

# External Linkages and Internal Security: Assessing Bhutan's Operation All Clear

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## Abstract

*Disruption of terrorist networks - intra-regional, inter-regional and trans-national - should be supplementary to the overall counter-terrorism strategy. Larger issues including socio-economic and cultural can only be addressed in the long-term. The immediate goal, however, has to be an effective localised response. Otherwise, efforts like Bhutan's counter-terrorism operations against ULFA, NDFB and KLO - popularly called 'Operation All Clear' - may only have a partial impact.*

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## Introduction

Various extremist groups in South Asia<sup>1</sup>, including the Islamic and the Left-wing, have developed among themselves a complex network, which in a number of cases extends to Southeast Asia as well.<sup>2</sup> This presents a challenge for individual states<sup>3</sup> to find ways to contain or eliminate such networks within the boundaries of specific theatres of conflict. The paper argues that disruption of such links would be effective in countering terrorism if employed as a supplementary strategy. Effective localised responses must come first, as underlying cultural, social and economic issues can only be addressed in the long term.

Assam is a case in point where the most prominent among the insurgent groups,<sup>4</sup> the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA)<sup>5</sup> uses external linkages for its survival and carrying out terrorist activities. However, the group's proclaimed objective - to 'achieve *Swadhin Asom* ('independent' Assam) through armed struggle' - is 'territorial' in nature. Further, ULFA's activities are primarily confined to present-day Assam's administrative jurisdiction. This would require the group to be 'spatially' contained and disruption of its suspected external linkages should supplement this act.

The linkages are primarily a facilitator in acquiring shelter, finances and logistic

support for a terrorist group's functional requirements.<sup>6</sup> Two or more such groups may even come together to carry out joint strikes despite the fact that the professed ideology of a group or its proclaimed objective conflicts with its 'allies'. The paper highlights this specific point, among other issues, in the background of Bhutan's December 2003 counter-terrorism operations against ULFA and its two allies - the National Democratic Front of Bodoland<sup>7</sup> (NDFB) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO).<sup>8</sup> The NDFB is active in Assam and the KLO in parts of Assam and West Bengal. These three terrorist groups together had gathered approximately 3,000 members<sup>9</sup> in 30 camps<sup>10</sup> situated between Diagam in the east and Samtse in the west of Bhutan, since 1990.<sup>11</sup> The Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) initiated the counter-terrorism operations widely known as Operation All Clear (OAC) on December 15, 2003. ULFA was the prime target during the OAC as the NDFB and the KLO were considered to be lesser threats.<sup>12</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, ULFA would be the focus of analysis, though smaller insurgent groups do pose a threat to security in Assam. For one, the group has been the largest thus far, with the highest conflict potential among those found active in the State. Also, only ULFA claims to represent the 'Assamese' identity and according to one view, initially produced "a unique political critique".<sup>13</sup> The group has managed to exist over a period of two decades and survived four military operations, including the OAC. Although the OAC destroyed ULFA's major external base including its 'general' and 'central' 'headquarters', the group has regrouped and resumed terrorist strikes especially on soft targets like public infrastructure facilities and the civilian population.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the paper attempts to find the intra-regional, inter-regional and transnational linkages that may have facilitated ULFA's subsequent attempt to regroup.

The paper comprises four parts. The first analyses the context in which Bhutan initiated the OAC. It argues that Bhutan has attempted to address India's security concerns in the Northeast. However, the continued presence of terrorist camps in Bhutanese territory was gradually becoming a security threat for Bhutan itself, as the groups were propping up Maoist presence owing to their strengthened links with the Nepalese Maoist insurgents.

The second part attempts to explore various kinds of possible linkages that allow the groups, including ULFA, to move across various theatres of conflict and in the process assist each other in procurement of arms or training each other's cadres. The third part uses the casualty figures compiled from official and other English language media reports to support the argument that Bhutan's OAC had

only a partial impact on the overall militant violence in Assam.

The concluding part argues that an inter-regional coordinated and integrated approach comprising India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, among other countries, would effectively contribute to counter-terrorism. In the light of this, India has enormous responsibilities and has to take the lead in convincing its smaller neighbouring countries about the enormity of the situation. Extremist groups active in neighbouring countries would remain an internal security threat for India. In addition, smaller countries in the absence of a proper response from India, may also be forced to look beyond South Asia for assistance.

## I

### **Operation All Clear: A Background**

Bhutan's Operation All Clear against ULFA, NDFB and KLO did not come to an end<sup>15</sup> with the destruction of 30 terrorist camps<sup>16</sup> in its southern region. Reports indicate that the RBA has renewed operations against the ULFA,<sup>17</sup> the details of which are yet to be made public. Also, Bhutan has not officially declared the number of casualties that occurred during the OAC. Media reports, however, have indicated that both sides suffered casualties and not less than 120 terrorists and at least 16 Bhutanese soldiers were killed.<sup>18</sup> In this context, the Indian Chief of Army Staff, General N.C. Vij was quoted as saying that 650 militants had been "neutralised" - either killed or captured - during the operation.<sup>19</sup> The ULFA and NDFB 'publicity secretaries' Mithinga Diamari and B. Erakrdao, and the KLO 'chief' Tom Adhikari were among the prominent terrorist leaders arrested during the OAC.<sup>20</sup>

The OAC forced the remaining militants - their number approximately 2,000 - to disperse into various parts of the Northeast as well as Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar.<sup>21</sup> The top ULFA leadership was allegedly hiding in Bangladesh even as the OAC occurred. The OAC is an example of the use of force to enact the 'will of the state' reaffirming the idea that the state alone must remain the agency for the 'legitimate use of force' within its territory. Groups like ULFA, NDFB and the KLO show no allegiance to the 'laws of the land' and little respect for ordinary people. Further, the OAC also signifies that Bhutan's action internally was an important step in depriving the Indian terrorists of their strategic external bases.



