Assam: Police kill at least 10 during protest against Indian Army murder

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In keeping with the arbitrary and violent manner that Indian security forces typically respond to protests in the country's north-east, police shot and killed at least 10 villagers and wounded more than 20 others during a February 10 protest in the state of Assam. The demonstrators were demanding punishment of Indian Army personnel responsible for the murder of a young villager who had been taken away from his house by army personnel.

Ajit Mahanta, a 30-year-old day-labourer with two young children, Satyajit (4) and Dharmendra (2), was picked up by soldiers on February 4 at his home in Tirak village, reputedly because he was suspected of belonging to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a banned insurgent group. The ULFA, emerged out of an exclusivist agitation mounted by the All-Assam Student Union (AASU) against Bangladeshi immigrant workers during the late seventies and early eighties. It claims to be waging a "national liberation struggle" of the Assamese against "colonial rulers" in New Delhi.

According to the *Telegraph*, a Calcutta daily, Mahanta's body was dumped by army personnel at the casualty ward in the Assam Medical College Hospital in Dibrugarh around 2 am February 5.

The Army initially claimed that Mahanta died after sustaining fatal injuries from a fall while trying to escape. This feeble excuse was contradicted by a police official who was quoted by the *Telegraph* as saying, "If he (Mahanta) died in the way the army has described, why didn't the troops hand over the body to the police, which is the established procedure in counter-insurgency operations? The army is getting itself into deep trouble by trying to cook up a flimsy story." According to the post-mortem report, Mahanta died of profuse internal bleeding.

Two days later thousands of angry people from the surrounding villages gathered in Kakopathar and rose up in protest against the army, which has the power to shoot and kill at its discretion while carrying out counter-insurgency operations. The villagers blockaded a major national highway, demanded that the responsible army personnel be handed over to them for trial, and refused to budge despite a large and armed contingent of security forces. The utter hatred the people feel towards an army that has killed thousands of people under the pretext of fighting insurgencies, was reflected in slogans such as "Indian army go back" and "Indian army are secret killers." The villagers pointed out that Ajit Mahanta was an innocent man with no police record.

The victim's 60-year-old mother Sabita and wife Kadamoni, along with her two young children, attended the demonstration. Recalling how her husband was picked up, Kadamoni said: "Five people in army attire came and called him out. They took him away before I could do anything. When I tried to call our neighbours, one of them showed me his gun and asked me to shut up." A tearful Kadamoni continued: "My husband was a daily wage-earner. What will I do with these two kids now that he is dead?"

Many of the women who have participated in the demonstrations protesting Mahanta's murder have threatened to stage a nude protest if the army fails to punish the guilty personnel. Similar nude protests were held in July 2004 in the neighbouring state of Manipur following an army killing of a young woman in its custody (see India: Popular agitation against army atrocities engulfs the northeast state of Manipur).

The demonstrations over Mahanta's murder continued unabated and on February 10, up to 20,000 people gathered in a further show of defiance against the Indian army. The protesters demanded that Assam Chief Minister Arun Gogoi, a member of the Congress Party, which dominates the United Progressive Alliance government at the center, and Assam's Governor, (Lt. Gen. Retd.) Ajai Singh, personally assured them that there will be no more killing of innocent people under the pretext of counter-insurgency operations.

The demonstrators were met by a large contingent of paramilitary police who fired tear gas to disperse the crowd. When the villagers showed defiance the police opened fire killing at least ten and wounding a further twenty. This enraged the demonstrators even more who then pelted the

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police with stones and subsequently stormed several police stations, killing one of the police officers.

Following the police's murderous action, voices in the government and security apparatus began to push for a change of course out of fear that the repression would only harden popular opposition. A senior military officer was quoted as saying, "All our hard work against ULFA has been undone by this single incident."

Indian Army chief-of-Staff Gen. J.J. Singh is reported to have urged the military in Assam to hold a speedy and impartial inquiry into Mahanta's killing. In a clear admission of the army's culpability, the commander of the Indian Army Eastern Command, Lt. Gen Arvind Sharma, visited the bereaved family on February 12 and handed a compensation check of Rs. 100,000 (about $US2,275) and a cash amount of Rs. 5,000 to the victim's wife Kadamoni. He also told the widow that the Army would be willing to adopt her two children.

The north-east—which is comprised of the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh—has long suffered under the repression of the Indian armed forces, which has been deployed in the region for decades fighting various insurgencies. Although rich in minerals including petroleum and forest resources, the north-east remains largely undeveloped despite the Indian ruling elite's claim that the region is granted more "development aid" than other parts of India.

Whatever the truth of this claim, the development funds pale in comparison with the amount New Delhi has spent on military activities in the region. Moreover, much of the development money has never reached the people, as it is siphoned off through corruption and business deals by politicians, their cronies and various local elites.

Introduction of capitalist relations have destroyed once primitive self-sufficient tribal economies. The lack of development in the region has resulted in 25 percent unemployment and deep resentment towards the Indian state, providing fertile ground for the rise of a number of national-ethnic insurgencies, many of them of an explicitly exclusivist character.

Whatever support these groups have gained has largely been as a result of the actions of the Indian government, which has coupled the plundering of the region's rich resources, with violent repression.

Assam with a population of 27 million produces around 15 percent of India's domestic petroleum and 50 percent of its tea.

In addition to its resources, the region is of strategic importance to the ruling elite because of its location. It straddles the borders of China, Burma and Bangladesh and is viewed by the Indian elite as the gateway to south-east Asia, an area with which it is eager to develop trade and geo-political ties.

Unable to provide any solution to the chronic socio-economic problems of the north-east, successive Indian governments, no matter their ideological orientation, have relied upon legislation such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that grants unrestricted powers to the armed forces to combat insurgencies and was first crafted by the British Indian colonial state. Armed with such legal powers, the army has run amok, killing innocent people, arresting at will, jailing and torturing the local people and otherwise humiliating them.

Despite UPA Prime Minister Manmohan Singh being a member of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) from Assam, he has shown little interest in the problems afflicting the state and region. Instead, he has taken the lead in opening up the state's oil wealth for plunder by private companies and urged the dismantling of the state electricity monopoly in order to open up this vital sector to private capital.

With an eye towards the upcoming assembly election in Assam, the UPA government has opened "peace talks" with the ULFA through its nominated civilian representatives. The government has even accepted their demand to discuss "autonomy" for the state and has promised to consider releasing some of ULFA leaders from jail. In an article headlined "ULFA talks a boon for Congress during Assam elections," the *Newindpress* web site quoted a political analyst as saying: "This is a well-planned strategy by the government ahead of state elections and could help the ruling party in a big way."

While the peace talks are an electoral maneuver, it is by no means excluded that the ULFA leadership will cut a deal with the Indian government and accept integration into the local state apparatus and ruling elite as did the Bodo Liberation Front, which claimed to represent Assam's Bodo people.

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