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Operation Golden Bird

Revisiting Counter-Insurgency on the India-Myanmar Border

*Rumel Dahiya**

Operation Golden Bird, conducted along the Indo-Myanmar border in the North-Eastern state of Mizoram under the aegis of 57 Mountain Division (57 Mtn Div) in April–May 1995, has often been portrayed as a joint operation between the armed forces of India and Myanmar. In reality, however, this operation was planned and executed by the Indian Army alone, with troops ex 57 Mtn Div and those under operational control of Headquarters Inspector General, Assam Rifles (North) or HQ IGAR(N). The Mizoram police was excluded from the operation, at least in the initial stages. That the Myanmar Army also got involved in the operation was not by design on any side. The operation was characterised by availability of local intelligence; adhoc mobilisation of troops who had no knowledge of the ground; ambitious planning without adequate logistics support; and great perseverance displayed by troops deployed to counter a strong contingent of about 185–200 strong insurgent group. In another context, the operation is cited as the first robust cross-border operation undertaken in Myanmar territory against Indian insurgents.

The operation was hardly covered by the national media at the time and only received a limited coverage by the press in the North-East. Besides, no authoritative account has ever been placed in the public domain and hence comments on it are often based on hearsay and conjecture. The author, having taken part in the operation as one of

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the two task forces commanders and having interrogated more than half of the insurgents apprehended, had a ringside view of the operation and is in a position to comment authoritatively on these and other aspects related to the operation based on practical knowledge and the benefit of hindsight that, hopefully, makes the analysis objective. Since no notes were made and there is no access to official records, this perspective, based on recollection of events that took place more than two decades back, may not be exact to the last decimal as some details may have faded from memory. However, it is felt that the researchers and the readers deserve to know the truth about a major operation that brought out some positive aspects and exposed some weaknesses in conduct of counter-insurgency (CI) operations by India.

BACKGROUND

The operation was launched following reports from the intelligence agencies that a group of about 200 Indian insurgents—initially reported belonging to National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak–Muivah) or NSCN (IM), but later found to be comprising of cadres from the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) from Manipur, and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) from Tripura—was planning to move with a huge consignment of arms and ammunition from Bangladesh to the state of Manipur in India. The aim of the operation was to apprehend and/or neutralise the insurgent group before they could enter into Indian territory. The information about delivery of an arms consignment near Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh was received in January 1995. The initial information received was that the consignment was meant for the Nagaland and Manipur-based insurgent group, the NSCN (IM). Subsequently, reports were also received that one of two factions of the Chin National Front, namely, CNF(R), was carrying out stocking of rations at some places within Myanmar all along the Indo-Myanmar border for use by the Indian insurgent group. It was known that two Myanmarese insurgent groups—the National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA) and Chin Army (CA)—and a Bangladeshi group—the Shanti Bahini—had established camps near Parva in North Mizoram (see Figure 1). These groups were requested for information about the plans of movement of the Indian insurgent group but only the CA agreed to provide information.

Information was received by one of the Assam Rifles (AR) posts at Bungtlang on 1 April 1995 that the insurgent group had moved to the tri-

junction, that is, the Bangladesh–India–Myanmar border, the previous day (see Figure 1). The same day, Indian civil intelligence agencies also reported that a large group of insurgents had entered Mizoram from the tri-junction on 31 March 1995. Border Security Force (BSF) personnel at Parva apprehended three CNF(R) cadres who confirmed the information provided by other sources. The next day, AR sources reported that the insurgent groups had crossed village Ltulphung Tlang in Myanmar and had moved north, and that the group was likely to cross the Kolodyne River. The approximate route that the insurgent group took is indicated in Figure 1.