**Fig-1: OAC in Southern Bhutan Along India's Border**

*Source: The Hindu, December 18, 2003*

In a developing liberal democracy like India, addressing issues pertaining to regional development and fulfilment of aspirations of various constituent communities takes time. In this context, a collective will against groups preaching the 'culture of violence' to exploit the vulnerability of the general people arising out of a sense of economic deprivation and cultural discrimination is necessary. Bhutan's OAC is an attempt in this direction.

A series of political activities preceded OAC. Bhutan's 81st National Assembly (NA) that met between June 28 and August 18, 2003 mandated the Royal Government to use force against the terrorist groups, but only after making "one last attempt at persuading the militants to leave the country".<sup>22</sup> This was not, however, for the first time that the NA had given such a mandate. Earlier, the 78th NA that met between June 25 and July 26, 2000 had also passed a resolution of this intent. The then Bhutanese Home Minister, Lyonpo Thinley Gyamsto, also introduced a four-point course of action, including cutting off ration supply to the terrorists, punitive action against the individuals and groups found guilty of helping the terrorists, persuading the terrorists to leave the territory peacefully, and military action against the terrorists, if all other efforts fail.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from consistent Indian efforts of persuading Bhutan to act decisively against the terrorists,<sup>24</sup> the Assamese population too had been protesting against the continued ULFA presence in Bhutan. The then Assam Chief Minister, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, had met the then Bhutanese envoy to India, Tshokey Tshering, in this regard.<sup>25</sup> A protest march against the alleged 'active support of Bhutan to

the ULFA' had also been organised in May 2000.<sup>26</sup> All these factors could have worked towards mounting pressure on the Royal Bhutan Government. However, the latter took its time to act against the terrorists.

Apprehension that military action<sup>27</sup> against the terrorists “might trigger off terrorism against its own people” had apparently forced the Bhutanese Government to delay<sup>28</sup> it till December 15, 2003. In addition, the Government's action was influenced by various other factors. ULFA was the first terrorist group, numerically and logistically more powerful than the other two, that took refuge in Bhutan's southern district of Samdrup Jongkhar following 'Indian security forces' Operations - Bajrang in 1990 and Rhino in 1991. Later, the outfit facilitated the entry of its two allies, the NDFB and the KLO, whose help it needed for carrying out its disruptive activities.

While initiating the OAC, the Bhutan Government clearly pointed out that the action followed a protracted effort of persuading the terrorists to vacate the territory peacefully. Bhutan's official statement has called the entry of approximately 3,000 terrorists and setting up of their camps illegal.<sup>29</sup> However, authorities in Bhutan have debated the presence of these terrorists since 1997.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, five rounds of talks were held with ULFA, including the third round with the 'chairman' Arabinda Rajakhowa in June 2001. The ULFA had agreed then to 'remove' four of its camps by December 2001; the camps were merely 'relocated'.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, three rounds of talks were held with the NDFB too, of which two rounds were held in October 2000 and May 2001, the latter being with NDFB 'chairman' D.R. Nabla.<sup>32</sup> The talks with the NDFB also did not yield any positive results.

The KLO, the youngest among the groups and numerically the least powerful in the territory, failed to turn up for talks, even after the Government corresponded with the outfit twice: in June and September 2002. Later, a four-member delegation under Zhong Kalyon, *Dasho Rinzin* (chairman of the Royal Advisory Council) held talks on May 25, 2003, with the middle-level KLO leaders in Lhamoizingka.<sup>33</sup> The outfit's top leaders were conspicuous by their absence. Subsequently, the fifth round of talks with the ULFA and the third round with the NDFB were held in October and November 2003. ULFA expressed its inability to move out of Bhutan and the NDFB categorically told the Bhutanese delegation that “they would have to come back” even if they left for the time being.<sup>34</sup>

Earlier, the Bhutanese government had given the terrorists a deadline (June 30, 2003) to abandon their camps. Likewise, before the OAC was launched, the government gave the terrorists a 48-hour notice “in the hope of avoiding

bloodshed”.<sup>35</sup> The unfavourable response of these groups to Bhutan’s repeated offer of talks convinced the latter that the terrorists were acting as extra-sovereign entities on its territory. With no breakthrough, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk called upon his subjects to defend the country. The King also took unto himself the responsibility to safeguard the country’s sovereignty (from these groups).<sup>36</sup>

Total disregard of the traditional authority was also mentioned in the official statement following the launch of the OAC. Further, the statement also reasoned, *inter alia*: (i) presence of terrorists ‘seriously affected’ development, economic activity and education. Besides, trade, cultivation and other commercial activities in several districts of the country were disrupted, and (ii) the terrorists victimised innocent people in Assam, West Bengal, as well as in Bhutan. Also, safety of travellers and goods being transported through the traditional and convenient routes to and from India was seriously disrupted.<sup>37</sup>

Other than the factors officially stated, Bhutan also probably perceived ULFA’s links with Ngolops (Nepalese settlers of southern Bhutan) as detrimental to its interests. After Bhutan’s attempt to evict the Ngolops attracted international criticism, the “Royal Government of Bhutan decided to shelter the ULFA in southern Bhutan as a foil to the Ngolops.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, “the ULFA started developing cordial relationship with the Nepalese and began to use them as guides and porters.”<sup>39</sup> The sequence of events leads to the following observations: (i) the terrorist groups have their own dynamics and are guided by their functional requirements to support their existence;<sup>40</sup> (ii) such requirements should conform to the wishes of the leadership, which is a small minority of the elite from within the terrorist organisation that controls the group from the above; and (iii) survival and maintenance of the status quo gradually becomes the prime consideration that guides actions of the terrorist leadership.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, it was probably the apprehension of the spread of Maoist violence<sup>42</sup> in Bhutan that alerted the authorities. Reports indicated the launch of the Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist, BCP-MLM) on April 22, 2003. Not much information is available in the media about the party or its leadership. The party allegedly circulated pamphlets in the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal<sup>43</sup> and also in areas inside Bhutan’s territory with the stated objective, among others, of dethroning the monarchy and the establishment of a ‘true and new democracy’.<sup>44</sup> Formation of the BCP-MLM was facilitated by the KLO’s alleged links with the Nepalese Maoists. The ULFA, NDFB and the KLO together were allegedly involved in the formation of a new militant outfit named Bhutan Gorkha Liberation

