

# United National Liberation Front (UNLF)

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## History

The *United National Liberation Front* (UNLF), the oldest Meitei insurgent group in the State was formed under the leadership of Arambam Samarendra Singh on November 24, 1964 to achieve independence and a socialist society. It was a secessionist organisation and was the culmination of several movements like the shadowy Pan-Mongoloid movement and the *Revolutionary Nationalist Party* (RNP), which raised the banner of independence in 1953. Later, differences within the outfit surfaced over the issue of strategies to be adopted. While Samarendra Singh sought to spread ideological consciousness before launching an armed struggle, the more radical leader Oinam Sudhir Kumar established *Revolutionary Government of Manipur* (RGM) in December 1968.

UNLF remained a social organisation for a decade after this, and took to arms again only in the early nineties. By mid-1990, the front decided to launch an armed struggle for the 'liberation' of Manipur from India. In the same year, it formed an armed wing called *Manipur People's Army* (MPA). Soon after its formation, UNLF launched its first armed action against Indian security force in Loktak hydel project area, 30 km from Imphal in December 1991. In that ambush five Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed by MPA militants. In 1990, a faction led by Namojam Oken left UNLF and formed the UNLF (Oken group). This led to bloody factional clashes between the two groups, which claimed more than one hundred deaths. Later, UNLF Oken group merged with splinter groups of the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and the *People's Revolutionary Party of*

*Kangleipak* (PREPAK) and formed the *Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup* (KYKL).

In the nineties, the front undertook a social reformation campaign against rampant alcoholism, gambling, drug peddling and drug abuse. The front even helped in solving private and petty disputes. UNLF has claimed to have shot death more than 50 rapists. UNLF has been on war with NSCN- (IM) since 1991. The ongoing conflict has claimed many cadres on both sides. The main reason for this conflict is attributed to the NSCN-IM's demand to include four districts of Manipur in creating a "Greater Nagaland" which UNLF firmly opposed to and has been challenging the Naga militant group to protect the territorial integrity of Manipur. UNLF has accused NSCN- (IM) of anti-Manipur policies and charged that NSCN- (IM) is trying to destroy the communal harmony by instigating, first, the Naga-Kuki bloodbath of 1993 against the Kukis as part of their "ethnic cleansing" plan, then initiating the Paite-Kuki bloodshed.

Samarendra the founder and first General Secretary of UNLF was killed by suspected *Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup* (KYKL) militants while attending a seminar in Imphal on June 10, 2001. From 1993 UNLF started observing October 15 as "National Resolve Day". From September 21 to October 15 every year, UNLF observed the period as "Oppose Indian Annexation Month".

## Objectives

The UNLF aims to establish an independent socialist Manipur. The front also aims at establishing a "revolutionary front" by uniting all the militant groups operating in Northeast. Its ideology is to

create a society based on equality - equality among different groups of people living in the Northeast region.

### **Leaders**

In 2003, the structure of UNLF Central Committee has been changed following a decision at its General Assembly Session.

The structure of the new Central Committee are as follows:

Chairman - Rajkumar Meghen aka Sana Yaima

Vice-Chairman - Vacant

General Secretary - Kh. Pambei

Secretary of Defence - A. Wangpa

Secretary of Organisation - M. Nongyai

Secretary of Publicity - N. Thabal

Associate Member - N.C. Koireng

### **Command Structure**

The Central Committee of UNLF is the highest decision making body. Its armed wing - MPA operates under different district commands. A District command is headed by a district commander and it is further divided into units. The front's armed wing MPA has three well-trained mobile task forces - Wangbran Task Force, Siroy Task Force and Maril Task Force. The front also maintains an organisational cell, which takes up developmental and welfare measures for the people. Department of Publicity and Propaganda is the publicity wing of the front and all press releases and propaganda work is done by it. The front also has a women's wing. The Chief of the women's wing is Nganbi and Banti is the Deputy Chief. These three task forces are there.

### **Strength**

There is no accurate source regarding the total strength of UNLF. Government sources put the total cadre strength of the front at 1,500. However, it is estimated by some UNLF analysts that the front has around 3000 to 3500 cadres. The strength

of the front has seen a sharp increase in recent years. The front enrolls roughly 200 to 300 new cadres every year in the last few years. A large chunk of its MPA fights are concentrated in Chandel and Churachandpur districts.

