

Beijing Behind Eastern India Separatists?
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By Neeta Lal

India alleges China funding, arming United Liberation Front of Asom

China allegedly is funding support for a banned separatist organization and its leader, Paresh Baruah, along the Northeast Indian mountainous region of Assam that abuts Tibet, say sources who have visited Baruah in Burma.

China has for decades assailed the border established as the McMahon Line in 1914 by the British colonial government, alleging that the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing calls Southern Tibet, is illegally occupied by India. The two countries fought a border war in 1962, with China invading well inside India before withdrawing.

Nearly cut off from the rest of India by a spur of Bangladesh that juts up almost to Nepal, Assam is one of five eastern states that lie close to the confluence of Myanmar, China, Nepal and Bhutan. Cut off economically as well from the rest of the country, the five states have often been the site of unrest and criticism of the central government for ignoring their economic needs.

GK Pillai, the former Indian home secretary, said during a public meeting at the Assamese capital of Guwahati on Feb.13 that many insurgents in northeast India maintain relationships with Chinese intelligence officials. He also claimed that Beijing was directly or indirectly supporting militant leaders including Paresh Baruah, who heads a militant faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom. Pillai also revealed that Baruah's wife and two sons, who were still hiding in Bangladesh, had expressed their interest to come back to Assam.

The elusive ULFA leader was quick to reject the allegation, saying in a statement a week later that 'GK Pillai's comment on the ULFA is baseless and an outcome of frustration.' China's foreign ministry spokesperson Liu Weimin also dismissed the charges saying that Beijing upholds the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

But Indian intelligence agencies stick to the report that Baruah has established a comfortable relationship with some levels of officers of Beijing administration. The leader, equipped with Chinese weapons, security guards and a satellite communication system, has been traced to the jungles of northern Myanmar to Ruili of Yunnan, where the arms deals are struck with various small groups of northeast India.

The intelligence source also disclosed that the Chinese Army has recently modernized their arms and ammunition, offloading old and used weapons to arm dealers and ultimately to militants in Myanmar and northeast India.

While the Indian government's assertion could be dismissed as propaganda, Rajib Bhattacharya, the executive editor of the Seven Sisters Post English-language daily and Pradip Gogoi, a cameraman from Prime News, both of whom went into Myanmar recently to meet the ULFA leader, reported that what appeared to be a Chinese security cordon surrounded the encampment, and that no Assamese cadres were with him.

ULFA was born in 1979 with the aim to make Assam a sovereign nation although the organization is split today, with one faction comprising all senior leaders including its chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, engaged in talks with the Indian Union government.

Baruah, however, continues to maintain the armed struggle. He was driven out of Bhutan in 2003 when the Bhutanese flushed out its ULFA hideouts, shifting his operations to Bangladesh during the regime of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. However, when the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina Wajed took the reins in 2009, most of the militant leaders and their families from northeast India, including those of ULFA, were arrested and secretly handed over to Indian authorities.

But Baruah escaped. After being declared a wanted criminal by a Bangladeshi court, he returned to his jungle bases in northern Myanmar, bordering the northeast Indian States like Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The Myanmar region, also bordering China's Yunnan province, has increasingly emerged as a safe haven for many other militant groups from Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Assam.

The banned groups reportedly run camps in the hilly, heavily jungled terrain where they are comparatively safe from both Burmese and Indian forces. They train new recruits, extorting money from the wealthy in their respective states, and issue press statements on various occasions.

Two recent e-mails drew the attention of the mainstream Assamese, arguing on behalf of China's sovereignty over the region. In the 1962 border incursion, the Chinese captured the state of Arunachal Pradesh, even venturing westward as far as the city of Tezpur in Assam on the banks of the Brahmaputra River. However, they withdrew after the United States and France warned Beijing following pleas from the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

The region has been disputed for nearly two centuries, with Burmese staging a series of attacks between 1820 and 1826 until they were defeated by the British, which brought the region under colonial rule in the Yandaboo Agreement signed in 1826.

The ULFA statement issued on March 31 insisted that Assam 'should build bridges with China' for its own prosperity. A friend like China is crucial for the people of Assam, it added.

Referring to the 'Indo-China war of 1962', the statement asserted that India had fallen backward from the war front in Arunachal, that the People's Liberation Army had reached the border of Assam and did not occupy an inch of Assam's land, proving "who our friend is, it stressed. "So there is no logic for any anti-China movement in Assam," the statement asserted.

The faction claimed on Mar. 26 that New Delhi is 'secretly setting up nuclear missile bases in northeast India, because of its growing conflict with China.' Baruah asserted in a press statement that 'the Indian government has already completed surveys for setting up bases for Brahmos cruise missile (Indo-Russian Technology) and Akash nuclear missiles in Nagaland and Assam'.

ULFA's awakened interest appears to coincide with growing activity on the part of Tibetan refugees in Guwahati, including street demonstrations and press conferences, with the cause for a free Tibet suddenly gaining momentum, which has caught the attention of the Chinese. Hundreds of Tibetans observed the Tibetan National Uprising Day in Guwahati on March 10, commemorating Tibetans' first massive uprising against the Chinese occupation in 1959. Clad in traditional dress and holding Tibetan national flags along with the Indian Tricolor, nearly 300 Tibetan exiles moved through the streets of Guwahati, also organizing a candlelight procession at the heart of the city in the evening.

Attending a public meeting in Guwahati on March 26, Gyari Dolma, the home minister of the Tibetan government in exile, appealed for help, saying 'Tibet is closer to northeast India than China.'

The hardliner ULFA faction countered by criticizing the Dalai Lama for "not being sensitive to the suffering of Assamese under Indian rule."

"We are not aware of any voices raised by the Dalai Lama (or any Tibetan refugee taking shelter in India since 1951) against New Delhi's oppressive action in Assam, especially in the period of Assam movement (1979 to 1985), when 855 students were shot dead by the government forces," the militant group claimed in a statement. " Even later also, the exiled Tibetan establishment has not expressed its concern on the atrocities and human rights violations going on in Assam in the last three decades of armed movement.

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