Front (BGLF), comprising ethnic Nepalese immigrants.<sup>45</sup>

## II

### ULFA's Linkages: Intra-regional, Inter-regional and Transnational

ULFA's linkages fall into various categories. There are individuals who support the group because members of their family are associated with the group clandestinely or openly. This support is not proclaimed, but remains concealed on two accounts. First, the people involved in such support activities are aware that their activities are perceived as 'illegal'. The linkage is discreet. Second, the terrorist groups also force individuals or groups to acquiesce with their activities. Such linkages are coercive. Under normal circumstances, both discreet and coercive linkages are intra-regional. They could also be inter-regional or trans-regional. 'Allies' and sympathisers help create the same. Sympathisers include members of an ethnic group, which the extremists claim to be representing. Then, there are inter-group linkages. This could be inter-regional and trans-regional. Considerations for such 'alliances' are based on mutual logistic assistance. ULFA's linkages have been shown in the following figure.

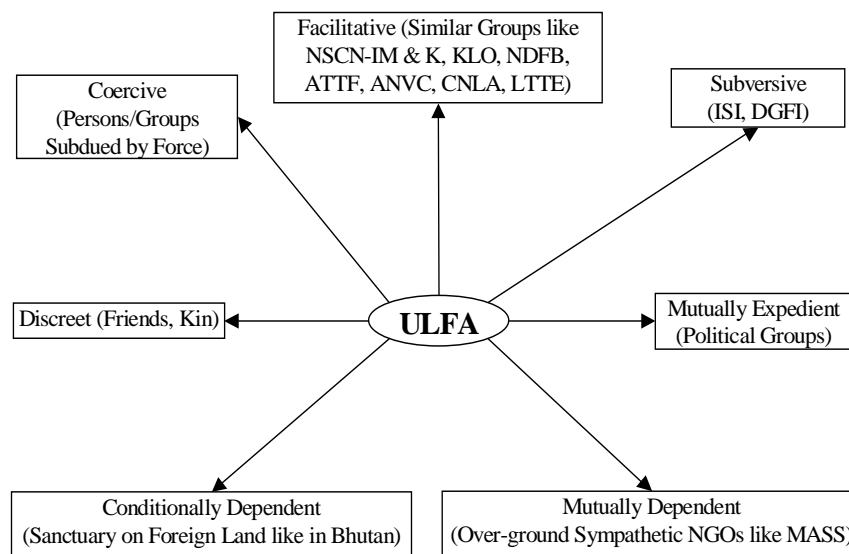


Fig-2: ULFA's Possible Linkages

These include, among others:

- Khaplang and Isak Muivah factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM and NSCN-K).<sup>46</sup>
- KLO and NDFB in Assam.
- All-Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF).<sup>47</sup>
- Meghalaya-based Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC).<sup>48</sup>
- Myanmar-based Chin National Liberation Army (CNLA).
- Separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka.<sup>49</sup>

Such linkages multiply because the groups in ‘alliance’ have further links. For example, the KLO links ULFA to the Maoists in Nepal. The linkage allows terrorist groups to facilitate movement of their cadres, procurement of arms and even funds.<sup>50</sup> This kind of support may be called facilitative.

Foreign state agencies are an additional support available to groups like ULFA. The role of the Inter-Services Intelligence<sup>51</sup> (ISI) and its Bangladeshi counterpart, the Directorate General of Field Intelligence (DGFI) in supporting disruptive activities in the Northeast is largely suspected. After the OAC, the ULFA also appealed for refuge to the Chinese, which was denied by the latter. However, the Chinese were alleged to have supported groups indulging in disruptive activities against India during the early years of insurgency in the Northeast.<sup>52</sup> Such linkages however would be subversive. The state agencies would dominate given their ‘power’ and ‘resources’ and also use the group for their larger political objective.

Yet another kind of support may come from various political formations within the area of the group’s activity. Jaideep Saikia and Udayon Misra have discussed ULFA’s covert links with the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) - a regional political party - and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in detail.<sup>53</sup> Mention may also be made of the situation in Tripura where the ATTF and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT)<sup>54</sup> are allegedly ‘politically polarised’.<sup>55</sup> Further, support from outside ‘political’ formations also comes through direct or indirect linkages. The ULFA through its ‘ally’, the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) is suspected to be in touch with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) of Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>56</sup>

The ‘external political linkages’ provide the terrorist groups finance and logistic facilities. Groups like the JeI, however, may use such linkages for their larger political agenda; for instance, propagation of Islamic ideology. In such cases, the external factors may become dominant. In addition, the terrorist group attempting



to benefit from an external linkage may lose its original identity, and simply remain a tool in the hands of the external factor, for instance, the relationship between the ISI and the ULFA.<sup>57</sup> In either case, the linkage may be called mutually expedient.

Finally, the terrorists' over-ground linkages also include non-governmental organisations. For instance, the alleged linkages between the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS), a 'human-rights' group and ULFA.<sup>58</sup> The ULFA may need MASS as a tool for political propaganda, but conversely the latter may be extending support to the former either due to close 'ideological' affiliations<sup>59</sup> or for funds and 'protection'. This kind of linkage may be called mutually dependent.

ULFA's presence in Bhutan was distinctly different. The group first imposed itself on a foreign territory and then developed linkages with the local population, including within the Bhutanese establishment. The locals may have been brought into contact to overcome difficulties in procurement of ration or other logistics, in return for money.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, the then Security-in-Charge and Military Adviser to the King of Bhutan, Brigadier V. Namgel, was alleged to be actively helping ULFA in obtaining arms and ammunition in 1999. Another official at Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wangchuk Dorji was reported to be assisting the ULFA's top leaders in the procurement of funds and travel documents.<sup>61</sup> In all probability, the Bhutanese government expected the ULFA to confront the Ngolops, beyond that the reasons for which such assistance was available to the ULFA are still not clear. At best, such linkages may be described as conditionally dependent. However, following the OAC, ULFA has declared Bhutan as an enemy of the 'Assamese'.<sup>62</sup> Earlier, the Bhutanese government had rejected ULFA's call to cease the OAC, pleading age-old ties.