The availability of troops at that time in Mizoram was rather meagre. There were no regular army units deployed in the state. The HQ Mizoram Range Assam Rifles (MRAR) comprised only of the 19 AR Battalion, and two companies each of 1 AR, 6 AR and 18 AR were available in the whole state. Operationally, only 19 AR was available, whereas the troops of other battalions were basically rear elements guarding various posts in small numbers. Also, no contingency plan appeared to exist for intercepting insurgent groups moving along Indo-Myanmar border from Bangladesh, despite the knowledge that this route had been used previously by NSCN (IM) on one or two occasions to ferry arms and ammunition to Manipur and Nagaland. The absence of contingency planning is explained by the fact that the 8 Mtn Div had been moved to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) following a strong uptick in Pakistan-sponsored terrorist activities in the state and prevalence of peace in Mizoram after the Mizo Accord. However, in the meantime, NSCN (IM), PLA, and other Manipur-based insurgent groups as well as ULFA had increased their terrorist activities. As Mizoram was a peaceful state, the AR troops had been moved out to Manipur and Nagaland for counter insurgency operations (CI Ops).

PHASE 1 OF THE OPERATION

The initial plan basically involved establishing first interception line along the Kolodyne River and a second interception line joining important villages such as Zawngling, Khengkhong, Tuipang and Tuithminhar (see Figure 1). Units in Nagaland and Manipur were occupying the insurgency grid with specific areas of responsibility, which precluded the lifting of a complete unit in one go at a short notice. Therefore, company size sub-units from various units, starting with 3/4 Gurkha Rifles (GR) and 1st Battalion Special Forces (1 SF), were heli-lifted from Imphal.

