the historic Ledo Road.<sup>308</sup> But the honeymoon did not last long. The violent break-up occurred in April 1988 and led to the creation of the NSCN-K and NSCN-IM factions, illustrating only one of the intra-ethnic rivalries of the region.

Today, the Khaplang outfit based in Myanmar is fighting mainly against the Burmese Army, while establishing close underground links with NSCN-IM's enemies within the Northeastern insurgent circle consisting mainly of ULFA, Meghalaya's ANVC and the UNLF-Meghen of Manipur.<sup>309</sup> It revealed in January 2003 that it has also provided extensive training to KYKL and PREPAK ultras.<sup>310</sup> As a manifestation of this trend, the *Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front* (IBRF) formed in 1990 and bringing together ULFA, UNLF, NSCN-K, CNF and KNA built criminal links to sustain the insurgency struggle (drug smuggling, arms trafficking, counterfeit currency...). Though it has split, the IBRF still has many underground links, particularly in drug and arms smuggling circles.

The Kachins of North West Burma have long been the main suppliers and trainers of the Nagas as well as other minor

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<sup>308</sup> The Khaplang followers have their headquarters close to the town of Chumnu in the Sagaing Division. Cf. Sashinungla, *Nagaland – Insurgency and Factional Intransigence*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 16, 2005.

<sup>309</sup> Mizzima News, *Indian insurgent groups get base in Myanmar*, March 08, 2002.

<sup>310</sup> Mizzima News, *NSCN-K admits to training Indian rebels in Burma*, January 07, 2003.

Northeastern militants groups. With a strength of 10,000 armed men in the 1980s, the KIA and its local militias controlled the entire illicit traffic on the *Ledo Road* between Assam and Yunnan where the CPB, another brother-in-arms though inspired by a totally different ideology, had its stronghold. It officially established links with the NNC and the MNF, which grew with its military assistance in the 1960s, Laldenga having contacted the Kachins through the *Chin Independence Army*, the Chins being related to the Mizos and having begun their armed struggle against Rangoon in 1961 before the MNF. Both the NNC and MNF acquired Chinese weapons (mainly AK-type rifles) from the CPB, thanks to the KIA and other Chin and Kachin outfits.

Between 1966 and 68, the regional turmoil (the Vietnam War, China's Cultural Revolution and various military coups in Southeast Asia) further added to the confusion in terms of security. While China was trying to promote its revolutionary ideology in Burma and in India's Northeast, connections between the Beijing-backed CPB and Indo-Burmese insurgents came to light. New Delhi and Rangoon, after their "more-than-cold" relations, got closer to try and solve the issue. After a second border agreement signed on March 10, 1967, General Ne Win came to India in March 1968 and Indira Gandhi paid her sole official visit to Burma in March 1969. Minor military operations were jointly undertaken by the *Tatmadaw* and the Indian Army against the NNC and the MNF, but the results were not as expected, especially because of the Burmese Army's lack of control over the remote Naga Hill Tracts and the Kachin state.

The Kachins continued to train and arm other Northeast militant outfits and set up a wide financial empire. The ULFA had reportedly benefited from KIA guerrilla training in 1986 (at a cost of INR 100,000 per trainee). As a rising insurgent force in Assam, ULFA built a powerful outfit thanks to help from the NSCN and its short-lived KIA ally, which provided it with large quantities of arms

from Burma and Cambodia, the main weapons market in the region.<sup>311</sup> The PREPAK (from Manipur, formed in 1977) and the PLA (Manipur, 1978), which has two camps in the Somra Hills, also received training from KIA. Their Chin neighbours, predominantly Christian like most of the Naga and Mizo outfits, also offered them training and shelter.<sup>312</sup> Many Chins fought for the MNF as some Mizos were part of the CIA, then known as CNF/A (reborn in 1985) and shared the aid.<sup>313</sup>

Drug trafficking has been one of the main sources of income for most insurgent groups in the region.<sup>314</sup> The Northeast shares a long and porous border with Burma, the second largest opium-growing country after Afghanistan but the largest producer of methamphetamines (ATS-type drugs).<sup>315</sup> Ethnic interconnectivity as well as the underground economic interests of insurgent outfits on both sides of the Indo-Burmese border has widely facilitated the peddling and smuggling of precursors and drugs on a large scale. Collusion, complicity and/or inefficiency of Indian and Burmese army and police officials are other reasons: consequently, the Northeast has been fully integrated into the regional drug trafficking network.<sup>316</sup>

According to various reports, poppy is now openly cultivated in the Kachin state (1,100 ha in 2004 according to the UN agency,

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<sup>311</sup> Binalakshmi Nepram, *South Asia's Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, pp 95-106.

<sup>312</sup> Renaud Egretreau, *Wooing the Generals, India's New Burma Policy*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003, page 63.

<sup>313</sup> The Irrawaddy, *The Chin and Mizo: Ex-Brothers?* Volume 12, Issue 4, April 2004.

<sup>314</sup> Nihar Ranjan Nayak, *Narco-trafficking: non-military threat in India's Eastern border*, IPCS Article No.1079, July 08, 2003.

<sup>315</sup> Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy & Joël Messonnier, *Yaa Baa – Production, Traffic and Consumption of Methamphetamine in Mainland Southeast Asia*, Singapore, Singapore University Press, 2004.

<sup>316</sup> Mizzima News Report, *India-Burma – Drug Cultivation, Consumption and Trafficking*, January 2004.

UNODC in Yangon),<sup>317</sup> in Sagaing Division (800 ha) as well as in Arunachal Pradesh (2,000 ha) and some isolated areas of Nagaland, Assam and Manipur. Heroin refineries are mainly based in and around the Shan state in Myanmar, but a few have also been reported in the Sagaing Division (Naga-controlled areas).<sup>318</sup> Smuggled into Burma, through the Manipur and Nagaland borders, opium is easily refined into heroin in factories run by local drug lords<sup>319</sup> (essentially Naga and Meitei). The surroundings of Moreh and Imphal as well as National Highway 39 have become a lawless area run by ultras and traffickers<sup>320</sup> and are very difficult to cross.<sup>321</sup>

However, poppy cultivation and heroin production in the region have fallen drastically since the end of the 1990s, mainly due to eradication programmes supported by the United Nations, bad monsoons and a very lucrative move from opiate-based products to ATS narcotics in Myanmar.<sup>322</sup> Though India has never been a market for these new synthetic drugs (*yaa baa*, for instance), it has become one of the main suppliers of precursors for ATS-type drugs as well as a safe corridor for their transportation and then exportation.<sup>323</sup> The Northeast as well as New Delhi and Calcutta (especially University campuses where there are ethnic minority students linked to Northeast

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<sup>317</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Myanmar Opium Survey 2004*, (informal information given to the author), Yangon October 2004.

<sup>318</sup> See the 221 page report of Altsean-Burma, *A Failing Grade – Burma's Drug Eradication Efforts*, Bangkok, November 2004.

<sup>319</sup> Larry Jagan, "Poppy Barons on the 'speed' boat", *Outlook India*, February 16, 2004.

<sup>320</sup> *The Bangkok Post*, *India's answer to the Wild West*, August 27, 2003.

<sup>321</sup> During fieldwork in Manipur in March 2005, the author was forbidden to travel on NH39 and confined to the Imphal Greater Municipality area.

<sup>322</sup> Various interviews with UNODC officials in Yangon, Myanmar (December 2002-May 2004).

