

Insurgency in India's Northeast Cross-border Links and Strategic Alliances[•]

Wasbir Hussain^{*}

India's Northeast is one of South Asia's hottest trouble spots, not simply because the region has as many as 30 armed insurgent organizations¹ operating and fighting the Indian state, but because trans-border linkages that these groups have, and strategic alliances among them, have acted as force multipliers and have made the conflict dynamics all the more intricate. With demands of these insurgent groups ranging from secession to autonomy and the right to self-determination, and a plethora of ethnic groups clamouring for special rights and the protection of their distinct identity, the region is bound to be a turbulent one.

[•] This article is based on a paper presented by the author at the National Seminar on 'India and the Global Order: Security and Diplomacy in the 21st Century,' organized by the Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, February 5-6, 2004.

^{*} Wasbir Hussain is a Guwahati-based Political Analyst and Associate Fellow, Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi. He has been covering insurgency, ethnic strife and other major socio-political developments in India's Northeast for the past 20 years.

¹ The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs' Annual Report for 2002-2003 lists 24 active insurgent groups in the northeastern States (there are several dormant ones). In its chapter titled 'Security Scenario in the North East', the report states: "The most serious militant affected states/areas viz, the whole of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and a 20 km belt in the states having common border with Assam have been declared as 'disturbed areas' under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 as amended in 1972."

Moreover, the location of the eight² northeastern Indian States itself is part of the reason why it has always been a hotbed of militancy with trans-border ramifications. This region of 263,000 square kilometres³ shares highly porous and sensitive frontiers with China in the North, Myanmar in the East, Bangladesh in the South West and Bhutan to the North West. The region's strategic location is underlined by the fact that it shares a 4,500 km-long international border with its four South Asian neighbours, but is connected to the Indian mainland by a tenuous 22 km-long land corridor passing through Siliguri in the eastern State of West Bengal, appropriately described as the 'Chicken's Neck.'

Battles at Home, Links Abroad

Trans-border linkages of Northeast Indian insurgent groups started developing within less than 10 years of the country's independence from the British yoke. The father of the Naga insurgency, Angami Zapu Phizo, chief of the rebel Naga National Council (NNC), had left the Naga Hills in 1956 to fight for an independent Naga homeland from foreign shores. He traveled through the then East Pakistan and Switzerland, to arrive, eventually, in London in 1960, and continued to pursue his dream from the British capital until his death in April 1990. His daughter Adinno Phizo, who has succeeded him as the NNC president, is still pushing that demand from her home in London.⁴

In 1972, New Delhi declared the NNC an unlawful organization under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967, and launched a massive counter-insurgency offensive. Cornered and faced with reverses, the insurgents agreed to hold peace talks with the Indian Government. This led to the signing of the controversial Shillong Accord on November 11, 1975,

² The State of Sikkim has recently been formally bracketed under 'Northeast' after it was included into the North Eastern Council (NEC), the region's apex funding and development agency. The other seven States of the Northeast are: Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura.

³ Located at: Longitude 89.46 degree E to 97.30 degree E and Latitude 21.57 degree N to 29.30 degree N.

⁴ Wasbir Hussain, "Father's Daughter," *Sentinel*, Guwahati, August 31, 2003.

between a section of the NNC and its 'underground government,' the Naga Federal Government (NFG) and the Government of India. The signatories to this agreement accepted the Indian Constitution and agreed to surrender their weapons and join the Indian national mainstream.⁵

A group of around 140 NNC cadres, however, repudiated the Shillong Accord and refused to surrender. They formed a new insurgent group called the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) under the leadership of Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu and S. S. Khaplang. The significant point to be noted is that this new group, formed in 1980, took shape and was launched from bases inside Myanmar.⁶ With the passage of time, the NSCN emerged as the most radical and powerful insurgent group fighting for the Naga cause. Clannish divisions among the Nagas (Konyaks and Tangkhuls) resulted in the split of the NSCN in 1988. The Konyaks took the lead in forming the NSCN-K (Khaplang) under the leadership of Khole Konyak and S. S. Khaplang. The faction, led mostly by the Tangkhuls under the leadership of Swu and Muivah, came to be known as the NSCN-IM (Isak-Muivah).

The NSCN, after its formation inside Myanmar and having established itself as a front-ranking insurgent group in India's Northeast, started providing arms training and other logistic support to outfits such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), formed in April 1979 to fight for a 'sovereign, Socialist Assam.' The ULFA started sending its cadres for advanced 'military training' at the hands of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), an anti-Yangon rebel group in Myanmar, from 1988 onwards. Surrendered or captured ULFA rebels, interviewed by this writer, have confirmed having received arms training at the hands of KIA instructors inside Myanmar.⁷ American author Shelby Tucker writes about having met ULFA 'chairman'

⁵ Wasbir Hussain, "Peace in Naga Country: New Delhi's Challenges in the far-eastern Frontier," paper presented at the seminar on 'Peace Initiatives in South Asia,' organized by the Delhi Policy Group and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, at the United Services Institute, New Delhi, on November 28-29, 2001.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wasbir Hussain, "We picked up our AKs and fled," *Sentinel*, December 24, 2003.