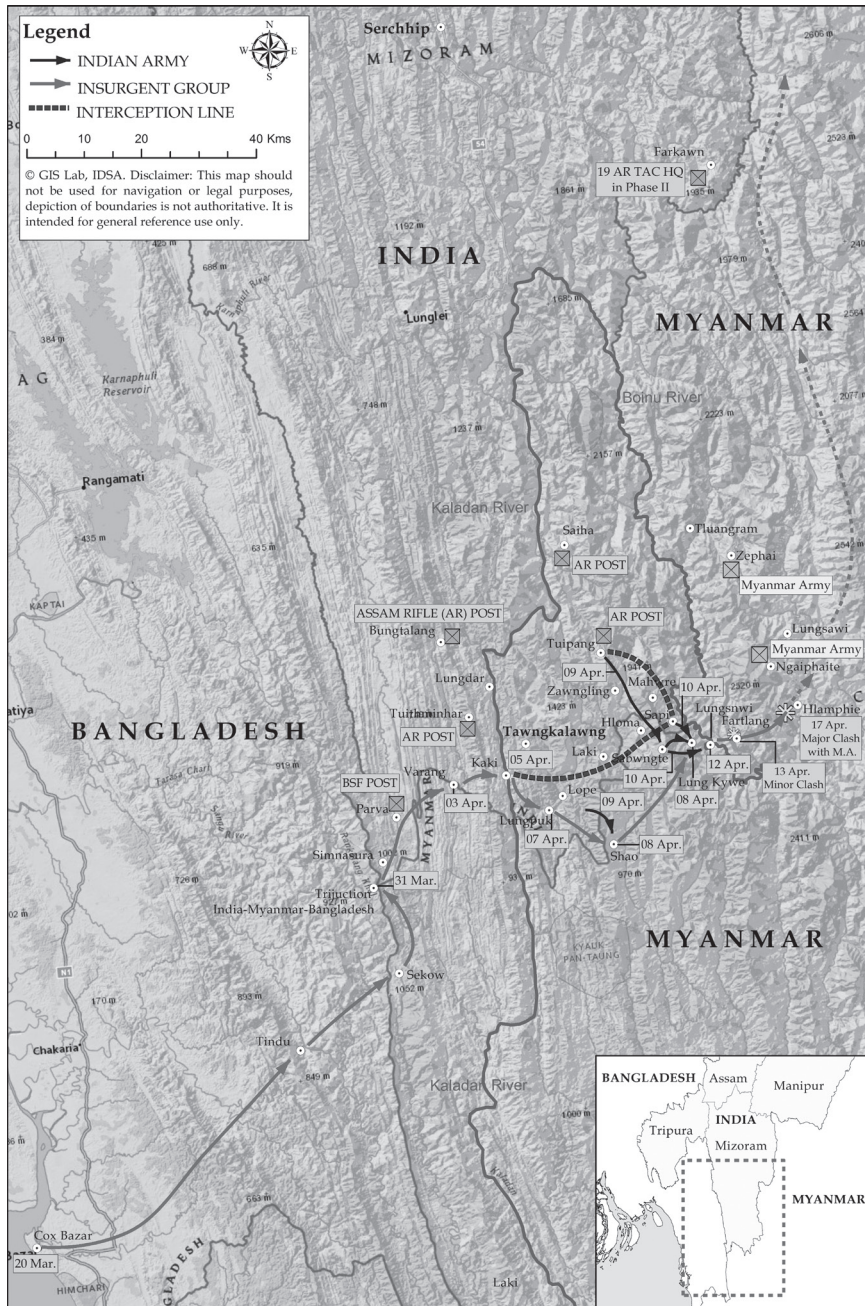


Figure I Op Golden Bird – Initial Action

The sub-units were ordered to move with three-days packed rations, on-weapon scale of ammunition and authorised scale of radio sets. A limited number of maps of the area of operation were issued on reaching Mizoram. These troops, as also additional troops brought in subsequently from Manipur and Nagaland, were unfamiliar with the area of operation and had to depend on guides for terrain information. Unfamiliarity with the ground and lack of adequate maps and radio sets made it difficult to send out sub-teams away from the sub-units restricting their operational reach and effectiveness. Besides, the companies often went out of radio communication range due to terrain configuration and distances involved. The operation was under the direct command of General Officer Commanding (GOC), 57 Mtn Div, who was initially operating from an AR post at Twangklawng. The overall impact was that there was no coordination amongst the columns drawn from various units. The Div HQ was located at Liemakhong near Imphal. The Div was deeply committed in CI operations in Manipur and could, therefore, only move two staff officers to HQ MRAR at Aizawl.

From time to time, information was received about the move of the insurgent group from one place to another, from various sources. Although sometimes the troops came tantalisingly close to the moving column of the insurgent group, it could not be intercepted because of unfamiliarity of Indian troops with the ground and the guidance provided to the insurgent groups by CNF(R) cadres. The insurgent column moved East in the Myanmarese territory on 5 April 1995. The information, however, was received only after about 12 hours of their crossing. Some readjustment was made in the deployment of troops and additional troops were brought in for the operation. On 8 April 1995, a few porters were intercepted by our own troops who confirmed that the insurgent group was making use of prearranged logistics bases and were using porters to carry heavy loads.