### **Areas of Operation**

In the eighties, the front's primary area of operation was confined to the three Valley districts - Imphal, Thoubal and Bishenpur. However from the early 90s, it began to mobilise in the hilly areas of the state. Presently, the front is active in Churachandpur and some parts of Chandel districts. It is also reported that there is a strong presence of UNLF cadres in the Jiribam sub-division. In these hilly areas, the MPA strikes at will and neutralised army operations against them on various occasions. The five day-long encounter between MPA and Indian security forces in Sajik Tampak area in January 2003 is a clear indication of the spreading influence of UNLF in the hilly district of Chandel. Of late, the front has spread its tentacles to some parts of Cachar district (Assam). In July 2002, a group of MPA cadres ambushed a column of Indian Army and killed three soldiers.

### **Funding**

#### *Extortion*

The funding for the front mainly comes from extortion from government employees, businessmen, contractors etc. The front used to collect some percentage from the monthly salaries of all the employees of the state until it formally declared in January 2002 that the front would not anymore collect monthly salaries. It is believed that UNLF also receive money from its sympathisers.

#### *Supply of Arms*

Highly placed official sources said that UNLF has been procuring large stocks of weapons from black markets in Thailand, Singapore and Cambodia and started

selling arms and ammunition to several Northeast underground organisations. There are reports that the front has, of late sold weapons to United National Liberation Front (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). It has also supplied arms and ammunition to Tripura's insurgent groups like All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF).

#### *Income Generating Projects*

Although there is no official source indicating UNLF's income generating business establishments, one can speculate from the seizure of a large stock of arms and ammunition and gem stones worth crores from its hideout in the Tamu area of India and Myanmar border by the Myanmar Junta in December 2002 that the front has involved in gems and gold smuggling to finance its activities.

#### **Training Camps**

UNLF has training camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It also maintains close association with the NSCN-(K). UNLF cadres received military training in the areas controlled by *National Socialist Council of Nagaland* (Khaplang group) in Upper Myanmar bordering Nagaland and Myanmar till the mid-nineties. But its training camps have come down in recent years and UNLF cadres are now mainly receiving training in Manipur's southern hilly areas. Its General Headquarters (GHQs) is located in Sajik Tampak areas of Chandel district and it is reported that there are many camps in this area. Besides, the front has established mobile training camps in Churachandpur district.

#### **Major Incidents**

##### **1999**

February 15: UNLF militants kill nine security force personnel in Churachandpur district.

##### **2000**

May 8: Eight MPA militants are killed in an encounter in Wangoo Laipham, Thoubal district.

June 10: Arambam Samarendra – UNLF founder who was also a Manipuri play right and social worker, is killed in Imphal.

##### **2001**

February 13: UNLF chairman Sana Yaima, speaking at the 36th anniversary of the outfit appreciates Union Government's willingness to hold talks with insurgent groups of Northeast. He, however, says issues such as independence of Manipur, right to self-determination must be brought under the ambit of negotiations.

October 4: UNLF kill two security force personnel and injures four others in an ambush in Chandel district.

October 14: Three security force personnel are killed by MPA militants at Kwakta in Bishenpur district.

December: The Myanmar Army arrest 192 UNLF militants including its chairman Sana Yaima from Tamu and Kalamyao areas following a series of raids on their hideouts. Myanmar Army seizes around 1,500 sophisticated weapons, over Rs. One crore in cash, a huge quantity of gold and 20 rocket launchers from their hideouts.

##### **2002**

January 16: A UNLF press statement says the outfit would not participate in the forthcoming State Assembly elections, due in February 2002.

February 14: All the 192 UNLF militants arrested in December 2001 by the Myanmar Army are set free. The release took place in four batches beginning in January 3.

December 8: Ukhrul Superintendent of Police escapes UNLF ambush. However, four other policemen are killed.

### **2003**

January 1: MPLF, which includes the UNLF, asks all the outfits in Northeast to put to an end to extortion in the name of armed movement, commencing from January 15, 2003.

January 10: Three militants affiliated to the MPLF, are killed in a prolonged encounter at Sajik Tampak in the Chandel district.

June 12: Rival militant outfits of UNLF and UKLF agree to end hostilities between themselves.

June 30: Assam Rifles personnel kill two UNLF militants, including a 'district commander', in an encounter at Mayang Imphal in Imphal West district.

