

Assam's Agony
The ULFA and Obstacles
to Conflict Resolution

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Out of the various terrorist outfits operating in Assam today, the most important, powerful and currently most active are the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). This paper focuses on the primary reasons for the birth and the phenomenal growth of ULFA so that a strategy to counter its influence can be formulated, and the impediments in the way of implementing such a strategy can be identified and analysed.

The ULFA was formed on April 7, 1979, in a meeting at the Rang Ghar, the famous amphi-theatre of the Ahom royalty at Sibsagar, by six radical Assamese youth, among whom were: (1) Rajiv Rajkhonwar alias Arabinda Rajkhowa, the present Chairman of ULFA (2) Paban Barua alias Paresh Barua, the present 'Chief of Army staff' of the outfit (3) Samiran Gogoi alias Pradip Gogoi, the present Vice-chairman and (4) Golap Barua

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alias Anup Chetia, the present General Secretary of the outfit.¹ It may be recalled that, at that juncture, the Assam agitation spearheaded by All Assam Students Union (AASU) on the foreigners' issue, and which later caught the imagination of the Assamese public, was in its formative stage. The highly popular agitation was generally peaceful and the ULFA did not have much influence in the conduct of this movement or among the majority of the agitationists. Then came the highly unpopular 1983 elections to the State Legislative Assembly, when the then Union government decided to go ahead with the elections despite clear indications that there would be large scale violence if the electoral process was undertaken. It was the lure of power and pelf on the part of those who were at that time out of office (the State was under President's rule then) that was the force behind this decision. Needless to say, it had the backing of many powerful politicians, as well as of senior government functionaries in the administration and the police. The necessity of Parliamentary elections at that point of time covering the whole State, and the way in which these were conducted, are separate issues and cannot be scrutinised in this paper. However, the fact that elections did take place at the cost of thousands of innocent lives had a great adverse psychological impact on the common people in Assam. This was exploited by extremist elements to propagate their view that the Indian state machinery could get away with such large-scale state violence to defeat the popular boycott of elections, primarily because resistance to it was peaceful, and that the narrative would have been different if the people resisting the government move were also armed. This argument found acceptance within sizeable sections of the younger generation and enabled ULFA to secure a large number of recruits and also to garner substantial public support.

Then came the elections to the State Assembly in the year 1985, after the students had called off their agitation consequent upon the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between AASU and the Union government on August 15, 1985²

¹ See South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; Assam; Terrorist Outfits; ULFA; www.satp.org

² For full text of the Assam Accord, see South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; Assam; Documents; www.satp.org

in which the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) secured a massive majority.³ As that government was sympathetic to the ULFA, the latter had a free run in the State. The outfit utilised this period for massive fund collection and recruitment. It can, thus, be seen that while the Congress Party's greed for power at any cost thrust an untimely election on the Assamese and thus helped the ULFA to enhance its popularity at a crucial formative stage, the support given to this organisation by the first AGP government helped it improve its fortunes and consolidate its position. Political parties in Assam, irrespective of their ideologies and public statements, have thus contributed significantly to the birth and subsequent dramatic growth of ULFA.

Subsequent governments under different dispensations helped the outfit out of sticky situations for their own selfish interests. The factors responsible for this extension of patronage by the political and administrative classes included the need for assistance from the outfit to secure selfish and corrupt goals, sympathy for the so-called ideology of the organisation and, in certain cases, fear of the consequences in case co-operation was withheld.

Next comes the question of funds for the growth of the outfit. For this, extortion has been the most effective means. With rampant corruption in all spheres, particularly in business, politics and administration, the mere threat of violence, with a few murders to convince the unwilling, was enough to make the corrupt elements and profiteers cough up the demanded amounts. A simple threat over the phone, the display of weapons by ULFA cadres, 'friendly advice', an occasional roughing-up, was enough to help local traders part with millions of rupees.⁴ The higher echelons of the business world, like the tea industry, were easy prey, particularly when a sympathetic political party was in power. In the initial stages of its growth, ULFA's extortion served a dual purpose: collection of a huge amount of funds and, ironically, earning the good will of the public. This was achieved by targeting only those individuals and groups who were known

³ See B G Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development* New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996, pp 46-48.