An additional team of 1 SF and four columns of 15 KUMAON were deployed on the second interception line, which also extended to the Myanmarese territory. Own troops had crossed into the Myanmar territory on a number of occasions, as marked in Figures 1 and 2. One of the columns came across the column led by a non-commissioned officer (NCO) from the Myanmar Army in village Fartlang in Myanmar. The Myanmarese troops also came to know about the night stay of the insurgent group in the village and punished the villagers by shooting two pigs as penalty. They were upset with the villagers for not informing

them about the arrival of the terrorists in the village. Columns of 15 KUMAON and 13 Sikh Light Infantry (SIKH LI) were moved East from area Sapi and Mahwre and to general area Ngaiphaipi in Myanmar where they were confronted by an officer-led column of Myanmar Army who asked own troops to return to Indian territory (see Figure 2). They deployed tactically to stop the movement forcibly. When this was reported to the higher HQs, a contradictory order to move deeper to a new line of interception, with the proviso that no casualties on own side were acceptable, was issued. When this anomaly was pointed out, there was no answer forthcoming.

The insurgent group had evaded contact on the first interception line along the Kolodyne River due to paucity of troops, lack of briefing and coordination, and inadequate radio communications. It clearly emerged that there was no understanding with the Myanmar Army till that time. Despite Indian troops in hot pursuit of the insurgent group, no success was achieved in intercepting them. The nearest Indian troops came to confronting the insurgents was on 13 April 1995 at Farlang. It came to light that the insurgent group had moved deeper into Myanmar territory on 16 April and had two clashes with the Myanmar Army on 17 April 1995 in general area Hlamphie (see Figure 1). This was also confirmed by the Myanmar side during the Indo-Myanmar Liaison Conference held at Imphal on 28 April 1995, when the Myanmar Army delegates confirmed killing 23 insurgents and recovering a large number of weapons from them in two encounters on 17 April 1995.

