

Can skirmishes in Manipur halt peace talks?

This is about how a small skirmish could impact bigger events. An indication of it came earlier this week in Manipur, where the very act of resolving one conflict can escalate others. The skirmish involves National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), which is conducting rocky negotiations with the government of India to convert a long ceasefire to permanent peace.

NSCN (I-M), which claims to speak for all Nagas—in Nagaland, and Naga homelands in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam—has for long been seen by most Nagas as a group with the keenest interest in Manipur. Most of its key leaders and large proportions of its cadres are from there, in particular the northern district of Ukhrul, home of the Tangkhul tribe.

On the morning of 12 September, NSCN (I-M) killed five members of a coalition of Manipuri rebels allied to its arch rivals, NSCN's Khaplang faction. The coalition is loosely called CorCom, or Coordination Committee, and includes a half dozen groups of Meitei rebels—Meitei have their homeland in Manipur's Imphal Valley. They have for long accused NSCN (I-M) of driving a violent wedge between the plains and hills, engineering a de facto break-up of Manipur through areas of ethnic influence.

Three of those killed in the skirmish are reportedly of the People's Liberation Army, an influential Meitei rebel arm. But significantly, two others are believed to be Tangkhul tribesmen of a group widely regarded as being birthed by Meitei groups, the Manipur Naga People's Front.

As significantly, the incident took place in Kamjong district, which was in December last year carved out of Ukhrul district in a blatant bid by the state government to rein in NSCN (I-M). Seven such new districts were added to the existing nine. Of these, four were earlier part of the Naga-majority districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel. Taken together, this hived off non-Naga areas, and leveraged disquiet that some Naga tribes and even some Tangkhul clans, such as in the 'southern' Tangkhul region of Kamjong—have towards domineering NSCN (I-M), and by extension the 'northern' Tangkhul.

If this seems confounding, that's because it is, but buried in this event is a series of implications that will impact peace talks with NSCN (I-M).

One is of course the mission creep that has led NSCN (I-M)'s enemies among Manipur's rebel groups to mount an attack on an area the former considers its turf. In any case, Kamjong is too close to Ukhrul for it to take such an incursion without immediate and violent reprisal. Besides loss of face, not doing so would encourage more such incursions—blessed by the Khaplang faction and also by the members of CorCom which have for decades smarted against NSCN (I-M)'s stranglehold on much of Manipur.

The second factor is that NSCN (I-M) cannot be seen to be weak, not when it could affect its negotiating position with the Indian government.

India's security establishment could sit back and let a bunch of rival rebel groups kill each other off, but the downside—and there are several—could be a surge in bloodletting that in a worst case could jump from rebel warfare to killing of non-combatants purely on the basis of ethnicity. This could set off a firestorm in ethnically fragile Manipur (which now has a Bharatiya Janata Party-led government).

Indeed, more such skirmishing could even lead, in another worst-case, to hardliners of NSCN (I-M) pulling out of peace talks to maintain status quo that permits them weapons, recruitment and,

for all practical purpose, a parallel administration across much of the Naga homelands. Assume the peace deal goes through. What security will former NSCN (I-M) leaders and cadres enjoy in Manipur—or Tangkhul homelands, for that matter—without the clout of weapons they now have, with which they purvey both fear and favour to fund the group? Their enemies will descend on them, attempt to exact revenge.

There is a push to hammer out the peace deal by December this year, well in time to make a big impact on elections to Nagaland's assembly due by March 2018. The biggest gainer in that case will likely be the Bharatiya Janata Party, which expects to substantially increase its seat count from the current four in the 60-member assembly. It will place the party in a better position to influence government formation in what is generally accepted will be a hung assembly.

I shall share more on that political flux in future columns, but meanwhile, there's this matter of war before peace.

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