

Nagaland: Twist in the Tale

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In an early morning ambush, suspected National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) militants killed three troopers of the 4th Battalion of the Rajput Regiment and injured another four at Tukpi village of Tirap District in Arunachal Pradesh on April 2, 2015. The identity of the faction responsible is yet to be ascertained.

A similar ambush was reported from the neighboring Changlang District (Arunachal Pradesh) on February 6, 2015, when two civilian porters were killed and nine Assam Rifles (AR) personnel were injured in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast at Monmao village. One of the wounded AR troopers succumbed to his injuries a day later. An unnamed source from NSCN's Khaplang faction (NSCN-K) claimed that the attack was a joint operation by the NSCN-K and the Independent faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA-I) against the Indian Army.

The February 6, 2015, attack was the first in Arunachal since October 25, 2007, in which a Security Force (SF) trooper was killed. Three AR personnel and a civilian were killed and eight persons were injured in a powerful IED explosion engineered by NSCN's Isak-Muivah faction (NSCN-IM) in a remote jungle in the Tirap District on October 25, 2007.

Perturbed by the developments, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Nabam Tuki, on April 4, 2015, made a fervent appeal to the Centre to resolve the insurgency in the region once and for all: "Unless the core issue of insurgency is resolved permanently, such incidents may recur. At the receiving end will always be the common people, security personnel, the administration and the State Government. The central Government needs to act fast." The 'core issue of insurgency' in Arunachal Pradesh is linked to Naga militant outfits, a fact that the Union Ministry of Home Affairs [UMHA] had underscored while extending the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) through a formal notification on September 20, 2014. Out of 21 Districts in the State¹², are currently under the purview of AFSPA.

Arunachal's Tirap, Changlang and Longding Districts, of which Longding shares borders with Nagaland, have long been strongholds of Naga outfits. These Districts share borders with Myanmar, where Naga militant formations have a strong presence. They are part of the imagined 'Greater Nagaland' for which Naga militants claim to be fighting.

Within Nagaland, one violent incident targeting SFs has already been reported since January 1, 2015. On March 26, 2015, four AR troopers were injured when gunmen opened fire at the personnel, who were waiting for a convoy near Indira Gandhi stadium in Kohima. Though the last SF fatality in Nagaland took place on May 11, 2008, when Police recovered the dead body of an Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB) trooper between the Keyive and Heningkunglwa areas under Peren District; the last attack targeting SFs took place on September 19, 2011, when militants opened fire targeting SF personnel on National Highway 2, near old Modern College in Upper AG colony in Kohima District on September 19, 2011. One civilian was killed and three others, including two AR personnel, were injured during the firing.

The incidents suggest that Naga militants, principally the NSCN-IM, NSCN-K and NSCN-Khole-Kitovi [NSCN-KK], amidst their continuing internecine battle, both within and outside the territory of Nagaland, are resuming their fight against the Indian State, believing that their respective ceasefire agreements have failed to 'deliver'.

Indeed, on March 31, 2015, NSCN-K asserted that it was no use extending the ceasefire without discussing the issue of Naga "sovereignty". In a press note issued by the organization's 'military supervisor', 'lieutenant-general' Niki Sumi, the group claimed that the Government of India had failed to discuss the "Naga sovereignty issue", which was the only basis of the Nagas struggle, and it was therefore futile to continue the extension of ceasefire: "Clamouring for peace without even an inclination to discuss sovereignty issue or resolution of sovereignty is only farce and any settlement or solution short of sovereignty would only be a betrayal of Nagas historical and political legacy."

Earlier, on March 27, 2015, NSCN-K 'chairman', S.S. Khaplang, had expelled two senior kilonsers (ministers), Wangtin Konyak, also known as Y. Wangtin Naga, and T. Tikhak, for their alleged "anti-Naga nationalism". The 'expelled' duo had reportedly, on the same day, attended the ceasefire supervisory board (CFSB) meeting at Chumukedima (Dimapur) and had expressed their desire to extend the ceasefire with the Centre. NSCN-K had signed the ceasefire agreement with the Central Government on April 28, 2001, and this has since been extended annually. The last extension agreed upon between the two sides was in April 2014, which will expire on April 28, 2015. Except for the ritual of meeting to decide the yearly extension of ceasefire, not a single round of talks was held between the Government and NSCN-K during this entire period.