⁴ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995, p.185-86.

to have amassed wealth by corrupt/illegal means, but whom the existing state machinery would not apprehend and bring to book, either because of connivance or because of the lengthy and mostly ineffective legal processes which made a mockery of the rule of law. It may be mentioned here that, even now, there is no effective anti-corruption agency in the State. The existing anti-corruption agencies are toothless tigers, because they cannot undertake any investigation without first obtaining prior clearance from the government, even though they have been legally notified as Police Stations and as such have legal powers to initiate investigations. This legal position has been sabotaged by administrative orders to restrain agencies from independence in action, so that the influential and politically well-connected are protected by their godfathers in administration and in politics. By targeting such elements, ULFA could collect huge amounts and also obtain a Robinhood-like image.

This state of affairs was transformed at a later stage when, in their quest for funds, even innocent and honest people were targeted, resulting in the organisation losing its image as a group of revolutionaries who could do no wrong in the eyes of a large section of the public. The most well known instance of the exposure of the outfit as a ruthless and not so innocent one was the abduction and brutal killing of Sanjoy Ghosh.⁵

The alienation of a large proportion of the State's populace from the rest of India played a great part in helping the ULFA (and also all other insurgent outfits of the region) to expand its influence. This alienation is the result of various factors, including the geographical location of the region (which has only a 22 km broad land corridor connecting it to the rest of the country compared to the 4500 kilometres of very porous international border); the inept handling of even the genuine demands and aspirations of the people of the region by an

⁵ Sanjoy Ghosh, a prominent social activist who did laudable work in the river island of Majuli through his non-governmental organisation, Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development - North East (AVARD-NE) and in the process exposed the corruption of the bureaucrat-contractor nexus from which the ULFA, which had a very big presence there, also benefited, was abducted and later killed by ULFA on July 4, 1997. See "Sanjoy Ghosh Dead", *The Week*, Kochi, August 14, 1997.

insensitive and, by and large, ill-informed establishment at the national level, etc. Assam produces more than 400 million kilograms of tea with a turnover of Rs. 20 billion.⁶ However, the headquarters of all the tea companies are located outside the State and, hence, it is believed by all sections of the people that Assam is deprived of the benefits of a larger share of taxes paid by the industry, and also denied business opportunities for local people in the supplies and servicing requirements of this huge industry. This has always been a sore point with the local populace, and the ULFA cadres harp on this, among others issues, to buttress their argument on discrimination against Assam and the Assamese by the big business lobby assisted by the Union and State governments.

Similar is the feeling of deprivation and discrimination in the matter of the oil industry.⁷ The oil wells in Assam produce five million tons of crude oil, but the first refinery to process this crude was set up in Barauni in Bihar, and it was only after a popular movement was launched that a small refinery was set up at Guwahati and later a second refinery at Numaligarh, as a result of the agreement reached with the AASU in the settlement of the Anti-Foreigners' Agitation.⁸ These and similar instances created a feeling that Assam gets even its legitimate dues only after agitations and sacrifice of valuable lives. What better fertile ground can any extremist set-up hope for, to propagate their theory that India and Indians never considered Assam as a part of the nation, and were only interested in exploiting the rich natural resources of the State?

The next major contributory factor for the growth and operational successes of the outfit are certain geographical features. The region has borders with four foreign countries:

⁶ Assam produces 55 per cent of the country's total tea production. See "Indian tea producers fear for future",

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/business/newsid_1970000/1970799.stm

⁷ In fact, economic exploitation of Assam to the benefit of rest of India, and by the non-Assamese, was one of the major planks on which ULFA based its movement. Its web site provides an idea of the same. See www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/economy.htm

⁸ Assam is the third largest producer of petroleum (crude) accounting for 16 per cent of the total production in the country. See http://databank.nedfi.com/content.php?menu=1105&page_id=13.

China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan.⁹ Of these, at least Bangladesh and Bhutan have served as safe havens for the ULFA, providing excellent training and operational bases. It is very easy for them to hit their targets in many of the lower Assam districts from their bases in Bhutan and escape to their camps there. This is a very major tactical advantage to them and a disadvantage to the security forces.

The next contributory factor is unemployment and lack of development, although these by themselves are not the main reasons for the emergence or persistence of the insurgency. Indeed, if one assumes – as is frequently argued – that terrorism comes into being and is nurtured primarily by these ‘root causes’, no State in India should have been free from this scourge. However, the ground being otherwise fertile for the birth and growth of terrorism, these elements certainly act as significant contributory factors, making certain sections of the youth more vulnerable to the message of terrorist groups. The primary reasons for lack of development are the absence of adequate transport infrastructure, inadequate and erratic power supply, absence of local entrepreneurship and capital formation, population and migration pressures, militancy, natural calamities like floods and earthquakes, etc.

