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Policy Brief

Garo National Liberation Army: An Emerging Threat in Meghalaya

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Summary

For a state long thought to be a role model to the other North-eastern states with respect to democracy, harmony and peaceful coexistence, Meghalaya has seen a steady rise in insurgency in the last few years. The rise of Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) since 2009 has seen the state slide into insurgency and terrorism. This policy brief attempts to examine the genesis of insurgency in Meghalaya particularly the rise of GNLA. A number of policy recommendations are suggested to counter the emerging threat from GNLA in the state.

On November 02, 2015, the Meghalaya High Court, while hearing a matter pertaining to frequent calls for *bandh* in the state by the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), had asked the central government to consider enforcing the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) and the deployment of armed and paramilitary forces in the militancy-hit Garo Hills region for maintaining law and order. The court noted that, as per the data supplied by the state police, a total of 87 people including 25 civilians, 27 businessmen, 25 employees of the private sector, five government employees and five teachers were abducted for ransom by insurgents in the Garo Hills region in the year 2015.

The court further observed that the police and civil authorities in the region, despite their best efforts, are not able to control the incidents of kidnapping and killing and that the funds allocated by the central government have not helped in improving the law and order situation.¹ There were sporadic protests against this order in the Garo Hills area and the central government decided to challenge it in the Supreme Court. That notwithstanding, essentially, this order of the high court aptly highlights the emerging threat from GNLA in Meghalaya.

Meghalaya Brief

Meghalaya, literally meaning 'the abode of clouds', is a hilly state. It is bounded by Assam's Goalpara, Kamrup and Karbi Anglong districts to its north and Cachar and North Cachar districts to its east. It shares a 443 km long border with Bangladesh on its south and west. The India-Bangladesh border is marked by a high degree of porosity and checking illegal cross-border activities has long been a major challenge.

Meghalaya was created as an autonomous state, carved out from erstwhile Assam state, on April 02, 1970 and was granted full statehood on January 21, 1972. The Khasis, Jaintias and Garos are the key indigenous tribal communities inhabiting the state. Over the years, various people, tribals and non-tribals, from other parts of the country have settled down in the state. As per the 2011 census, Meghalaya has a population of about 29.67 lakhs, 85 per cent of which is tribal. Almost all the tribals in Meghalaya are Christians. Out of the 15 per cent non-tribal population, Hindus comprise about 10 per cent, Muslims two per cent, and others the remaining two per cent.

Insurgency in Meghalaya

A number of issues such as support to demand for secession/statehood for Garos and Khasi – Jaintias, influx of outsiders, exploitation of natural resources, border disputes with Assam and trans-shipment of weapons from Bangladesh into Assam via Meghalaya could be said to have given rise to the insurgency in the state.

The insurgency in Meghalaya began in the latter part of the 1980s, wherein it started as a movement against the socio-economic and political domination of the

¹ "Meghalaya HC asks Centre to consider imposing AFSPA in Garo Hills, says no one safe", *Legally India*, November 04, 2015, at <http://www.legallyindia.com/blogs/meghalaya-hc-asks-centre-to-consider-imposing-afspa-in-garo-hills-says-no-one-safe> (Accessed February 04, 2015)

dkhars (outsiders). Many militant groups were then formed by the locals to seek greater autonomy or a separate/sovereign state. Initially the Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC) was formed which represented the interests of the dominant tribes of the state, the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos. However, the tribal differences due to Garo people developing a feeling of being sidelined led to a split in the HALC in 1992, with Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) representing the Khasis and the Jaintias, and the Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (AMLA) representing the Garos. The AMLA subsequently passed into oblivion and was replaced by the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC). While the HNLC aims at converting Meghalaya into a state exclusively for the Khasi tribe by freeing it from the 'domination' of the Garo tribe, the ANVC's purported objective is to carve out a homeland called 'Achik Land' in the areas of Garo Hills.²

The ANVC was declared an unlawful association on November 16, 2000 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. The outfit entered into a tripartite Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with the central/state government on July 23, 2004 for a period of six month, which was subsequently extended by another six month. The same has since been extended periodically. Its cadres are now confined to the Youth Hostel in Tura.. Later, the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC-B), a splinter group from the ANVC, too signed a tripartite pact on September 24, 2014 and suspended its activities.

Key Factors

A. Porous Border with Bangladesh

Illegal immigration has become a major issue in Meghalaya. Millions of Bangladeshis have poured into India over a period of time as the Indian economy prospered. In Meghalaya, dozens of political and civic groups have demanded that this migration be stopped or controlled to manageable levels. Migration from Mankachar Circle of Dhubri District of Assam to Meghalaya is another area of concern.