<sup>323</sup> Jane's Intelligence Review, *New drug trafficking routes in Southeast Asia*, July 01, 2002.

insurgent outfits), have become a hub for drugs that are not necessarily consumed in India.<sup>324</sup>

In addition to the Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh bordering Bhutan, Tibet and the Kachin state are well known for cultivating ephedra. One of the oldest medicinal plants used for centuries by the Chinese, ephedra (*Ma Huang* in Chinese) is largely used for its heat and energy producing properties (for treating asthma, cough and digestive problems). Ephedrine (an alkaloid derived from ephedra) is a compound of methamphetamine. Though legally cultivated (ephedra) and processed (ephedrine) in India and China, ephedra/ephedrine is nevertheless illegally exported to Myanmar to be refined and manufactured into Amphetamine Type Stimulant (ATS) tablets in various private laboratories (in Wa, Kokaungs and the Shan area and also along the Chindwin River).<sup>325</sup> The ever increasing seizures of ephedrine by Indian authorities along the Indo-Burmese border confirm this trend.<sup>326</sup> Even though India cannot be compared to Thailand, which is flooded with almost one billion ATS tablets every year, the Indian corridor (through Manipur, Assam and Calcutta) has become very profitable<sup>327</sup> and Northeast insurgent groups such as the NSCN-IM and ULFA are taking full advantage of it. The *Kuki National Army* has even started levying a tax (of 10-20%) on drug peddling in the territory under its control.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Mizzima News, *Burmese and Chinese drug traffickers arrested in India*, May 23, 2003.

<sup>325</sup> See Geopolitical Drug Observatory, *Géopolitique mondiale des drogues; Annual Report 1998-99*, Paris, April 2000, Asia, pp 35-75 as well as Geopolitical Drug Newsletter, *Axes of the Burmese Drug Trade*, Issue 6, March 2002.

<sup>326</sup> The Hindu, *Truckloads of ephedrine seized*, February 1, 2003 (2 tons of ephedrine were seized at that time).

<sup>327</sup> As far back as in 1999, Wa brand ATS were seized in Manipur by the Indian Army: The Irrawaddy, *Burmese Drugs seized in India*, Volume 7, Issue 3, March 1999.

<sup>328</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Gulliver's Troubles: State and Militants in North East India*, Economic and Political Weekly, October 12, 2002. Also, Tehelka News, *How drug money fuels the Northeast militancy*, October 09, 2000.

HIV/AIDS inevitably came into the picture with the rise of drug trafficking, especially of heroin, and Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland have the most staggering figures in India. As the region boasts of one of the highest literacy rates in the country, the awareness campaign against sexually transmitted diseases has proved to be successful, but as injected drugs became more easily available, cheap and popular, intravenous drug users (IDU) became the main vectors of the pandemic. Manipur alone reported 40,000 opium addicts in 2002.<sup>329</sup> According to Altsean-Burma sources in Nagaland, 30% of IDU in India are to be found in the Northeast, while the area's total population constitutes only 3% of India's population.<sup>330</sup>

However, New Delhi and Rangoon (Yangon) have shown little inclination to cooperate in order to tackle the insurgency issue and the illegal trade that fuels it. Their respective policies are guided by political considerations and matters of 'national interest' that sometimes go directly against the neighbouring country. Totally ignoring Burma in the 1980s, the Indian government chose to establish direct links with the Kachin rebels who had become the main suppliers of arms in the Northeast. Rajiv Gandhi's government reportedly contacted Brang Seng, leader of the KIO/A in order to persuade him to change his strategy. In fact, in addition to a huge financial compensation, India proposed to the KIA that it should train counter-insurgent groups loyal to the *Research and Analysis Wing* (Indian intelligence). The *Kuki National Front* (KNF) was one of the main recipients of the assistance, receiving funds and support from RAW and military training from the KIA.

The Indian authorities then tried to make the most of the growing enmity between the NSCN-IM and the Kachins by using the KNF

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<sup>329</sup> Frontline, *In a vicious circle*, Volume 19, Issue 15, July 20, 2002.

<sup>330</sup> Altsean-Burma, *A Failing Grade – Burma's Drug Eradication Efforts*, Bangkok, November 2004, page 141.



and other Kuki outfits to fight against the Swu and Muivah Naga faction in the early 1990s. At the same time, by courting the KIO/A, India thought that it could checkmate China's thrust into Myanmar as the Chinese had established an open and strong military partnership with the new Burmese junta that came to power in 1988. As masters of the buffer zone between Assam and Yunnan, the Kachins could counter China's influence even as the Burmese government opened its arms to receive technical and financial assistance from China. A KIA base was thus built in Arunachal Pradesh (at Pinawng Zup), near the Army base of Vijayanagar and a KIO liaison officer moved to Vikas Puri, a Burmese-dominated suburb of New Delhi, under the protection of RAW.<sup>331</sup>

Rangoon definitely knew about this Kachin-RAW link as well as the support India provided the Karens and how close India was to other insurgents outfits in Eastern Burma (especially through its Consulate in Chiang Mai, North Thailand). Upset by these developments, the *Tatmadaw* contacted PLA cadres across the Manipur frontier (January 1990) and helped them to flee from the Indian Army after various counterinsurgency operations.<sup>332</sup> It also turned a blind eye to all the activities of ULFA, the Nagas and other Manipuri militants groups and desisted from attacking their training camps in the Sagaing Division and Kachin state (not entirely under its control anyway) as long as they did not interfere in Myanmar's local affairs. It then gave a free hand to the *Tatmadaw* to concentrate its counter-insurgency operations in the Chin state (against the CNF) and the Arakan state (against the Rohingyas and the Arakanese separatists) on the western front. The mutual mistrust of the Indian and Burmese governments during the late 1980s and early 1990s further fuelled insurgency in the Northeast, which delightfully took advantage of the tense situation.

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<sup>331</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, 1999, page 395.

<sup>332</sup> Sushil K. Pillai, *The invisible country – Ethnicity and Conflict Management in Myanmar*, Faultlines, Volume 7, 2003.

However, the Kachins were soon affected by internecine rivalries and weakened by the numerous offensives of the modernised *Tatmadaw* and entered into negotiations to finally reach a cease-fire agreement with the Burmese junta in 1993. As a consequence of the withdrawal of Burma's second largest insurgent outfit, the picture changed in the Northeast as well as in New Delhi. Indeed, the Congress government, on losing its Kachin ally, decided to engage the Burmese Military. In March 1993, the official visit to Rangoon (Yangon) of the late J.N. Dixit, then Indian Foreign Secretary, marked a turning point in the Indo-Burmese Relations as India decided from then on to drop its isolating and opposition policy and gradually toned down its vociferous criticism of the Burmese junta. Dixit's visit was the first opportunity for both governments to discuss the issue of a potential military cooperation in Northeastern India and the western part of Myanmar.

The following year, in January 1994, the first *Border Trade Agreement* between the two neighbours was signed in New Delhi. Implemented in April 1995 with the opening of a cross-border post between Moreh (Manipur, India) and Tamu (Sagaing Division, Myanmar), this agreement enhanced (and made official) the bilateral border trade in the Northeast. But the Indo-Burmese cooperation got a major boost at the military level in 1995 when both armies decided to conduct a first joint military operation (called *Operation Golden Bird*) against some insurgents groups in Northeast India. Aimed at dismantling ULFA, NSCN-IM/K, PLA, UNLF and CNF/A camps, this joint operation considerably weakened the militant outfits by killing or arresting many of their cadres, but it did not end as initially planned.