Arabinda Rajkhowa at the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), political wing of the KIA, at Pajau Bum, during his trek across Myanmar around 1989.⁸ Former ULFA cadres say the group's 'commander-in-chief', Paresh Barua, too, was in Myanmar's Kachin hills around that time.

Such trips were among the first attempts by rebels from Assam to strengthen strategic alliances with militant groups located in India's South Asian neighbours like Myanmar. In 1985 itself, the ULFA opened shop in Bangladesh, setting up safe houses at Damai village in the Moulvi Bazaar district, bordering the Northeastern Indian State of Meghalaya.⁹ In 1990, the ULFA had its Pakistani contacts in place, and leaders like Munin Nobis (since surrendered) were instrumental in establishing the links. Nobis told this writer during extensive interviews in October 2002 that the Pakistanis facilitated the crossover of a number of ULFA leaders, including Paresh Barua, into Afghanistan through Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. These visitors, assisted by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), met Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a top Afghan *Mujahideen* leader of the time. Not surprisingly, ULFA cadres, who surrendered in the wake of the Bhutanese military assault on their camps in December 2003, talked of the presence of an Afghan-trained artillery expert in their Bhutan bases.¹⁰ By the end of 1990 and early 1991, the ULFA had set up well-entrenched bases inside Southern Bhutan, mainly in the district of Samdrup Jhongkar, bordering western Assam's Nalbari district.

The rebels' entry into the Himalayan Kingdom followed the first organized counter-insurgency operations that the Indian Army launched against the ULFA in Assam on the night of

⁸ Shelby Tucker, *Among Insurgents, Walking Through Burma*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 82-83.

⁹ Disclosures by a top surrendered ULFA leader during an interview with the author on October 23, 2002, at Guwahati.

¹⁰ Surrendered ULFA 'lieutenant', Domeswar Rabha, said Afghanistan-trained rebel Satabda Kumar was the chief instructor of the ULFA's artillery squad inside Bhutan. Kumar, he said, was also 'commander' of the group's 'General Headquarters' in Bhutan that was neutralized during the Bhutanese military assault in December 2003. See Hussain, "We picked up our AKs and fled," *Sentinel*, December 24, 2003.

November 27-28, 1990, codenamed 'Operation Bajrang.' The Army offensive came in the wake of the ULFA creating a virtual reign of terror in the State, killing, kidnapping and extorting money from tea companies and others, and New Delhi's dismissal of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) Government of Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta for its alleged failure in maintaining law and order. Unlike in Myanmar, where Indian insurgent groups like the ULFA had allies like the KIA, in Bhutan, they had none. The Himalayan Kingdom was chosen by the ULFA, and later the National Democratic Front of Bodoland and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO),¹¹ because Southern Bhutan, where it set up base, was not properly policed, was densely wooded and was located just across the border from Assam. Besides, Bhutan, had a small Army and limited capabilities in the beginning, and was reluctant to take on counter-insurgency measures against a group of heavily-armed rebels. It consequently served as an excellent staging area for the Indian separatists, who could return to the safety of their camps in the Kingdom after carrying out violent strikes in Indian territory. Bhutan took 12 years to launch a military crackdown to oust the Indian separatists for reasons that are described later in this paper. But, unlike Thimphu, which had admitted the presence of these foreign militants right from the beginning, Dhaka has always denied the fact that Indian insurgents were staying in, or operating from, Bangladesh.

Bangladesh: Partner in Terror?

On December 21, 1997, Bangladesh immigration and security officials arrested ULFA 'general secretary', Anup Chetia, from downtown Dhaka's North Adabor locality. The main charges against the Indian separatist leader were illegal entry into Bangladesh, possession of two forged Bangladeshi passports (Nos. 0964185 and 0227883), possession of an unauthorized satellite telephone and illegal possession of foreign currency of countries as diverse as the US, UK, Switzerland, Thailand,

¹¹ For profiles of the ULFA, NDFB and KLO, see South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org.

Philippines, Spain, Nepal, Bhutan, Belgium, Singapore and others.¹² Two of Chetia's accomplices, Babul Sharma and Laxmi Prasad Goswami, were also arrested along with him the same day. Dhaka often seeks to cite this action by the Bangladeshi authorities against the ULFA leader to drive home its claim that the country would not permit Indian militants to operate from its soil.

The presence of Indian insurgents in safe havens in Bangladesh has never been in doubt, considering the volumes of hard intelligence inputs with New Delhi. In January 2004, New Delhi had handed over a detailed list of 194 Indian insurgent camps located inside Bangladesh.¹³ This was during the meeting of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) in New Delhi between January 6 and 9, 2004. If confirmation was needed, a spate of reports relating to multiple incidents on January 2, 2004, and Dhaka's subsequent responses, gave confirmation to India's long-standing complaint that its neighbour was being less than forthcoming on the issue.