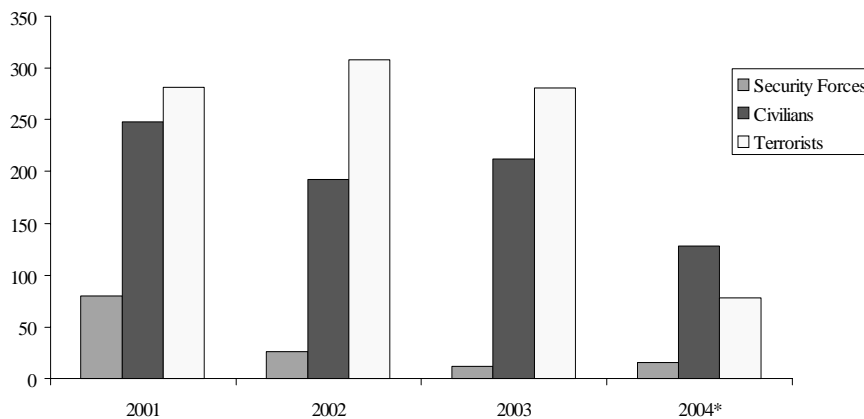
Excluding the discreet and coercive, these linkages, once they come into existence, become a two-way phenomenon. For instance, one can debate whether the ISI reached out to ULFA to accelerate subversive activities in the Northeast or vice-versa. Subsequently, both have to reciprocate to carry the 'partnership' further. In contrast, either of the partners would resist snapping of the 'ties' if carrying on the same becomes untenable. In such a case the stronger partner may have the final say.

### III

#### **Assam Post-OAC: Casualty Trends**

The camps in Bhutan were considered strategic where the terrorists could hide after targeting the civilian population or security force personnel. The OAC

was also believed to have had an impact on the overall security environment in Assam because the most prominent among the terrorist groups, the ULFA, was the prime target. A comparison of the number of civilian casualties in Assam over a period, however, suggests that the disruption of external linkages of terrorist groups - an important part of the counter-terrorism strategy - would prove effective if the conflict area has been secured spatially. This is evident in the case of Assam where smaller groups are also found to be involved in indiscriminate civilian killings. For instance, the militant Kuki group, the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) killed 34 Karbi tribals in March 2004.<sup>63</sup> However, the ULFA and the NDFB have been responsible for a majority of the terrorist incidents over the years. Data available for insurgent violence for five years show that approximately 75 per cent of the total 1,644 civilians between 1997 and 2001 were killed by ULFA and NDFB.<sup>64</sup> Hence, it is the spatial dimension of a conflict that makes disruption of the linkages supplementary in the overall counter-terrorism policy. This would become further evident from the following figure.



**Fig-3: Casualties Involving Terrorist Groups in Assam**

\* Till August 2004

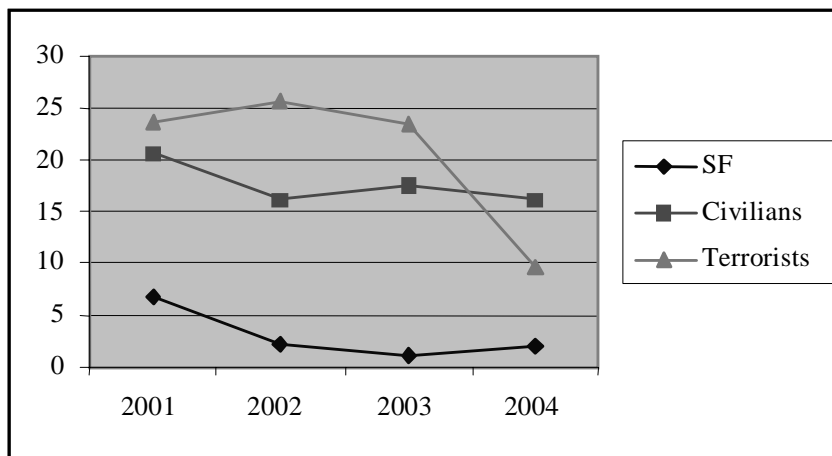
Source: Union Ministry of Home Affairs' *Annual Report, 2002-03* for the years 2001 and 2002; and [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org) for years 2003 and 2004.

Casualty figures involving terrorist violence<sup>65</sup> show a declining trend in 2004, at first glance. A closer examination of the casualty break-up, however, reveals that the number of security force personnel killed in Assam in the first eight months of 2004 has already crossed last year's figure. Also, civilian casualty appears at this juncture to be less in comparison to the preceding year, but this would be

closer to the figure in 2002. The total casualties in 2004 till August are 222. At this rate, the figure could be about 333 by the year-end as against 610, 527 and 505 in 2001, 2002 and 2003, respectively. However, till August 2004 the break-up for the civilians, security force (SF) personnel and terrorists killed in various incidents, is 128, 16 and 78, respectively. The corresponding figures by the end of the year could be 192, 24 and 117. Thus, the number of terrorists killed would go down in comparison to the three previous years, as shown in Fig. 4.

As is evident from Fig. 3, the average of the total number of fatalities in terrorist violence in the State per month for 2001, 2002 and 2003 was 50.83, 43.91 and 42.08, respectively. In contrast, the same stands at 27.75 for the first eight months in 2004. However, the average of the number of civilians killed per month till August 2004 is 16, which is closer to the figures of the previous two years. Against this, the monthly average for terrorist fatalities is just 9.75 in 2004 till the month of August.

The figure below also shows that while for the first time terrorist casualties are on the decline during the period under analysis, trends in casualties among civilian and security forces have remained more or less unchanged. This means, that the terrorists are able to inflict more casualties losing less number of their cadres.



**Fig. 4: Average Monthly Casualty (Till August 2004)**

\* Based on Data from Fig-3.

