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Special Report

India's Troubled Eastern Region

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INDIA'S TROUBLED EASTERN REGION

Eastern India, the scene of the protracted Naga rebellion and more recently of the Mizo uprising, is now threatened by tribal unrest in the hills south of the Assam Valley and on the plain along the Brahmaputra River. Tribes in the hill districts are demanding an autonomous state while plains tribes, spurred on by New Delhi's willingness to consider the hill tribe demands, are beginning to agitate for their own autonomous areas. Communal problems add to the tension in the Assam Valley.

With some 70,000 troops and paramilitary personnel already tied down by the Naga and Mizo rebellions, the Indian Government wants to avoid further serious unrest. The eastern region is virtually surrounded by East Pakistan to the west and south, Burma on the east and China and Bhutan to the north. It is tied to the main part of India only by a narrow 50-mile border with the northern neck of West Bengal. Evidence that China is interested in the rebellions, and is providing modest arms and training assistance to at least the Nagas, increases Indian concern over security in the area.

The Indian Government has considered various schemes to satisfy the tribes and mute the unrest. New Delhi's proposals, however, always fall short of the minimum demands of the tribes. The central government, confronted by pressures from separatist interests elsewhere in India, cannot afford the precedent of acceding to the independence demands of the Nagas and Mizos, nor even to petitions for new autonomous states. Fractionization of the eastern region into a group of separate political units would also complicate India's defense of the area.

The Naga Rebellion

Most of the Nagas live in extreme isolation along mountain ridges in Nagaland state and in the bordering regions of Assam and the Union Territory of Manipur. Much of the area is wild jungle, among the most impenetrable in the world. The Nagas have traditionally lived in fortified villages connected by winding jungle

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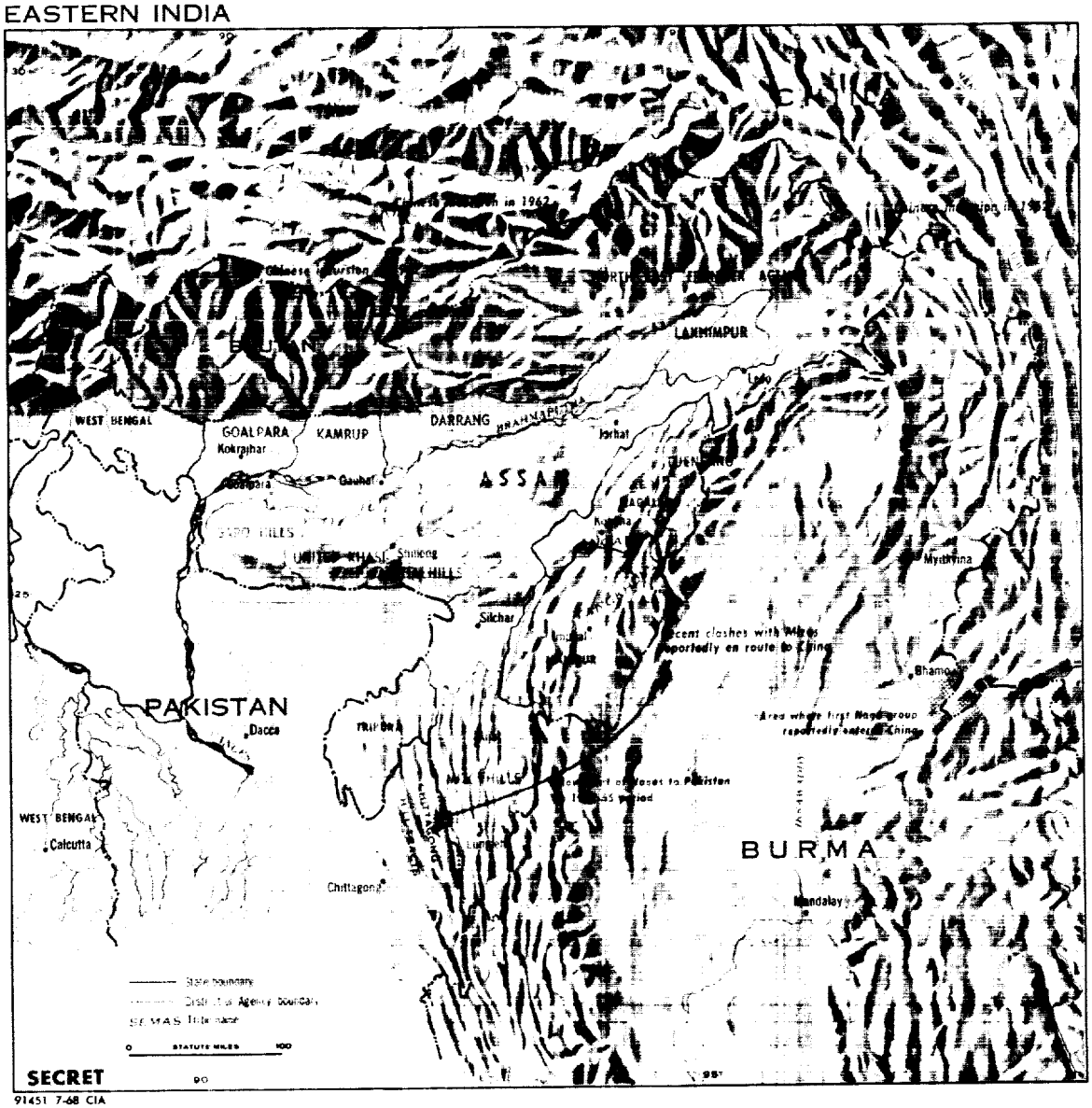
EASTERN INDIA