- On January 2, the BDR raided a hideout of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and captured six of its cadres and seized some weapons and a mobile telephone set. According to media reports originating from Bangladesh, the raided NLFT camp was located near Karisapunji village in the Habiganj district. The *United News of Bangladesh* identified those arrested as Kokek Tripura, Philip Debbarma, Manjak Debbarma, Bukhuk Debbarma, Satish Debbarma and Shoilen Debbarma.
- In another incident on January 2, the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) 'chief' Ranjit Debbarma's residence in Dhaka was attacked by rocket propelled grenades (RPG). Indian media reports said five ATTF cadres were killed in that attack and eight others, including Debbarma, were wounded.
- Further on January 2, Bangladeshi security forces reportedly arrested as many as 34 ULFA cadres from different parts of

¹² Wasbir Hussain, "Catch 22 in Dhaka," September 3, 2003, <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fname=bangladesh&fodname=20030903&sid=1>.

¹³ "Bangla denies presence of ultra camps," *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, January 10, 2004.

Dhaka. Some Bangladeshi newspapers, including *Jugantar*, quoted police officials as saying the militants were arrested after raids at different places including Mohammedpur, Green Road and Gulshan, all up-market localities in Dhaka. According to *Jugantar*, four people who were caught while making bombs at a house in the city's Mohammedpur area, had received treatment at the Suhrawardy Hospital, concealing their identities.

- According to a section of the intelligence community,¹⁴ the January 2 rocket attack occurred in the Shamoli building, apparently owned by a leading Bangladeshi political figure. The 'chiefs' of the ATTF and ULFA were reportedly staying in this highly secure building. After the rocket attack on the building's 2nd floor, where the ATTF 'chief' was allegedly staying, the local police swung into action and detained almost everyone in the building. Some of those detained were supposed to have been Bangladeshi intelligence operatives. Four injured persons were taken to hospital. Later, the police released all those detained. These intelligence reports claim that top officials of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) intervened to secure the release of these men. It is claimed that many of those arrested were ULFA cadres, and that this is the same incident that the local media reports in Dhaka had talked about, when they mentioned the arrest of 34 ULFA cadres. It is also claimed that members of a local mafia group called 'Seven Star' was behind the rocket attack. No independent confirmation of this incident was immediately available.

How did Dhaka respond to these media reports? While it preferred to remain silent on the reports relating to the raid and the arrest of six NLFT cadres as well as the bomb attack on the residence of the ATTF chief, Bangladesh came out with a formal denial of reports about the arrest of 34 ULFA militants from Dhaka. "We would like to categorically state that the reports (about the ULFA rebels' capture) are false, baseless and concocted and have been fabricated to strain the friendly relations between Bangladesh and India. No such incidents took place in

¹⁴ Claim made by intelligence sources to the author.

the capital city of Dhaka,” a Home Ministry Press Release¹⁵ issued in Dhaka on January 3 said. The Bangladesh Home Ministry statement added: “We would also like to reassert the well-known position of the Government of Bangladesh that Bangladesh has never allowed or assisted insurgent groups of any country for acts against that country and this policy was being pursued by the Government consistently and rigorously.”

Within the changing global context of counter-terrorism and perspectives on South Asia, Bangladesh is certainly and increasingly on the back-foot, with its official position *vis-à-vis* Indian insurgent groups increasingly losing the cover of credible deniability. In addition to the volumes of evidence accumulated by Indian authorities, the case against Bangladesh is also gradually being independently validated. For instance, the location of the NLFT hideout that was reported in Bangladesh media as having been raided by the BDR on January 2, 2004 tallies with a location mentioned in the list of 194 Indian insurgent camps inside Bangladesh submitted by the BSF to its Bangladesh counterpart, the BDR, in January 2004. The Indian list stated that the NLFT had a transit camp at Thakurgaon under Chunarughat Police Station in the Habiganj District of Bangladesh. Again, the very fact that Dhaka did not deny the raid and subsequent capture of six NLFT cadres goes against its official position that there are neither camps nor any Indian insurgent cadres operating from Bangladeshi territory.

Denials aside, Bangladesh, by reliable accounts, may in fact be waking up to the need to rein in these foreign militants. This report in a leading English daily from Dhaka, makes interesting reading:

The Home Ministry at a high-level meeting with paramilitary BDR and intelligence agencies yesterday (January 4, 2004) asked them to step up border security and watch on Dhaka to stem infiltration of Indian terrorists. The Ministry officially denied discussion on steps to tackle infiltration of the operatives of the ULFA and other outfits, but meeting sources confirmed the agenda. They said Home Minister Altaf Hossain

¹⁵ *The New Nation*, Dhaka, Internet edition, January 3, 2004.