On 18 April 1995, the contingent of about 300 Myanmar troops, under their commanding officer (CO), reached village Zephai (see Figure 2). An attempt was made to negotiate conducting a joint operation against the insurgents but the Myanmar commander firmly asked own troops to withdraw immediately from their territory. He expressed readiness to use force if necessary. Accordingly, it was decided to withdraw Indian troops to this side of the border.

In the meantime, additional columns from 13 SIKHLI and 6 Rajputana Rifles (RAJ RIF) were also inducted into the operation. However, the induction of additional sub-units from Nagaland and Manipur did not produce much success. Limitations of radio communication due to short range of very high frequency (VHF) sets carried by the columns, and inadequate numbers of both high frequency (HF) and VHF sets as well as that of medical cover had become serious handicaps. In many cases, the troops were left with limited or no rations and many troops had

suffered cerebral malaria attacks due to lack of appropriate medicines. This was the result of the initial assessment that the operation would be of a short duration and, in most cases, the troops were asked to move self-contained for a period of three to five days. The difficult terrain, hot weather, and the one change of clothing they had taken with them affected their ability to operate for a longer period. Moreover, neither staff officers from 57 Mtn Div and MRAR were available in adequate numbers, nor were communications efficient. During the first phase of the operation, columns were often out of contact with one another and with GOC 57 Mtn Div/Commander MRAR located at Twanglawng.

Whereas the urgency in carrying out the operations was fully understood, the lack of adequate planning, communication and logistics support in conducting the operations are difficult to explain. These shortcomings were clearly a result of the lack of foresight and overambitious planning on the part of the higher HQs. However, the presence of Indian troops in large number fairly deep inside the Myanmar territory possibly forced the Myanmar Army to carry out offensive operation. A small group of insurgents, including self-styled Foreign Secretary of ULFA, Sasha Chowdhury, broke away from the main group at Hlamphie after clash with Myanmar Army and were arrested near Tuipang on 22 April. It was also learnt that CNF(R) disengaged itself from the group after 17 April due to the Myanmar Army becoming active.

PHASE 2 OF THE OPERATION

When it became clear that the insurgent group, despite pressure from the Myanmarese Army, had actually moved deeper into the Myanmarese territory rather than crossing to the Indian side, and that Indian troops could no longer move freely across the border, it was decided to move the latter in and around Farkawn Bulge (see Figure 3) on 18 April 1995. It was for the first time that all the column commanders were collected together at Serchhip (see Figure 1), HQ of 19 AR, for a sand model briefing on 19 April which was conducted by the Commander, MRAR. An operational instruction and maps of the new area of deployment were issued and Indian troops were grouped under two task forces: one under CO 19 AR; and second under officiating CO 15 KUMAON. The first task force was allotted columns from 13 SIKHLI, 6 RAJ RIF, a team from 1 SF and a column each from 1 AR and 19 AR. The second task force comprised of columns of 15 KUMAON, a team of 1 SF and a column of 3/4 GR. Tactical HQ of MRAR was established at Khwabung, at an existing 19

AR post. Most of the troops had bath and two hot meals after a number of days at Serchhip.

The troops were then redeployed along the Farkawn Bulge. After an intelligence void of some days, on 25 April, definite information was received about the movement of the insurgent group and a concurrent readjustment of deployment was carried out. The surveillance detachment of 13 SIKH LI picked up the footprints of the insurgents just across the border on a foot path leading to Klangpi, inside Myanmar (see Figure 3). In a firefight lasting for about 15 minutes, six insurgents were killed; five weapons, 52 rucksacks, approximately 500 rounds of ammunition, and about 5 quintals of rice were also recovered. Getting wind of this encounter, about 80 Myanmarese troops arrived in village Klangpi on 28 April 1995. They were requested again to carry out joint operations with the Indian forces, but it was turned down. After discussions at the Indo-Myanmar Liaison Conference held on 28 April 1995, HQ 3 Corps issued explicit orders not to cross the international border.

