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Issue Brief

Operation All Out against Bodo Militants: What Next?

Sushil Kumar Sharma

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S*ummary*

Operation All Out appears to be a grand success. The gradual willingness of militant groups to compromise on their erstwhile rigid ideological goals and come forward for a negotiated settlement points to a welcome change. Further, the common people continue to long for development and peace. Therefore, the Centre's focus needs to be directed towards the setting up mechanisms to ensure rehabilitation of displaced persons and surrendered militants as well as their participation in governance.

On 26 December 2014, the Government of India declared the launch of Operation All Out against Bodo militants. As part of the operation, it deployed as many as 9,000 security forces personnel drawn from the Army, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the State Police.¹ The decision to launch the operation was taken during the meeting between Chief of Army Staff General Dalbir Singh Suhag and Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh. The meeting was held to review the security situation in Assam after the killing of 69 Adivasis by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit), NDFB(S), in the three districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang and Sonitpur.² In May 2014, the government had attributed a similar attack on Muslims to the NDFB(S). The December attacks, described as one of the worst massacres in the history of Northeast India, led to widespread protests by all sections of people. In retaliation, the Adivasis had killed 14 Bodos.

Bodo Movement

Ethnic identities have been the key reasons of unrest in the Northeast. The demand for the creation of a homeland for the plains tribal communities in the shape of Udyachal was a major plank of the Bodo political movement in the 1960s.³ The All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was formed in 1967 to represent the Bodo cause. In the 1970s, the ABSU emerged as a potent force under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma and spearheaded agitations for the recognition of Bodo as an official language of Assam. Although this demand was granted in 1982, the Bodo movement gathered further momentum in the wake of the Assam spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) during the period 1979-85. The Assam Accord of 1985 became the reference point for the Bodos, with ABSU taking exception to Clause 6 of the Accord dealing with the legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote "the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people". In March 1987, ABSU stepped up the movement for a separate state of Bodoland on the North Bank of the Brahmaputra spread over 25,478 sq km, with the slogan of Divide Assam fifty-fifty.

Bodo Insurgency

Bodo demands soon came to be backed by Bodo armed groups, leading to the emergence of an insurgency situation in the region. Ranjan Daimary had raised a militant outfit, the Bodo Security Force (BdSF), in 1986. This was later rechristened as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Violence and intimidation by this group escalated with a cycle of extortion, kidnapping and killings. The Bhutanese forest afforded these insurgents a safe haven across the border.

¹ "After Assam Killings, all out war begins against Bodo Militants," *India Today*, December, 26, 2014, at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/assam-killing-operation-all-out-army-bodo-militants/1/408881.html> (Accessed on December 24, 2014).

² The Adivasi community of Assam, locally known as the Tea tribe, were brought by British colonial planters as indentured labourers from Central India between the 1860 and 1890s. They belong to the Munda, Oraon, Santhal and other tribes from Jharkhand, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

³ To address the issue of new migrants, in 1967, the Plains Tribal's Council of Assam (PTCA) demanded Union Territory status for an area to be carved out of Assam, called Udayachal.

In 1990, the Army launched Operation Bajrang, followed by Operation Rhino, against separatist groups in Assam. Faced with sustained pressure, Assam's militant groups relocated their camps to Bhutan. Subsequently, the Royal Bhutan Army launched Operation All Clear between December 2003 and January 2004 to eliminate militants based in South Bhutan. To assist it in that task, the Indian Army was deployed along the Bhutan border to prevent rebels from entering Indian territory. About 30 militant camps, including those of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), NDFB and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) were targeted in the intelligence-based operation. The Indian Army later claimed that 650 militants were either killed or apprehended during the operations.⁴