Chowdhury and State Minister Lutfozzaman Babar asked the DGFI and NSI (National Security Intelligence) agencies to keep an eye on suspicious people in hotels and rest houses in Dhaka. The ministers also asked the agencies to strengthen vigilance in the porous bordering areas of Cox's Bazaar, Bandarban, Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Sylhet.¹⁶

There is some speculation that Dhaka may, in fact, have been stung by Bhutan's year-end crackdown in 2003 on anti-India separatist camps on its territory, a move for which the Royal Government in Thimphu has received widespread appreciation from nations in the forefront of the global war on terror. But any action that Dhaka may be initiating, does not appear to have been triggered simply because another South Asian neighbour had shown the way by launching an assault on anti-India rebels in the Kingdom, or because New Delhi has been persistent in its claim that an increasing number of camps of Indian insurgents are located inside Bangladesh. It is, rather, the rising pressure of international opinion that is forcing a reassessment in Dhaka¹⁷ and could even be compelling it to launch a rather covert offensive against the Indian militants operating from Bangladesh.

The publication in part, on December 10, 2003, of a report on Bangladesh, prepared by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and an advisory issued by the US State Department to its citizens and officials posted at or visiting Bangladesh, have been particularly embarrassing for Dhaka. The CSIS report prepared in December 2003, said that the Bangladesh Government was not taking enough measures to prevent the country from becoming a haven for Islamist terror groups in South Asia. The report expressed concern over the activities of terrorists suspected to be connected with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. The CSIS report added that Dhaka was not willing to crack down on terror, and expressed fear of dangers to Canadian aid workers in Bangladesh. Significantly, the report also

¹⁶ "Home Ministry orders watch on borders to stop Indian insurgents," *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, Internet edition, January 5, 2004.

¹⁷ Wasbir Hussain, "Bangladesh: Increasing Pressure", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. 2, No. 26, January 12, 2004, South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org.

said that there had been a number of serious terrorist attacks on cultural groups and recreational facilities in Bangladesh, but Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) had been blaming the main Opposition party (the Awami League of former Premier Sheikh Hasina Wajed) for such criminal activities as a matter of routine, rather than zeroing in on the real people or groups behind such acts of violence.

Dhaka rejected the observations made in the CSIS report and has been consistently denying that Bangladesh had become the latest hub of Islamist terror groups, including the Al Qaeda. The fact remains, however, that a local terrorist group, the Harkat-ul-Jehad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-BD), led by Shauqat Osman, with the avowed objective of establishing 'Islamic rule' in Bangladesh, is indeed active in the country. Western media reports suggest this group has an estimated 15,000 cadres.¹⁸

With increasing international attention focused on terrorist and insurgent activities in Bangladesh, Dhaka's past pretence is becoming progressively unsustainable. Nevertheless, the flow of insurgents from India to safe havens in Bangladesh continues. Indeed, with ULFA having lost its bases and once-secure staging areas inside Bhutan, it is expected to turn to two obvious alternate locations, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Yangon has reportedly turned on the heat on Indian insurgents in the country, leaving Bangladesh as the only place that rebels like those of the ULFA have to hold on to. This, too, may not be easy anymore. Dhaka might continue to push ahead with its stand that no Indian insurgents are located or operating from the country, but may eventually have to move as quietly as possible to neutralize these rebels and choke them off within its territory to escape a possibly foolproof indictment by the international community as a nation that has not done enough to combat terror.

It is the articulated views of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's BNP on insurgent groups from Assam, for instance, that increases the level of concern in India. As Opposition leader in May 1998, within six months of Chetia's arrest, Zia had told this writer during an interview at the BNP headquarters in Dhaka that her party would like to regard the ULFA cadres as 'freedom fighters'

¹⁸ For profile of HuJI-BD, see South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org.

just as the Mukti Bahini were freedom fighters.¹⁹ She had then also expressed her gratitude to the people of Assam and Meghalaya for sheltering the Mukti Bahini freedom fighters, indirectly implying that there was nothing wrong in some ULFA men taking shelter inside Bangladesh. That obviously may not be the BNP or Premier Zia's official position now, particularly after 9/11 when the world is engaged in a global war against terror.

It is in this context that some western media reports of the ULFA sending its representatives to attend a meeting of radical Islamist outfits, organized by the HUJI-BD, at a secret rendezvous in Bangladesh in the summer of 2002, arouse curiosity.²⁰ The ULFA is not an Islamist outfit and is rather secular in the sense that its cadres are drawn from diverse groups and communities, cutting across religions. But what cannot be ignored is the possibility that ULFA would have to arrange for sanctuary for some of these Islamist militant leaders or cadres as a *quid pro quo* for its continued stay in Bangladesh, should the pressure against terror is to be increased by Dhaka. However, it would appear that the Bangladeshi Islamists would rather turn to the Rohingya rebels in adjoining Myanmar due to the fact that their chances of hiding in that terrain would be better than in India's Northeast, where the military is constantly on the insurgents' trail.