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trails, practicing a system of shifting agriculture on the mountain slopes and going forth on periodic hunting and warring expeditions.

Open Naga rebellion against the Indian Government was launched in 1956. It came after a decade of intermittent negotiations during which the Indians not only rejected a Naga claim to independence but seemed to be steadily infringing on the substantial autonomy that the Nagas had enjoyed under the British. Several thousand Naga guerrillas took up arms and engaged in a campaign of raids, ambushes, kidnapings, murder, and sabotage which was eventually to tie down some 50,000 Indian troops and paramilitary personnel.

Despite differences among Naga tribes and a tradition of intertribal warfare, Naga leaders were able to organize a disciplined political movement that cut across tribal lines. To reinforce their demands for independence, an underground "Federal Government of Nagaland" was established, consisting of a 100-member legislature, a 15-member council of ministers, and a system of local government based largely on traditional tribal lines of authority. The guerrillas were organized into a Department of Home Guards, which was to include a 500-man division from each of the 12 main tribes.

As the revolt continued to fester, New Delhi gradually became more conciliatory, partly in order to strengthen the position of the more moderate Nagas, who viewed independence as impractical and were willing to settle for greater autonomy within the Indian Union. Finally in 1962 New Delhi agreed to a proposal by Naga moderates--members of the Naga Peoples' Convention (NPC)--to make Nagaland a separate Indian state with substantially greater autonomy than that accorded other states in the Indian Union. In the state elections in January 1964, the NPC won 33 of 46 Legislative Assembly seats and formed the first state government.

This largely autonomous state did not satisfy the underground and the rebellion persisted, but in September 1964 the rebel "Federal Government" reluctantly agreed to a temporary cease-fire and an Indian Government offer of direct negotiations. Guerrilla strength may have declined by this time to around 3,000, and the underground was also attracted by New Delhi's willingness to talk with "Federal Government" representatives, by-passing the state government.

Talks between New Delhi and the underground Nagas have taken place intermittently since the most recent session in October 1967. Although Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took a personal hand in the negotiations in early 1966, no substantive agreements have yet been reached. The "Federal Government" has continued to insist on independence while New Delhi will not discuss any arrangement that would place the Naga region outside the Indian Union.

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Old Kuki Tribesman

Naga from Sema Area

Garo Tribesman

Naga from Angami area

Southern Khasi-Jaintia hills--the highest rainfall in the world

Interior of House in Naga Village

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Since the formation of the state government, New Delhi has tried to strengthen the position of the moderates by pumping development funds into the area. Road building, which helps the Indian security forces, has held a priority, but schools, clinics, and a power network have also been constructed. The development expenditure is one of the highest per capita for any state in India. The cease-fire has generally been honored throughout the state; the occasional clashes between security forces and the Nagas occur mainly in northern Manipur.

