

Eighteen coal miners and villagers massacred by Indian army in Nagaland

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Indian Army and paramilitary forces killed 18 civilians, including at least 6 coal miners, in the northeastern state of Nagaland last weekend.

The wanton massacre of poor workers and villagers is the direct outcome of the regime of military impunity and terror that has been in force in much of India's northeast under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or AFSPA since 1958. Under the AFSPA, security forces in areas the central government declares "disturbed" have the "right" to shoot and kill anyone they claim is breaking the law or threatening public order, to conduct warrantless searches, and to detain people on mere suspicion.

The security forces' killing spree began late afternoon Saturday, when an Indian Army Special Forces unit ambushed a pick-up truck near Oting, a Nagaland village close to India's border with Myanmar, that was conveying coal miners to their homes after a day of hard work. Six of the miners died on the spot. Two others were critically wounded.

The military would subsequently claim the deaths were the outcome of a case of "mistaken identity" and that they had set up an ambush for separatist insurgents fighting for an independent "Nagalim" based on an "intelligence tipoff." Neither the military nor India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which has issued a hollow "apology" for the coal miners' deaths, questions the military's right under the AFSPA to use deadly force without warning.

In two subsequent shooting incidents both directly tied to the first, the Indian Army killed a further 10 people. Eight of these died on Saturday, while two others succumbed Sunday to gunshot wounds from the previous evening. One of the victims had accompanied a local BJP official who was investigating reports that shots had been fired near Oting. The other nine were part of a large group of Oting villagers who went looking for the coal miners when they did not return from work.

These subsequent deaths arose from the Army Special Forces' attempts to cover up their murder of the coal miners.

According to the BJP official and the Oting villagers, when they came upon the slaughter site, military personnel were in the process of removing the corpses and dressing them in khaki-coloured clothes with the intent of claiming their victims were insurgents.

When the villagers realized what was happening, they set fire to three military vehicles. The soldiers, who were from the 21 Para (Special Forces), responded by firing indiscriminately at the villagers. According to the police report, the soldiers fled the scene "even firing in the coal mine hutments" as they retreated. In the melee, one soldier was killed. All told, the India Army killed 16 people and a further 14 were seriously injured. One soldier was killed in the clash with the villagers and a couple more injured.

Fearing further protests from a population that has repeatedly taken to the streets to demand the repeal of the AFSPA, the authorities invoked the draconian Section 144 of the Criminal Code Sunday. It bans all gatherings and restricts vehicle movement to emergency vehicles and those carrying essential commodities. The Nagaland state government also suspended mobile Internet and data services and bulk SMS for the entire Mon district to which Oting village belongs.

Nevertheless, there was a further bloody incident on Sunday. When the Konyak Union, which styles itself as the "apex body of the Konyak Naga tribe," postponed a mass funeral for the military's victims, hundreds of angry demonstrators attacked its offices in Tiru and the nearby camp of the Assam Rifles, a heavily armed paramilitary force long involved in counterinsurgency operations.

According to the state government report: "After almost an hour into the melee, the second round of continuous firing by the Assam Rifles resulted in the mob running for safety and protection. After the firing ceased, one protestor by the name of Leong of Chi village was confirmed to be dead on the spot and six others sustained bullet wound injuries." One of the wounded subsequently died. Local media report two Assam Rifle soldiers also died; however this has not been picked up by the national press.

Nagaland's state government is a two-party coalition, with the BJP serving as the junior party of the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP). State Chief Minister and NDPP leader Neiphiu Rio has announced a measly Rs. 500,000 (\$6,750) in compensation to the families of the deceased. While shutting down the "internet" and imposing other "law and order" measures, Rio and his government, in a transparent attempt to deflect mass anger over the Indian Army's actions, is now calling on the BJP-led central government to withdraw the AFSPA.

"AFSPA," the Chief Minister demagogically declaimed, "gives powers to the Army to arrest civilians without any arrest warrant, raid houses and also kill people. But there is no action against the security forces."

Nagaland, a small state with a population of just 2.25 million, has been ravaged for decades by atrocities committed by the Indian army, the Assam Rifles and other heavily armed paramilitary forces as they seek to ensure the Indian state's unfettered dominance of the resource-rich and strategically significant northeast. As elsewhere in the region, the people of Nagaland have been subject simultaneously to neglect, brutal exploitation and repression by India's capitalist ruling elite.

Much of the northeast's population is comprised of tribal peoples and religious minorities. Christians, for example, make up close to 90 percent of Nagaland's population.

Undoubtedly, the Narendra Modi-led BJP government's relentless promotion of Hindu supremacism has increased tensions, fear and alienation in the northeast. The region has repeatedly been swept by mass protests against the BJP government's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act, which for the first time makes religion a criterion for determining citizenship and threatens to strip millions of Muslims living in the northeast of their citizenship rights.

The BJP government has also been conspicuous in its brutal treatment of Rohingya refugees, who have sought refuge from persecution by the Myanmar government in India's northeastern states and Bangladesh. Modi's chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, has repeatedly labelled these helpless victims a "security threat" who, along with other Muslim migrants, should be thrown into the Bay of Bengal.

While fuelled by genuine popular grievances, the various tribal-based secessionist movements that have arisen in the northeast over the past six decades offer no progressive alternative to Indian capitalism. Championing exclusivist national-ethnic demands, they have frequently clashed with each other. Many have subsequently been incorporated into the mainstream of establishment politics, becoming regional props of Indian bourgeois rule.

In 2015, the BJP government signed a "framework peace

agreement" with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. However, talks toward implementing that deal have stalled due to continuing differences, and a minority continues to wage an insurgency with the aim of creating a sovereign Nagalim out of Nagaland, and parts of several neighbouring northeastern states and Myanmar.

At its adoption in 1958 under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's Congress Party government, the AFSPA was aimed at an earlier Naga separatist political movement and insurgency. Ultimately it came to be employed against ethno-secessionist movements in all seven states that today comprise the northeast, giving the military vast arbitrary powers, which it has used with impunity in ruthlessly suppressing opposition to the Indian state.

In 1991, it was invoked in Jammu and Kashmir—India's lone Muslim majority state till it was stripped of that status in a 2019 constitutional coup—and for the past three decades it has provided pseudo legal-constitutional cover for savage state repression, including murder, torture, forced disappearances, and phony "encounter killings."

Not least among the AFSPA's many outrageous antidemocratic provisions is the stipulation that military personnel cannot be prosecuted for crimes committed in government-declared "disturbed areas."

In addition to Nagaland, it is currently in force in the northeast in the states of Assam, Manipur (apart from its principal city, Imphal), and parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

Human Rights Watch, in a report published in 2008 on the 50th anniversary of the AFSPA's adoption, documented some of the gruesome acts of mass killing, rape, disappearances, and torture committed under its provision of blanket immunity. It also emphasized that civilians have been the principal victims of these crimes.

Whilst there have been mass protests for many years against the AFSPA in the northeast, the Indian military has bitterly opposed calls for its withdrawal or repeal and central governments, whether led by the Congress Party or BJP, have hastened to reassure the top brass that that is not in the cards.



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