Bhutan: Taste of War

At the crack of dawn on December 15, 2003, Bhutanese monarch, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, unleashed his small military machine, comprising the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and the Royal Body Guards (RBG), to expel an excess of 3,000²¹ heavily armed Indian separatists belonging to three different groups, the ULFA, NDFB and the KLO. Bhutan said the insurgents were

¹⁹ Wasbir Hussain, "Friendly neighbour, unfriendly acts," *The Hindu*, Chennai, November 23, 2002.

²⁰ On May 9, 2002, 63 representatives of nine Islamist groups, including Rohingya forces, the Islamic Oikya Jote and the ULFA, met in Ukhiya and formed the Bangladesh Islamic Manch, a united council under the HuJi's leadership.

²¹ Bhutanese Foreign Ministry statement to the media issued on December 16, 2003.

operating from 30 camps inside the kingdom (ULFA had 13 camps, NDFB 12 and the KLO 5). Buddhist Bhutan had last gone to war against any foreign force 138 years ago when they fought the British. That was the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1865 in which the Crown's Army defeated Bhutan's then Deb Raja or temporal head, Sonam Lhendup, and came to exercise much influence on Bhutan's affairs.²² That victory gave the British unhindered trans-Himalayan access for trade with Tibet. In 2003, the royal Government's ultimate decision to go to 'war' by using its military, comprising a strike force of just about 6,000, came after six years of failed talks with the ULFA, NDFB and KLO, in a bid to persuade them to have their heavily armed cadres pull out peacefully from the Himalayan Kingdom. "The military crackdown was our ultimate option. The last round of talks was held in October-November 2003 where the KLO went unrepresented as it did not respond to our invitation. Middle-level ULFA and NDFB leaders who came for the meetings said they were unable to leave the kingdom immediately," Aum Neten Zangmo, Bhutan's Foreign Secretary, told this writer by telephone from Thimphu, the nation's capital.²³ On the insurgents' response during the last round of talks, a Bhutanese Foreign Ministry statement had this to say:

The ULFA said that it would be suicidal for their cause of independence of Assam to leave Bhutan while the NDFB said that even if they left their present camps, they would have to come back and establish camps in other parts of Bhutan...²⁴

The Foreign Secretary said even during most of the earlier 'exit talks' (talks to persuade the rebels to withdraw from the Kingdom), the insurgent groups were represented by middle-level leaders while the Royal Government was represented at the highest level, including that of the Prime Minister and Home Minister.

²² Bhabani Sen Gupta, *Bhutan: Towards a Grass-root Participatory Polity*, Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1999, pp. 25-26.

²³ Wasbir Hussain, "Bhutan: Going for the Kill," *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. 2 No. 23, December 22, 2003, South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org.

²⁴ Bhutanese Foreign Ministry statement to the media issued on December 16, 2003.

That was a difficult decision indeed for King Wangchuck to take. Firstly because, the battle capabilities of the RBA and the RBG (the Royal Body Guards is a force actually meant exclusively for protection of the Royal family) were totally untested. If anything, the Bhutanese Forces could have been absolutely rusty, not having had the occasion to fire a single shot except during their training sessions with the Indian Army, which runs a military training centre inside Bhutan. Secondly, a military crackdown could turn the insurgents against the Bhutanese state machinery or its citizens. This, in turn, would make access into the landlocked kingdom difficult as most of the roads into southern Bhutan, the insurgents' stronghold, pass through Indian territory, via the northeastern State of Assam and the eastern State of West Bengal. But, King Wangchuck could wait no more.

The timing of the assault certainly needs to be examined. The Bhutanese cite the mandate of the 81st session of the National Assembly to the Royal Government to try and persuade the insurgents to leave the Kingdom 'one last time', or to expel them by using military force. However, that had been the National Assembly's directive for several years. This makes it pertinent to try and zero in on the possible trigger for the operations in December 2003, twelve years after the rebels had first entered Bhutan. Such an analysis would make it necessary to examine the significance of the relatively smaller and rag-tag group, the KLO, and its affiliations and linkages, more than those of the ULFA or the NDFB.²⁵

Both the Indian and Bhutanese security establishments were stung by news of the launching of the Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) on April 22, 2003, the 133rd birth anniversary of Lenin.²⁶ Pamphlets widely circulated by this new group in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal and in areas inside Bhutan itself, revealed that the new party's objective was to 'smash the monarchy' and establish a 'true and new democracy' in Bhutan.²⁷ Both New Delhi and Thimphu were quick to put the KLO under the scanner. Security agencies soon

²⁵ Wasbir Hussain, "Bhutan: Timing an Assault," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, December 23, 2003, www.ipcs.org.