Indeed, the apparently cordial and understanding relations suffered due to a decision taken by the establishment in New Delhi. When India awarded the *Nehru Prize for International Understanding* to Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition in Burma, as a proof of her commitment to democracy, the Burmese Military

responded by stopping Operation *Golden Bird* and withdrew its troops, thus expressing its strong disapproval of New Delhi's choice. Distrust thus continued to rule the Indo-Burmese relationship.<sup>333</sup> Another more recent example also illustrates this lack of trust. In 2001, the *Tatmadaw* launched a vast offensive against the ULNF-Meghen, the Manipuri outfit which was seriously involved in drug trafficking, much against the will of the Burmese authorities. The UNLF-M suffered a severe blow and 300 of its cadres (including its leader, RK Meghen) were captured and jailed in Burma.<sup>334</sup> However, the Burmese military government was hesitant at first<sup>335</sup> and has since then always refused to extradite insurgents, preferring to keep them as a bargaining chip.

However, while a growing rift became apparent between the Indian Army and India's political and diplomatic circles as far as India's Burma Policy was concerned, the two armies drew closer.<sup>336</sup> In February 1998, the Indian Navy arrested offshore several Arakanese militants suspected of drug trafficking.<sup>337</sup> Like with the Kachins in the North, India gave assistance and support to the *National Unity Party of Arakan* (NUPA), a separatist outfit on Burma's west coast (the Arakan/Rakhine state). In 1995, the Indian government, which was keen to learn more about the Chinese facilities on Ramree Island and in the port of Sittwe and also about Sino-Burmese military activities in the Bay of Bengal, allowed some

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<sup>333</sup> Jane's Defence Weekly, *India and Myanmar look to bury years of distrust*, January 18, 2000.

<sup>334</sup> Mizzima News, *Burmese Attack: a Major Blow to Northeast Militants*, November 18, 2001.

<sup>335</sup> Mizzima News, *Burma Junta Delays Extradition of North East Rebels*, December 02, 2001.

<sup>336</sup> Subir Bhaumik, BBC's East India correspondent, who is himself a Tripuri and expert on Northeast Affairs, affirmed that the Indian Army has always pushed for a closer cooperation with the Burmese Army, regardless of the nature of the Burmese regime. Army personnel in the Northeast apparently want a greater say in matters relating to Burma and do not want to leave India's Burma policy to pro-democracy intellectuals and diplomats in Delhi. Discussions between Subir Bhaumik and the author, Guwahati and New Delhi, September 2004.

<sup>337</sup> BBC Asia-Pacific News, *Burmese rebels ask India to release fighters*, May 4, 1998

NUPA cadres to use a couple of small islands to the north of the Indian Andaman Islands % close to the famous Coco Islands where China had set up a signal intelligence system % as an alternate base and a centre for illegal trade. But New Delhi promptly changed its stance by stopping its assistance to NUPA and arresting many of its cadres during the 1998 *Operation Leech*.<sup>338</sup> However, India has not yet extradited them to Myanmar, another illustration of India's ambivalent policy towards Yangon.<sup>339</sup>

In October 2000, another "joint operation" against Naga rebels was planned between the two armies. Actually, it was more "two operations conducted at the same time", rather than a "coordinated one". As a result, the operation failed miserably with the *Tatmadaw* losing many soldiers during the assault on NSCN-K camps in Myanmar.<sup>340</sup> In May 2001, the Indian Army posted itself along the Nagaland border to cut off the retreat of Nagas insurgents under fire from the *Tatmadaw*. Once more, the Burmese offensive met with unexpected resistance and the Indian troops did not move in spite of the withdrawal of the Burmese soldiers.<sup>341</sup>

The Burmese Army thus seems neither able nor willing to cooperate with India.<sup>342</sup> According to Naga prisoners, no Burmese government would ever be able to dismantle the two NSCN (NSCN-K and NSCN-IM) camps in Myanmar or the ULFA bases, adding that some *Tatmadaw* officers are very close to the ultra leaders of these rebel groups, who have been using the Sagaing Division as a launching pad for their illegal and terrorist

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<sup>338</sup> Outlook India, *George Catches a Chill: A sudden betrayal* by G. Fernandes, April 17, 2000.

<sup>339</sup> BBC Asia-Pacific News, *Arakan rebels fear deportation*, March 24, 1999 and *Burmese rebels appeal for asylum*, January 18, 2001.

<sup>340</sup> BBC South Asia News, *Burmese army attacks Indian rebels*, November 1, 2000.

<sup>341</sup> BBC South Asia News, *India and Burma target rebels*, May 17, 2001.

<sup>342</sup> Mizzima News, *Burma unwilling to fight India insurgent groups*, May 19, 2002.

activities.<sup>343</sup> About 12 ultra outfits maintain camps in the area sometimes serving mutual interests.<sup>344</sup>

In October 2004, the landmark official visit to India by Senior General Than Shwe, the head of the Burmese junta since 1992, could not change this trend. It appears that the *Tatmadaw* is not willing to go beyond the skirmishes it agreed to conduct to satisfy India. The latest crackdown on insurgent outfits in November 2004 did not affect the re-established ULFA bases in Myanmar after the crackdown by the *Royal Bhutan Army* in December 2003.<sup>345</sup> Only the fight against the Naga Khaplang faction is taken seriously by the Burmese military as S.S. Khaplang has always threatened the sacrosanct 'National Unity' of Myanmar with his separatist objectives of setting up a *Nagalim* within Myanmar. On the contrary, the other outfits (UNLF, PLA, ULFA, KYKL and PREPAK) do not threaten the integrity of Myanmar's territory. They only constitute a destabilising force as they are more involved in arms and drug trafficking. But their collusion with local *Tatmadaw* officers and Burmese government officials, enriched by these links, prevents them from being crushed. Successive official visits by Indian ministers, army men and diplomats will not change this fact.

### **e. Bhutan – No Longer a Safe Haven?**

Although tucked in the heart of the Himalayas, the kingdom of Bhutan occupies a strategic position between India and China.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Mizzima News, *No government can dismantle the camps, said surrendered militants*, July 18, 2002. More recently: The Assam Tribune, *ULFA still has bases in Myanmar*, January 21, 2005.

<sup>344</sup> Mizzima News, *Militant groups of Indo-Burma border get together*, October 06, 2002.

<sup>345</sup> The Assam Tribune, *Army offensive against ultras on Myanmar border*, November 10, 2004.

<sup>346</sup> Though Bhutan has had full diplomatic relations with India since 1978 (after being treated as a dependency following the 1949 India-Bhutan Treaty), it has never had any diplomatic relations with China. A 1998 Sino-Bhutanese treaty however settled the border issue (pre-1959 status).

Not only does it border the Chinese province of Tibet but it also adjoins the Brahmaputra Valley and Assam. It was just by misfortune that the hereditary monarchy got involved in India's troubles in the Northeast. Bhutan has always enjoyed good relations with India and supported it at the international level.<sup>347</sup> However, porous borders, weak Bhutanese armed forces, the strength of the militant outfits from the Northeast, the rise of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the problem of “unwanted” refugees and a conflict of political interests have drawn the kingdom into the turmoil affecting India's Northeast.