## IV

### Neighbours and Internal Security in India

The above analysis points to the fact that the targeting of external hideouts of an insurgent group like ULFA has proved inadequate in containing 'terror', though the success of Bhutan's operations are most noticeable in terms of its psychological impact on the other terrorist groups active in the region.<sup>66</sup> After the operations, the two factions of the NLFT led by Nayanbasi Jamatiya and Manto Koloj, reported to be based in Bangladesh, have begun negotiations for a political settlement,<sup>67</sup> even though the outfit is not perceived as being capable of altering the overall security environment in Assam.<sup>68</sup> There were also reports of Myanmar having initiated action<sup>69</sup> against the terrorist groups from India, which was later denied.<sup>70</sup> The ULFA and the NSCN-K are alleged to have bases there.

Bhutan's action demonstrates clearly that an individual country can address neighbours' security concern within their territories. The OAC was debated during the 12th SAARC Summit<sup>71</sup> in Islamabad; Bhutan's Prime Minister Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, observed that "lack of will" among the South Asian countries was an impediment in rooting out "the menace of terrorism" in the region. Thinley added that Bhutan's efforts should be emulated.<sup>72</sup> Member-nations also agreed to an "Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism".<sup>73</sup> The Protocol is not yet a blueprint for a regional approach to counter-terrorism.

If Bhutan's efforts towards counter-terrorism were followed as a precedent in South Asia, the disruption of external linkages of various terrorist groups would be a positive outcome. Internal dynamics contribute to the rise of groups like the ULFA in a pluralist democracy like India. At a later stage, however, organisational exigencies and covert or overt external support sustain the group and not the cause *per se* for which the group had initially 'come into being'. The ULFA was able 'to occupy centre-stage in Assam's politics' in the early 1980s and thereafter because the 'perceived socio-economic grievances' of the local people were not correctly addressed by the existing political forces, including the then nascent regional political party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP).<sup>74</sup> The ULFA, thus, was the focus of attention because it was able to use the existing conditions to rationalise its cause. The outfit could never have become 'revolutionary' 'to liberate' Assam through an 'armed national liberation struggle' given its very nature.<sup>75</sup> Udoyan Misra has aptly described this when he says, "right from the beginning the ULFA was organised as a militaristic organisation where the political wing occupied the

subsidiary status.<sup>76</sup> Political ideology being irrelevant in this case, the group was bound to degenerate with the gradual fading of the emotional element.<sup>77</sup>

India desires that its neighbours assist in addressing regional security concerns and Bhutan's OAC is a good example. Under the present scenario, internal security has become mutually dependent, at least in the context of a region like South Asia. For instance, India cannot afford to ignore the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and is looking forward for its early resolution. Indian assistance, though not necessarily military involvement, would be crucial for a political settlement there. India's interest lies in defeating the Maoists' objective of creating a 'compact revolutionary zone' from Nepal to Andhra Pradesh. In addition, India can also address China's apprehension of a possible US intervention. Not surprisingly, the US is viewing the Maoist violence with serious concern.<sup>78</sup>

The role of Bangladesh is crucial to India's internal security. The presence of anti-India elements in Bangladesh remains one of India's serious concerns.<sup>79</sup> Reports have even indicated the presence of Al Qaida.<sup>80</sup> Bangladesh has been unsuccessful in countering Indian allegations of the presence of terrorist camps on its territory in spite of India having provided their precise locations. The terrorist groups active in the Northeast, including the Tripura-based NLFT and ATTF, and the ULFA, among others, are alleged to have camps in Habibganj, Khagrachari and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area, among other districts, along India's border with Bangladesh. Such camps allow the terrorists to cross over to the other side of the border after committing terrorist acts in India.<sup>81</sup> During the recent four-day annual Director General (DG)-level meeting that concluded on January 9, 2004, India reiterated its stand. The Director General, Border Security Force, Ajai Raj Sharma handed over to his Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) counterpart, a fresh list of 194 anti-India terrorist camps and 100 prominent terrorists based in Bangladesh.<sup>82</sup> These groups also procure arms and ammunition within Bangladeshi territory. Recovery of a huge cache of arms in the CHT area on April 2, 2004 is one such instance reported in the media.<sup>83</sup> Even reports of terrorists from India being arrested or arms being seized from them, are not being publicly accepted in Bangladesh.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, the neighbourhood is important to India's internal security. Conversely, India's security is central to peace in South Asia, given its geographical spread. Understandably, India looks towards the smaller neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Pakistan, to achieve 'regional security'. As regards counter-terrorism, the respective security forces of South Asian countries could launch military operations within their sovereign boundaries and India may coordinate their efforts. Essentially, the extremists, including the Maoists, should

be contained within their area of effective presence, and this could be done by indigenous forces. Allies and friends could lend logistic support where required, as was obvious in Bhutan's case. The RBA had to wait for six years to raise the requisite force of 5,000 personnel and to establish 20 army camps along the Assam-Bhutan border<sup>85</sup> for launching the OAC. However, only a part of the visible terrorist infrastructure in the Northeast has been dismantled; even so, similar action could go a long way in preventing the terrorists from hiding in safe havens after committing acts of terrorism within India.

