

## Naga peace: Indian govt has turned the pressure on Khaplang faction

A belligerent rebel group is now in a marquee moment in the Naga peace process.

Last week I suggested, reflecting substantial public opinion, that there cannot be true Naga peace and reconciliation without the National Socialist Council of Nagaland's Khaplang faction. As the second-largest Naga rebel group and in active combat against India, Myanmar-based NSCN-K has still-impressive reach in Indian territory in South-Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, North and East Nagaland, and parts of Manipur.

It is in alliance with several rebel groups rooted elsewhere in North-East India, such as the so-called independent faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom, a Bodo splinter group, a Kamtapuri offshoot that locates its emotional heart in Northern West Bengal, and a half-dozen Manipuri rebel groups under the umbrella of CorCom, or Coordination Committee. NSCN-K offers these groups sanctuary and/or logistics support. Since 2015, when it broke away from a ceasefire with government of India, NSCN-K has conducted joint operations in India with elements of CorCom.

This continues the policy of S.S. Khaplang, the chief of this faction who died in June this year, by his successor Khango Konyak. Unlike Khaplang, who was a Hemi Naga from Myanmar—which has substantial Naga homelands separated by Britain's sharp partitioning knife—Konyak is from the eponymous tribe largely located in Nagaland's northern Mon district.

It's not a pretty picture in the otherwise hyped Naga peace process, in which the largest group of Naga rebels, the Isak-Muivah faction or NSCN (I-M) is in active talks with the government of India; these formally began in August 2015. That happened just months after NSCN-K went its way, as if in recognition of India's compact with its arch-enemies: NSCN (I-M). The peace process has since September been joined by six smaller Naga rebel groups.

It is clear that the government has turned the pressure on the Khaplang faction. Besides hitting back with combat operations, including an end-September hit by India's Army on some NSCN-K strongholds across the border in Myanmar. In end-October, a team from National Investigation Agency (NIA) seized nearly Rs28 lakh in Dimapur from Shelly, wife of a key general in NSCN-K, the flamboyant and crafty Nikki Sumi, the mastermind of several attacks against Indian troops. Days later NIA announced it had proof of four Nagaland government officials channelling Rs20-25 crore of extorted funds to NSCN-K from 2012-16.

This is classic power play with signals going out loud and clear. For several years now, combat in this sphere has generally kept away from families of combatants on every side. The government publicly tagging the wife of a senior NSCN-K officer is a "back-off" gambit. It's also seen as a move to create fissures in NSCN-K by exposing Sumi's vulnerability, though whether that will actually happen as part of a continuing play to get NSCN-K or a substantial section of it back to the talks table, is as yet wide open.

Significantly, there is no such public tagging when it comes to NSCN (I-M), though by all accounts, the faction gathers maximum revenue among all rebel groups in India with the exception of the Maoist machinery; or the six Naga groups recently added to the peace process. After all they are at the table for talks.

India's security establishment has increasingly got better at keeping tabs on rebels, including knowledge of assets that leaders and their families own, say, in India, Myanmar and Thailand, let alone homes in what is sometimes jocularly called the Beverly Hills suburb of Dimapur,

Nagaland's commercial hub. A senior army officer once boasted to me of how they could roll it all up—at least in India—if they wished. Naturally, there is a limit to penetration, as attacks by NSCN-K on India's Army and paramilitaries have shown, but it's all point and counter-point.

The cat-and-mouse game extends to containing China, which India's security apparatus believes is the puppeteer behind NSCN-K and its allies. Indeed, another chess move came earlier this week, when *Mizzima*, a respected Myanmar news organization, cited a general saying, "We will not allow our soil to be used against India." *Mizzima* claimed the statement was made in Imphal, Manipur's capital, at the end of a seminar on 3 November.

Will it bring it all to boil, bring NSCN-K in one form or another to the table alongside efforts by Naga citizens' groups to reach out for peace and reconciliation—citizens who realize there can be no true peace without NSCN-K either on board or strictly contained in Myanmar? Game on.

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