Since 1991, the main bone of contention between New Delhi and Thimpu has been the presence of Assamese insurgent outfits on Bhutan's territory. Following the counter-insurgency operations Bajrang and Rhino launched by the Indian armed forces in 1990-91, ULFA relocated its main headquarters in Eastern and Southern Bhutan. Very soon, the NDFB and KLO joined them and established a total of at least 30 home bases and training camps.<sup>348</sup> Bhutan soon became a “safe haven” for the Assamese and Bodo ultras who settled in the area and controlled several districts.<sup>349</sup> In 2003, an estimated 3,000 militants from Northeast India were reported to be living in these home bases: 1,560 belonging to ULFA, 740 to NDFB, 430 to KLO and few dozen to various other insurgent groups and criminal organisations (Nagas, Khasi, *Arunachal Dragon Force...*).<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Article 2 of the 1949 Treaty stipulates that New Delhi should be consulted on all international matters, especially within the United Nations framework. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San who would later become the leader of the democratic opposition in Burma, was nominated UN advisor to the new Bhutanese King in 1972.

<sup>348</sup> Palden Tshering, *Militants Camps: Ending a Foreign Scourge*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 1, Issue 10, September 23, 2002.

<sup>349</sup> Praveen Kumar, *Indian Militants Sit Pretty in Bhutan*, IPCS Article No.1092, August 11, 2003.

<sup>350</sup> Wasbir Hussain, *Bhutan: King-Siz̄e Problem*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 10, September 22, 2003.

At first, the attitude of the Bhutanese government was quite conciliatory towards the Indian militants. Indeed, the arrival of the Assamese nationalist outfits was even welcomed to some extent. For a decade, the 3,000-odd militants and their families boosted Bhutan's backward economy by bringing in Indian money spent freely in the well-organised camps boasting of an efficient infrastructure. Besides, ULFA adopted a violent anti-Nepali stance and targeted the ethnic minority wherever it was found. The presence of a large but unwelcome population of Nepali origin on Bhutanese territory further facilitated ULFA's infiltration and activities in the area.

The Bhutanese population (officially estimated at 1.9 million) is roughly divided into two ethnic groups: the Drukpas (in the North, who are a minority but represent the ruling class) and the Lhotshampas (in the South, who are of Nepali origin). The latter probably represent more than 50% of the Bhutanese population, but according to government sources they constitute only 28%. The influx of Nepali economic migrants from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century coupled with the arrival of Nepali farmers fleeing the Maoist insurgency after 1996 has undermined Bhutan's demographic and, therefore, political stability.<sup>351</sup> The 1985 Citizenship Act provoked a massive exodus of some of these Nepali Bhutanese which was further aggravated by the arrival of the xenophobic ULFA patrols in the early 1990s. The presence of 100,000 odd Nepali Bhutanese refugees illegally settled in West Bengal and Assam consequently worsened Indo-Bhutanese relations.<sup>352</sup>

The Bhutanese King's hesitation to dismantle the Indian insurgents' camps and ban their activities on its soil had long worried India

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<sup>351</sup> Michael Hutt, *Unbecoming Citizens – Culture, Nationhood and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>352</sup> P.G. Rajamohan, *Bhutan & Nepal: Terror & Refuge*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 3, Issue 19, November 22, 2004. Also Manas Milind, *Politics of Migration in Bhutan*, IPCS Article No.1179, October 15, 2003.

which kept pressuring the little kingdom to take steps against them. In November 1998 and in May 1999, two rounds of talks were held between the Bhutanese authorities and ULFA leaders, but in June 2000, the *Bhutanese National Assembly* was still reluctant to take a stand against the Assamese outfit and declared during its 78<sup>th</sup> Session that the “peaceful negotiations” would continue. In other words, no military action was planned to flush out the Indian militants who had however increased their hostile activities against the Bhutanese (assassination of a Bhutan Cabinet minister in 1996,<sup>353</sup> attacks on the *Royal Bhutan Police* from 1997 and on the *Royal Bhutan Army* from 1998).

However, combined pressure from the Vajpayee government, the Assam state government under Chief Minister T. Gogoi and the creation of an embarrassing position where Bhutan’s sovereignty was being challenged led the King to launch a vast military operation in 2003.<sup>354</sup> On December 15, 2003, *Operation All Clear* was launched by the Royal Bhutan Army which had not faced any military adversary since 1865 when it was defeated by the British colonial troops. Led by the King himself, the offensive was aimed at destroying the 30-odd camps belonging to ULFA, NDFB and KLO. The operation was organised with New Delhi’s support (the King himself visited New Delhi on September 14-18, 2003).<sup>355</sup> But as everybody knew about it and much had been written about it in the Indian press since August 2003, the operation was expected by the insurgents.

Yet, the Kingdom deployed 6,000 men out of its 14,000 strong army in the counter-insurgency operation while India sealed its

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<sup>353</sup> Binalakshmi Nepram, *South Asia’s Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India’s Northeast*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, pp 159.

<sup>354</sup> Anand Kumar, *Bhutan’s offensive against the terrorists*, IPCS Article No.1258, December 29, 2003.

<sup>355</sup> Frontline Volume 20, Issue 16. Also, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 10.



266 km long border with Bhutan, arresting the runaways or killing the ultras who opened fire and resisted.<sup>356</sup> The crackdown lasted two weeks and an estimated 200 militants were gunned down while 500 were captured (or surrendered), along with many of their family members.<sup>357</sup> Huge stocks of ammunitions and weapons were seized, many sub-camps were busted and the main headquarters of the ULFA (Phukaptong and Merengphu)<sup>358</sup> and the NDFB (Tikri) were destroyed. As it was well organised, the operation dealt a severe blow to the militants, but it did not crush them entirely as only one major ULFA leader was caught (Bhimkanta Buragohain)<sup>359</sup> and they were able to retaliate within India.<sup>360</sup> Limited police operations followed the crackdown in March 2004, but without causing any major upheaval.<sup>361</sup>

The Indian government's satisfaction was obvious. To persuade Bhutan to intervene, India increased its official bilateral trade with the kingdom eight times. But even though a free trade zone was established between the two countries as far back as in 1972, their bilateral trade has never taken off.<sup>362</sup> Coupled with technical and military aid, this assistance helped Bhutan to cover the cost of the crackdown to a large extent. In fact, in addition to seeking the destruction of the ULFA-NDFB-KLO camps in Bhutan, India was trying to break the growing nexus between ULFA and the Nepali

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<sup>356</sup> Jaideep Saikia, *Bhutan's Tryst with ULFA*, Aakrosh, Volume 7, No.23, New Delhi, April 2004.

<sup>357</sup> The Indian Express, *Operation All Clear by Royal Bhutan Army enters last lap*, December 31, 2003.

<sup>358</sup> Rediff.com, *Bhutan starts ousting anti-India ultras*, December 17, 2003.

<sup>359</sup> See the analysis given in Frontline, *Crackdown in Bhutan*, Volume 21, Issue 1, January 03, 2004.

<sup>360</sup> The Times of India, *ULFA striking at will despite Bhutan action – three attacks in five days*, January 11, 2004.

<sup>361</sup> The Assam Tribune, *Bhutan launches more combing operations against NE ultras*, March 16, 2004.

<sup>362</sup> During the financial years 2002-03 and 2003-04. Moreover, the aid given to Bhutan by the Indian External Affairs Ministry rose to 20% of the latter's budget in 2003-04. Rakesh Chhetri, *India-Bhutan relations: a strategic partnership*, Bhutan News Online, January 03, 2005.