The porous border with Bangladesh, especially to the west and south, can be attributed as one of the major reasons for insurgency and illegal activities in the state. It provides an easy gateway to insurgents seeking safe havens in Bangladesh. Adequate hideouts are also available in Meghalaya due to the rugged terrain and thick forest cover. The conditions are thus conducive for insurgency and illegal activities to flourish. The border between Meghalaya and Bangladesh is about 443 km long, of which some 350 kms is fenced; but the border is not continuously patrolled and is known to be porous. Efforts are underway to fence it completely and to issue identity cards.

B. Tribal Aspirations

Meghalaya is one of the four tribal majority states in India's Northeast, others being Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. It is the homeland of three major hill

² "Overview: Insurgency and Peace Efforts in Meghalaya", *Centre for Development and Peace Studies (CDPS)*, Guwahati, at http://cdpsindia.org/meghalaya_overview.asp (Accessed February 04, 2015)

tribal communities: the Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo, each divided into numerous clans. In fact, the term 'Khasi' is often used in a generic sense and includes the Khasi, Jaintia, Bhoi and the War. They are collectively known as the Hynniewtrep people. Besides Garo hills, Garos are scattered in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and Mymensingh District in Bangladesh. Khasi constitute more than half of the total population of the scheduled tribes (STs) in the state (56.04 per cent). Garo is second with 34.06 per cent.³

Meghalaya is witnessing a growing demand for a separate Garoland for the Garo tribe. A long-standing demand for a Khasi state to be carved out of Meghalaya has also periodically resulted in conflicts with non-tribals and, at times, even with the Jaintia and Garo communities. Government programmes have not significantly helped the tribals in raising their economic status. The divide between the tribal residents and non-tribal settlers (mostly Bangladeshi) or the locals and the non-locals, issues of identity, widespread corruption, perceived injustice, and growing unemployment have been at the root of the conflict in Meghalaya.

C. Ineffective Autonomous District Councils

There are three Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in the state: the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council at Tura, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council at Shillong and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council at Jowai. More than four decades of experimentation with ADCs has not helped fulfill the hopes and desires of the tribal people. It has only strengthened the identity politics in the state. The idea of establishing ADCs was initially hailed as the harbinger of political and constitutional advancement towards granting autonomy to the ethnic minorities in Meghalaya. However, the areas administered by ADCs continue to remain backward even after all these years. The pace of development has left the people at large disappointed.

There are a number of socio-political organisations in Meghalaya which have been projecting the demands of the local population, the main ones being deportation of outsiders settled in the state and institution of inner line permit system. In addition, the student unions of the respective tribes, which wield considerable influence in the state, too have failed to mobilise the population at large towards achieving an acceptable solution to the vexed issues. Thus, unless the issues concerning the entire region are addressed in a holistic manner, tribal development will remain a distant dream.

Emergence of Garo National Liberation Army

The GNLA was formed in 2009 with the aim of creating a separate 'Garoland' in the western parts of Meghalaya. The group is known to have an estimated strength of 200-250, which operates from the coal-rich Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Garo-inhabited areas of Goalpara/Kamrup (R) District of Assam. The outfit was formed by former Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), Meghalaya, Pakchara R. Sangma *alias* Champion R. Sangma, after he deserted the police force. He is the 'chairman' of the outfit and Sohan D. Shira, former ANVC 'area commander' for the

³ Data Highlights: The Scheduled Tribes, Census of India 2001, at http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_meghalaya.pdf

East Garo Hills, is the 'commander-in-chief' of the outfit. The cadre base of the outfit is mainly formed by deserters from ANVC and Liberation of Achik Elite Force (LAEF).⁴ The group is in possession of modern weapons like AK series rifles, US M-16 rifles, HK rifles, under barrel grenade launchers, rocket propelled grenades, Chinese grenades, other automatic weapons and explosives.