²⁶ "Maoists form unit in Bhutan," *Times of India*, Delhi, May 18, 2003.

²⁷ Ibid.

came to the conclusion the KLO was active and had pockets of influence in the strategic North Bengal areas of West Bengal and could act as a bridge between the Maoists insurgents in Nepal and the newly emerging Maoist force in Bhutan. Besides, Indian intelligence agencies were aware of the fact that the KLO had provided sanctuary to fleeing Maoist cadres from Nepal, that the outfit had acted as a link between the Maoists and the radical left-wing activists in Bihar, and that it received help from the Maoists in setting up a number of explosive manufacturing units in North Bengal.

In the final analysis, Bhutan's emerging Maoist threat could have been the key factor in provoking the eventual Army action, although intense pressure from New Delhi to oust the Indian insurgents, as well as the threat the rebels' presence posed to Bhutan's own sovereignty and development, could be the other factors that may have made the King shake off his long-held ambivalence and act decisively.

Thimphu's action: Impact in South Asia

The debate on whether the Bhutanese military carried out the anti-rebel offensive entirely on its own or whether the Indian Army's role, as claimed by New Delhi, was limited to providing nothing more than 'logistic support' and ammunition, is not very relevant. However, the fact remains that Bhutan carried out a military operation and managed to dismantle the well-entrenched bases of three Indian insurgent groups which were carrying out violent strikes against symbols of Indian Governmental authority as well as civilians with ease, and returning to the safety of their bases in the Himalayan kingdom by simply walking across the porous border.

Thimphu's military strike against the Indian insurgents did create an immediate impact in South Asia in so far as the war against terror was concerned. The following responses were clearly noticeable in the region:

- Bangladesh reacted by saying it had sealed its borders with India to prevent Indian insurgents fleeing Bhutan or Myanmar from entering its territory.

- The arrest of 34 ULFA cadres in and around Dhaka and the rocket attack on the ATTF chief's apartment in downtown Dhaka were some post-Bhutan offensive developments that cannot be ignored.
- The Bangladesh Home Ministry, as mentioned earlier, decided to crack down on Indian militants, and to keep such operations secret, obviously due to Dhaka's official stand that no Indian insurgents were operating from that country.
- There were strong indications of Myanmar already tightening its noose on Indian insurgent groups like the NSCN-K and the ULFA, which have bases in the country.²⁸

New Delhi seized the initiative and used the forum of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which was holding its 12th Summit in Islamabad in the first week of January 2004, to call upon nations in the region to actively clamp down on terror. Pakistan could not have missed this strong statement by India to fight terrorism in South Asia as well as globally. The then Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, addressing the Summit, said:

I would like to draw attention to the courageous action taken by His Majesty the King of Bhutan and his government against insurgent groups which were trying to use Bhutanese territory to launch terrorist activities in India. It is an outstanding example of sensitivity to the security concerns of a neighbour which is at the same time in the direct long-term security interest of Bhutan itself.²⁹

Earlier, on January 1, 2004, the then Indian Foreign Minister, Yashwant Sinha, had urged the SAARC countries to emulate Bhutan in flushing out insurgents from their soil.³⁰ New Delhi's remarks and Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Thinley's strong plea for the adoption and effective implementation of the protocol on terrorism during the Summit were points that did not go

²⁸ Wasbir Hussain, "Anti-rebel offensive by Junta: Myanmar scene hazy, claims by NSCN-K differ," *Sentinel*, January 8, 2004.

²⁹ "PM calls for trust, lauds courageous action of King," *Sentinel*, January 5, 2004.

³⁰ "India tells SAARC: Emulate Bhutan to flush out insurgents," *Assam Tribune*, January 2, 2004.

unnoticed. In an indirect reference to Pakistan's role, Thinley, during his address at the Summit, said that the attempt to assassinate Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf was a rude reminder of the need to root out terrorism.³¹

Post 9/11 and, thereafter, post-military offensive by Bhutan, India's neighbours and all those engaged in the global war against terror, had started speaking in a similar language, that terrorism needed to be curbed with a firm hand. During the offensive, in a dramatic move, ULFA 'chairman', Arabinda Rajkhowa, appealed to the Chinese leadership on December 25, 2003,³² to provide safe passage to the insurgents from Bhutan for temporary shelter in China. Rajkhowa in his fax communication to the Chinese leadership said: "We have come under massive attack of Indo-Bhutan joint forces and our combatants have been forced to retreat up to the Sino-Bhutan border due to all out air and artillery campaigns..."³³ Beijing was quick to turn down the ULFA plea and cautioned that it had alerted its frontier forces to prevent any intrusion of Indian militants. A Chinese Embassy spokesperson in New Delhi said the Chinese Frontier Forces were quite capable of preventing the entry of Indian insurgents into their country and that they were closely monitoring the development of the situation.³⁴

It is not that China or sources in China have always maintained a distance from Indian separatists. Indian insurgents had not only visited China in the past for help, but had received assistance from sources within the country. NSCN-IM 'general secretary', Thuingaleng Muivah, is on record as having said that Naga insurgents had, in the early days, obtained arms from China and Pakistan.³⁵ Of course, Muivah's claims do not match Indian media reports in 2000, that talked of a Chinese 'agency' supplying machine guns and AK-47 rifles to insurgent groups in India's Northeast. A crossed cheque of half-a-million dollars

³¹ "All rebel leaders captured: Bhutan," *Sentinel*, January 5, 2004.