25X1 The Nagas have exploited the cease-fire to rebuild the strength of their Home Guard units. [redacted]

25X1 [redacted] Naga forces numbered roughly 9,000 by early 1968, a threefold increase over their strength in mid-1964. At the same time, the Naga "Federal Government" has sought outside support for its cause and has received arms and training assistance from the Pakistanis and more recently from Communist China.

Help from Pakistan was provided during the 1962-65 period but probably ended by early 1966 when cooperation between Indian and Burmese army patrols made the Naga route down the India-Burma border to the Chittagong Hill Tracts much more hazardous.

25X1 [redacted] Naga contact with China dates from December 1966 when the first group of approximately 200 tribesmen went across northern Burma to obtain arms and training in Yunnan.

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[redacted]

a recent clash south of Kohima, the Nagaland capital, the Indian Army discovered the Nagas in possession of Chinese-made small arms and mortars, as well as radio sets, diaries, and other materials that the Indians believe show the Nagas were in China.

The discovery of Chinese arms caused New Delhi to fire off a protest to Peking charging it with "aiding," "abetting," and "training subversive elements in Nagaland." Although India is annoyed over Chinese meddling in what is already a prolonged rebellion, it is not expected that the Chinese will furnish more than small-scale arms and training assistance, which China can provide at little expense to itself.

The clash near Kohima was the most serious between the security forces and Nagas since the institution of the cease-fire, and the first of major proportions to take place within Nagaland. New Delhi and the "Federal Government" each threatened to terminate the cease-fire--the Nagas on grounds that the Indian Army had launched the attack, which it did, and the Indians because importation of the foreign arms found at Kohima was proscribed by the cease-fire agreement. The cease-fire was finally extended, however, but for only one month--to 31 July--the shortest renewal since its institution.

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Meanwhile, the unity of the underground Nagas has become seriously strained. A split developed last summer when Kaito Sema, the commander in chief of the army, broke with the "Federal Government" and went off to his tribal area with about 3,000 Sema troops and a large stock of Naga arms and ammunition. The "Federal Government" vice president resigned shortly after, and in early 1968 the Tuensang district unit (one of five districts in the "Federal Government") seceded and established the "independent state of Honking." The president of the "Federal Government" meanwhile had responded to the crisis by setting aside the underground parliament and imposing "presidential rule."

Tribal enmities may be behind the split, inasmuch as leaders siding with Kaito are largely Semas from central Nagaland, while those now leading the "Federal Government" are Angamis or Tangkhuls, tribes from southern Nagaland and northern Manipur. Ostensibly, however, the issue is whether to continue negotiations with New Delhi or to revert to all-out guerrilla warfare. Kaito and others who back negotiations also attack the "Federal Government" for accepting Chinese assistance and for undermining the Nagas' democratic institutions.

New negotiations, however, do not seem to be an immediate prospect. If the Naga groups that New Delhi believes are still in China return, the militant element among the Nagas, which reportedly has the support of a majority of the rebels, may increase the tempo of the rebellion. Meanwhile New Delhi is increasing its border surveillance and has announced that it will attack any Naga group "known" to be in possession of Chinese arms.

The Mizo Rebellion

The revolt in the remote Mizo hills, now in its third year, continues to tie down some 20,000 Indian troops and paramilitary personnel and shows no sign of abatement. Like the Nagas, the Mizo militants launched their rebellion in order to win independence, maintaining that their "excluded area" status under the British entitled them to choose their political alignment when the British departed. The Mizo rebels have offered several times to negotiate with New Delhi but have been ignored, the Indian Government refusing to negotiate until the demand for independence is dropped.

The Mizo region was quiet for the first decade after Indian independence. Mizo leaders for the most part cooperated with the Assam government administration and worked within constitutional legislative machinery that included district councils set up to give the tribes control over limited aspects of their affairs. Partly because of the especially strong missionary influence--over 90 percent of the Mizos are Christians--Mizos are, in general, less hostile to outside influence than the Nagas.

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Increasing disenchantment with the government of Assam preceded the outbreak of rebellion. Assam authorities badly mishandled a serious famine in 1959-60, despite warnings of disaster from Mizo leaders, and while the effects of this were still fresh, the Assam government introduced legislation declaring Assamese the state's official language.

