Assam, India: Separatists' killing of migrants provides pretext for continuing state repression

Vilani Peiris
17 March 2007

In a coordinated series of attacks in January, the separatist United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) murdered at least 62 migrant workers in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam.

The ULFA bases itself on an exclusivist "anti-immigrant" ideology and has a long record of attacking non-Assamese, especially poor migrants from Bangladesh and from Bihar and other Indian states, who have moved, or whose ancestors moved, to Assam in the hopes of eking out a living.

Between January 5 and 7, the ULFA shot dead some 48 people in eastern and upper Assam. Earlier three people had been killed and more than 20 injured in a string of bomb blasts. The month ended as it began with the ULFA gunning down two workers on January 29.

Most of the victims of these attacks were highly oppressed Bihari migrants or the descendants of Bihari migrants—brick kiln workers, cow herders, petty traders and day labourers. While the ULFA targets the Biharis as "outsiders," much of Assam's Bihari population has in fact lived in the state for three and even four generations.

On January 8 hundreds marched in Bihar and burned effigies of Tarun Gogoi, Assam's chief minister and state Congress Party leader. The protesters demanded that Assam's state government do more to ensure the safety of Bihari workers and their families in Assam.

The ULFA, in the December 20 issue of its organ *Freedom*, scapegoated migrant workers declaring, "Illegal migrants from the rest of the country have threatened the existence of the state." Similarly its mid-January issue warned: "Again we appeal to those people coming from colonial India to stay away during this conflict period. We also appeal to all concerned, whether Hindi-speaking or not, not to cooperate with the occupational forces to carry on oppression and repression in Asom (Assam) so as to ruin the national liberation struggle."

The ULFA claims that on January 1 and 2 the Bihar regiment of the Indian army killed five ULFA members and demolished the houses of several innocents after receiving information from "Hindi-speaking people."

Following the ULFA's early January killing spree, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid a visit to the state. While there, he declared, "The Government of India is firm in its resolve to work with the people and the state government to ensure that terrorist groups do not succeed in their nefarious designs. There will be no compromise with these groups if they resort to violence."

As a political gesture, Manmohan Singh suggested the government might be open to resuming negotiations with the ULFA: "At the same time, I would like to reiterate that the doors for dialogue are open to all disaffected groups—including the ULFA—which are willing to abjure violence."

Various Indian governments and the ULFA have engaged in on-again/off-again peace talks for years. There has been a marked increase in ULFA attacks since last September, when India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government cancelled the most recent "truce," having declared that the latest round of negotiations with the ULFA had ended in failure.

Since the latest ULFA atrocities, thousands of Hindi-speaking migrants, primarily from the neighbouring state of Bihar, have fled Assam. Many others have been forced to seek refuge in dilapidated government-run camps.

The ULFA was formed in 1979 in the wake of an exclusivist agitation by the All-Assam Student Union (AASU) against Bangladeshi "immigrant" workers. (In fact the state border between Assam and Bangladesh was only erected in 1947, when South Asia's departing British colonial overlords connived with the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to divide the subcontinent along communal lines into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India.)

At its founding in 1979 as now, the ULFA claims to be waging a "national liberation struggle" of the Assamese against "colonial rulers" in New Delhi.

With several million Hindi speaking people migrating to Assam from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh over the past quarter century, the ULFA has, however, redirected its exclusivist violence, making the Biharis and other Hindi-speakers, not migrants from Bangladeshi, its targets of choice.

The ULFA's virulent campaign against migrants serves simultaneously to divide the Assamese workers from their class

© World Socialist Web Site

brethren in India and to pressure the Indian government to grant Assam some form of political autonomy if not outright independence. Publicly the ULFA declares its aim to be nothing less than full independence for Assam.

Assam, like other states in India's northeast, has for decades suffered under the jackboot of the security forces that New Delhi has dispatched to the region to fight various separatist insurgencies.

Although Assam is rich in minerals, petroleum and forest resources, the state remains largely undeveloped and poverty and unemployment are rampant. Quite simply, the Indian bourgeoisie and a parasitic local elite have siphoned off much of the wealth generated from Assam's resources for themselves.

Indian state repression and economic underdevelopment are the main causes for the growth of separatist sentiment, not just in Assam but across the north-east.

The ULFA draws the bulk of its support from unemployed youth and students, particularly in rural areas where poverty and unemployment are especially severe. Outlawed in India under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the ULFA operates from camps near or on the other side of India's borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan.

The ULFA's political perspective is geared towards creating a local elite that can exploit the state's resources and labour power for its own enrichment. Thus it utilizes separatism to split the Assamese-speaking working class from those who speak Hindi and pejoratively dubs the latter as "foreigners."

Seizing upon the recent attacks, the ruling Congress-led UPA and Assam state governments have launched yet another anti-ULFA counterinsurgency campaign. "No quarter" will be "given to the ULFA," declared Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony, following a meeting with Tarun Gogoi and Indian Army commander J.J. Singh in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The government has deployed tens of thousands of personnel from various military and paramilitary forces to step up operations against the ULFA in both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. As in the north-western state of Jammu and Kashmir, such operations invariably result in Indian security forces murdering or detaining innocents, stoking wider resentment that in turn feeds the anti-Indian insurgency.

The Indian elite is keen to stamp out the insurgency in Assam and the northeast so as to implement its "look-east policy"—a dramatic expansion of trade and investment ties with Southeast Asia. New Delhi is especially eager to improve relations with Myanmar (formerly Burma) so as to gain access to the country's large natural gas deposits and so as to counteract China's aggressive courting of the Myanmar military regime.

The Indian government has asked Myanmar's military government to assist it in clamping down on the ULFA. To date, the Myanmar military has taken a noncommittal stand, asking India to provide it with information as to the location of ULFA camps.

Similarly the Indian government has pressured Bhutan to act against the ULFA. In response, the kingdom launched a frontal assault against ULFA cadres encamped in border areas of Bhutan last year.

Indirect talks between the Indian government and ULFA broke down last September when the separatist group demanded the release of five of its jailed leaders as a precondition for entering into direct negotiations with the central government. The Indian government, for its part, refused to extend the ceasefire declared to facilitate the indirect talks unless the ULFA gave a written commitment to hold direct talks.

After the negotiations unravelled, Paresh Barua, leader of the ULFA's military wing, told the BBC: "We wanted the negotiations to continue for a final settlement.... But Delhi has shown its true colours by resuming military operations."

The opposition parties in the state—including the Asom Gana Parishad, the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Asom Gana Parisahad (Progressive) and the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF)—have demanded that the central government impose presidential rule in Assam, that is they have called on New Delhi to sack the current state government. This antidemocratic demand is an attempt to exploit mass anger in the state against the ULFA's ethnic killings so as to give the security forces carte blanche to mount a campaign of terror and violence.

The ULFA's exclusivist politics, as manifested in its targeting of poor migrant workers, are deeply reactionary. However it needs to be emphasized that the root cause of the conflict in Assam is the inability of the Indian bourgeoisie and its political representatives to address the region's longstanding socioeconomic problems and its use of draconian repression—murder and mass detentions—to safeguards its venal rule.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site