Maoists. Indeed, the ULFA had established flourishing links with the Nepali insurgents through Bhutan and the *Bhutanese Communist Party* (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist: BCP-MLM) and Indian intelligence tried hard to break this new link.<sup>363</sup>

But just one year after the crackdown, the militants were back, crossing the porous Indo-Bhutan border and setting up camps once again in Eastern Bhutan.<sup>364</sup> After sneaking into Bangladesh, Myanmar and even China and Arunachal Pradesh<sup>365</sup> for a short while, ULFA and NDFB re-established their bases in Bhutan, but keeping a low-profile this time and reducing their underground activities. For the time being...

#### **f. Nepal – Fear of a Maoist Contagion**

None of the Seven Sisters has a common border with the Kingdom of Nepal. Yet a large, even if scattered, Nepali community has settled in the Northeast affecting the demographic composition of the region. Moreover, the recent large-scale Maoist insurgency that has torn Nepal apart since 1996 has had serious repercussions in Northeast India.

At least 120,000 Nepalis live in Northeastern India, mainly in Assam. The first lot of migrants came with the British when Assam was annexed to the Bengal province in 1826. Most of them worked as labourers in Assam's vast tea plantations, but a tiny minority of Gurkhas (the Gorkha Kingdom having been defeated by British troops in 1816), settled in the British military outposts scattered in the Northeastern Hills as they had been recruited in the colonial army. A few Nepali farmers moved to remote Bhutan and became Bhutanese citizens in 1958. But it

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<sup>363</sup> Frontline, *The view from New Delhi*, Volume 21, Issue 1, January 03, 2004.

<sup>364</sup> Rediff.com, *ULFA trying to re-establish camps in Bhutan*, March 24, 2005.

<sup>365</sup> AFP, *Indian rebels fleeing Bhutan ask China for safe passage*, December 29, 2003.

was not so in India, where the Nepalis (and all other 'foreigners') were denied Indian citizenship. Considered as "outsiders", they were – along with the Bengalis – the main targets of the Anti-Foreigner Movement during the 1970s and 1980s. Still a cheap labour force, the Nepalis continued to migrate to the Northeast and this economic migration has been further aggravated by the political exodus caused by the rising Maoist insurgency in the kingdom from the late 1990s.

The Maoist rebellion started just six years after a major political upheaval in Nepal when King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah (1972-2001) abolished absolute monarchy to set up a democratic multiparty system in the country. As a constitutional monarchy, the Kingdom of Nepal went through a democratisation process that saw the political scene becoming free with the emergence of many political parties. However, one left-oriented faction grew stronger than the others to pose a severe threat to the monarchy. The *Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist* (CPN-M), inspired by a Chinese "Gang of Four" Maoism, claimed represent the backward areas (the whole country except the Kathmandu Valley), belittled and neglected by the Nepali monarchist elite.<sup>366</sup>

In February 1996, the Maoist rebels (*maobaadi*) took up arms and went underground, controlling most parts of the country where they established parallel institutions, a taxation network and a leftist education system. The armed insurgency increased its illegal activities and the struggle against the *Royal Nepal Army* (trained and armed by India and the United States) became bloodier claiming more than 8,000 lives in 2004. The estimated strength of the rebels is around 5,000 armed militants supported by 8,000

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<sup>366</sup> Ironically without any support from China, which from the very beginning has strongly condemned the insurgency as a potential threat and a source of instability on its southern Tibetan flank. For further details on the insurgency, Thomas A. Marks, *Insurgency in Nepal*, New Delhi, Faultlines, Volume 15, 2005.

militiamen and 25,000 to 35,000 hardcore followers.<sup>367</sup> Demanding a free *Maoist People's Republic of Nepal* and thereby the abolition of monarchic rule, the CPN-M and its armed outfits simultaneously fight against so-called “Indian Imperialism”, a mix of cultural (Hindu caste-system and linguistic similarities), economic (Indian ‘capitalism’) and political domination.

Indeed, India and Nepal, which share a common religion (Nepal is the only official Hindu Kingdom in the world) and a common script (*devanagari*), have agreed on the free movement of people and currency along their 1,800 km long border (despite a growing opposition from the establishment in New Delhi).<sup>368</sup> But their relations have always been tense as the tiny Kingdom feels stifled by India’s hegemonic (“Big Brother”) attitude. On its side, New Delhi has been accusing Kathmandu of turning a blind eye towards ISI operations on its soil as well as of collusion with drug traffickers who flood India with cheap marijuana (*ganja* which has always been easily available all over India).<sup>369</sup> Drug trafficking is one of the main bones of contention between the two governments and the Indian Police have not been very successful in tackling the problem. Indo-Nepal military cooperation is mainly aimed at containing the insurgency in Nepal,<sup>370</sup> partly due to the fear of ideological contagion, partly to put an end to smuggling, but not at preventing the development of links in the future between the Maoists and the Northeastern outfits.

Indeed, as far as India’s Northeast is concerned, the growing ramification of links between Indian insurgents and Nepalis has raised

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<sup>367</sup> Ashok K. Mehta, *Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Implications for India*, Bharat Rakshak Monitor, Volume 6, Issue 4, January-February 2004. Also Maj-Gen. Dipankar Banerjee, *The Crisis in Nepal and India’s Response*, IPCS Article No.1341, March 18, 2004.

<sup>368</sup> The Hindu, *Scrapping the Treaty with Nepal?* January 29, 2001.

<sup>369</sup> Meha Dixit, *Maoist Insurgency in Nepal*, IPCS Article No.1622, January 27, 2005.

<sup>370</sup> The Hindu, *India, Nepal launch joint operations*, August 21, 2004.

an alarm in security circles in New Delhi, who are wary of the possibility of Nepal offering a base to Indian insurgents from the Northeast, especially the neighbouring Assamese and Bodo insurgents.<sup>371</sup> However, it seems that the CPN-M's strongest connections in India are with the leftist militant groups like the *People's War Group* in Andhra Pradesh and the CPI-M and CPI-ML outfits and *Naxalites* in Bihar. The only reported linkages between Maoist insurgents and Northeastern groups are with ULFA, KLO, ATTF and NDFB. More opportunistic than ideological, these linkages enable both parties to benefit from each other's arms smuggling networks. The ATTF (from Tripura, situated far away from Nepal) has been accused of being the main go-between between Nepal and the major weapons trafficking hub of Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh).<sup>372</sup> ATTF cadres caught in June 2003 admitted that they had organised the shipment of AK-type rifles from Bangladesh to Nepal.

Earlier in 2001, leaders of ULFA, KLO, NDFB and CPN-M (and its armed outfit the *Nepali People's Liberation Army - NPLA*) secretly met at Birganj on the Indo-Nepal border. Assam's KLO has also been brokering relations between the *Bhutan Communist Party* and the CPN-M (the potential threat posed by BCP is more than limited). More recently, following the severe crackdown on its refuge in Bhutan in December 2003, ULFA is reported to have resettled some of its combatants in three or four camps in Nepal,<sup>373</sup> near the Sikkim border, under the protection of the Maoist "Head of Foreign Affairs".<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Binalakshmi Nepram, *South Asia's Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's Northeast*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, pp 160-161.

<sup>372</sup> P.G. Rajamohan, *Maoist incursions across open borders*, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 2, Issue 22, December 15, 2003.

<sup>373</sup> The Assam Tribune, *Nepal Maoists, ULFA forging links*, November 11, 2004.

<sup>374</sup> James Hackett, *India's troubled Northeast – Insurgency and Crime*, Strategic Comments, IISS, Volume 10, Issue 6, July 2004. Also, Bijoy Shankar Handique, *Maoists offer ULFA sanctuary in Nepal*, Assam.org Portal, December 01, 2003 (available on <http://www.assam.org/article.php?sid=261>).