In October 2004, Daimary declared a unilateral Cease Fire (CF) possibly due to his group's waning strength and lack of safe haven in Bhutan. Subsequently, a tripartite agreement was signed between the Government of India, the Assam Government and NDFB on 25 May 2005 for holding peace talks. NDFB thereafter submitted its charter of demands in May 2008, with the creation of Bodoland as the main demand. However, on 30 October 2008, the outfit carried out serial blasts in Assam resulting in the breakdown of peace talks. On 15 December 2008, NDFB Vice President B. Sungthagra alias Dhiren Boro declared himself as the new President and Govinda Basumatary as General Secretary of the outfit. The existing Chairman, Ranjan Daimary, was formally expelled from the outfit and Dhiren Boro came forward for peace talks with the central government.⁵ The Dhien Boro faction was later named NDFB (Progressive), NDFB(P). According to ground reports, since September 2009, 837 cadres of NDFB(P) have been located in three designated camps at Sarfanguri, Sapkhati and Batabari.

In April 2010, Ranjan Daimary was apprehended by the Bangladesh Police and handed over to India. He was released on bail in June 2013, following his expression of willingness to hold peace talks and drop the demand for sovereignty. The faction headed by Daimary is called NDFB(RD). Talks between the Centre, Assam and NDFB(RD) have been underway since July 2013. A tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement was signed on 29 November 2013. 579 cadres of NDFB(RD) have been located in two designated camps established in Panbari, Dhubri District, and Udalguri Town.⁶

In November 2012, sensing the possibility of Daimary engaging with the Centre, the C-in-C of NDFB(RD), Ingti Kathar Songbijit, who was against the talks, split from the outfit along with his supporters and formed the NDFB(S). NDFB(S) has

⁴ "Operations All Clear & Golden Bird: India's past campaigns on foreign soil," *One India*, June 10, 2015, at <http://www.oneindia.com/india/operations-all-clear-and-golden-bird-indias-past-operations-on-foreign-soil-1773008.html>, (Accessed on December 30, 2015).

⁵ The serial blasts were attributed to Ranjan Daimary. The subsequent developments indicate both an ideological as well as personality difference between Daimary and Boro.

⁶ "Centre signs peace pact with NDFB, Daimary faction in Assam," *Hindustan Times*, November 30, 2013, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/centre-signs-peace-pact-with-ndfb-daimary-faction-in-assam/story-q6iX88PCdkKBjUMBm1qXxN.html> (Accessed on December 30, 2015).

now joined the "United National Liberation Front of West South East Asia", formed by nine militant groups of Northeast India.⁷

Thus, at present, the NDFB has split into three factions – NDFB(P), NDFB(RD) and NDFB(S). Of these, only NDFB(S) is involved in militant activities, while the other two are in talks with the government.

Formation of BTAD

The first accord between ABSU and the Centre was signed on February 20, 1993, after which the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed. But the BAC setup had serious deficiencies especially with regard to the demarcation of its jurisdiction given that Bodo villages are not contiguous. Large scale violence erupted in Bodo areas primarily because of this issue, which in turn increased militant activities as well. On February 10, 2003, the Centre, Assam and representatives of the Bodo community signed a new Bodo Accord for the creation of a "Bodoland Territorial Council" (BTC) under provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The area under the BTC jurisdiction is called the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD). It consists of four contiguous districts — Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri.⁸ The BTAD has a mixed population. According to the latest figures, the Bodos consist of only 29 per cent of the population in BTAD. The remainder is made up of non-Bodos – Asomiya Hindus (27 per cent), Muslims (14 per cent), Adivasis (9 per cent), and others such as Koch-Rajbanshis, Bengali Hindus, Nepalis and Marwaris making up 21 per cent.⁹

Ethnic Violence in BTAD

The incessant growth of Muslims in Bodo-dominated areas and their increased economic foray into land and other resources has caused concerns among Bodos. The Bodos have consistently viewed it as an encroachment of their ancestral land, to their way of life and illegal utilisation of natural resources. This has resulted in frequent clashes between the two communities in various parts of BTAD. These clashes are an indication that peace between the Bodos and non-Bodos in the Bodoland areas continues to be fragile.¹⁰

⁷ "Nine militant groups of NE form united front with Chinese blessings," *Hindustan Times*, August 24, 2015, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/nine-miltant-groups-of-ne-form-united-front-with-chinese-blessings/story-6SuTFuFRymf27fSueYyoaP.html> (Accessed on December 30, 2015).