³² "Arabinda SOS to China for safe passage, shelter," *Sentinel*, December 28, 2003.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "China turns down ULFA plea for safe passage," *Assam Tribune*, January 1, 2004.

³⁵ The Rediff Interview/NSCN (I-M) General Secretary Thuingaleng Muivah, January 25, 2001, www.rediff.com/news/2001/jun/25inter.htm.

encashed by a Chinese firm in Beijing revealed the source from where the NSCN-IM was getting arms. News reports talked of NSCN-IM arms procurer, Anthony Shimray, having flown from Bangkok to Beijing in September 2000 and holding talks with the 'Chinese agency' in Kunming.³⁶ The report may or may not be correct, but it is undeniable that China has always been looked upon by several Northeast Indian insurgent groups as its ideological source.

While New Delhi may have received sufficient co-operation from Bhutan and Myanmar in combating the separatists, it is yet to get what it would like to from, say Thailand. Pakistan, of course, is a different story altogether. To illustrate: In a major joint Indo-Myanmar anti-insurgency drive in April 1995, the Indian and Myanmarese Armies launched a pincer attack on a group of some 200 Indian insurgents, codenamed 'Operation Golden Bird,' along the border with Mizoram. Up to 60 ULFA and other Northeast Indian insurgents were killed and several others arrested during the 44-day offensive. The insurgents were returning to their bases in India after procuring a huge consignment of arms from Bangladesh.³⁷ This military co-operation has been generally continuing between the two nations despite some ups and downs in recent years.

Thailand, too, has been a favourite location of some of the top Northeast Indian insurgent leaders. New Delhi has, for long, been persuading Bangkok to disallow insurgents from the Northeast using Thailand as a sanctuary for striking arms deals and holding strategy sessions. In the mid-nineties, the Royal Thai Navy seized an illegal arms shipment of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur.³⁸ Ten men were arrested after their 16-metre vessel was intercepted by a Navy patrol boat following a chase in the Andaman Sea off the southern Thai seaport of Ranong. The arrested persons, suspected to be PLA cadres, were found holding Bangladeshi passports. Among the two tons of

³⁶ "NSCN ultras negotiate arms deal in China," *The Pioneer*, Delhi, October 31, 2003.

³⁷ Wasbir Hussain, "Golden Bird: Army morale soars high," *The Asian Age*, Delhi, May 18, 1995.

³⁸ Wasbir Hussain, "Thais help India fight Northeast militants," *Asian Age*, Kolkata, 1996.

weapons seized by the Thai Navy were two RPG launchers, 20 American assault rifles, two recoilless guns, four M-79 grenades launchers and more than 10,000 rounds of assorted ammunition.³⁹ It was for the first time that the Thai authorities swooped down on Northeast Indian insurgents, including the ULFA and both factions of the NSCN, who had been using this particular sea route to ferry military hardware to their bases.

However, this appears to have been a one-off action. Since then, New Delhi has not been receiving much help from Bangkok. For instance, on January 19, 2000, Thai authorities arrested Muivah from the Bangkok International Airport. But it is unlikely that the Thai authorities acted against him because of New Delhi's persuasion. According to published reports, Muivah was arrested apparently on the basis of information that he was traveling on a false South Korean passport and that he was actually a North Korean agent on a mission to blow up the South Korean embassy in Bangkok. Media reports have also said that Muivah and the NSCN-IM chairman, Isak Chisi Swu, have been living in Bangkok for more than 20 years now, own apartments and have business interests in the Thai capital.⁴⁰

Rebel Groupings as Force Multipliers

Events on the insurgency front in India's Northeast have shown that rebel groups have often succeeded in neutralizing the reverses faced by them by entering into deals with other insurgent groups, and these alliances act as force multipliers. Insurgent politics in the region registered a very important development in year 2000—the signing of a deal for joint operations by the ULFA and United National Liberation Front (UNLF), a Manipuri insurgent group whose primary area of operation was Manipur's Jiribam Valley and neighbouring Assam's Cachar district. A UNLF statement on July 29, 2000, disclosed the agreement between that group and the ULFA for the first time. Significantly,

³⁹ "LTTE-Indian North-East Militant nexus exposed following Thai Arms Seizure," www.lanka.net/lankaupdate/27_mar_97.html#section1.