However, it must be noted that the main threat is posed by the “Maoist corridor” running from Nepal to Andhra Pradesh and Kerala through the strategic Siliguri Neck and the *Naxalites* in Bihar and West Bengal and not by a nexus between Maoists and insurgents in the Northeast, even though there are a few leftist groups in the Northeast region.<sup>375</sup> But the NSCN outfits, the PREPAK and KCP do not share a common ideology and struggle with the CPN-M. There are no threatening ideological connections between Nepal and the Northeast but only pragmatic underground linkages, mainly due to relocation after the crackdown in Bhutan in 2003. Linkages that can be curbed more easily.

### **g. LTTE Acquaintances and the Indochina Ring**

The Sri Lankan Tamil insurgency, whose roots go back to the uprising in the island in the 1970s, became one of the biggest and best organised terrorist outfits in the world. The *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE, successor of the *Tamil New Tigers* – TNT formed in 1974) has been fighting for the independence of the Tamil-dominated part of Sri Lanka and it has established for this purpose a worldwide underground network. Taking advantage of the widely scattered Tamil diaspora (in Western countries as well as in India and Asia), the LTTE have raised huge funds and gained international political support, despite being among the world’s most dreaded outlawed organisations which has claimed the death of two Heads of State (India’s Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991 and Sri Lanka’s President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, in 1993).<sup>376</sup>

Above all, they have set up a global illegal circuit of arms trafficking (and training) which had a strong impact on regional

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<sup>375</sup> Aisha Sultanat, *Nepal-India Relations: Current Issues*, IPCS Article No.1553, November 13, 2004.

<sup>376</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, *International and Regional Implications of the Sri Lankan Tamil Insurgency*, December 1998, available on-line at <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articleDet.cfm?articleId=57>.

security in South and Southeast Asia in the 1990s.<sup>377</sup> They have also created their own fleet of warships and “trading” vessels (the “Sea Tigers”), which was anchored in some of the uninhabited islands of India’s Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. Further, they also set up several harbours along the Thai Andaman coast (stretching from the city of Ranong, the southernmost Burmese town, to Phuket),<sup>378</sup> for the export of illicit goods. This also enabled them to control piracy in the Indian Ocean in the area stretching from the mouth of the Malacca Straits right up to Sri Lanka.<sup>379</sup> From their Thai bases, they have been able to organise a wide smuggling network of weapons and drugs to Sri Lanka as well as to the Indian coast, Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar), with most of the arms coming from the Cambodian market.<sup>380</sup>

Also, the LTTE have reportedly established training camps in the Burmese jungles in the Arakan state and Sagaing Division where they maintain contacts with some rebel groups for whom they act as exporters, exchanging drugs (mainly heroine) for arms.<sup>381</sup> The main transit port in the region is the “Far West-type” harbour city of Cox’s Bazaar (Bangladesh), which has become a den for all the smugglers of the region, while one islet (St. Martin’s Island, between the Burmese Coco Islands and Andaman’s Landfall Island) is known to be the other major transit

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<sup>377</sup> Outlook India, *Fastest Guns in the East*, April 17, 2000.

<sup>378</sup> Anthony Davis, *Tracking Tigers in Phuket*, Asiaweek, Volume 29, Issue 23, June 16, 2000. Also, The Bangkok Post, *Cache of explosives of LTTE Tamil Tigers seized in Ranong*, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 and The Bangkok Post, *Tamil Tigers seen*, May 24, 2003.

<sup>379</sup> Outlook India, *LTTE: Lord of the Seas*, February 1, 1999.

<sup>380</sup> Bertil Lintner, *The Phuket Connection*, The Week, April 30, 2000. The tiny Tamil community settled in Cambodia (during the French colonial regime, the French having brought a cheap Tamil labor force from Pondicherry and Karaikal to Indochina in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), revived in the 1990s the old commercial networks (legal and illegal) set up during the French era. The LTTE took advantage of the presence and easy manipulation of some Cambodian *Tamil Eelam* supporters to buy and resell Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian and US arms that had poured into the country during the past five decades.

<sup>381</sup> The Bangkok Post, *Tigers adopt new tool of terror*, October 29, 1997.

point in the Indian Ocean, although the Indian Navy in Port Blair keeps a close watch over the area<sup>382</sup>.

As far as the Northeast is concerned, the LTTE rapidly established links with ULFA in the course of their search for international arms suppliers. The LTTE-ULFA connection was unearthed in 1991-92 by the Jain Commission inquiring into Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Its report revealed that by mid-1990 Indian intelligence (RAW) was fully aware of the close contacts between ULFA cadres and LTTE leaders in Tamil Nadu. In January 1991, the Tamil Nadu government came to know of these connections and a report from RAW in February 1991 described the linkage as a pragmatic partnership with the LTTE selling arms and offering training and shelter to ULFA in the numerous camps they were running in Tamil Nadu.<sup>383</sup> Lastly, during *Operation Rhino* launched by the Indian Army against ULFA in September-October 1991, several ULFA camps and caches were busted and tracts and LTTE papers were found.<sup>384</sup>

A few other separatist outfits in the Northeast have been reported to have links with the LTTE, but not on a regular basis. In March 1997, off the Thai Andaman coast, where the LTTE control some harbours, a Thai vessel captured a shipment belonging to the *People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA)*.<sup>385</sup> Also Th. Muivah, General Secretary of the NSCN-IM, has himself admitted during an interview that there are "some" links with the LTTE.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Deccan Herald, *Shipped to Cox's Bazar*, July 2, 1997 and also Outlook India, *Arms, Drugs and the Man*, March 26, 2001.

<sup>383</sup> The chapter dealing with the ULFA-LTTE nexus in the Jain Commission Report (1992) is available on-line at: <http://www.india-today.com/jain/vol7/chap10.html>.

<sup>384</sup> B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers, 1996, page 59.

<sup>385</sup> The Pioneer, *Thai arms seizure confirms NE militants-LTTE nexus*, March 27, 1997.

<sup>386</sup> B.G. Verghese, 1996, *ibid*, page 406.



However, the Tamil community in the Northeast<sup>387</sup> was ostensibly involved mainly in trafficking, particularly drug smuggling. Thanks to LTTE's international connections, the 17,000-odd Tamil population living in and around Moreh (Manipur's last frontier post, facing Tamu, in Burma/Myanmar) got quite involved in the heroin business through an obvious collusion with Burmese army officials as well as some Meitei insurgent outfits.<sup>388</sup> In exchange, the LTTE procured light arms for the local Tamil drug lords to protect their "business" interests and defend themselves against the local police as well as ethnic rivals (Nagas and Kukis, this rivalry having led to the particularly bloody Kuki-Tamil riots in Moreh in 1993).

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<sup>387</sup> Of diverse origins. But most of them came from Burma, either during the 1942 flight of British troops retreating before the Japanese Army or in 1962-63 in the aftermath of General Ne Win's coup and the wave of xenophobia in Burma.

<sup>388</sup> G.H. Peiris, *Clandestine Transactions of the LTTE and the Secessionist Campaign in Sri Lanka*, Ethnic Studies Report, Volume XIX, No.1, January 2001.

