

National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)

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History

The Bodos, a major tribe in the State of Assam, have initiated their own form of insurgency to fight against the possession of their tribal land by Bengali settlers and the native Assamese, neglect of the Bodo language, and to express a sense of being exploited. The Bodos, being the earliest settlers in Assam, have cited economic and social neglect by the State government. The first Bodo organisation, the All Bodo Students ' Union (ABSU) was founded in 1967, and the Bodos started demanding a separate state within India towards the later half of the 1980s. In 1988, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was founded, and it initiated guerrilla war. NDFB was originally established as the Bodo Security Force (BSF) in 1988 under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary. It was later renamed NDFB.

Objectives

The purported objective of this outfit is to secure a "sovereign Bodoland" in the areas north of the river Brahmaputra. While the other Bodo groups, such as the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), demanded a separate state within Indian territory for the Bodo people, the NDFB wants a separate country for itself.

The other demand of the NDFB is regarding the script of the Bodo language. Currently the Bodo language is written in Devnagri script; NDFB, whose members are mostly Christians, prefer to use the Roman script.

Strategy

The NDFB was originally founded to protect the interests of the Bodos; but, over the years, this objective has been diluted, and it has joined hands with the ULFA (United Liberation front of Asom), which fights against the non-Assamese domination in the State. Presently, NDFB works in tandem with the ULFA. Sometime in 1999, the ULFA and NDFB formed a coordination committee for launching a united struggle. NDFB has also established a working arrangement with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), an insurgent outfit in neighbouring Nagaland.

Their different objectives have put the NDFB at logger heads with other Bodo outfits such as the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), All Bodo Student 's Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS). As the result of a decision taken on 10 January 2001 in Bhutan, the NDFB decided to target members of the BLT, BSS, ABSU, Bodo People Action Committee (BPAC), and the All Bodo Women 's Welfare Federation (ABWWF), for selective killing.

The NDFB regularly indulges in acts of insurgency, targeting the symbols of governance and civilians. On 15 September 1998, NDFB insurgents killed fourteen Santhal adivasis (tribals) in Gossaigaon subdivision of Kokrajhar district. At least twelve security forces personnel were killed and ten others injured on 31 July 2000 when suspected NDFB militants triggered a powerful landmine explosion in a train near the Sonmohuri village in Kamrup district. On the next day, on 1 August 2000, NDFB terrorists exploded a bomb on a passenger

train killing twelve and injuring several others near Tezpur. On 8 November 2000, eight civilians, including seven from the non-Assamese community were killed by suspected NDFB terrorists. On 25 November 2000, eight woodcutters were killed by NDFB terrorists in the Lung Sung forest reserve. On 21 December 2000 NDFB terrorists targeted Bhutan government vehicles, including a bus, killed two and injured sixteen others in Kokrajhar district. In Bongaigaon district, they set ablaze a Bhutanese police truck carrying rations to that country at Amlaiguri. In another incident, the ultras set fire to a vehicle going to Bhutan.

In the year 2000, NDFB terrorists were responsible for the deaths of twenty-nine security force personnel and 176 civilians. In the same period, ninety-five NDFB cadres were killed, eighty-three were arrested and hundred surrendered to the authorities.

It called for a boycott of the Republic Day celebration on 26 January 2001 to draw the international eye to the colonial nature of Indian rule.

Dialogue with the Government

Except for occasional indications to initiate peace talks with the government, probably as a gesture to buy time to replenish its declining resources, the NDFB, unlike the Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLT), has still shown no real inclination for peace.

On 3 April 2000, the Union Minister for Home Affairs, LK Advani, expressed the government's readiness to enter into a dialogue process with the NDFB and ULFA, if they give up violence and agreed to negotiations within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Subsequently, some NDFB leaders met the Army's Tezpur based 4-Corps Commander and expressed their desire to hold peace talks. The Army authorities also decided to

provide safe passage to the NDFB leaders to attend the proposed meeting. In May 2000, the head of the counter-insurgency operations in Assam, Lt Gen DB Shekatkar, said that the NDFB had established direct contact with the army commanders for holding peace talks. In March 2001, the PDF demanded that the State government hold unconditional talks with the NDFB. However, this process has not moved beyond such expressions.