Once ULFA was born and commenced its operations to destabilise the State and declare war on the so-called ‘state machinery’, it was but natural that foreign powers inimical to India would extend assistance to them. The Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan’s external intelligence agency, is known to have helped ULFA in a big way, particularly in matters of training in camps located in Bangladesh, in the procurement of arms and ammunition, and in arranging training and indoctrination to selected cadres in Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁰ At

⁹ N.S. Narahari, *Security Threats to Northeast India: The Socio Ethnic Tensions*, New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2002, pp. 13-14. For a detailed account of the history of Assam’s geography, see Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, chapters 2 and 3, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹⁰ The ISI conducts training camps in Bangladesh for the various terrorist groups operating in India’s Northeast – most prominently, the NSCN, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the ULFA and the Northeast Students Organisation (NESO). The ULFA cadres were trained by ISI at a camp in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and others received specialised training in

one point of time, ULFA is known to have been in touch with the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but the extent of assistance, if any, is not clear.¹¹ As far as Bangladesh is concerned, in addition to allowing its soil to be used for ULFA's camps and hideouts, its Directorate of General Forces Intelligence (DGFI) also rendered help to this outfit.

The case of Bhutan is on a different footing. The General Headquarters, the Council Headquarters and security-cum-training camps of ULFA are known to be located in Bhutan.¹² The dense hilly jungles of Bhutan adjoining Assam are extensively and very effectively used by the insurgents to launch successful forays into Assam from their camps there. ULFA's activities inside Bhutan have risen dramatically since 1995 after their safe havens in Bangladesh came under attack by the then Bangladesh government.¹³ ULFA has camps located in the forests of southern Bhutan and the Samdruk Dzonkha area and it was at one such camp that the ISI trained the ULFA.¹⁴ While the Bhutanese government is not inimical to India, they have not been successful in either persuading or physically expelling the insurgents from their soil.¹⁵ There are approximately 36 well-established ULFA camps in Bhutan,¹⁶ and in spite of the Bhutanese National Assembly resolution empowering the government to take strong action against Assamese insurgents, Thimpu is soft-peddalling on the matter.¹⁷ Till now, the Royal Government of Bhutan has also

Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). For a detailed exposition of the ISI's activities in the Northeast region see Jaideep Saikia, "The ISI Reaches East: Anatomy of a Conspiracy", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 6, New Delhi, August 2000, pp. 61-78; For details of ULFA's bases in Bhutan, See South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Assam; Terrorist Outfits; ULFA; www.satp.org.

¹¹ Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, pp 205-206.

¹² The ULFA is reported to be operating in Bhutan since 1992. See South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; Bhutan; backgrounder; www.satp.org.

¹³ P V Ramana, "'Networking 'The Northeast: Partners in Terror'", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 11, New Delhi, April 2002, pp. 114-15.

¹⁴ Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, p. 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6.

¹⁶ Jaideep Saikia, "Security Scenario in Assam by 2010 – A Development Perspective" in R. Gopalakrishnan and Jaideep Saikia, eds., *Development Challenges in India – Assam in the 21st Century*, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2001.

¹⁷ See "Deadline for ULFA expires today" *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, December 31, 2001.

not taken India's assistance to weed out insurgents from its soil. This is a great strategic advantage to the ULFA.

Drawbacks in the effective functioning of the police is another factor that favours the activities of ULFA. The strength of the State police and the logistical support available to it is absolutely inadequate, even though there has been some improvement on these parameters over the last few years. The training and motivation of the members of the Force needs further and dramatic improvement. This is particularly important because of the fact that the members of the force are drawn from the same society which produces the terrorists, and many of them have relatives/friends in the outfit against which they have to fight. The lack of continuity in policies and leadership due to changing political situations in a democracy also lead to decline of the operational efficiency of the police. The changes required to be brought about if the police are to become effective have been, time and again, discussed in many fora and recommendations made any number of times. The crux of all such recommendations is directed towards devising and empowering a system by which the administrative and operational control on the force is taken away from the politicians and bureaucracy and given to an independent statutory body. However, no political party is willing to take the necessary steps to implement such recommendations, as it serves the selfish interests of the politicians to have a force under them that can be influenced by a 'carrot and stick' approach.