⁸ M. S. Prabhakara, "Territories of fear," *Frontline*, December 5, 2003, at <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2024/stories/20031205003103900.htm>, (Accessed on December 30, 2015).

⁹ "Bodoland Territorial Area District Elections 2015," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Volume 50, Issue No 51, August 1, 2015, at <http://www.epw.in/journal/2015/31/reports-states-web-exclusives/bodoland-territorial-area-district-elections-2015.html> (Accessed on December 30, 2015).

¹⁰ Jaikhleng Basumatary "Quest for Peace in Assam: A Study of the Bodoland Movement," Manekshaw Paper No. 44, *Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)*, 2014, at http://www.claws.in/images/publication_pdf/324891001_MP44Inside28-03-14.pdf (Accessed on January 10, 2015).

IMPACT OF OPERATION ALL OUT

Operation All Out has been a grand success. Additional Army personnel and Paramilitary Forces were inducted during the operation. Helicopters and other force multipliers were also used for surveillance and carriage of troops. The objective was to carry out relentless and well directed military operations to decimate the NDFB(S), instil confidence among the local populace and bring normalcy in the region.¹¹ Its success can be gauged by the fact that as of January 1, 2016, 48 militants have been neutralised, 766 apprehended and more than 443 weapons of various kinds recovered. Since December 23, 2014, the area has been peaceful. No large scale act of violence has taken place. Extortion and illegal taxation activities have come down and recruitment into militant groups has considerably reduced.

Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism

NDFB(S) having been marginalised, an upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism to address the perceived neglect of Muslims in Assam and to avenge repeated violence against them in the BTAD, has become a challenge for the security forces. The recent busting of a jihadi training centre and seizure of arms in Chirang district are the latest pointers to this emerging challenge. The threat from Islamic fundamentalist forces, particularly Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) under the tutelage of the ISI and ISIS, is higher than that of local outfits like the NDFB(S) because of the former's pan-Islamic links and agenda. Investigations into the activities of the JMB in connection with the Burdwan blast has brought to light that some key leaders of Islamic fundamentalist organisations have been visiting minority-dominated areas in Lower Assam also.¹² Their linkages with local militant groups like the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) and Muslim Tiger Force of Assam (MTFA) cannot be ruled out.

Revenge against Bodos

The threat of revenge against Bodos still remains, particularly from Islamic fundamentalist and Adivasi militant groups like All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA), National Santhal Liberation Army (NSLA), Birsa Commando Force (BCF) and Santhal Tiger Force (STF). Thus, the area remains sensitive and the possibility of recurrence of militant violence cannot be ruled out. The emergence of new Bodo terrorist groups or the re-emergence of the NDFB(S) as self-proclaimed champions of the oppressed Bodo community is also not a distant possibility.

Filling of the Void Created by NDFB (S)

With NDFB(S) having been marginalized, a void has been created. Other militant groups in Assam could take advantage of this and fill the gap. These groups include the JMB, KLO, ULFA or other Bodo groups emerging with different names.

¹¹ "Indian Air Force involved in 'Operation All Out' to eliminate Bodo militant group," *The Times of India*, September, 19, 2015, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Indian-Air-Force-involved-in-Operation-All-Out-to-eliminate-Bodo-militant-group/articleshow/49026272.cms> (Accessed on January 15, 2015).

¹² Pankaj Sarma, "Revenge link to rebel rise - Upsurge in fundamentalism in BTAD a challenge, say forces," *The Telegraph*, September 21, 2015, at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1150921/jsp/northeast/story_43700.jsp#.VpPRMvI97IU, (Accessed on January 15, 2015).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the backdrop of the success of Operation All Out and the continuing possibility of ethnic and militant violence recurring, the following policy interventions are needed to usher in long-term peace and stability in the region.