GNLA was declared a terrorist organisation by the Centre in January 2012. Sangma was apprehended in Bangladesh last year and is presently in judicial custody. The group is now active under its self-styled commander-in-chief Sohan D Shira. GNLA has been involved in several cases of murder, extortion, gun running and kidnapping in all the three Garo Hills districts in Meghalaya.⁵

Expanding Co-ordination with Other Groups

The GNLA has forged close operational links with other militant groups in the Northeast like the United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I)⁶ and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Songbijit, NDFB (S). It also has links with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM). The outfit has also forged an alliance with the Bangladesh-based militant group, A'chik Special Dragon Party.⁷

Meghalaya has been used as a "corridor" for routing sophisticated arms and ammunition by the militant outfits from neighbouring states including Assam. As per information available with the intelligence agencies of the central and the state government, the militant outfits like ULFA (I) and the NDFB (S) have been using Meghalaya as a corridor. According to the state chief minister, most of the GNLA and other militant outfit cadres operating in the state are either from Assam or Bangladesh as these areas too have a Garo population.⁸

There is enough evidence to show ongoing co-operation between GNLA and the anti-talks ULFA (I) based in Bangladesh. According to the police, there are evidences indicating that talks have been held between the GNLA supremo Sohan D. Shira and deputy commander-in-chief of ULFA (I) Drishti Rajkhowa *alias* Manoj Rabha. The links between GNLA and ULFA (I) seem to have been renewed last year during Operation Hill Storm when Shira fled Meghalaya and camped in Bangladesh for a few months. GNLA had also sought the services of ULFA (I) for training in

⁴ Garo National Liberation Army, South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Meghalaya/terrorist_outfits/GNLA.htm (Accessed February 04, 2015)

⁵ A more recent case in point is the brutal murder of a 35-year-old woman in June 2014. The woman was assaulted, molested and shot six times through the head at point blank range with an automatic assault rifle right outside her home. The woman's husband and her five children were locked up in the house by the assailants. Such brutality on the pretext of her being an informer of the security forces is an example of the excesses committed by the outfit. See "Woman's head is blown off while trying to resist rape in Meghalaya", *The Times of India*, June 04, 2014, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Womans-head-is-blown-off-while-trying-to-resist-rape-in-Meghalaya/articleshow/36044588.cms> (Accessed February 04, 2015)

⁶ ULFA I (or Independent) is a faction which is against the peace talks with the Indian Government. It was formed in August 2012 by Paresh Baruah with Abhijit Barman as the chairman. ULFA (I) continues to demand a 'Sovereign Assam'.

⁷ A'chik Special Dragon Party is a Bangladesh based militant group. The group is believed to have its presence in Bangladesh's Mymensingh District, bordering Meghalaya's Garo Hills region.

⁸ "Proposed govt, GNLA talk under cloud," *Oh Meghalaya*, June 11, 2014, at <http://www.ohmeghalaya.com/proposed-govt-gnla-peace-talk-under-cloud/> (Accessed February 04, 2015)

Improvised Explosive Device (IED) making in the latter's camps in Bangladesh.⁹ Since the ULFA (I) has been marginalised in Assam, it wants to continue this alliance to remain relevant.

On the eve of the Republic Day this year, GNLA's publicity secretary announced that the group had joined hands with other major militant groups operating in the north east so as to be part of the ULFA and NSCN-Khaplang-led United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA)¹⁰ coordination committee, after the highest ranking leaders of the group presumably led by Sohan D Shira held an emergency meeting. It was also stated that GNLA is now a part of the new joint organisation which also includes the Khasi Hills based HNLC as a member.¹¹

Illegal Extortion

In view of rampant extortion drives by the banned GNLA in West Khasi Hills (WKH), the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) Adelbert Nongrum demanded deployment of additional forces to ensure safety and security of the people of the region. According to him, such incidents are on the rise owing to the fact that the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in its order issued had permitted and allowed the transportation of the already extracted coal. Groups of over 20 armed cadres of the GNLA visit the coal mining sites on a daily basis serving demand notes ranging from Rs. two to 25 lakhs, he stated.¹²

Impact of Ban on Rat-Hole Mining

Coal mining in Meghalaya is done by local individuals in the form of a long narrow tunnel known as "rat-hole" mining. Unscientific mining of minerals poses a serious threat to the environment, resulting in reduction of forest cover, erosion of soil, pollution of air, water and land as well as reduction in bio diversity. NGT has ordered a ban on rat-hole coal mining across Meghalaya. Acting on the orders of the Tribunal, the state government in May 2014 banned the rat-hole mining and transportation of coal in the entire state.¹³ This has impacted the financial resources of GNLA as the extortion from transporters and miners was the main source of funding. It has in turn led to GNLA extorting more from the common people.

⁹ "ULFA-GNLA combine planned W'nagar blast", *Nelive*, January 11, 2016, at <http://www.nelive.in/meghalaya/news/ulfa-gnla-combine-planned-w%280%99nagar-blast>

¹⁰ The United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA) is a newly formed platform of four outfits of the region: NSCN (K), ULFA (I), -Songbijit faction of the NDFB and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO). Six Manipuri groups have also extended moral support to the coalition and have agreed to take part in joint operations against their common enemy.

