

Naga peace can't happen without NSCN-K

The Naga peace process, Eastern India's most anticipated political show, has in the past couple of weeks added several important dimensions.

I hear of a move to have all 12 of Nagaland's council of ministers in New Delhi for a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to fast-track a satisfactory conclusion to the matter at the very latest before February 2018. This would be just in time for elections to that state's assembly and could pre-empt policy being affected by the Election Commission's model code of conduct.

It would, of course, be lovely if Nagaland's politicians made a grand gesture to include in the formal power structure Naga rebels who, for all the heartburn about their strong-arm tactics, extortion, and "taxation", occupy a special place in many Naga hearts and minds. There's the wonderful example of Mizoram's Congress chief minister Lal Thanhawla stepping aside to accommodate rebel leader Laldenga of the Mizo National Front in the wake of a peace deal in 1986 overseen by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

There has been some talk of a similar move. In June 2016, at a meeting in Kohima, all 60 legislators of Nagaland and its two members of Parliament put aside major political and tribal differences to "put pressure" on the Indian government and the Isak-Muivah faction of National Socialist Council of Nagalim, or NSCN (I-M), the largest Naga rebel group with which the government signed a framework peace agreement on 3 August 2015, to speed up the process. They even resolved to give up their seats to absorb rebel leadership into the political mainstream. This mirrored an earlier move by Nagaland's legislators in mid-2012.

If this works, it would be nothing short of stunning, and it is hardly a matter of kite flying. As I have written earlier, it mirrors the desire of the Naga people to formally end conflict, overcome a history of a genocidal war India waged against them, and seek an equitable future of peace and prosperity.

The issue is, of course, overcoming major hurdles both among the political and rebel establishments. S.C. Jamir, for many years the Congress chief minister—and more recently an itinerant governor to various states—has never hidden his ambition to once again rule Nagaland, though he is reviled in particular by NSCN (I-M). He has a competitor Nagaland's current chief minister, T.R. Zeliang, a canny political player who muscled his way back to power in July this year after a half-year hiatus; and is a favourite among Modi's courtiers, in particular Bharatiya Janata Party's president Amit Shah and Ram Madhav—the party's general secretary who retains great personal interest in North-East Indian affairs. The third player is Neiphiu Rio, a former chief minister who is, like his former protégé Zeliang, a power-player. Though Zeliang and Rio, a Lok Sabha MP, are currently ranged on the same political side, it's on shaky ground.

Rebel territory is as charged. I-M last year made a great departure from its norm when Rh Raising, the home minister—kilo kilonser—of its proclaimed administration, Government of the People's Republic of Nagalim, or GPRN, welcomed other competing rebel groups to the peace dialogue. Raising paraphrased other leaders when he invoked the spirit of reconciliation: "... to forgive our mistakes," he said, "as we have also forgiven their mistakes."

As if in agreement, more than a year later, on 26 September R.N. Ravi, interlocutor for the Naga peace process, met members of six rebel groups, including smaller factions of NSCN as well as remnants of Naga National Council, in the 1950s the fount of Naga resistance and rebellion. When Ravi visited Dimapur to hold talks with these groups, Naga tribal bodies and civic groups accorded him a massive reception at the airport.

That was unprecedented, but so is a lot happening in the peace process. These are far smaller and less influential groups than NSCN (I-M), but important from the comprehensive perspective a peace process must necessarily hold. The inclusion of these groups helps to carry both the credentials of past struggles as well as their membership that spreads across several Naga tribes, always an important emotional content when dealing with matters in Naga homelands.

But there remains NSCN-K or the Khaplang faction, the largest and most influential group after I-M, and at war not just with India but all other groups, in particular I-M. There can be no peace without K on board, and that game is unfolding rapidly, interestingly. More on that next week.

Sudeep Chakravarti's books include Clear.Hold.Build: Hard Lessons of Business and Human Rights in India, Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country and Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land. This column, which focuses on conflict situations and the convergence of businesses and human rights, runs on Thursdays.

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