On the same day, some adjustments were made to intercept this group. However, one such adjustment subsequently proved wrong wherein a column ex 15 KUMAON deployed at a strategic place on the edge of Farkawn Bulge at Ford 1 (see Figure 3) had moved South to put a block; and in the meantime, the main column of about 80–90 insurgents reached the same spot where 15 KUMAON column was originally deployed (Ford 1). Finding the place vacant, they approached a hut where a Mizo couple was working in the nearby field. An officer of Special Intelligence Bureau and a Mizo translator also reached the same spot at the same time. These two were murdered on the spot and the Mizo couple were ordered at gunpoint to show them the safe route towards Myanmar territory. This action was observed by another farmer working in a field nearby who hid himself on seeing large number of unfamiliar armed men. Subsequently, they were also murdered by the insurgents and their bodies were recovered by Indian columns after two days. In the meantime, the columns of insurgents, including the one with Sasha Chowdhury, which had separated from the main column after an encounter with the Myanmarese Army at Hlamphie on 17 April, were fired upon by CNF volunteers near Sapi (vacated by Indian troops on 18 April). In this encounter, SS Lt Angam John Singh, deputy leader of PLA in the group, was injured; he died at civil hospital in Tuipang where he was evacuated by the civilians for treatment.

By the end of April 1995, the insurgent group was tired, demoralised

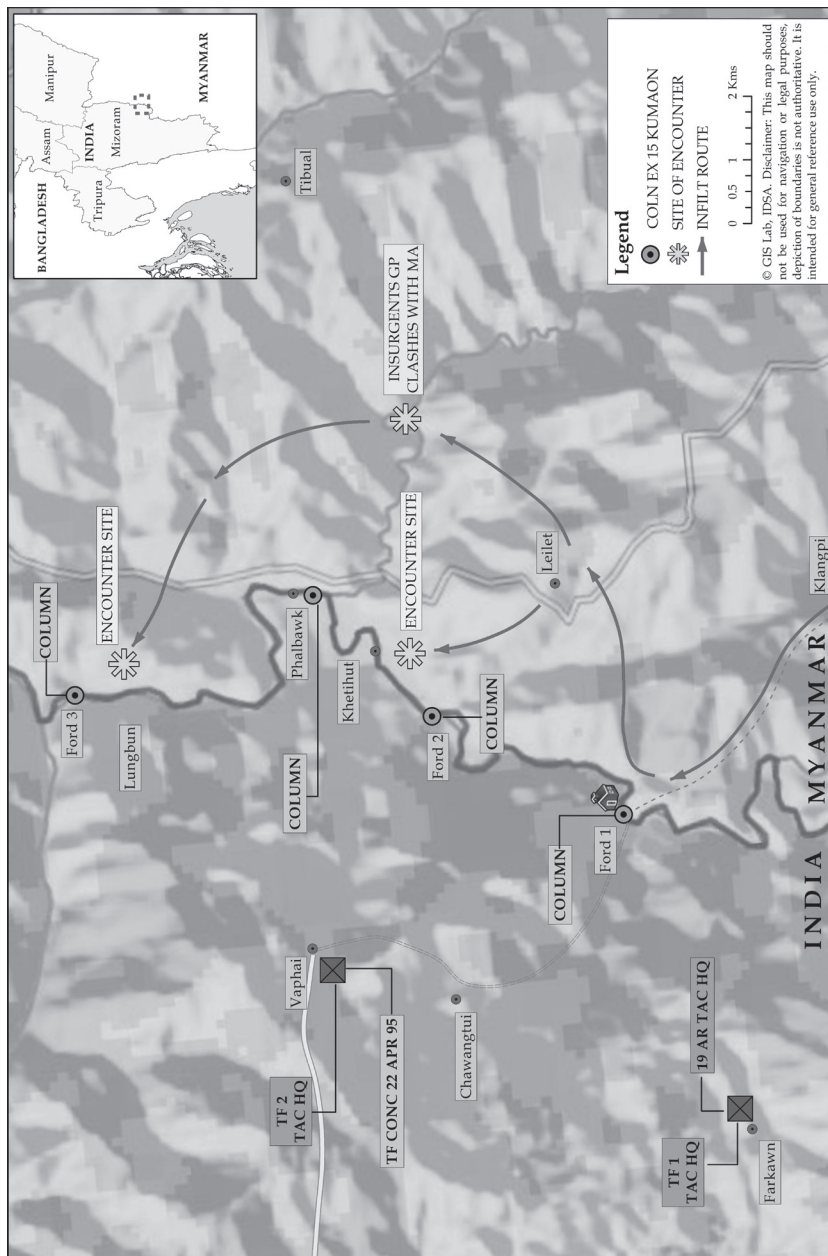


Figure 3 Op Golden Bird – Phase 2

and disorganised. Two-inch mortar firing was also observed in general area of Leilet, and subsequently it was confirmed that the Myanmar Army had a clash with the insurgent group in which they killed six insurgents and recovered an undisclosed number of weapons. On 3 May, the 1 SF teams were de-inducted. Indian troops apprehended two insurgents and killed one the same day. One of the apprehended insurgents, nicknamed Hathi Baruah, who had been trained by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) near Karachi in the past, was interrogated on the spot. He gave out the broad composition of the group, the route taken by it, the state of morale and other valuable information. He also led one of our own patrols to a spot where five insurgents were hiding. The insurgents fired on a 15 KUMAON patrol party but fled after being charged at, leaving behind five weapons including a light machine gun (LMG) and four AK-47 rifles. These insurgents had separated from the main group on 1 May after an encounter with a 15 KUMAON column North of Ford 2 (see Figure 3). Some more insurgent cadres, along with weapons, were apprehended by various columns of Indian security forces.

In the meantime, on 4 May 1995, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding for the year 1993 was announced for Aung San Suu Kyi, following which our own troops observed through binoculars the Myanmar Army personnel shaking hands with the insurgents across the border and waving them off. This, along with other incidents narrated earlier, clearly prove that there was no understanding either with the Myanmar Army or with the Myanmar government for this particular operation. It can be speculated that had any understanding existed or been reached when the operation was launched, it was likely that the whole group would have been neutralised or arrested. This group included senior leaders from political and military wings of PLA and ULFA, as the interrogation of the apprehended insurgent cadres, and diaries recovered from abandoned rucksacks, proved. To this extent, therefore, it was an opportunity lost. The Mizoram police was involved in the operation only at this stage, following which they also managed to apprehend some insurgent cadres who were moving around under suspicious circumstances or trying to make use of public transport to move out of the area.

PHASE 3 OF THE OPERATION

Starting 9 May, the columns were moved to North Mizoram, with Champhai being the administrative base. New deployment areas were