¹¹ "GNLA Joins Hands with UNLFWSEA", *Northeast Today*, January 26, 2016, at <http://www.northeasttoday.in/gnla-joins-hands-with-unlfwsea/> (Accessed February 24, 2015)

¹² "Extortion by GNLA on the rise in WKH", *Meghalaya Times*, December 12, 2012, at <http://www.meghalayatimes.info/index.php/front-page/28111-extortion-by-gnla-on-the-rise-in-wkh>

¹³ Srestha Banerjee, "Meghalaya suspends rat-hole coal mining", *Down to Earth*, May 19, 2014, at <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/meghalaya-suspends-rathole-coal-mining-44432>

Government Response

On July 11, 2014, the Meghalaya Police, along with Combat Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), launched Operation Hill Storm in the Durama Hills of Garo Hills to flush out cadres of GNLA, ULFA (I) and other militant outfits. During this month-long operation, a total of 25 militants belonging to GNLA, ULFA (I), ASAK and other militant groups were apprehended from various hideouts. However, many important GNLA cadres such as Savio, Baichung, Sacheng and Jarek had managed to flee.¹⁴ While there have been many successes for the Special Forces during Operation Hill Storm, but in a major setback on July 25, 2014 two police personnel were killed and another three constables were injured in an IED attack by suspected GNLA militants. Despite significant gains during Operation Hill Storm, the possibility of violent attacks by one or the other militant faction remains.

GNLA's Willingness to Talk

As per a press release by GNLA's publicity secretary, the militant outfit expressed its willingness to come forward for talks in February 2016. The outfit has asked the government to appoint an interlocutor for holding negotiations. The release said according to the constitution of the outfit, its 'chairman' Champion R. Sangma is the right person to hold talks on behalf of the outfit. It added, "The GNLA will abide by the decisions arrived at a meeting between Champion R. Sangma and a government-appointed interlocutor." The outfit also clearly stated clearly that to create conducive atmosphere for talks, it is willing to declare a unilateral ceasefire.¹⁵

In Shillong, the state government announced that it was "keen" and "open" for dialogue with proscribed outfits like the GNLA and HNLC provided they abjure violence. However, the recovery of 66 IEDs planted by the GNLA from East Garo Hills in the last week of February 2016 raises pertinent questions on the sincerity of the GNLA for talks¹⁶ It is also a pointer for security establishment to continue with its operations against all insurgent groups so as to force them to seek early negotiations and agree to the terms of the Indian Government.

¹⁴ "'Operation Hill Storm' dismantles important camps of GNLA", *Meghalaya Times*, August 20, 2015, at <http://meghalayatimes.info/index.php/front-page/26569-operation-hill-storm-dismantles-important-camps-of-gnla> (Accessed February 04, 2015)

¹⁵ Saidul Khan and Andrew W. Lyngdoh, "GNLA sends feelers, asks for interlocutor", *The Telegraph*, February 11, 2016, at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1160212/jsp/northeast/story_68841.jsp#VsBWZfI97IV (Accessed February 04, 2015)

¹⁶ "16 more IEDs recovered from Meghalaya village", *The Times of India*, February 26, 2016, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/IEDs-in-Meghalaya/articleshow/51158329.cms> (Accessed February 04, 2015)

Recommendations

AFSPA for Short Duration

Presently, AFSPA is not in force in Meghalaya despite a series of violent acts by armed insurgent groups including GNLA. But areas within 20 km of the state's boundary with Assam are under the purview of the Act. The central government has declared this 20-km belt "disturbed", and armed forces deployed in Assam are permitted to go into this area in hot pursuit of rebel groups.¹⁷ Extension of AFSPA to the areas affected, i.e., Garo Hills and West Khasi Hills, may not be required immediately. However, extension of AFSPA to these areas for short duration should remain an option until GNLA continue with their violent acts.

Conditional Talks and Unconditional Surrender

To give a strong message to GNLA, the central government formally indicated to the state government that there can be no talks with the GNLA. The only option left before the group is to surrender or face the wrath of security forces which continue to conduct counter-insurgency operations.¹⁸ However, given their recent willingness, the idea of holding talks with GNLA could be considered. As is evident elsewhere, surrender by militants has had a positive impact at the local level. Therefore, the idea of holding conditional talks and offering 'one time' unconditional surrender could be explored for the sake of peace in the region.