### References/End Notes

- 1 For the purpose of this study South Asia's geographical boundary includes those of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal.
- 2 National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) 'Chairman', Isak Chishi Swu and 'General Secretary', Thuingaleng Muivah, for instance, are based in Bangkok, Thailand's capital. Also, many Northeast militant groups are alleged to be involved in drug smuggling in the Golden Triangle area through Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Also, NSCN-Khaplang allegedly has camps in Myanmar.
- 3 For the purpose of this study, state with lower case denotes sovereign countries and State with upper case constituent provinces of a state.
- 4 There could approximately be 35 insurgent groups in Assam whose presence has been noticed since 1979 – when the emergence prevailing insurgency in the State is traced. ULFA is secessionist and has been found active in most of the districts in Assam. Another secessionist group is the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), but it's proclaimed 'objective' is exclusivist. It wants 'sovereign' Bodoland for the Bodo tribes in the north of the river Brahmaputra. Four others, among the currently active groups are exclusivist too and their 'political' objectives include more autonomy or separate 'States' within India for the ethnic groups or tribals whom they claim to represent. For details see, <http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/index.html>
- 5 ULFA was formed on April 7, 1979, with Arabinda Rajakhowa as 'Chairman', Pradip Gogoi as 'Vice President' and Paresh Paruah as 'Commander in Chief', among other leaders with a declared objective to create 'sovereign socialist Assam' through an armed struggle. For a brief description of the group, see *Militant Groups. Frontline*. (Chennai). January 3-16, 2004, **21** (1). While Pradip Gogoi is under judicial custody in Guwahati, Assam, Rajakhowa and Baruah were suspected to be hiding in Bangladesh.
- 6 Militancy, insurgency or terrorism has become interchangeable in the current Indian internal security discourse. See for instance, Ajai Sahni, *Survey of Conflict and Resolution in India's Northeast. Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*. May 2002, **12**, 39; no. 1.

- 7 NDFB, formerly the Bodo Security Force, was formed in 1988 with D.R. Nabla alias Ranjan Daimari as 'President'. Its proclaimed objectives include creation of 'sovereign' Bodoland carved out of the areas inhabited by Bodo tribe in Assam (north of the Brahmaputra river). Many NDFB top leaders including 'Vice President' Dhiren Boro and 'General Secretary', Govinda Basumatary are currently in custody in India. See *Frontline* (Chennai), no. 5.
- 8 KLO is the youngest among three organisations, which was formed on December 28, 1995, with Jiban Singha as 'Chairman'. Its declared aim is to carve out a separate Kamatapur State for the Rajbongshi tribe from the States of West Bengal and Assam. See *Frontline* (Chennai), no. 5.
- 9 Cadre-strength of ULFA in Bhutan was estimated to be 1,560, and those of NDFB and the KLO, 740 and 430, respectively. See, "Government to make last attempt at peaceful negotiations" at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/assembly03/03ulfajul18.php>.
- 10 Of the 30 camps 13 belonged to the ULFA, 12 to the NDFB, and five to the KLO. See, "RBA makes good progress in flushing out operations". *The Kuensel*. Thimpu. Internet edition at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3599&PHPSSESID=478e0a296bfe6940386c861972473c11>
- 11 The outfit was forced to shift its 'headquarters' from the Lakhi Pathar area in Upper Assam's Tinsukia district following the Indian Army's 'Operation Bajrang' against it in 1990. Two subsequent operations were also launched against ULFA - in 1991 Operation Rhino, and with Myanmar security forces Operation Golden Bird in 1995.
- 12 The groups are capable of further deteriorating the security environment by indulging in indiscriminate violence. The NDFB, for instance, had killed 21 non-tribals in Datgiri village of Assam's Kokrajhar district on October 27, 2002. For details of the incident, see Another Round in Assam. *Frontline*. November 9-22, 2002, **19** (23).
- 13 See, Samir Kumar Das, Assam: Insurgency and the Disintegration of Civil Society. *Faultlines*. November 2002, **13** 96. ULFA alleged that Assam-New Delhi relationship was that of 'internal-colonialism' and the underdevelopment in Assam was due to the 'neglect' by the Union Government.
- 14 For instance, on August 15, 2004, the group killed 14 school children in a blast in the Dhemaji district. See, 14 Killed, 40 Hurt in Dhemaji Blast. *The Assam Tribune*. Guwahati. August 17, 2004. Later, on August 26, 2004, the "ULFA militants set off bombs blasts in at least seven places across Assam killing six persons, including two BSF men and a minor girl, and injuring 67". See, "6 Killed, 67 Injured in Assam Blasts". *The Indian Express*. August 27, 2004 at <http://www.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=35477>.
- 15 See, "Done But Not Over: Bhutan". *The Times of India*. New Delhi. January 20, 2004 at <http://timesofindiatimes.com/articleshow/431667.cms>
- 16 *The Kuensel*, Bhutan's national newspaper reported on January 3, 2004: "The last of the 30 camps that were established on Bhutanese soil by the three separatist

groups from India was burnt down and the operation to flush out the militants who were dislodged from these camps was making good progress.” See, no. 10.

- 17 Bhutan Launches Operations Against ULFA. *The Times of India*. March 10, 2004.
- 18 The number of casualties reported in the media also varies. On December 22, 2003, *The Kuensel* reported, “While both sides are reported to have suffered casualties, the total number of deaths and injuries are not yet known”, however, earlier quoting a Government spokesperson it had said on December 16 that the Royal Bhutan Army had lost 16 soldiers. See, <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3556>. Another report said that 90 terrorists including 40 NDFB cadres, 38 ULFA cadres and 12 KLO cadres, besides 40 members of the RBA had been killed. See, *The Times of India*. December 18, 2003 at <http://timesofindia.com/articleshow/549401.cms>. Chennai-based *The Hindu* reported that 120 terrorists and six to seven Bhutanese Army personnel were killed. Yet another report said that more than 100 terrorists were killed. See, *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, December 18, 2003. Besides that a media report from Bangladesh said, “At least 40 soldiers and 100 militants were killed in two days since Bhutan launched its first ever modern military operation against Indian separatists...” See *The Daily Star*. Dhaka, dated December 18, 2003, at <http://www.thedailystar.net/2003/12/18/d3121801066.htm>.
- 19 See, Myanmar Operation in Sight. *The Telegraph*. Kolkata. January 3, 2004.
- 20 See, ULFA Publicity Secy, Top NDFB, KLO Ultras Held. *The Assam Tribune*. Guwahati. December 18, 2003.
- 21 See, Anthony Davis, and Rahul Bedi, Pressure from India Leads to Bhutan Insurgent Crackdown. *Jane’s Intelligence Review*. February 2004, Thanet Press Ltd.; Margata, Kent. 34-35.
- 22 Bhutan’s Foreign Ministry in its statement on December 15, 2003 mentioned the 81st National Assembly resolution in this regard. See, “The Militant Problem.” *The Kuensel*. December 15, 2003 at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3552>
- 23 Cited in Jaideep Saikia, Autumn in Springtime: ULFA Battles for Survival. *Faultlines*. November 2000, 744.
- 24 In fact, India had been persuading Bhutan to flush the terrorists for the last six years. Bhutan maintained that it preferred negotiations with them for their ‘friendly’ exit. See, Mahendra P. Lama. Experiments with Democracy. *Frontline*. January 03 16, 2004, 21 (1).
- 25 See, Mahanta Meets Bhutan Envoy. *Assam Tribune*. June 8, 2000.
- 26 Cited in Jaideep Saikia, no. 23, p. 41.
- 27 Bhutan’s King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk is reported to have said that in the event of a conflict with the ULFA, NDFB and KLO, more than 66,000 Bhutanese nationals in 10 dzongkhags (districts) – Samdrup Jongkhar, Pema Gatschel, Trashigang, Mongar, Zhemgang, Samtse, Chukha, Dagana, Tsirang, and Sarpang would be exposed to risk because the terrorists had camps or travelled through them. The last time



