

NORTH-EAST

## Managing News

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The primary focus of the Indian state in the North-east has been on the security issue. Chronically disturbed borders, smuggling of arms and drugs across them, a delicate geo-political situation, and restive ethnic groups in revolt against a lop-sided pattern of development which they are powerless to correct, have all combined to concentrate the attention of the Centre and its energies too on this issue. This turn of affairs has eventually favoured the growth of corrupt and unscrupulous special interest groups who would like nothing better than a perpetuation of such a situation. They have succeeded in establishing control over the flow of news from the North-east. Either there is a blackout on important political developments, like the tragic outbreaks of boundary disputes for instance, or a systematic campaign of disinformation in a fairly large section of the mainstream media. To top it all people here are mystified to see the most unpopular political leaders from this region feted in Delhi as outstanding and sagacious statesmen. The disillusionment and consequent unrest among the common people under the two terms of AGP rule not only helped to bring the Congress back to power in Assam, but also drove youths in large numbers to join the armed rebellion of the ULFA. The latter's blunders and atrocities notwithstanding, there is a widespread feeling among the people that they had after all risen in arms against injustice and misrule and that they cannot be regarded as a gang of bandits.

The main response of the Centre has been military, and the military objective now is to crush the revolt. The entire bag of tricks in control of insurgency, including encounter deaths, secret killings, collective punishment imposed on villages, treating anyone suspected of giving shelter to rebels regardless of whether it was done out of fear as friends of the Dushman, had been witnessed in certain phases here and except some civil rights groups the string of such operations escaped the notice of most people outside Assam. As members of a citizens' delegation in early nineties this writer and others had met the President and Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who promised to put an end to such outrages, but at the press conference only a handful of reporters turned up and only a couple of them filed any report! The insurgency has at the moment been certainly hamstrung, but not wiped out. In the meantime taking advantage of the weak local resistance, powerful political and economic forces are trying to open the state to inroads of MNCs and corporate giants backed by international finance capital with slogans of development, aiming at exploitation of the natural resources of the region, which now includes Uranium ore, with marginalization of the indigenous people in its wake.

But such 'development' is unlikely to improve the internal situation a bit, but rather may goad displaced and impoverished people into desperate renewed rebellion under chauvinist banner. Hence the need of the hour is a genuine dialogue where the basic and long-standing grievances of the people of Assam can be voiced and the demands following from them receive a patient hearing. The mainstream media have highlighted

the ULFA's atrocities (against which the author of this note had been among the first locals to have raised a strong voice of protest), but have maintained silence on these basic problems as well as the army's and paramilitary forces' excesses against innocents. One dark chapter hardly ever finds a mention in such media—the chilling campaign of 'secret killings' in which state-sponsored goons in collusion with paramilitary forces killed scores of innocent people simply for the crime of being hapless relatives of youths who had joined the ULFA, sometimes virtually wiping out entire families. The Justice K N Saikia Enquiry later had come to a definite conclusion that there had been evidence of a conspiracy behind those horrifying acts and a section of senior police officers were involved. If justice is to be ensured in the case of regions and communities, as in the case of individuals like Jessica Lal and Ruchika, then it is imperative that a less hostile attitude towards the ULFA is adopted by policy-makers and an attempt is made to understand instead of demonizing them as psychopaths. Had the 'national' press covered events in the North-east in a responsible manner that might have been possible. But reporting has been slight and often tendentious.

The latest periodical to join this disinformation campaign has been unfortunately the respected left-wing fortnightly, *Frontline*. The June 4 issue has published a highly misleading report on the state-level convention held on April 24 to raise the demand for resumption of talks between the government and the ULFA leaders. The majority of the members of the Central Committee of the rebel organization are now lodged in Guwahati jail and through colleagues now out on bail they have expressed a desire for arriving at an honourable settlement through talks. And the convention had been held in response to that request after two rounds of talks between a facilitator group PCG chosen by ULFA military chief Paresh Barua and the Centre ended in a deadlock and a prolonged stalemate followed. Eleven concerned and elderly citizens including Dr Indira Goswami, a leading member of the PCG had a few rounds of discussion among themselves before agreeing on such a convention. The Assam correspondent of the fortnightly did not meet the spokesman of the conveners who happens to be the author of this note, but collected information from other sources for no conceivable reason. The result has been a string of distortions and patent untruths. For example the report attributes the success of the convention to the efforts of two former members of PCG, who had indeed worked tirelessly and with admirable energy in providing logistic support. But the success (with nearly 2000 guests, delegates and spectators in attendance and more than half sitting through a marathon ten-hour session with unabated enthusiasm) by and large expressed the deep yearning of the people of Assam for peace based on a clear recognition of the basic problems of the state. Hundreds of letters of support and advice were received by the author of this note. The convention included people ranging from die-hard supporters of the ULFA to sharp and outspoken critics of the outfit. Many organizations did not receive invitation in time because of the convention had to be held in a hurry. To attribute this spontaneous and massive enthusiasm to the efforts of two individuals alone is a flagrant misreading of the situation. PCG had received a more guarded response from the public because many of its members were seen as close to the ULFA.

Then the report goes on to convey the impression that the conveners were forced to alter the draft resolutions twice—once under pressure from a section of participants to include the issue of sovereignty (secession) on the agenda for discussion, and next, following the Chief Minister's flat rejection of such a demand later, to delete it, paring it down to "unconditional talks"! Actually as everyone here knows, and there are documents to prove, that in the very first draft "unconditional talks" had been given

prominence. It had also been recommended to the government that the jailed leaders be freed so that they could respond to the resolution positively without appearing to have sold out in the opinion of irresponsible critics. As mentioned earlier powerful vested interests would prefer to see the stalemate continue. The draft resolution had been modified only to mention in a preamble reasons for such a demand arising at all in order to accommodate the views of a section of participants in a democratic spirit. But sovereignty had not been the plank of the conveners from the beginning who stated in press-conferences before and after the convention that they themselves did not support secession from India. The author of this note had to join a bitter battle in the vernacular press with Paresh Barua against his attempts to discredit the conveners as enemies of Assam. Barua's view is that only the issue of sovereignty should be on the agenda, a rather unhelpful position to start any dialogue. But the formulation by the conveners has proved to be rather popular with the great majority of the conscious people all over Assam, who believe that talks can and should be held on its basis, which includes certain constitutional guarantees to be mooted by ULFA leaders, so that bitter outrage and frustration do not break out once again into a state of sanguinary anarchy. Hardliners on both sides will of course never agree, but they have never found lasting support among common people at any time in history. □□□

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