Joint Operations with Bangladesh

Meghalaya shares a 443-km long border with Bangladesh, of which around 70 km is unfenced and has terrain which is difficult to patrol. Northeast militants particularly GNLA have long taken advantage of this to have safe havens in Bangladesh along the border with India. It has also been seen that when the security forces pressurise the militants, they slip across to militant camps in Bangladesh. Areas in Bangladesh close to the international border are also being used to supply arms and ammunition to the militant groups operating in Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. Cox's Bazaar, a completely unmonitored port in Bangladesh, has emerged as a major transit point for the supply of illegal arms and ammunition coming from Southeast Asia.¹⁹ Thus, there is a need to carry out joint operations with the Bangladesh Army to target these camps.

Joint Operations by the Security Forces

From the above analysis, it is clear that GNLA is a potent security threat to Meghalaya as well as Lower Assam. The growing influence of the group therefore needs to be neutralised. Hence, there is a need to clearly layout the Rules of Engagement (RoE) for our own troops while operating against GNLA. Empowering state police and equipping them with latest weapons and equipment is essential for

¹⁷ "Explained: Tripura junks the controversial AFSPA, where do the other states in Northeast stand?", *The Indian Express*, May 29, 2015, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-tripura-junks-the-afspawhere-do-the-other-states-in-northeast-stand/> (Accessed February 14, 2015)

¹⁸ "No talks with GNLA, only surrender option: CM", *The Assam Tribune*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=jul1114/oth050> (Accessed February 14, 2015).

¹⁹ Bibhu Prasad Routray "Southeast Asian arms trail to India's northeast", *Asia Times*, November 15, 2002, at http://atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/DK15Df02.html (Accessed March 09, 2016)

their operational effectiveness. However, if the situation deteriorates to a point where it is difficult for the state security apparatus to manage, joint operations by army, paramilitary and police on the lines of Operation All Out in Assam is in order and should remain an option. Use of helicopters and other force multipliers will add to the success of such operations. Necessary co-ordination with Bangladesh Army again will be useful.

Rehabilitation of Surrendered/SoO Cadres

There are a large number of surrendered and SoO cadres in the area. There is a need to carry out an early and comprehensive rehabilitation of these individuals. At times such surrendered individuals have rejoined militancy or have launched a new outfit. To arrest such trends, early and fruitful rehabilitation of these cadres is imperative. The area is suitable for organic farming and has abundant natural resources. Thus productive measures for exploiting these avenues should be incorporated as a policy so as to generate employment for such individuals and help them lead a peaceful life.

Sustained Role of Church

The church plays an important role in the entire socio-political spectrum of the society in Meghalaya. It therefore can play a positive role in the conflict resolution particularly in Meghalaya. The Shillong Khasi-Jaintia Church Leaders' Forum (SKJCLF), recognised by the Meghalaya Government as its official negotiator with the proscribed outfit HNLC, has been making efforts to bring the militant outfits to the negotiating table. The Roman Catholic Church has pledged to go all out to ensure that peace returns to the strife-torn region of Garo Hills. The message of Shalom Meghalaya²⁰ is in fact simple, straight and uncomplicated. To the militants, "please return home and live as we live". To the Meghalaya Government, "please ensure prevalence of rule of law in Garo hills."²¹

Addressing Root Causes

- a. Unemployment coupled with criminal nexus has its bearing on the rise of such militant groups. Easy money has often been a luring factor for the unemployed youth to pick up weapon. Coal mining and forest produce has also contributed to extortion demands which are avenues for easy money. Thus, creating employment opportunities along with proper enforcement of law and order needs to be prioritised.
- b. The border with Bangladesh, despite being guarded, has ample gaps due to the nature of terrain. That, coupled with the anti-social elements on both sides of the border, contributes to the criminal nexus including gun running, kidnapping, killing and extortion. This aspect requires an immediate attention.

²⁰ Shalom Meghalaya Campaign is an initiative of the local Catholic and Baptist Church to strengthen and sustain peace in the Garo hills.

²¹ "Church movement for peace in Garo hills", *The Telegraph*, July 04, 2014, at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140704/jsp/northeast/story_18578067.jsp#.VsBImPI97IU (Accessed February 14, 2015).

- c. The lines of communication especially in the Garo Hills and interiors are under developed or almost absent. Lack of effective communication infrastructure inhibits the reach of security forces as well as the civil administration, which provides the insurgents a safe environment. There is an urgent need to improve infrastructure in the remote areas.
- d. Addressing tribal aspirations through inclusive development will lead to inter-tribal harmony and promote peace in the state. Need for transparency and accountability on the part of ADCs and state government is necessary to ensure fair distribution of the benefits of the development projects including skill development.

Brigadier Sushil Kumar Sharma is presently posted as DIGP, CRPF in the Northeast Region.

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