

INSURGENCY DOWN IN NORTHEAST, ARMY SHIFTS TO LAC

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With insurgency having significantly gone down in the northeast as seen by recent revocation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in several parts of the region, the Army has been able to pull out most of its troops from counter-insurgency (CI) duties to refocus on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) amid the stand-off with China in Eastern Ladakh in the last two years. Assam Rifles is now responsible for all CI duties.

There is only one Army Brigade in the entire Eastern sector now tasked with CI duties with its mandate spread across four districts of Assam bordering Arunachal. "Insurgency has waned and the counter to it has also changed. It is a whole-of-the-nation approach now. Now the battle is for the mind-space," said Brig. K.S. Gill, commanding the 73 Brigade. Recruitment still happens but has come down in last two years, he stated.

Elaborating, he said while space for United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is shrinking, residual potential still remains and "it's a threat in being" as threat of use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), kidnapping and extortion loom large.

However, their operational space is reducing due to constant pressure on them and outreach to people for development, Brig. Gill said adding they continue to keep pressure by area domination, keeping up checks and "intelligence-based ethical operations."

'Major achievement'

Terming the lifting of AFSPA from areas of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam as a "momentous achievement" made possible by reduction in violence, Lt. Gen. R.P. Kalita, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Command, noted that the Act is now restricted to only those areas where remnants of militancy still exist.

"With public support and our constant domination of these areas, I am sanguine that in the future, more such areas will reach a level of peace," he said speaking on the sidelines of an event at Kibithu. The situation is dynamic and is being constantly monitored, he stated.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has also been active and keeping up the pressure. In addition to dwindling recruitment, there have also been desertions among the cadres and also differences among the various factions.

In this regard, the footprint of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) has been seen in Assam of late, officials on the ground said, with inputs suggesting that that NSCN (Ky) is working with ULFA. NSCN (Ky) is active in Longding, Tirap and Changling districts of Nagaland and so offers a conduit for ULFA.

Among the various initiatives by the Army to win hearts and minds of the people, those that have caught attention are an effort to impart training in football and another to impart training to students to crack national-level entrance examinations for engineering and medicine.

Football tournament

For instance, the 'Capt. Jintu Gogoi, VrC Memorial Football Tournament' organised in February-March this year by the Army in coordination with the Assam Football Association and Tinsukia District Sports Authority was a huge draw. It brought together 64 teams from several districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, according to Lt. Col. Kumar Gaurav, who was involved in the organisation of the tournament.

"It was not just a match, but a platform for budding talent to go ahead and get national recognition," he said.

Capt. Gogoi from Assam served in 17 Garhwal Rifles and was posthumously awarded the Vir Chakra (VrC) for his actions during the Kargil conflict of 1999.

Commenting on reorientation, Lt. Gen. Kalita said the deployment of Army on CI duties is dictated by the security situation and the violence parameters and as situation improves, Army is de-inducted and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and police take on the responsibility of ensuring peace and stability.

"In northeast also, with improvement in situation, Army has got de-inducted and is geared to look at the primary role," he said while cautioning that even while being employed for CI Ops, the units are always prepared for a conventional role at all times.

"We have a large border with three neighbouring countries, each with its own unique dynamics. Therefore, our units and troops are always prepared, trained and equipped for multifarious tasks and multiple threat scenarios," Lt. Gen. Kalita added. "This is an ongoing exercise all round the year," he added.

Two Divisions of troops have been pulled off CI duties and redeployed along the Line of Actual Control in tune with the overall reorientation towards the LAC carried out by the Army since the May 2020 stand-off. Of the 3,488-km-long LAC, 1,346 km falls in the Eastern sector.

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