Added to these reasons is the delay in the judicial processes vis-à-vis speedy trial and disposal of cases. Securing witnesses to depose against terrorists is, in any event, a difficult task. and long delays in the trial process make it all the more difficult to take cases to a successful conclusion. Even in normal criminal cases of a serious nature, the rate of conviction in the whole country is approximately 6.5 per cent,¹⁸ and the conviction rate in cases involving terrorism is a minuscule fraction of even this abysmally low figure. Organisations sympathetic to ULFA, with the help of some members of the legal profession, have also lent a helping

¹⁸ See "Fight terror, not POTO", *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, November 5, 2001. Also see "Experts Sound Alarmbells on Economic Crimes", *The Financial Express*, New Delhi, April 6, 2002.

hand to terrorists accused to delay/obstruct the legal processes. From organizing *dharnas* (strikes) by women and children when members of ULFA are picked up by security forces, to filing cases in court on flimsy and sometimes false charges, a number of tactics have been resorted to in order to obstruct the speedy investigation and prosecution of cases.

Impediments to the resolution of the problem

The reasons for the growth of ULFA, as discussed above, themselves suggest several steps that can be taken in order to tackle the problem of insurgency in the State. The matter, however, is not that simple, as has been the experience of all those engaged in anti-insurgency operations launched in a concerted manner since September 1990, when the first Army operation was launched – and which is still continuing under a Unified Headquarters (UHQ), involving the Army, Central Paramilitary Forces and the State Police.¹⁹ During this fairly long period, various authorities, at different points of time, have claimed to have ‘broken the backbone’ of the ULFA, but from the manner in which it still retains the capacity to strike, it appears that this particular entity is endowed with multiple backbones.

One of the basic and essential measures to bring back normalcy is the need to take effective and strong action by the security forces to pre-empt violent strikes by the ULFA, and in case violence has occurred, to neutralise its perpetrators by successful encounters, apprehensions and prosecution leading to deterrent punishment. A highly effective intelligence apparatus to collect timely and actionable intelligence is one of the essential requirements for effective counter-insurgency operations. This has been achieved to a considerable extent of late, due to a more professional approach towards collection of intelligence and enhanced public cooperation. However, as long as the ULFA have their bases on foreign soil, where Indian security forces cannot enter to destroy them, it is well nigh impossible to defeat them decisively. What can be done is to seal their routes of entry

¹⁹ *Operation Bajrang* from November 1990 to April 1991; Operations *Rhino-1* from September 15, 1991 to January 13, 1992 and *Rhino-3* from March 1, 1992 and continuing.

and exit, but anyone who is familiar with the topography of the region will realise the complexity of such a task. With the available resources of security forces, foolproof sealing of the border is not practicable. Despite such a drawback, the security forces have done a commendable job, as is evident from the fact that the ULFA no longer has as free a run of the countryside as was the case in the past. The UHQ system, under which the various security forces operate in a well-planned and co-ordinated manner, has gone a long way to ensure optimum utilisation of available resources. In an ideal situation, it should be the sole responsibility of the State police to deal with internal disturbances, and the Army should be left alone to pursue its own mandate. However, due to lack of manpower, sophisticated arms and ammunition, training, motivation and logistical paraphernalia in the police forces, it had become necessary to involve the Army in a big way in counter-insurgency operations. The combined operations have, to a considerable extent, neutralised violent acts indulged in by the insurgents. However, it needs to be emphasised that complete success in such operations can be achieved only when their bases in Bhutan and Bangladesh are destroyed and they are fully prevented from operating from such safe havens.

Another significant measure to be undertaken to defeat the insurgents is to choke off their sources of funds. Unless they are denied access to huge amounts of money, their capacity to purchase arms and ammunition, to recruit and maintain their cadres, etc., cannot be neutralised. The sources of extortion money are big business houses, businessmen, professionals and corrupt public servants. At one stage, action was initiated against some very rich and powerful business houses when irrefutable evidence of their having extended monetary and other types of help and co-operation to the ULFA was unearthed, and cases were registered. However, the reaction from the national media, business circles and even from some of the then highest authorities in the Union government was such that it gave an impression that it was the police who were the culprits and not the parties who knowingly helped the outfit. The present state of these cases is unknown and plausibly, they have been buried in governmental red tape – which is no surprise to those who know how the system works when the rich and the powerful come