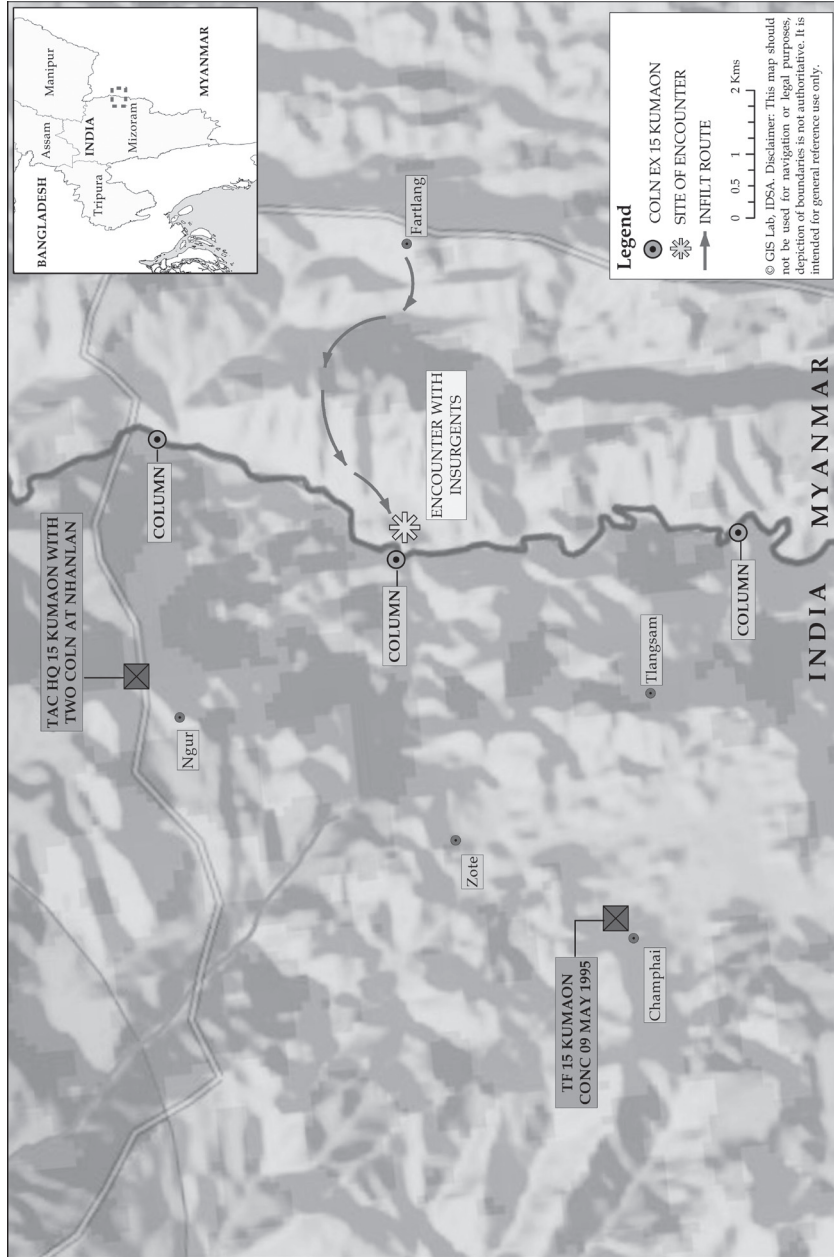


Figure 4 Op Golden Bird – Part Deployment in Phase 4

earmarked for the task forces. Task Force 'B' was deployed to the North (see Figure 4). With the insurgents having been given a free pass by the Myanmar Army on 5 May 1995, the main purpose of the fresh deployment was to get hold of individuals or small groups of insurgents who had got separated from the main group as a result of a number of encounters with either Indian or Myanmar troops. Between 10–21 May 1995, 10 insurgents, comprising mainly of PLA, were apprehended by Indian troops and the civil police, along with a large quantity of arms and ammunition. All of them were interrogated and valuable information was collected. Having been given a free pass by the Myanmar Army from 5 May onwards, the main elements of the surviving column, numbering between 40 and 50 insurgents, entered Manipur on 15 May. After carrying out searches for hidden insurgents, weapons and ammunitions in suspected areas, Operation Golden Bird was officially called off on 21 May and the troops de-inducted by 27 May 1995.

OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS

A few lessons that stood out were as follows.

1. The terrain in the area of operation was tough, both for the troops and insurgent groups. Much after the operation, it was revealed that NSCN (IM) had advised the group not to take this route because of the nature of the terrain and difficulty of logistics, as also the distances involved. Whereas the insurgent group had taken care to enlist the support of one of the insurgent groups in Myanmar for guidance, arranging porters and other types of logistic support, they still had to contend with the Myanmar Army on the other side and the Indian security forces on this side. As a result of that they suffered frequent encounters enroute till they got a free pass on 5 May 1995. By that time, their numbers were severely depleted due to casualties and some of the cadres having left the main group due to the hardships involved. Some of the seriously injured cadres were abandoned, to die near the site of the encounters. Indian troops were brought into the operation without adequate preparations, ground knowledge or planning, which resulted in lack of success in the Phase 1 of the operation from 2 April to 18 April 1995. After the first full briefing about the situation, grouping and tasking on 19 April 1995, the operations became more focused and that resulted in the success achieved thereafter.

