

## **Karbi-Kuki Clashes in Assam**

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Militant groups clashing among themselves for control over the public resources even at the cost of the rights of the local tribal or ethnic community they claim to be defending, is an important factor behind persistent inter-ethnic conflicts<sup>1</sup> in India's Northeast. In the state of Assam such groups push the ordinary members of the community to the margins.

A study of the clashes between October 2003 and March 2004 between militant Karbi and Kuki tribal groups in Karbi Anglong<sup>2</sup> district, including the Singhason hill area, supports this point. It is estimated that militants of the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and the anti-talks faction of the United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity<sup>3</sup> (UPDS)<sup>4</sup> together killed 85 persons, mostly men,<sup>4</sup> in this period. The casualty includes at least 23 Kukis and 54 Karbis.

Incidents in March 2004 have led to higher Karbi casualty. KRA, primarily a Manipur-based militant Kuki outfit, killed 39 Karbi tribals — 34 in the villages of Udentisu, Tarak Teron and Jari Teron on March 24 in separate incidents<sup>5</sup> and 5 more in various villages on March 27.<sup>6</sup> The KRA has allegedly retaliated to the killing of six Kukis by the UPDS-K on March 19, 2004.

The March 24 incident is an instance of the highest civilian casualty in Assam in a terrorist incident in a single day. Also, it is the largest civilian casualty in the district since the pro-talks UPDS faction under Horen Singh Bey signed the ceasefire agreement with the Union Government on May 23, 2002. H.E. Kathar, the UPDS 'General Secretary' who was opposed to talks with the Government, leads the anti-talks faction.



However, the KRA denies having taken active help of the NSCN-IM in its formation. Meanwhile, the outfit also claims to have linkages with the following groups:

- United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) and the Military Council faction of the Kuki National Front (KNF-MC), and Manipur-based militant Kuki outfits demanding a Kuki 'homeland';
- NSCN-IM and its rival faction NSCN-Khaplang, Nagaland-based militant groups, demanding 'unified' Naga 'homeland';
- National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), militant tribal groups in Assam. While NDFB demands 'sovereign' territory for the Bodo tribe in Assam, the DHD demands include a separate state within India for the Dimasa tribe.

Most of these groups have a history of disruptive activities in the Northeast in support of their demands which range from autonomy to secession. Of these groups, the factions of the NSCN and DHD have signed separate ceasefire agreements with the Union Government.

Ethno-political dynamics, and rivalry between the KRA and UPDS to gain control of the underground economy provide the context for a study of the incidents occurring since October 2003. Karbis are the largest tribe in Karbi Anglong, but the Kukis are in majority in the Singhason hill area. Kukis roam in pursuit of *Jhum* (shifting) cultivation. Their largest concentration is in Manipur (15 per cent).<sup>7</sup>

Karbi groups, including the UPDS, dispute KRA's projection of the 'indigenous' Kuki population at more than 35,000 in the Singhason hills;<sup>8</sup> according to them, it is about 2,000. They allege that this is KRA's 'tactic' to 'justify' the Kukis' demand for an autonomous council. The political goals of the Karbi and Kuki groups thus clash as UPDS is for a Karbi state carved out of the present North Cachar Hills area and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. Further, violent movements have occurred in the history of the State due to 'indigenous' population being numerically subordinated by immigrant communities. The 'anti-foreigners' agitation between 1979 and 1985 led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) is cited and it continues to shape the grammar of political violence. UPDS also alleges that Karbis would be outnumbered<sup>9</sup> in Karbi Anglong due to a Kuki 'influx' since Naga-Kuki clashes<sup>10</sup> occurred in adjoining Nagaland and Manipur in 1992.

There are differences between the Kuki National Assembly (KNA), the apex Kuki political organisation in Karbi Anglong, and the Autonomous State Demand

Committee (ASDC), a district-level political party supporting the demand for a Karbi state. KNA had first demanded an autonomous regional council for the Kukis in 1992 through a memorandum to the state government. Two rounds of talks were also subsequently held in 1997 and 1998.

The ASDC split in July 2000 due to differences within the local leadership that allowed Congress to control the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council. Later, a faction called ASDC-United (ASDC-U) endorsed KNA's demand of a Kuki council, ostensibly to widen its support base against the rival faction of ASDC-Progressive (ASDC-P), an ally of the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML) that represented the area in the 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. ASDC-U is now against KNA's demand. Reports are not clear about the role of other political groups in the violence. However, contesting political claims, combined with the changing dynamics of power<sup>11</sup> at the local level, seem to have affected activities of the militant Karbi and Kuki groups.

In addition to the complex ethno-political dynamics mentioned above, militant groups often clash to control the underground economy. In the present case, the UPDS and the KRA both have intimidated the local tribal population in the Singhason hill area which produces about 2,000 metric tons (MT) of high quality ginger every year. While, both the outfits resort to extortion, the UPDS considers the area its 'turf'. This is a cause of rivalry between KRA and UPDS.

