

Naga Violence: Reminiscent of ‘Wild West’

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“When you have to shoot, shoot, don’t talk”, is a line that has stayed over the years from the classic *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. That’s the kind of scenario unfolding in Nagaland. Shooting has been rampant, with little room for talk, and inter-tribal feud and tension between the civilian Naga population and the National Socialist Council of *Nagalim* led by Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (NSCN-IM) is high.

It all started on December 21, 2013 when two Sumi women were allegedly molested by four NSCN (IM) cadres near Aghuito town as they were travelling towards Zunheboto. The NSCN (IM) cadres stopped the vehicle in the early hours of that morning, and allegedly stripped searched the women and injured the two male passengers who were accompanying them. This led to a large rally the next day organized by the powerful Sumi Hoho who demanded that the four cadres must be handed over to the District Administration by December 25. When the NSCN (IM) refused to oblige and instead stated that it would carry out its own internal review, the Sumi Hoho along with thousands of Sumi villagers marched towards the nearby NSCN (IM) designated camp at Mukali in Zunheboto district. This has resulted in a cross-fire between the outfit and the villagers leading to approximately eight deaths (two NSCN –IM cadres and five civilians) and a few injured.

This kind of protest by local Nagas against the NSCN (IM) designated camps is the first of its kind. While there have been incidences of NSCN (IM) cadre misbehavior, it is usually reported to the NSCN (IM) leadership at the top level like Muivah or Swu who looks into the matter. In fact, Swu, the Chairman of the outfit, has held numerous meetings in the past with cadres who have misbehaved warning them of the strictest punishment possible. This time around, what is significantly new is that local Naga population has asserted their unwillingness to be dictated by the armed group’s *diktat*.

Tension between the NSCN (IM) and the Sumi Hoho is not new. In 2007, Azheto Chophy, a low rung leader of the NSCN (IM) along with 100 or more NSCN (IM) cadres deserted the outfit and formed the NSCN (Unification). The NSCN (IM)’s hold on Naga society was questioned at that time after civil society bodies like the Western Sumi Hoho, which had earlier

supported the outfit, shifted their loyalty to the NSCN (U). This was an alignment along tribal lines as Chophy is a Sumi Naga. This rift got reflected in the NSCN (IM)'s inner workings when there were indications then that there was a difference of opinion between the two main leaders of the NSCN (IM), Muivah (a Tangkhul) and Swu (a Sumi), on this split but matters seems to have settled down between the two leaders.

Going beyond the particular, the broader implications of the recent violence is that local people are now openly challenging the NSCN (IM)'s methods of collecting so called "taxes" from vehicles plying on roads in Nagaland. This must have miffed the outfit as it amplifies its decreasing hold on the imagination of the Naga population. The deeper social impact of this trend is that if NSCN (IM) cadres have been asked to behave tough on those who refuse to cede to their monetary demands, they may end up misusing their ill-begotten power and visibly indulge in more coercive methods.

The second significant implication is that the cease-fire framework between the NSCN (IM) and the Union government is under threat of breaking down if the cadres have indulged in fire-power. It also shows that the cease-fire ground rules have not been followed by the outfit. Cadres of the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) have admitted to the national media that they often broke cease-fire rules. For instance, according to cease-fire rules, both the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) cadres are to be confined to designated camps and carrying of arms in civilian areas is banned. No one follows these rules and armed insurgent cadres are found moving in civilian areas. The recent violence indicates that armed groups have not disarmed and that state forces are simply unable to keep "extortion" networks in check. Neither are they capable of enforcing the cease-fire with the outfits.

The third implication of the recent violence is on the Naga peace talks. Both Muivah and Swu are in New Delhi for the next round of peace talks. While the cease-fire agreement signed in 1997 has been the harbinger of the subsequent peace talks, blatant violations of the agreement by the outfit with extortions, inter-factional killings, and the recent violence against civilians render the framework of the talks weak and question its effectiveness and legitimacy.

Such violent incidences between the NSCN (IM) who will want to maintain its dominance in Naga areas and the local population, starting to challenge the outfit openly, will recur. The only mechanism by which the negative consequences of such incidences are limited is a robust and effective police presence to maintain law and order. A viable programme of disarming the outfit should also be worked out soon, and be made a condition for continuance of peace talks.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.