2. Many of our own troops suffered from cerebral malaria, and a few succumbed to the disease subsequently. Many troops had to go without a change of clothing and bath for weeks together. At one stage, when the rations fell short, the meals had to be curtailed to twice a day and limited in quantity. There was hardly any transport or medical support available throughout the operation. The operation was poorly coordinated overall, despite some improvement in Phases 2 and 3. Some money was provided for purchase of medicines and rations which mitigated the circumstances to some extent. However, in most cases, the village shops or small AR posts wherever located did not have adequate anti-malaria medicines. Non-availability of water was an extremely serious limitation. In most cases, dirty water had to be collected by digging in the dry streams or rivulets and then boiling it by using wood. Despite these difficulties, the troops remained in high state of morale because most of the columns were led by officers who underwent same hardships and led by example.
3. Crossing the border in hot pursuit on a number of occasions was definitely a bold step. However, in many cases, operational reach of troops was severely restricted since they had very few maps and radio sets, rations got exhausted, and there was no inter-column coordination. Cohesiveness of troops would have ensured even greater success. However, it may be appreciated that the non-availability of troops close to the areas of operations made that impossible. Indian troops were also handicapped due to lack of night vision devices, light vehicles, assault rifles, and adequate number of radio sets. The troops were carrying 7.62 self-loading rifles (SLRs), whereas the insurgents were carrying AK-47/56 rifles.
4. Involving the civil administration right in the beginning would have probably generated more actionable intelligence and would have prevented some of the insurgents from escaping in small groups by making use of private transport or on foot.
5. Contrary to the general impression amongst security analysts, there was no coordination with the Myanmar government or the army in carrying out the operation in the course of which the security forces had to cross the Indo-Myanmar border at some places in hot pursuit. There were at least four occasions when

own troops were confronted by the Myanmar Army columns and asked to turn back to avoid a clash. The lack of coordination is also brought out by the fact that the Myanmar Army, which was then trying to confront the insurgents wherever it could, gave them a free pass when the announcement of the Indian award to Aung San Suu Kyi was made in the first week of May 1995. It may be recalled that she was then under house arrest.

OUTCOME OF THE OPERATION

Overall, the operation was a great success from the point of view of disintegration of a large body of insurgents, many of them either neutralised or apprehended. The group also suffered in terms of loss of equipment, arms and ammunition and was thoroughly demoralised. Indian troops displayed grit, determination and perseverance in an environment of ambiguity and deployment in an unfamiliar area, without adequate guidance and severe limitation of logistics support.

Fourteen insurgents were confirmed killed by Indian troops. In addition, the Chin National Army (CNA), an insurgent group in Myanmar, also claimed having killed six insurgents in encounters when the insurgent group was moving in the Myanmar territory. The Myanmar Army was reported to have killed 38 insurgents in encounters between 10 April and 4 May 1995. A total of 23 insurgents were either apprehended or surrendered to the security forces (Army and AR columns) and 21 to civil police during the operation. One of those later died in hospital. Therefore, it is estimated that 58 of a group of about 185–200 insurgents were either confirmed or reported killed, and 44 were apprehended or surrendered, thus dealing a severe blow to the insurgent group. The maximum loss was caused to the PLA with 31 insurgents from the group either killed or apprehended. Fifty weapons were captured from the insurgents during the operation which included 6 LMGs and 26 AK-47/56; 17 of these weapons were captured by 15 KUMAON columns alone. There were unconfirmed reports of 25 weapons being captured by the Myanmar Army and six by the CNA.

The state of contingency planning to deal with a similar situation in future is not known to the author. However, it is learnt from those in the know that no big movement of insurgent group(s) following the same route has come to light after 1995. In the late 1990s, a conscious decision was taken by the Government of India to improve relations with the Junta government in Myanmar, ignoring criticism from various quarters.

The fact that the insurgents have continued to make use of the Myanmar territory for bases, transit and training despite understanding between the two governments is due to the fact that the Myanmar Army is thinly deployed in areas bordering India and that at lower levels the Myanmar Army personnel have avoided taking action against insurgent camps.

Unlike the doubts being expressed about the understanding, or lack thereof, with the Myanmar government and the scale as well as the outcome of the last two media-reported operations across the border opposite Manipur—in 2015 and 2016—Op Golden Bird was an operation carried out over a long period of almost seven weeks. The border was crossed in hot pursuit on a number of occasions but there was no understanding between the two governments or armies at the time. The Myanmar Army had to confront the insurgents not so much because they liked to do so but because the aggressive action by Indian troops left them with little choice. That the media did not rake up the issue when the operation was continuing helped in containing the diplomatic fallout. Besides, once the issue was formally raised on 28 April 1995 at the bilateral Liaison Conference held at Imphal, Indian troops scrupulously adhered to the understanding arrived at.

As an aside, it is suggested that conducting more frequent or regular joint CI ops and/or tactical exercises at various places along the border would help in exercising better border control on the India-Myanmar border.