Conditional Peace Talks With NDFB(S)

Under pressure from the Security Forces, NDFB(S) has been completely marginalized and its leadership has been requesting for ceasefire, which the Centre has rightly rejected. The question now is whether this is the right time to initiate conditional peace talks with the NDFB(S) leadership and accept their surrender? The condition here can be that the entire leadership of NDFB(S), including those in Myanmar, should come forward and surrender before peace talks commence. The requisite diplomatic pressure may need to be applied to get these leaders from Myanmar and Bhutan. If the entire leadership does not come forth to join the peace talks, then there is always a possibility of another splinter group emerging. The government's earlier declaration of the policy decision of not holding separate talks with any warring faction of the same organization will perhaps enable NDFB(S) to join the talks already in progress with the other two factions.

Flexible Surrender Policy

To give a strong message to the militants, the Centre, as policy, has stopped accepting surrenders after the carnage of December 2014. Is there a need to review this policy now in the wake of the success of Operation All Out? A reconsideration of this policy may be in order. Poverty as well as grievances generated by ethnic clashes have often motivated the youth to choose the path of militancy. Also, the inherent "kick" in dominating the local populace fuels militant recruitment. This state of mind needs to be addressed and the idea of pardoning those who have contributed little to the militancy needs to be considered.

Closure/Relocation of Displaced Camps Established After Ethnic Violence

A report by the Asian Centre for Human Rights claims that there were over 300,000 internally displaced persons in Assam during 2014, which is the highest in the world. Closure/relocation of these camps to safer areas is important. At the same time, the police need to be accorded a more proactive role in maintaining law and order. And for that, it is essential that the Police are well represented by all the tribal groups. This aspect needs to be incorporated into policy while strengthening the Police Force.

Joint Operations with Neighbouring States

When faced with pressure from the security forces, Bodo militants generally slip away to neighbouring states, particularly West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh. Though the Security Forces are operating in these States as well, there is scope for greater synergy and jointness in operations. Effective and cohesive Joint Patrolling and real time information sharing are possible methods to check the activities of these militants as also a tool to maintain continuous and unrelenting pressure upon them in the region.

Joint Vigil of Borders with Bhutan and Myanmar

The porous borders with Myanmar and Bhutan are thinly held by border security personnel of those countries. The Indo-Myanmar border has a unique arrangement in place called the Free Movement Regime (FMR). The FMR permits the tribes residing along the borders to travel 16 kms across the IB without visa restrictions.¹³ There is a need for continuous joint vigil by the security forces of both sides along the Bhutan and Myanmar borders. It would definitely act as a deterrent to insurgents operating close to the border.

Joint Operations with Bhutan and Myanmar

It is a well-known fact that all militant outfits in the Northeast, including NDFB(S), have camps in Myanmar. There are also reports of makeshift hideouts/camps of the NDFB(S) in Bhutan. There is thus a need to carry out joint operations with both these countries against Indian militant groups based in their territory. Operation All Clear by Bhutan was a landmark operation in this regard. Bhutan's action demonstrates clearly that a country can address its neighbour's security concerns within its territory.¹⁴ Similarly, joint military operations against insurgent groups that have based their camps 20-50 km inside Myanmar are necessary to bring peace to that part of the region. Joint Operations are also essential along the Bhutan and Bangladesh borders for similar reasons. A mechanism must be evolved whereby joint operations can be conducted based on real time scenarios, bypassing traditional channels that would have had to be activated under ordinary circumstances. The institution of such a mechanism would save precious time and lead to successful joint operations.¹⁵

Border Personnel Meet With Bhutan

At present, we have a border personnel meet (BPM) with Myanmar. It is also recommended to be conducted between the Indian Army and the Royal Bhutan Army. This meeting can take place quarterly. It will help in real time sharing of intelligence, better understanding of each other's perspectives and execution of well-coordinated operations primarily against the NDFB(S) and its allies who may be operating along the Indo-Bhutan border.