## **PROSPECTS: OPENING UP THE LANDLOCKED REGION?**

As first a mere reflection of all the local identity struggles in the Northeast, insurgency is now a common phenomenon in the region. India's Northeast has had to face an increasingly violent criminalization of the various militant outfits first born out of ethnic considerations. Now largely motivated by purely financial and politico-criminal interests, the insurgent movements of the Northeast have plunged the region into an ocean of instability. Furthermore, the numerous military solutions proposed by the Indian armed forces posted in the "Seven Sisters" has confirmed that the central government always tends to heed the recommendation of the army keen to embark on a large-scale crackdown with the help of the neighbouring governments of Bhutan, Myanmar and maybe (if possible) Bangladesh. Despite some peaceful negotiations (that have led nowhere) with the Nagas and the Bodos, keeping in mind Laldenga's Mizo model, successive Indian governments have seen the rift between the Centre and its Northeastern periphery widening dangerously.

Why did the integration model proposed by the Union of India fail in the Northeast? From the Northeastern perspective, the central government is more often than not perceived as another invader and never as a helping hand. Considered as another sub-colonisation, the overwhelming presence (and corruption) of Hindi-speaking civil servants as well as the pressure of the Indian army, which has an overweening influence in every state, are among the factors that explain (but do not justify) the current crisis in the Northeast. The mismanagement of funds granted to the successive districts, Union Territories and states of the Northeast by unscrupulous officials, not only those sent by New Delhi but also

local authorities yearning to grab more power and wealth, is responsible for the “balkanisation” of the region.<sup>389</sup> Lack of proper control over a corrupt ruling class, often acting in collusion with marginal insurgent outfits, and also a lack of willingness to solve the problem on the part of the central government have hindered a positive resolution of the turmoil, a problem that has not been addressed even by the local political elite (especially the powerful but over-nationalistic Assamese ruling elite).

The external linkages of most of the insurgent outfits studied in this paper are obviously one of the main factors responsible of the instability in the Northeast. Internationally connected, the insurgent outfits have been fuelled by trafficking and external support. The Indian government has often complained that it cannot intervene across its borders to tackle cross-border militancy and trafficking. But it has not even managed to solve the issue internally. Is New Delhi's political establishment really committed to the restoration of stability and development in the Northeast although it constitutes a marginal vote bank (only 30 million potential voters in seven states)? Are the politicians inclined to give in to the growing influence of the Indian Army? One way to avoid a military solution would be to follow the path of economic development.

Developing the Northeast and its infrastructure, creating jobs and a stable climate for investment would be the first step to curb insurgency as economic and social despair will then cease to be a factor for recruitment.<sup>390</sup> New Delhi has poured a lot of money into security and also in development projects but without exercising proper control as a result of which the region has got used to its

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<sup>389</sup> Dr. Chandrika Singh, *North East India: Politics & Insurgency*, New Delhi, Manas Publications, 2004, page 245.

<sup>390</sup> Dipankar Sengupta, *North-East: Causes of Economic Backwardness and Plan for Growth*, in Dipankar Sengupta & Sudhir Kumar Singh, *Insurgency in North-East India – The Role of Bangladesh*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2004, pp 115-139.

laxity.<sup>391</sup> However, by extricating the Northeast from this appalling condition without any help from the neighbouring countries of the region (Bangladesh, Myanmar...) would certainly create new waves of labour migration, a trend that has for a long time radicalised the nationalistic movements in the region – from the anti-foreigner movement in Assam to the reactionary sub-nationalism of the hill tribes.<sup>392</sup> India then needs to have developed border areas as well as neighbours engaged in rapid growth development.

So would the economic opening up of the landlocked Northeast to its neighbouring regions solve the insurgency problem?<sup>393</sup> Since the *Look East Policy* was launched in 1991 for the purpose of moving closer to the increasingly prosperous Southeast Asian countries, India has been trying to expand its trade relations with the ASEAN countries.<sup>394</sup> With the admission of Myanmar, strategically situated between India and Indochina, to the ASEAN Club in 1997, New Delhi has sought to include the Northeast in its “Look East” policy.<sup>395</sup> Why not reach out to Asia through Myanmar and the Northeast? With this in mind, India has drawn closer to the Burmese regime so as to involve it in the opening up of the Northeast.<sup>396</sup>

The first project that could be considered viable was launched with the opening of the Tamu(Myanmar)-Moreh(Manipur) cross-

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<sup>391</sup> H. Sirkanth, *Militancy and Identity Politics in Assam*, Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, November 18, 2000.

<sup>392</sup> Atul Sarma, *Economic Development of the Northeastern States in the Context of Globalisation*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 25, Issue 2, May 2001, pp 295-312.

<sup>393</sup> Shreeradha Datta, *What Ails the Northeast: an Enquiry into the Economic Factors*, Strategic Analysis, Volume 25, Issue 1, April 2001, pp 73-87.

<sup>394</sup> Frédéric Grare & Amitabh Mattoo (Eds.), *India and ASEAN*, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 2001.

<sup>395</sup> B.G. Verghese, *Re-orienting India: the new geo-politics of Asia*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers, 2001.

<sup>396</sup> Frontline, *The Roads to Myanmar*, Volume 18, Issue 05, March 03-16, 2001.

border post in April 1995. Earlier, even though the town of Moreh was linked by National Highway NH 39 to Imphal (capital of Manipur) and to the rest of the Northeast, the bilateral trade with Myanmar/Burma was merely a local exchange of goods. On the Burmese side, there was an obvious lack of transport infrastructure. However, during the visit of J.N. Dixit, the then Indian Foreign Secretary, to Yangon (March 1993) India managed to discuss with the Burmese government the means of financing the construction of a 160 km long road on Burmese territory from Tamu to Kalewa and then to Kalemyo in the Kabaw Valley of the Sagaing division. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs financed the US\$ 3 million project that began only in 1997. Completed by late 2000, the 12 metre wide road was inaugurated by Jaswant Singh, India's Minister of External Affairs, in February 2001. India also signed an agreement for the maintenance and upgrading of this *India-Myanmar Friendship Road* during the next 5 years.

However, the rest of the road connecting Kalemyo to Mandalay is still in a pathetic condition. It is very difficult to reach Mandalay from Kalemyo in one day. But India has now declared it is not interested in financing or building the road further, leaving it to the Burmese government to draw up plans and undertake the rest of the construction by itself, which it has not done so far, despite its commitment to the *Trans-Asia Highway* project supposed to connect Bangkok to India. Thus this project was the first to attempt at opening up Manipur and the neighbouring hilly areas to the East. Nevertheless, since the Chindwin Valley of Myanmar between Mandalay and the Indian border is another economic and political no-man's land, also plagued by insurgency, poppy cultivation and smuggling activities, the opening up of the area is not viewed as favourably as initially proposed.

But New Delhi and the Northeastern states are more keen on developing another project linking the Northeast to its Burmese neighbour. A link between the southwestern coast of Myanmar

(and not the isolated heart of the country around Mandalay) and the Lushai Hills through a fluvial route would be another solution. Indeed, India is now more enthusiastic about the *Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project*, based on the development of the Kaladan River. This project plans to connect Mizoram to the Burmese harbour city of Sittwe (formerly Akyab) through the Chin state and the Kaladan River. India, in fact, wants to upgrade Sittwe's port facilities and build another river port on the Kaladan River, a few kilometres north of Sittwe. This would facilitate trade through the new transport corridor going around Bangladesh (and that could be the major reason behind this project) and the Northeast would thus be connected to the Indian Ocean through a route other than the Siliguri Neck.