under the scrutiny of law. When the less powerful and not so rich people are arrested for similar offences, no one raises their voice. It is only when payments of huge amounts, running into the many millions, and evidence of active help in other forms given by the super-rich and the powerful is unearthed, that an orchestrated outcry is heard. It is as if there are different sets of rules in this country for the rich and the powerful and the less privileged classes. Unless we have the moral and political will to come down heavily on such 'donors', this menace cannot be controlled decisively. The police and other enforcement agencies can act strictly and efficiently if the political leadership makes it clear that they mean business and will support the enforcement agencies completely. It is true that, in this process, there are bound to be financial losses and danger to the life and property of some of the parties concerned. But, this can be met if all concerned are determined to fight the insurgents by joining hands with each other and acting in unison. Furthermore, the concerned business houses have already paid millions and are still not sure of their security. Once the insurgents are starved of funds for a fairly prolonged period, the movement will automatically be weakened.

At this stage, it will be worthwhile to look at the difference in perception of the large majority in the national media and of the entire regional press vis-à-vis the happenings in Assam – which have a direct bearing on the lives of 25 million people of this State – when cases against the high and the mighty were initiated. These divergent orientations can be seen in the various editorials and other articles published at the time of the 'Tata Tea controversy.' The entire local press, in spite of their differences on many other issues, was unified in its support to the action initiated, whereas, except for one or two honourable exceptions, the entire national press condemned the police, basing their analysis on inaccuracies and views which were patently unfair to Assam.²⁰

²⁰ A compilation of the different views expressed in various newspapers on this topic at that time was published by the Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Assam in an informative booklet titled "Points Of View!!! Towards understanding a clear and a coloured vision", Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Government of Assam, 1998.

Strict action was also initiated to check large-scale corruption in various governmental departments and at the inter-State check posts which generate a huge amount of black money – a significant portion of which goes into the coffers of the insurgent outfits. Here, the entire scheme was sabotaged from within by powerful political and bureaucratic elements who had a vested interest in perpetuating such a corrupt system, as they were among the primary beneficiaries of the illegal income from these activities.²¹ One of the biggest obstacles to the restoration of peace in Assam has been in the inability to take effective action to curb the flow of funds to the ULFA.

The absence of any special laws for investigation and trial of terrorist activities is another difficulty that prevents effective action. To have to treat terrorist crimes at par with ordinary crimes, and to deal with them under laws which were enacted to deal with ordinary criminals, creates a situation in which no effective legal deterrent exists for these crimes of extreme violence by members of terrorist groups. The arguments for and against special laws for dealing with terrorist activities have been widely discussed²² and are beyond the purview of this paper. If the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), 1987, which was in force earlier, was not properly and effectively utilised, the fault does not lie with the law, but with the system of enforcement. Suffice to say that the ordinary laws have many loopholes that can help in delaying early trial and conviction of the miscreants and unless trial and punishment is swift, no deterrent effect will be felt, to dissuade terrorists from indulging in violent activities. Implementation of the provisions of the

²¹ See Ajai Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, "SULFA: Terror By Another Name", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 9, New Delhi, July 2001, pp 1-38; Ajai Sahni and J. George, "Security and Development in India's Northeast: An Alternative Perspective", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 4, February 2000, New Delhi, pp. 43-67.

²² V.S. Jafa, "Ten O' Clock to Bed: Insouciance in the face of Terror", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 5, May 2000, pp. 23-58; Ajai Sahni, "Anti-POTO hysteria: delusions of misuse", www.tehelka.com/channels/commentary/2001/nov/12/com111201poto1.htm K.P.S. Gill, "The Imperatives of National Security Legislation in India", *Seminar*, April 2002, New Delhi; "The POTO Debate", *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 18, no. 24, December 7, 2001; "The Perils of POTO", *Frontline*, vol. 18, no. 24, December 2, 2001;

newly enacted Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), 2002, in deserving cases will be of immense help in dealing with terrorism.