A similar incident had occurred in Assam's Cachar district on March 31, 2003. A militant Hmar tribal outfit, Hmar People's Convention-Democracy (HPC-D), had killed approximately 23 Dimasa tribals after abducting them.<sup>12</sup> Before this incident, the HPC-D and the DHD both had targeted the ordinary tribals in a manner comparable to the activities of the KRA and UPDS. Hmars are spread over the Cachar and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam and in the adjoining areas of Manipur and Mizoram.

The militant outfits involved in the last incident with the highest casualties, the HPC-D and the KRA, are not primarily based in Assam, where the terrorist incidents occurred. Also, while both the HPC-D and the KRA targeted the ordinary tribals, there were no reported instances of direct clashes between the rivals.

The factors mentioned above, indicate that the involvement of militant groups in inter-ethnic conflict leads to high civilian casualties. There are more than 30 such groups active in Assam<sup>13</sup> and most of them proclaim tribal or ethnic loyalty. A study of similar contemporary conflicts involving some of them is beyond the scope of this brief commentary. However, if seen in the overall context of militant violence,

it would be safe to conclude that the activities of ragtag groups such as the KRA and the UPDS would lead to high civilian casualties even as separate efforts are made to contain more dangerous groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), NDFB and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO). Clashes involving militant Kuki and Karbi groups have intensified even after the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) destroyed 30 camps of some of these groups.<sup>14</sup>

A suggestion on the ways of containing such groups can be attempted elsewhere. Redressing the socio-political and economic grievances of the local population needs to be taken up along with tackling specific groups militarily.

### References/End Notes

- 1 In fact, demands for more rights and recognition by ethnic groups “are now recognised as the major source of domestic and international conflict in the post Cold War world”. See for instance, Gurr, Ted and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*. 1994. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview, p. 2.
- 2 Karbi Anglong is administered as an autonomous council under the Constitutional provisions for the tribal areas in the four Northeastern States of Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya.
- 3 UPDS anti-talks faction has renamed itself as Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF) and its armed wing as Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Peoples’ Resistance (KNPR). See UPDS (anti-talk) renames itself. *The Sentinel*. Guwahati, May 16, 2004.
- 4 Data compiled on the basis of English language media sources from the Northeast. Referring to incidents involving KRA and UPDS, a report in the Guwahati-based daily *The Assam Tribune*, on December 28, 2003 had said that UPDS-K and KRA had killed 35 persons, including 17 Kukis and 15 Karbis since November 2003 in Karbi Anglong.
- 5 See, 28 massacred in Karbi Anglong. *The Sentinel*. March 25, 2004.
- 6 See, Five more Karbis killed in Assam. *The Times of India*. New Delhi. March 27, 2004.
- 7 Cited in Demand for Regional Council Could Aggravate Kuki-Karbi Clashes. *The Shillong Times* (Internet edition). December 13, 2003.
- 8 See, “UPDS Says No to KRA’s Peace Proposal”. *North East Enquirer*. 2 (18) December 22-January 6, 2004, at <http://www.nenanews.com/NEE%20%20Dec.22-Jan.6,%2004/oh11.htm>.
- 9 For an analysis of the same, see, M. S. Prabhakara, “Outrage in Assam”. *Frontline*. at <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2025/stories/20031219006800800.htm>.
- 10 See, Karbi-Kuki Imbroglia: Ultras Blamed for Clashes. *Assam Tribune*. December 30, 2003.

- 11 Cited in Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Assam: Karbi-Kuki Clashes", *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR). 2 (37) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_37.htm#ASSESSMENT3](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_37.htm#ASSESSMENT3).
- 12 For a detailed analysis of the incident see, Wasbir Hussain, "A New Rebel Turf War", *SAIR* 1 (38) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/1\\_38.htm#ASSESSMENT3](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/1_38.htm#ASSESSMENT3).
- 13 For a list of such groups, see [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org).
- 14 The RBA initiated action against United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) on December 15, 2003. The three organizations had together gathered approximately 3,000 cadres in the camps from Samdrup Jongkhar in the east to Samste in the West along Bhutan's southern border with India. These groups were using these camps to attack on civilian population, security force personnel and other public installations, including oil facilities in Assam. ULFA and NDFB together are also responsible for the majority of civilian casualty in Assam. Of the 30 camps 13 belonged to ULFA, 12 to NDFB and five to the KLO. See, "RBA Makes Good Progress in Flushing Out Operations". *The Kuensel* at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3599&PHPSESS ID=478e0a296bfe6940386c861972473c11>. Cadre strength of ULFA in Bhutan was estimated to be 1,560, and that of KLO and NDFB 430 and 540 respectively. See, "Government to Make Last Attempt at Peaceful Negotiations" at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/assembly03/03ulfajul18.php>.