

## From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

### A dirty war rages in India's northeast

*Aided by drugs from across the border and arms from the Khmer Rouge arms bazaar, the ULFA terrorists continue the killing.*

**H**idden from public view and unreported in the media, India's northeast remains hostage to a number of terrorist fronts who are armed to their teeth. The war of attrition, which has taken thousands of lives over the decades, is becoming nastier. On Aug. 22, concerned over the escalating violence, the Union Home Ministry sent a high-level delegation to Guwahati, the capital of the State of Assam, where the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is now on a killing spree, targeting the Army men.

Unlike Kashmir, which hogs the international media attention, violence in India's northeast never drew the sustained notice of the local and foreign media. Although the terrorists, such as the ULFA and the rebel Nagas, have long-standing well-wishers in London and Geneva, violence in India's northeast is seldom considered as part of the Great Game. Nonetheless, violence continues, and more terrorist organizations come into existence every other year. This happens despite the widely accepted view that the northeastern states cannot be physically separated from India and made into an independent country,

As the terrorist groups flourished with drugs and guns from Southeast Asia, the Indian Army moved in last May to choke the supply routes and round up the terrorists. Politically, the Indians are in a good position to do so. Bangladesh had pushed the terrorists out of the border territories, and the Indian troops were getting help from the Myanmar Army in busting the mil-

itant camps located in the Indo-Myanmarese border areas. Company commanders from both armies hold regular meetings, and it seemed that the ULFA and Bodo Security Force (BdSF), a rival terrorist group in Assam, in conflict with both the ULFA and the Indian Army, will soon be tamed and finished.

However, the capabilities of the terrorists were no doubt underestimated by the Indian Army. Moving in and out of bordering Bhutan, through the wildlife reserves, the ULFA and the Bodos remained virtually untouched. The Bhutan government's apathy, letting the Indians flush out the terrorists, was working against the Indian Army's favor. Only recently, the Bhutan government has agreed to participate in an Indo-Bhutan joint venture to tame the terrorists.

Both the BdSF and the ULFA are headquartered in Assam. Internationally, BdSF is reportedly linked to the Kachin Independent Army of northern Myanmar. Kachins, in association with a number of other tribal organizations, have been in a state of revolt for decades. The BdSF is also linked to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) of the Muivah faction—the mother of all terrorist operations in northeast India, with long-standing connections to London, Geneva, and a score of non-governmental organizations from the West.

The ULFA specializes in assassinations. Its leadership, besides developing ties with the NSCN and the Kachins, had flown to Pakistan and

met with Pakistani ISI intelligence officers and Afghan leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The ULFA had sent some of its recruits to Afghanistan to get intensive training with the Afghans, reportedly under the supervision of the ISI.

From time to time, however, the Indian Army used to swoop down on these terrorists. Previously, this would have had limited effect, because the hard-core terrorists would move into border areas of Myanmar and Bangladesh, making it impossible for the Indian soldiers to chase them down. Things have, however, changed, as both Myanmar and Bangladesh are now cooperating with the Indian Army against the terrorists.

There is a reason behind the recent spurt in terrorist killings. Besides the fact that both the ULFA and the BdSF find themselves abandoned by Bangladesh and Myanmar, Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral has recently promised to pay more attention to the development of the area. He was instrumental in formulating, and getting the approval of the Bangladesh government for, a sub-regional economic grouping consisting of Bangladesh and northeast India. There seems to be a realization in Delhi that northeast India needs a whole range of infrastructural development, in order for India to establish a strong land-based trade with Southeast Asia. This is, in effect, the eastern wing of the southern tier of the Eurasian Land-Bridge.

In order to put the policy in place, the prime minister had visited the area and invited the chief ministers to meet in Delhi. It is expected that the government will come up with a policy paper soon for the approval of the Gujral cabinet. It is perhaps this development which has forced the hands of the terrorists, and they have embarked on a killing rampage.