⁴⁰ Wasbir Hussain, "Peace in Naga Country: New Delhi's Challenges in the far-eastern Frontier."

the statement came less than a fortnight after the UNLF claimed responsibility for the July 16, 2000, killing of three soldiers in the Cachar district of Assam. Given the admission about the agreement, the ULFA could well have provided logistic support to the UNLF in carrying out that ambush.

The UNLF, formed on November 24, 1964, under the leadership of Areambam Samarendra Singh to establish an independent socialist Manipur, has a rather frightening history, in so far as its one-time allies are concerned. At its inception, the outfit shared a close 'political relationship' with the then East Pakistani regime, and in 1969 underwent military training in that country. The group is also said to have backed the Pakistani Army during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. Not just depending on Pakistan, the UNLF moved closer to China with a team headed by N. Bisheswar Singh proceeding to Lhasa in 1975 to ask for Beijing's assistance. Now headed by Rajkumar Meghen alias Sana Yaima, the UNLF is also close to the NSCN-K and has training camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh.⁴¹

It is linkages such as these and the potential for immense trans-border movement by cadres of these groups that has made the ULFA-UNLF pact so significant. The ULFA would like to describe the agreement as a 'fraternal bond sealed to fulfill certain tactical goals.' It may not have been a purely bilateral pact, but could have emanated from the loose pan-Mongoloid coalition called the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) forged in May 1990, of which both the ULFA and UNLF were a part. Formed to wage a 'united struggle for the independence of Indo-Burma', the IBRF itself was a failure, primarily because it was too much of a problem for its leaders to hold on to a coalition of insurgent outfits that claimed to represent diverse tribes and communities.

What then was the need for the ULFA to tie up with the UNLF in 2000 or vice-versa? The ULFA's main fighting machine, until the Bhutanese crackdown in December 2003, was located in Bhutan. For several years before the crackdown, the ULFA had been under pressure from Thimphu to pull out of the

⁴¹ Wasbir Hussain, "Northeast Rebels: Strategic Alliances & Open Borders," Paper presented at seminar on 'Dynamics of Border Management, Past, present and future,' organized by the Border Security Force at the Police Officers' Mess, Shillong, October 7-8, 2002.

Kingdom. Bhutan's Home Minister, Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, confirmed at that time that, by December 31, 2001, the ULFA had indeed closed down four camps as per an agreement of June 2001. By 2001, the ULFA had started feeling the heat and perhaps realized that they would have to leave Bhutan sooner or later.

Under the circumstances, the ULFA perhaps was eyeing the UNLF's bases and training facilities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. A denial from Dhaka notwithstanding, it is a fact that Bangladesh has been a favourite hiding place for the ULFA leaders. The ULFA knew that, in the event of a possible assault on its camps inside Bhutan, the group would have to have an alternative destination to head for, and that would obviously be either Bangladesh or Myanmar, or both. The pact with the UNLF was, therefore, an absolute must for the ULFA, as 'hiding places' apart, some concrete training bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar would be necessary.

At one stage, some of the ULFA arms consignments were even traced to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a deal brokered in 1993 by General Bo Mya's Karen National Union (KNU), an anti-Yangon guerrilla group.⁴² That deal was apparently clinched by ULFA's self-styled foreign secretary, Shasha Choudhury, who visited the KNU base at Manerplaw, on the Thailand-Myanmar border. As surveillance increased, rendering weapons smuggling more difficult, the ULFA might then have pinned its hopes on the UNLF to serve as a conduit for shipment of military hardware from Myanmar rebels.

The UNLF's equations with the Junta in Myanmar also appears to have been extraordinary, at least around year 2000, a fact which the ULFA may have taken note of while forging a deal with it. In December 2001, as many as 192 UNLF cadres, including some top leaders, were 'arrested' by the Myanmarese Army. Interestingly, all of them were set free by February 14, 2002, in four phases. The entire episode is still shrouded in mystery, particularly because Yangon had been almost simultaneously promising Indian leaders of support in checking cross-border insurgency. Does this mean that the UNLF has some

⁴² Wasbir Hussain, "ULFA gets new weapons from Khmer Rouge," *Asian Age*, August 14, 1995.

sort of an understanding with the Junta in Myanmar, or a section of it? Answers are difficult to find, but theories abound, particularly because New Delhi was, from the mid-nineties onwards, supposed to have improved relations with Yangon considerably.

There is no scope for complacency in so far as the Indian authorities are concerned. This is because groups such as the NSCN-IM, even while engaging in peace negotiations with New Delhi, supported the 48-hour general strike in Assam and elsewhere in the region called on December 20-21, 2003 by the ULFA, NDFB and KLO in protest against the 'brutal operations' and 'human rights violations' caused by the military inside Bhutan to oust the Indian separatists. The conflict dynamics as well as complex rebel equations combine to keep India's Northeast on the boil.