- Bhutan fought a war was in 1865 when the 18 Duars (passes) were lost to the British. See, "The People Must Defend their Country." *The Kuensel*. May 17, 2003 at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=2855>.
- 28 "Flushing Out ULFA" (Editorial). *The Hindu*. December 18, 2003 at <http://www.hindu.com/2003/12/18/stories/20033121800891000.htm>
- 29 That the terrorists entered Bhutan's territory clandestinely was reiterated in the official statement after the offensive against the terrorists began. no. 22.
- 30 The Bhutan King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk himself conceded that the issue had dominated the National Assembly since 1997. no. 9.
- 31 "Resolving the Militant Problem". *The Kuensel*. December 15, 2003 at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3551>.
- 32 no. 9.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 no. 31.
- 35 See, "Security Troops Continue Operations to Flush Indian Militants Out of Bhutan". *The Kuensel*. December 20, 2003 at <http://kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3571&PHPSESSID=a6d152ca4e5cefdc7ff5b7ab205a25d5>.
- 36 no. 27.
- 37 no. 22.
- 38 no. 23, p. 36.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Wilkinson would define terrorism as the systematic use of coercive intimidation, usually to serve political ends. See, Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*. 2001. Frank Cass; London. p. 12. However, it would be evident in the case of organisations like ULFA that more than 'political ends', it is their survival that become the first priority and terror the tool of survival, particularly of the leadership.
- 41 It is interesting to observe here the comments made by K. P. S. Gill regarding the terrorist movement in Punjab that swore by the 'objective' of Khalistan, an independent homeland for the Sikhs of Punjab. He writes, "Nor was indeed any 'Sikh aspiration' involved in the movement for Khalistan. Far from being a revolution against 'oppression', this was actually a rebellion of a privileged quasi-feudal caste-based orthodoxy that saw its privileges shrinking." See his article, *Endgame in Punjab: 1988-1993. Faultlines*. May 1999, 15.
- 42 Maoist movement in Nepal. "started with a 40-point charter of social, economic and political (nationalist) demands presented to the then Sher Bahadur Deuba government in February 1996 by Dr Babu Ram Bhattarai." See, Lok Raj Baral, "The Maoist Puzzle". *South Asian Intelligence Review*. August 12, 2002, 1 (4) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/1\\_4.htm#assessment2](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/1_4.htm#assessment2). The organisation that is leading the movement is known as the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-

- M), more widely as Maoist insurgents. Objective of the group is to establish a 'classless society' through a protracted 'people's war' along the lines suggested by Mao Zedong and overthrowing the Monarchy. The group's documents are available online, for instance at <http://www.cpnm.org/documents/beterworld.htm>.
- 43 Approximately 100,000 Bhutaneese of Nepali origin are settled in the eastern Nepal district of Jhapa who were displaced following the violence in the early 1990s. See, Kinley Dorji, "The Refugee Conundrum: Getting There?" *South Asian Intelligence Review*. November 10, 2003, **2** (17) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_17.htm#ASSESSMENT2](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_17.htm#ASSESSMENT2).
- 44 Hussain, Wasbir, "Going for the Kill." *South Asian Intelligence Review*. December 22, 2003, **2** (23) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_23.htm#assessment1](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_23.htm#assessment1).
- 45 "ULFA, NDFB, KLO Form New Outfit in Bhutan". *Assam Tribune*. July 17, 2003 at <http://assamtribune.com/jul1703/at03.htm>
- 46 The Naga extremist groups have now entered a ceasefire agreement with the Union Government. Their demands include unified 'homeland' for Naga tribe carved out of the Naga populated areas in the present States of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.
- 47 ATTF is active in Tripura, and its demands include independent homeland for the indigenous Tripuri tribal population.
- 48 A tribal extremist outfit that demands 'Achik land' for the Garo tribe in the State of Meghalaya.
- 49 Gunaratna, Rohan, "International and Regional Implications of the Sri Lankan Tamil Insurgency" at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/sinhala/rohan.htm>.
- 50 For an analysis of inter-theatre and intra-theatre linkages of various terrorist groups in the Northeast India, see, P. V. Ramana, Networking in the Northeast: Partners in Terror. *Faultlines*. April 2002, **11** 99-126. ULFA was reported to have taken assistance of the NSCN-K to collect extortion in the Sonari area of Assam. See, "Hunger Gnaws at ULFA Hideout in Nagaland" *The Telegraph*. Kolkata. September 19, 2002 at [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1020919/asp/frontpage/story\\_1213180.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1020919/asp/frontpage/story_1213180.asp).
- 51 In his statement in Assam Legislative Assembly on April 6, 2000, the then Chief Minister, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta had submitted a detailed account on ISI's activities in Assam and its linkages with ULFA. The document is available online at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/isi\\_activities.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/isi_activities.htm)
- 52 Bhaumik, Subir, *The Insurgent Crossfire: North East India*. 2000. Lancers; New Delhi. p. 40.
- 53 Misra, Udayon, *Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. 2000. Indian Institute of Advanced Study; Shimla. pp. 134-6, and Jaideep Saikia. *Allies in the Closet: Overground Linkages and Terrorism in Assam*. *Faultlines*. April 2001, **8** 105-125.