Mass support is vital for the operational success and survival of any insurgent outfit. Some of the main reasons for ULFA's mass support have been discussed earlier. There was a time, not long ago, when ULFA held sway over a large section of the Assamese public who thought that 'our boys' could do no wrong. However, the conditions currently prevalent are very different. The ULFA, which came into existence on the anti-infiltration plank, has itself now sought to explain away the problem in a 15-page booklet addressed to "The people of Assam of east Bengal origin" which makes interesting reading as it tries to justify the role of the migrants in the life of the State: "When we refer to the Assamese, *instead of meaning the Assamese-speaking people we actually mean the different inter-mixture of tribal nationalities* – those who are committed to working for the good of Assam. *The mixture of nationalities that is the Assamese is, in reality, the result of immigration. We consider the immigrants from East Bengal to be a major part of the national life of the people of Assam.* Our freedom struggle can never be successful without these people...the masses who earn their living through hard physical labour can never be our enemies. All the labouring masses are our friends and the main motive force of our freedom revolt."²³ (emphases added)

This naturally did not go down well with the Assamese and cost the outfit dearly in terms of public support. The highhanded and senseless violence and large-scale extortion indulged in by the group also alienated a sizeable section of the Assamese from the outfit and its activities. At the same time, the security forces have, by and large, acted with great restraint and have also undertaken many welfare activities in their areas of operation, earning a considerable amount of goodwill. In a State where even young doctors shy away from serving in the rural areas, free medical camps frequently organised by the security forces in remote and inaccessible villages have been highly appreciated by

²³ Sanjukta Mukti Bahini, *Asom Prachar Patra*, July, 1992, cited in Udayan Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2000, pp. 141-42

the public, and have earned substantial support for the Forces. Other welfare measures carried out by the security forces like repairing rural roads and school buildings, construction of culverts and bridges, training local youth in various trades, etc., have also come as a boon to the rural people, as hardly any developmental activity has been carried out by the government for quite some time.

Lack of industrial development, partly due to the unsettled law and order situation, has added to the woes of the people of the State and has also worsened the already serious unemployment situation, for which the insurgents are responsible to a large extent. This has also added to the growing unpopularity of the ULFA. However, it is also worth noting that the unemployment situation acts as an incentive for recruitment to the outfit, as it offers a monthly remuneration of Rs. 1,500 to 2,000 to each recruit. Added to this is the lure of the surrender package, as and when these cadres decide to come over ground.²⁴ Offering incentives for surrender is not justified, as it is akin to the government attempting to bribe wayward youth away from their criminal activities, when law abiding and educated youth are going around begging for jobs to eke out an honest living. If the pace of developmental activities is increased, it would go a long way in further defeating the violent designs of the ULFA. Developmental activities have to be concurrent with anti-insurgency operations to prevent unemployed youth from becoming easy targets for recruitment into insurgent groups. However, past experience will bear testimony to the fact that mere pumping in of money for developmental activities is not

²⁴ The Assam government in order to wean away insurgents offered surrender packages. One was offered by the then Chief Minister, Hiteshwar Saikia, in year 1992. Called the “100 per cent Margin Money Scheme”, it offered liberal financial assistance to the surrendered terrorists. Instead of bringing the surrendered terrorists back to mainstream, it gave rise to a group of over-ground criminals. The other such scheme was introduced by the then Prafulla Mahanta regime in August 1998 with active support from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs. Among other things, its features included arms for money deal and subsequent ‘rehabilitation’. Both these packages fell short of their objectives. For a detailed account of the surrender packages and their outcomes, see Ajai Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, “SULFA: Terror By Another Name”, *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 9, New Delhi, July 2001, pp 1-38.

enough, because the lion's share of such financial transfers is invariably siphoned off by the politician-bureaucrat-contractor nexus and never reaches the intended beneficiaries.²⁵ In fact, a sizeable portion of the so-called developmental funds land up in the terrorist kitty. While expecting to have a completely corruption free establishment is wishful thinking and can never be achieved, a proper mechanism to monitor execution of developmental projects, and exemplary and swift punitive action against miscreants, will go a long way to ensure development. It is not that there is an absence of a committed and honest citizenry. The problem lies more in the system that has not encouraged such elements, and that has also seen to it that they are kept away from positions where they can do some good.

In spite of such difficulties in the path towards peace in Assam, there is optimism that better days are in store for the people of the State. The forces of disruption and anarchy, it is increasingly expected, will be decimated as the public at large has become progressively less tolerant of the disruption of peace and progress. This is reflected in the lack of support to the calls given by ULFA to boycott various functions, and in the positive response to peace rallies in different parts of the State, as also in the refusal of free food and shelter to militants in the villages which they visit in the course of their operational movements.

²⁵ See Sahni and George, "Security and Development".