Dominance and Presence of Security Forces to Continue

Though All Out has achieved substantial success, any reduction of forces at this juncture may result in the void being filled by other militant organizations. The Army should be employed for operations in the hinterland and far flung areas,

¹³ Pushpita Das, "India-Myanmar Border Problems: Fencing Not the Only Solution," *IDSA Comments*, November 15, 2013, at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IndiaMyanmarBorderProblems_pdas_151113 (Accessed on January 15, 2015).

¹⁴ Praveen Kumar, "External Linkages and Internal Security: Assessing Bhutan's Operation All Clear," *Strategic Analysis* IDSA, 28 (3), July 2004, at http://www.idsa.in/strategicanalysis/ExternalLinkagesandInternalSecurity_pkumar_0704 (Accessed on January 15, 2015).

¹⁵ Sushil Kumar Sharma, "Insurgency in North-East India: External Dynamics," *Journal of Defence Studies*, IDSA, 8 (4), October 2014, at http://www.idsa.in/jds/8_4_2014_InsurgencyinNorthEastIndia, (Accessed on January 15, 2015).

while other Security Forces should continue to conduct population protection related operations in populated areas and other miscellaneous security duties in vulnerable areas.

Continuation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)

There has been an ongoing debate on the relevance of AFSPA. It is recommended that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act should continue in Assam and up to a 20 km belt of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. The act has inbuilt mechanisms to ensure transparency and safeguard human rights. The recent recommendation of the Meghalaya High Court to impose AFSPA in Meghalaya, considering the atrocities being committed by the GNLA, adds weight to this fact.

Closure of Designated Camps and Rehabilitations of Cadres

According to ground surveys, there are approximately 1200 cadres of NDFB(P) and NDFB(RD) in five designated camps located in BTAD. These cadres are continuing with the illegal activities of extortion, kidnapping and illegal taxation. Unless they are suitably engaged and employed, their rehabilitation is likely to continue to be a major issue. In the past, there has been no credible government effort to fruitfully employ the youths. Most of the young cadres in these camps are disillusioned as they do not see not much of a future in continuing the conflict with the government machinery and want to join the mainstream. So, the closure of these camps and comprehensive rehabilitation of the cadre of militant groups based therein is necessary for peace. The raising of a Territorial Army Unit, Home & Hearth (TA (H&H))/Central Armed Police Force Battalion is one of the options for rehabilitation of these cadres. In case of TA (H&H), this unit can be employed in the BTAD area and operate under the Army. This will have a positive impact in influencing perceptions of the people and bring peace in the BTAD region.

Countering Islamic Fundamentalism

It is an accepted fact that Islamic fundamentalism under the influence of the JMB is an emerging threat particularly in lower Assam. This may further expand in view of the likely void being created by the marginalisation of the NDFB(S). Special focus needs to be given to the inaccessible Char/Chapori¹⁶ areas, which are known for illegal activities. A special task force from within the existing Security Forces to address the same may be visualized. It may be worth considering the deepening of security relations with Bangladesh especially with the present regime being alive to the problem of worldwide Islamic fundamentalism in general and Indian concerns in particular.

Synergised Operations

The success of Operation All Out can be attributed to the excellent synergy among Security Forces, Intelligence Agencies and Civil Administration. The Strategic Group and Operational Group have been functioning effectively and efficiently. These are examples of excellent execution of counter insurgency and counter

¹⁶ The Char and Chapories of Brahmaputra River are inaccessible islands that facilitate subsistence in anonymity and are becoming havens for illegal immigrants.

terrorist operations which could be emulated by other States and even different countries facing similar situations.

Conclusion

So far, Operation All Out appears to be a grand success. The willingness of militant groups to compromise on their erstwhile rigid ideological goals and come forward for a negotiated settlement points to a welcome change. Further, the common people continue to long for development and peace. Therefore, the Centre's focus needs to be directed towards the setting up mechanisms to ensure rehabilitation of displaced persons and surrendered militants in various camps as well as their participation in governance.

About the Authors

Brigadier Sushil Kumar Sharma is presently posted as DIGP, CRPF in the Northeast Region.

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