- 54 A tribal extremist group in Tripura, two of the three factions of which have recently declared ceasefire with the security forces in April 2004.
- 55 For a detailed analysis of politics-terrorism nexus in Tripura see, Praveen Kumar, Tripura: Beyond the Insurgency-Politics Nexus. *Faultlines*. July 2003, **14** 99-122.
- 56 Saikia, Jaideep, Terror Sans Frontiers: Islamic Militancy in North East India. ACDIS Paper (Program in Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, July 2003, pp. 63-64.
- 57 For an assessment of the ISI activities in the Northeast, see, Jaideep Saikia, The ISI Reaches East: Anatomy of a Conspiracy. *Faultlines*. August 2000, **6** 61-78.
- 58 Saikia, Jaideep, no. 53.
- 59 See for instance, Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Human Rights Organisations in the Northeast: Credibility in Question". Article no. 726, April 10, 2002 at <http://www.ipcs.org/ipcs/issueIndex2.jsp?action=showView&kValue=265&issue=1014&status=article&mod=b>.
- 60 Disclosed to the writer by an officer from the Indian Army who had served along the Indo-Bhutan border.
- 61 Saikia, Jaideep, no. 23, pp. 42-43.
- 62 "Snap Ties with Bhutan: ULFA" at <http://www.centralchronicle.com/20031222/2212002.htm>.
- 63 For the details of the incident see Bibhu Prasad Routray. "Assam: Karbi Kuki Clashes". *South Asian Intelligence Review*. March 29, 2004, **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).
- 64 See Table for the civilians killed by ULFA and NDFB between 1997 and 2001 at [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)
- 65 The figure includes all incidents involving various terrorist groups active in Assam.
- 66 "Bhutan's action against militants a psychological warfare". *Indian Express*. January 20, 2004, at <http://www.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=27690>.
- 67 "Centre Opens Peace Talks with NLFT Factions". *Assam Tribune*. April 16, 2004 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/apr1604/at06.html>
- 68 Routray, Bibhu Prasad and Sayed Sajjad Ali. "Tripura: Making Sense of a Surrender". *South Asian Intelligence Review*. January 19, 2004, **12** (27) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_27.htm#assessment2](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_27.htm#assessment2). Also see, "Tripura Not Euphoric About NLFT's Peace Initiatives" at [www.northeasttribune.com](http://www.northeasttribune.com), April 16, 2004.
- 69 India and Myanmar had jointly conducted Operation Golden Bird against ULFA in 1995 to destroy latter's camp on Myanmar's territory.
- 70 Myanmar Yet to Take Action Against Indian Insurgents. *Assam Tribune*. January 19, 2004.

- 71 The Association comprises India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives. The 12th SAARC Summit was held between January 4 and 6, 2003.
- 72 “Blunt Bhutan Message to Pak”. *The Telegraph*. January 5, 2003 at [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1040105/asp/nation/story\\_2752520.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1040105/asp/nation/story_2752520.asp).
- 73 According to Article 1 of the Protocol, “The purpose of this Additional Protocol is to strengthen the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, particularly by criminalizing the provision, collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts and taking further measures to prevent and suppress financing of such acts. Towards this end, State Parties agree to adopt necessary measures to strengthen co-operation among them, in accordance with the terms of this Additional Protocol.” For the full text of the Protocol see official website of the Association at <http://www.saarc-sec.org/>.
- 74 Baruah, Sanjib, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. 1999. Oxford University Press; New Delhi. pp. 142-143. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) spearheaded the ‘anti-foreigners’ movement in Assam between 1979 and 1985, purportedly to save Assam from ‘political, cultural and economic domination’ by non-Assamese forces, particularly the Bangladeshis. Its leaders including Prafulla Kumar Mahanta later formed the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) that was voted to power following the August 15, 1985 Accord.
- 75 ULFA calls itself ‘revolutionary’ and also mentions its purported objective on its website, available at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/ulfa.htm>.
- 76 Misra, Udayon, no. 53, p. 139. On page 135 Misra even argues that given the ULFA’s “structure and class character” it could not have been either a communist or radical Marxist organisation.
- 77 Saikia has analysed the different streams of views about ULFA. See, Jaideep, Saikia, *Revolutionaries or Warlords: ULFA’s Organizational Profile*. *Faultlines*. July 2001, 9105-129.
- 78 See for instance, Thomas A. Marks, *Insurgency in Nepal*. *Faultlines*. February 2004, 15 1-37.
- 79 For a detailed analysis of the use of Bangladesh territory for their activities by the Northeast terrorist outfits see, Chapter 2 entitled ‘Swadhin Asom or Brihat Bangladesh’ (Independent Assam or Greater Bangladesh) in Jaideep Saikia, no. 56.
- 80 See, Alex Perry, “Deadly Cargo”. *Time*. at <http://www.time.com/time/asia.magazine/article/0,13673,501021021-364423,00.html>
- 81 See for instance, Praveen Kumar, “Tripura: Lethal Strikes from External Bases”. *South Asian Intelligence Review*. May 12, 2003, 1 (43) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/1\\_43.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/1_43.htm).
- 82 India, Bangladesh Disagree on Illegal Immigration, Camps. *The Times of India*. January 10, 2004.
- 83 Khan, Shahedul Anam, “Chittagong Arms Haul: Some Queries”. *The Daily Star*. April 5, 2004 at [www.thedailystar.net](http://www.thedailystar.net).

- 84 Hussain, Wasbir, "Increasing Pressure". *South Asian Intelligence Review*. January 12, 2004, 2 (26) at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_26.htm#assessment 2](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_26.htm#assessment%20).
- 85 "India and Bhutan are in Close Cooperation on Militant Problem". *The Kuensel*. September 21, 2003 at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/article.php?sid=3304>.

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