July 21: Security force personnel kill at least seven UNLF militants in an encounter at Moreh in Chandel district.

### **2004**

January 5: Suspected cadres of Manipur People's Army (MPA), armed wing of the UNLF, kill one Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel at Khumoi village in the Churachandpur district.

January 6: UNLF hands over one of the killers of Lungnila Elizabeth, the minor daughter of a Manipur legislator who was kidnapped and killed in November 2003, to women activists at an undisclosed location in the Imphal East district.

April 6: UNLF bans 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in Manipur. The front warns poll related activities like holding of public meetings, campaigning, flag hosting should be stopped with immediate effect.

April 16: A team of Imphal East commandos kill three cadres of UNLF

after a fierce encounter in Yairipok Yambem. Police recover two AK-47 rifles, one Lathod bomb, 15 bullets and a small arm from the slain militants.

June 12: Indian Army kill three MPA cadres in an encounter at Holjang village near Joupi in Chandel district.

### **Internal Linkages**

The front has maintained close relations with other militant groups such as *Revolutionary People's Front* (RPF), *People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak* (PREPAK). On 1st March of 1999 UNLF, PREPAK and RPF had formed the *Manipur People's Liberation Front* (MPLF). It has also links with *Kuki National Front* (KNF) and *Zomi Defence Volunteers* (ZDF). The front is also trying to establish links with *United Kuki Liberation Front* (UKLF). After frequent clashes with UKLF, the front had signed a truce with UKLF on June 8, 2003. In a statement UNLF said that both sides had agreed not to strike at each other and would work towards resettling villagers displaced as a result of clashes between the two them.

### **External Linkages**

Soon after its formation, the UNLF leaders established a political relationship with the authority of the then East Pakistan, and underwent military training in that country in 1969. The front first established links with Naga National Council (NNC) in 1975. UNLF has closed strategic relations with Khaplang faction of NSCN. On May 22, 1990, the UNLF, along with other insurgent groups operating in the Northeast – *the National Socialist Council of Nagaland* (NSCN-K), the *United Liberation Front of Assam* (ULFA), – floated a pan-Mongoloid coalition called the *Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front* (IBRF) to wage a "united struggle for the independence of Indo-Burma". It is also reported that the front has links with *All Tripura Tribal Force* (ATTF). The MPLF along with ULFA and

the *Tripura People's Democratic Front* (TPDF), a front outfit of the *All Tripura Tiger Force* (ATTF) have jointly signed a statement to carry out attacks under "Operation Freedom". UNLF also maintains relations with *National Democratic Front of Bodoland* (NDFB) – a secessionist armed group demanding an independent state of Bodo.

UNLF has set up close strategic with ULFA. It has officially acknowledged its close association with the *United Liberation Front of Assam* (ULFA). The official acknowledgement from the UNLF came in its annual statement on the occasion of the outfit's 34th anniversary. In a statement on July 18, 2002, UNLF claimed responsibility for the July 16 attack on the 14<sup>th</sup> Jat Regiment near Jirighat (Assam) and admitted that the attack was carried out with support and coordination with ULFA. Recently, on December 23, 2003, UNLF along with RPF and PREPAK called for a "solidarity strike" in Manipur to show support to the ULFA cadres who were facing difficulties in Bhutan in the wake of the military operations launched by Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) to flush out Northeast militants from Bhutanese soil. UNLF also maintains relation with some military junta officials of Myanmar. In December 2001, 192 UNLF cadres, including chairman Sana Yaima, were arrested by the Myanmar Army, but all of them were set free by February 2002. Sources say that UNLF supply arms and ammunition to various militant groups in the Northeast with active connivance of Myanmar's security forces. Beginning with the year 1996, UNLF has made serious attempts to get the international attention to the liberation movement. It has attended Unrepresented Nations People's Organisation (UNPO) and the United Nations Group on Human Rights (UNWGIP). The Chairman of UNLF Sana Yaima in an interview in a local English paper *The Sangai Express*, on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2000, claimed that there were many countries and NGOs who were

sympathetic with the front. However, he did not mention of those countries and NGOs who were willing to lend support to it. He said: "We are forgoing ahead strongly with our struggle to let the world international community know that there exist a problem here."

### **Publications**

The front publishes a journal for its cadres called *Ningtam Meira*. It has so far not launched any website to propagate its liberation struggle.