Command Structure

NDFB has an estimated strength of 1500 cadres, most of whom are holed up in camps inside Bhutan and Myanmar. Nothing is known regarding the command structure of the outfit whose activity revolves around the dictates of its Chairman. It announces its programmes through its publicity secretary. The Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) is believed to be the political front of the NDFB in the State.

External Linkages

The NDFB has set up a number of camps in neighbouring Bhutan. According to some estimates, both ULFA and NDFB have more than twenty-one camps in the jungles of southern Bhutan. In July 2000, the Assam Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta stated that he had documentary evidence of the alleged nexus between terrorist groups, including the NDFB, and the Bhutan government. Several Bhutanese government officials have visited the insurgent camps located inside Bhutan and have been openly aiding the Assam militants.

On 21 January 2001, Bhutan indicated that it would take army action against the NDFB and ULFA if these outfits do not stop operating from its territory. However, no such action has been taken though deliberations at various levels are going on. In one such meeting in Punakha

on 16 March 2001, the leaders resolved to safeguard the country's sovereignty.

Popular Support

The NDFB is active in the districts of Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Darrang, Barpeta, Dhubri and Sonitpur. It also uses the Manas National Park, an important biodiversity hotspot in South Asia, as a sanctuary. Taking advantage of the fact that the forests in the Park extend across the border into Bhutan, the insurgents use it as a corridor to slip in and out of Bhutan.

To garner support, NDFB occasionally promotes high visibility social issues. In February 2001, there were media reports suggesting that the NDFB have set up signboards and banners in and around the Manas reserve forest areas in Assam to save valuable trees from being smuggled out of the region.

Funds

Extortion and loot form the basic source of funding which is then used to purchase arms and ammunition for the outfit. Tea companies in the area, especially in the districts of Darrang and Sonitpur, have been regularly subjected to extortion by terrorist outfits, including the NDFB. In 1991, the Goodricke group allegedly paid about Rs 15 lakhs (US \$31,250) for the release of its Manager of the Nonoipara tea estate. In 1992, an executive of the Williamson Magor company, which has nearly forty-five tea gardens in the area, was abducted by the NDFB militants and the company had to airdrop Rs 1.3 crore (US \$27,833) at a specified NDFB hideout for his release.

In 1996, the army claimed to have seized a NDFB document, which showed that the Williamson Magor group paid Rs 24 lakh (US \$50,000) between September and October 1994. Another tea company, the Assam Frontier Company, with fifteen

gardens, paid Rs 9 lakh (US \$18,750). In addition, smaller companies paid regular installments. On 20 September 1997, the Tata Tea Company published a report in the newspapers explaining how it was being forced to pay extortion amounts to the terrorists of NDFB.

Another report revealed that (in the year 1995-96) government departments like Sales Tax, Forest and Inspectorate of Motor Vehicles, accounted for close to fifty percent of the NDFB's collection of about Rs 1.3 crore (US \$270,833). In 1997, the police arrested six officers of the transport department in the State on charges of providing funds to NDFB militants. Dutch NGO's such as Landlijke India Werk (LIW) and the Netherland Council of Indigenous Vodlesgeist (NCIV) are alleged to have provided funds for the outfit.

The outfit's extortion drive is directed against the non-Bodo families in various parts of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts. Civilians and business establishments are served with regular notices for payment of tax and donations. The NDFB also indulges in collecting Bodoland tax from the people in various districts of Lower Assam ranging from Rs 4000 (US \$83) to Rs 20,000(US \$417) depending on their financial position.

The Army, operating in the lower Assam districts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon, claimed that the NDFB is involved in illegal felling of trees. They also collect taxes from other illegal timber contractors at the rate of Rs 20,000 (US \$417) per truck. Small time timber merchants also pay at the rate of Rs 50 (US \$1.04) to Rs 100 (US \$2.08) per hand-cart of timber. Those who fail to pay are attacked.

In July 2000, the Chief Minister of Assam alleged that the NDFB, along with the ULFA, were channeling funds through the "Bhutanese diplomatic pouch" to their leaders based in Southeast Asian capitals.

Leadership

Ranjan Daimary is the Chairman of the outfit. Lieutenant B Irakdao is the outfit's self styled publicity secretary.