Further, prior to the signing of the ceasefire with the NSCN-IM in July 31, 1997, the Centre had assured the outfit that it would not engage in dialogue with any other Naga group, and had stated that the NSCN-IM was the only 'legitimate' Naga group. The assurance has proven costly in the long run.

Meanwhile, the 'expelled' duo of Y. Wangtin Naga and T. Tikhak formed a new faction, NSCN-Reformation (NSCN-R) on April 6, 2015. The Press Release announcing its formation stated that its primary agenda would be to "develop a sense of brotherhood among the Naga family and also to rebuild the trust and faith among the Naga society. We would also like to give opportunity to all the Naga people, NGO's, social organization, intellectuals and leaders of various tribal councils to share their ideas in building a renewed Naga society. It will also be our humble effort to run the party without becoming a liability to the people."

This is the second split within NSCN-K since 2011. Earlier, on June 7, 2011, Khole Konyak and N. Kitovi Zhimomi left NSCN-

K to form the NSCN-KK. The split was followed by a sharp increase in fratricidal killings. The incidents of fratricidal killing, however, declined through 2014, primarily due to the signing of the 'Lenten Agreement' on March 28, 2014, during a two-day reconciliation meeting of three Naga militant groups - NSCN-IM, NSCN-KK and Naga National Council/ Federal Government of Nagaland (NNC/FGN) - at Dimapur, under the banner of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR). NSCN-KK is presently observing a ceasefire with the Government.

The Centre, however, is continuing the unilateral ceasefire with NSCN-K, according to a statement by an unnamed senior intelligence officer on April 3, 2015, when asked why the Centre was not retaliating to the April 2 attack.

In the meantime, there has been no positive development with regard to talks with the NSCN-IM. The Union Government's Interlocutor for Naga Peace Talks and Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), R. N. Ravi, ruling out any time bound strategy to deal with the NSCN-IM, on April 6, 2015 observed, "The Government has not given any timeline to end the talks. I have no knowledge of it but we are trying to come to a logical conclusion as early as possible." Interestingly, National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval, on October 18, 2014, had asserted, "There should never be any feeling that it (talks) is protracted. The (peace) process is the means to an end and if there is an end, which is a desired end, it must be found in real time. There should be rule of law in the Naga insurgency-affected areas for which peace process must be completed as early as possible."

The Government is clearly pinned on the horns of a dilemma. More than 70 rounds of talks have taken place between NSCN-IM and the Central Government since 1997, without any tangible gains on issues such as 'Naga sovereignty' and 'integration'. On the other hand, NSCN-IM 'general secretary' Thuingaleng Muivah, on April 4, 2015, clarified that in the course of political negotiations with the Union Government, the Nagas have not given up on any issues, including the "sovereign rights and integration of all the Naga areas that were divided by the colonial powers without the free and informed consent of the Nagas."

The Government's directionless approach could also impact on the neighbouring Manipur State. The Coordination Committee (CorCom), an umbrella of Imphal valley based militant groups in Manipur, stated on March 29, 2014, "The decision taken by the NSCN-K under the leadership of S.S. Khaplang to abrogate the 14-year ceasefire with the Centre is a right step." According to reports some cadres of NSCN-K are stationed in Manipur's Tamenglong District. On March 21, 2015, four Army personnel, including a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) of the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Gorkha Rifles on December 17, 2014, were injured in an ambush by NSCN-K militants at Luklang Khunou in Tamenglong District.

As the violent incidents of last few months suggests, NSCN-K decision to unilaterally call off the ceasefire, the split within its ranks, and the Union Government's failure to make any progress with regard to talks with NSCN-IM, could lead to greater violence in Nagaland and neighboring northeastern states. SFs, who had enjoyed clear respite from terror, will, in particular, face the brunt of escalating violence, if these developments continue. Intelligence inputs predict a spike in hit-and-run attacks on SFs over the coming days, particularly by NSCN-K militants operating from across the Indo-Myanmar border.

While better management of the Indo-Myanmar border will be critical to contain the current trend, the unending ramble of the 'Naga talks' will have to be brought to a rational conclusion if a permanent solution to the repeated cycles of violence is to be found.

Source:

<http://www.newkerala.com/news/2015/fullnews-44362.html...>