The project is expected to begin soon and will probably be completed around 2012 at a cost of US\$ 500 million. Such a project would be of immense commercial value for India's traders, especially those based in Calcutta or on the east coast, wanting to do business with the Northeast but through the Indian Ocean and Myanmar instead of going through West Bengal and Assam. It may also be noted that this trade corridor exists already and has been used by many insurgent outfits and traffickers who have been smuggling goods from the region around Cox's Bazar to Mizoram and vice-versa. Certainly the best option India can develop in the region, it will nevertheless be dependant of Myanmar's internal developments in addition to being one of the costliest projects.

Further, a lot of ink has been spilt over a third project aimed at reviving the old Ledo/Stillwell Road further north.<sup>397</sup> This northern road historically connected Assam to the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan through the Upper Burma jungle (Kachin state). It was first reactivated by the British in the late 1930s, but it was

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<sup>397</sup> D. Nath (Ed.), *Reopening of the Stilwell Road – Prospects and Problems*, New Delhi, Anamika Publishers & Distributors, 2004.

the American General Joe Stillwell who undertook the rebuilding of the road in 1942. The main purpose was to reinforce the “Ledo Road” starting from Ledo (Assam) and going through the Kachin forests by setting up military bases and building a large paved road to sustain a counteroffensive against the Japanese troops. The Ledo Road was then known as the “Stillwell Road”. After 1945, it was used once again, but by the CIA this time, to help the Chinese Nationalists still fighting against Mao in southern China, but it was soon abandoned due to the increasing instability in Burma. By the 1960s, most of the road was covered by the jungle. However, it has been used by the Communist Party of Burma, the Kachin rebels as well as the Nagas who had established home bases near the corridor. This road became a lucrative passage for clandestine activities including the smuggling of goods, arms and drugs.

Today, many people in the Northeast, including state government officials are in favour of reopening this part of the road to gain access to Burma/Myanmar and/or China. But the Burmese military government is not particularly keen on reviving this road, especially the 400 km stretch between Myiktyina (capital of the Kachin state) and the Paunglaw Pass (India-Burma border in Arunachal Pradesh). Even the Burmese Director for Border Trade (Trade and Commerce Ministry), who came to Guwahati in January 2004, affirmed this as the official position of the Burmese junta. In fact, this region is not entirely controlled by the current ruling junta and even though the major Kachin group (KIO) signed a cease-fire agreement with Yangon in 1993, there are still lawless areas there that could threaten official trade. As long as political and ethnic instability continues in Burma/Myanmar, this kind of project is far from feasible. India expects too much from the Burmese junta.<sup>398</sup> To reach Yunnan from Northeast India, two options are viable and more advisable: from Moreh to Kalembo and Mandalay and then

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<sup>398</sup> Renaud Egreteau, *Wooing the Generals – India's New Burma Policy*, New Delhi, Authorspress, 2003.

on to China, even if the Kalemjo-Mandalay road is in an awful condition, or directly to Yangon (by air or by boat) and then up to the Irrawaddy corridor.

It is not really possible to go through Tibet as cross-border posts are very few and transportation and roads are strictly controlled and foreigners are not allowed to travel through Tibet (especially on the Yunnan-Tibet road). Obstacles are many: political instability, unfavourable terrain with dense forests, steep mountains and deep gorges together with the reluctance of the Burmese military and lack of sufficient funding as it will cost a lot to revive this road. Given the Chinese strategy in Yunnan, there is no way India can compete with China. China has put in a lot of money and effort to construct a modern, western standard 4-lane highway in Yunnan going right down to Myanmar. India definitely does not have either the will or the money to build such roads to open up its Northeast, despite the viability of several projects. Nor it has the means to enhance airborne trade from the Northeast to Southeast Asia as the failure of the Guwahati-Bangkok air link proves it. Nevertheless the possibility of using the Northeast (with its high literacy rate and education) as a skilled labour reservoir for high-value products (then air shipped) has to be kept in mind, even though the native qualified labour force is literally fleeing the region.

If we were to take a somewhat provocative view, we could consider the possibility of solving India's problems with Bangladesh by opening up the Northeast southwards rather than eastwards to Myanmar. Why not reviving the trade routes used by the British during the colonial era (but closed by the 1947 Partition) not only to solve the insurgency problem but also to open up the Northeast? The establishment in New Delhi as well as the political and economic elite in the Northeast must give serious thought to this far more secure option. The political stalemate and the appalling economic position in Myanmar today is far worse than the situation in the Northeast. This heart-rending situation is a major constraint



for opening up the Northeast to its eastern neighbour. India has to think twice before planning a very close partnership with Burma/ Myanmar through the Northeast and, for the time being, it would be more advantageous for the Northeast to remain a territorial boundary and not a gateway to the East.

In fact, the Northeast is not as landlocked as it is claimed to be. Transnational insurgencies, large-scale smuggling, common cross-border affinities have intertwined many communities, businesses and political interests. The underground economy of the Northeast is far more globalised than its apparent landlocked position would suggest. In Imphal, Tinsukhia and Guwahati smuggled goods of Burmese, Thai and Chinese make are easily available.<sup>399</sup> The Northeast is far more connected to the 'outside world' than we think. But it is and will remain as troubled as it appears from the outside. Suffering from negligence by the political elite in addition to lack of trust, criminalisation and increasing disparities, there is every chance that the region will unfortunately remain unstable unless New Delhi makes an all-out effort to solve the problem internally. If the "external factor" has a considerable weight, the internal dynamics (degeneration of the insurgency coupled with the inefficiency of the Central government) might doom the Northeast.

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<sup>399</sup> Fieldwork done by the author in various markets in the region, whenever permitted (2003-2005).

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# **INSTABILITY AT THE GATE : India's Troubled Northeast and its External Connections**

## **SUMMARY**

India's Northeast has long been described as a remote and sensitive area, racially and culturally disconnected to mainland India but strategically attached to it. Expressions of ethnic identities since India's independence have been very blunt in the whole region and many sub-nationalists developed a strong separatist stream from the late 1940s. Rapidly, the ethnic struggle became a well-organised and multidimensional militancy which took up arms and launched various enduring insurgencies against India's central government. Facing a harsher repression orchestrated by New Delhi, the few separatist groups that had burgeoned in the region turned rapidly radical. Moreover, most of them had found in the local population their main back-up : the "Robin Hood syndrome" they had created enabled them to benefit from a wide popular support.

This paper intends first to give a brief overview of the rise and growth of some of those separatist groups, with a special focus on the Nagas, the Mizos and the Assam movement. Insurgency took different forms in the Northeast as ethnic leaders chose different paths, means and patrons to pursue their struggle for recognition and/or separatism. Indeed, most of the armed ultras soon criminalised their activities in order to sustain their struggle. An analysis of the degeneration of these sub-nationalist movements into mere criminal groups has been proposed in this paper. With the Indian Armed Forces having more and more capacities and discretionary power of action, insurgency has radicalised its forms and activities. The criminalisation process will be broached by focusing the study on few separatist groups that have dropped their original revolutionary and lofty ideals to concentrate their struggle on easy money and underground activities, in spite of the fact that individualised interests, internecine rivalries and indiscriminate violence have often turned the population against those outfits.

Finally, how has the externality of the insurgency influenced this phenomenon? The third part of the paper will propose an overview of the rapid externalisation of all the insurgent groups. The linkages they have established across borders enabled them to obtain friendly support (Pakistan), funding (China, LTTE) and strategic shelter (Burma, Bangladesh). We will attempt to demonstrate how these external connections fuelled the instability in the Northeast and conceptualised their struggle and survival. However, in the meantime, the external factor could also be the solution to the problem: by opening up the Northeast and developing it as a result of a more globalised local economy, the stalemate could possibly be overcome.

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