Probably encouraged by concessions being forced on New Delhi by the more militant Nagas--Nagaland was by then a separate state--formerly moderate Mizo leaders formed a Mizo National Front (MNF) with the avowed objective of complete independence. They first confined their campaign to nonviolent agitation but received no response from New Delhi. In March 1966, shortly after Prime Minister Gandhi started her talks with Naga underground leaders, the MNF suddenly launched a surprisingly well coordinated armed attack that captured all major administrative centers in the Mizo Hills and besieged the cantonments of the local Indian forces. The Mizos were well armed and disciplined. Many of them were drawn from the 10,000 Mizos who had served with the Indian armed forces.

The reinforcements dispatched by New Delhi quickly chased the rebels from the major administrative centers, however, and helicopters and bombers were employed in an attempt to pin down the rebels in their jungle hideouts. Later, the government began systematically to move Mizos out of their jungle villages and into "progressive protected villages" along the north-south Silchar-Aijal-Lungleh route, where they could be guarded by security forces.

Mizo guerrillas have not again threatened major administrative centers, but the Indian Army has been unable to curtail sporadic ambushes and harassment raids against its forces. The rebels can move at will through most of the heavily jungled and mountainous area, apparently with the support of the population remaining in the remote and isolated villages. New Delhi concedes that no more than 35 percent of the villagers have been concentrated in the "protected villages." Both New Delhi and the loyal Mizos who serve on the district council--members of the Mizo Union--admit that security in the region is insufficient to permit new elections for the district council.

The MNF received small arms and training support from East Pakistan before the start of the rebellion. Periodic reports of Pakistani support continue, but it is likely that East Pakistan is now mainly useful to the rebels as a safe refuge. Indian allegations about Pakistani training camps, which were frequent in late 1966 and 1967, have not been made in recent months, although it is possible that Mizos still pick up guns and ammunition on visits into East Pakistan. The president of the MNF is still in East Pakistan.

Approved For Release 2006/10/12 : CIA-RDP79-00927A006600090004-9

Approved For Release 2006/10/12 : CIA-RDP79-00927A006600090004-9

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New Delhi has been attentive to signs that the Mizos are in contact with the Nagas or are receiving assistance from the Chinese. Thus far, there is no evidence of a link-up with the Nagas, although the Mizos do seem to have been joined by Kuki tribesmen, who live in Manipur and are closely related to the Chins across the border in Burma. Mixed Mizo-Kuki contingents have been identified in clashes north of Imphal, the Manipur capital, and also farther west near the Silchar-Aijal road. The Mizos have reportedly promised the Kukis an autonomous district in an independent state of Mizoram; this could conflict with Naga interests, however, because the Kukis inhabit parts of northern and eastern Manipur that the Nagas envisage as part of an independent Nagaland.

Until recently there was no evidence of Chinese contact with the Mizos, although China's propaganda has supported both the Naga and Mizo independence struggles. In June, however, a group of Mizos was intercepted by security forces along the Mizo Hills - Burma border. the group--the first Mizo contingent sighted in this area for some time--was preparing to cross Burma to China.

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Other Tribal Dissidence in Assam

Hill tribe unrest in the Garo and Khasi-Jaintia hill districts is also a reaction to domination by the Hindu population that controls the state government in Assam. The Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia tribes, like the Nagas and Mizos, are Tibeto-Burman in origin and in their isolated hill villages have been historically insulated from dominant subcontinent influences.

The moderate-led All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) which represents tribes in this region, demands a largely autonomous state separate from Assam in all matters except for those where a single administration would be mutually beneficial, such as control of river waters. The Assam government's introduction of Assamese as the state language was the initial APHLC grievance, but the moderates' demand for autonomy has been spurred by economic problems in the region and large-scale unemployment among young people, which they attribute to neglect by state authorities.

Wishing to avoid another uprising of the Naga or Mizo type, New Delhi has been negotiating with the APHLC for more than two years. These talks, which once looked promising, seem to have foundered over APHLC insistence that the new substate have responsibility for internal law and order. Also, some members of the Indian cabinet oppose the creation of substates that are virtually separate new states, arguing that this will dangerously fragment the region and set a precedent for meeting similar pressures elsewhere. Although negotiations have not been broken off, the APHLC was disturbed over New Delhi's failure to reach a solution

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during the last parliamentary session, as promised by Home Minister Y. B. Chavan in talks held late last year.

Moreover, demands from the Assam Valley plains tribes complicate New Delhi's handling of hill district proposals, especially so because the plains tribes' demands seem to have developed as a result of New Delhi's willingness to negotiate with the APHLC. The Koches of western Assam and northern Bengal and the Kacharis (or Bodos) of western and central Assam have both formed organizations in the last year and a half, as have the Ahoms, a Shan tribe that occupies the upper Assam Valley. All three peoples at different times in history dominated significant parts of the Assam Valley and they regard the Indian population, now in the majority, as latecomers or intruders.

The three organizations have been under moderate leadership but the Plains Tribe Council, representing the Kacharis, may be stepping up its agitation. To further its demand for "full autonomy" for the tribal belt running along the northern frontiers of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Lakhimpur districts, it boycotted a recent parliamentary by-election in the Kokrajhar area. Clashes between pickets and police resulted in 500 arrests, after which some 4,000 Bodo tribesmen stormed a Kokrajhar police station. A curfew was imposed in the area for several days.

Adding to New Delhi's concern is communal unrest in the Assam Valley, especially between long-resident Assamese and more recent immigrants who dominate the economy and who have been the main beneficiaries of new economic opportunities afforded by India's development effort in Assam. This surfaced on Republic Day last January when Marwari businessmen, immigrants from Rajasthan, were the targets of large-scale rioting, destruction, and looting.

Also close to the surface are pressures resulting from large-scale immigration from East Pakistan, which continues at a reduced pace even today. Assam had the largest population increase of any Indian state in the 1951-61 period. The predominantly Hindu immigrants bring heavy competition for Assam's scarce jobs, but a special problem is their incursions into protected tribal land, especially in the plains areas. Although the land is sometimes illegally sold to the immigrants by poor plains tribesmen the Assam government's inability to control the incursions is a main grievance of the Plains Tribe Council.

Hindu-Muslim rioting is a further danger, inasmuch as 25 percent of Assam's population is Muslim. The Jan Sangh, a militant Hindu-supremist party, has announced an intensified organizational effort among Assam's Hindus, hoping to capitalize on the Hindus' concern over New Delhi's alleged sympathy to hill

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the Assam government from the picture and provide time for working out a solution.

Blanket reorganization ideas founder, however, on continuing disagreement between New Delhi and the tribes as to what represents permissible autonomy. The APHLC, for example, shows little interest in blanket schemes unless internal police power is vested in the autonomous substate. The Assam government, which has been dragged along very reluctantly on the APHLC negotiations, is unlikely to support proposals that even further reduce its area of authority. The imposition of "President's Rule" would be difficult at a time when it has already been employed across much of northern India during the last year. And in the case of Assam, it would mean displacing a stable Congress government.

New Delhi will more likely try to temporize, hoping that somehow a workable solution will eventually emerge. The Naga and Mizo rebellions use up resources that India can ill-afford, but the rebellions are isolated on the eastern fringes of the country and do not directly affect security in the main part of India. There is no evidence yet that the Nagas and Mizo-Kukis are cooperating in such a way as to change the current fractured nature of the rebellions or that they are in contact with other hill tribes. Despite the persistence of the rebellions, there have been no dramatic Indian setbacks that would suggest the situation is deteriorating further.

Reports of Chinese assistance to the Nagas excited the Indian press for a few days but no pressure has yet developed for an all-out military solution to the Naga or Mizo problem or even for increasing the current military presence. Military leaders wish to maintain the cease-fire with the Nagas because they believe that the impossible terrain and the rebels' demonstrated fighting ability and mobility foreclose a military solution without excessive bloodshed. New Delhi probably finds security problems in eastern India less pressing now, as continuing internal problems in China minimize the threat of another invasion.

Nevertheless, New Delhi's attitude could change if there were evidence of increased and concerted Chinese assistance to the Nagas or Mizos or if open rebellion spread to other parts of eastern India. Menacing activity by China in the border regions would also put pressure on India for clear action. But existing divisions in New Delhi over policies for the eastern region suggest that a serious strain would develop in the government if it were forced to decide between more resolute military pressure on the rebels or significant political concessions. (SECRET

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