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# Terror in the Abode of Clouds: Insurgency and Nexus Politics in Meghalaya-1994-2004

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*Considered a new comer to the problem of insurgency in comparison to other Northeastern states of India, Meghalaya has been witnessing organized armed violence since the early 1990s. Over a period, intermittent violence led to full-fledged insurgency movement, camouflaging itself under the cover of a movement based on ethnic identity. The situation has been manipulated by the social elites, including politicians and bureaucracy while the disillusioned youths have been a pawn in the game of power struggle.*

Violence against the outsiders (*dkhars*), comprising Nepalese, Bengali (Bangladeshis), Assamese and Marwaris, has been on rise since the birth of the state.<sup>1</sup> Many a times it got manifested through bloody riots between the indigenous tribal populations, consisting of Khasis, Garos and Jaintias, and the outsiders. Over a period of time, these sporadic rioting led to full-fledged insurgency movement, camouflaging itself under the cover of a movement based on ethnic identity. Nevertheless, the idea of sub-nationalism and ethnic identity seems far-fetched a cause for the armed violence for the homegrown underground elements in Meghalaya. Unlike its neighbouring Assam and Tripura, the underground outfits in Meghalaya initiated a movement against the outsiders primarily focussing on economical deprivation as an agenda. But in course of time criminal elements got attached to the whole movement and diluted it to the core. As John R Bowen rightly observes, "The very phrase 'ethnic conflict' misguides us. It has become a shorthand way to speak about any and all violent confrontations between groups of people living in the same country. Some of these conflicts involve ethnic or cultural

identity, but most are about getting more power, land, or other resources..."<sup>2</sup>

This paper seeks to examine the rise of insurgency and violence in Meghalaya, simultaneously probing the links between the politics and insurgency in the light of recent socio-political developments in the state. It, however, does not aim to deconstruct or reconstruct the much-perceived theories of ethnic conflict taking Meghalaya as referent.

### **Situating Conflict in Meghalaya State**

The genesis of insurgency though traced back to inter-tribal rivalry and indigenous acrimony against the outsiders, there is at least one visible factor primarily responsible for the growth of indigenous militant outfits and successive bloodletting in the otherwise hospitable state. The Sharma Commission<sup>3</sup>, appointed by the Meghalaya government to investigate growing ethnic conflicts in Shillong from August to October (1992), observed in its report, that the primary cause of such disturbances has been economic and growing menace of unemployment in the state. The fear of the indigenous tribal populations regarding the demographic change in the state and a steady rise of non-tribal settlers through external and internal movements made the indigenous people think that they were going to be outsmarted sooner or later in the sphere of culture and economic progress.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Meghalaya emerged as an Autonomous state on April 2, 1970 and was declared a state of the Indian Union on Jan 21, 1972. Prior to April 1970, Meghalaya was a part of the state of Assam. More than a decade of peaceful constitutional agitation for a separate Hill State, the Government of India conceded partially to the demand and the Parliament passed the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act, 1969 constituting the Autonomous State. The Parliament again passed the North Eastern Areas Reorganization Act, 1971 which conferred full statehood on the Autonomous state of Meghalaya.

<sup>2</sup> John R Bowen, "The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7(4), 1996. pp. 3-14.

<sup>3</sup> For an excerpt of *Sharma Commission Report*, 1995, See Gurudas Das, "Migration, Ethnicity and Competition for State Resources", in M K Raha and A K Ghose (eds), *Northeast India: The Human Interface*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 321-322.

<sup>4</sup> Reuben Lyngdoh and L S Gassah, "Meghalaya: Decades of Inter-Ethnic Tension", *Economic*

Regarding this cultural factor, it is observed that in Meghalaya, the issue of ethnicity and identity are clearly related to the nature of relationship between the Khasis<sup>5</sup> and the outsiders. The very nature of this relationship has led to the formation of groups like the Khasi Student Union (KSU) and Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo People (FKJGP), apparently to protect the cultural heritage of the Khasis and other indigenous peoples inhabiting Meghalaya including that of Garos.

The external influx formed the bulk of populations belonging to bordering countries, such as from Nepal and Bangladesh while the internal movements constituted Indian nationals from other states within the country. The impetus for the migration to Meghalaya came from three factors —trade and commerce, employment and permanent habitation. The constant pressure on the economic resources and opportunities for the native populace, coupled with the illegal migration from Bangladesh and Nepal has affected the socio-economic equilibrium in Meghalaya, which in turn paved the way for organized militancy in the state. Although the origin of conflicts is rooted in economic disparities, in due course of time, the underground elements have used the cultural symbols to organise opposition in order to create a movement. Besides, experts believed that the much-hyped issue of 'identity' along with growing corruption and injustice prevailing in the state are equally responsible for the growth of armed struggle in Meghalaya.

The otherwise strained relations between tribals and non- tribals, which often

culminated in violent clashes or riots<sup>6</sup>, became uglier day by day since 1979. The issue of 'foreigners' illegally residing in the state has become the most important one that dominated the state politics since then. In October 1979, Meghalaya witnessed the crisis for the first time, when one person was killed and 120 injured in a periodic violence that engulfed the capital city, Shillong. Around 143 families were forcibly evicted from their place of residence and a total of 567 persons were evacuated.<sup>7</sup> Hereafter, similar incidents of targeting members of the non-tribal communities continued unabated in the subsequent years. The year 1987 had also witnessed bouts of violent incidents where non-tribal communities were attacked. In the months of June, at least three youths lost their lives due to police firing and the numbers of evacuees from different parts of the Shillong area were around 4, 000, largely lodged at various relief camps around the city. This time the violence was triggered due to the illegal influx of Nepalese settlers in the wake of Gorkha National Liberation Front's (GNLF) movement in West Bengal, and was largely directed against them.<sup>8</sup>

Again the situation took a dangerous turn in 1992 when the KSU, often termed as a student-militant outfit,<sup>9</sup> and the FKJGP started issuing threat orders to non- tribal businessmen and traders, forcing them to

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and *Political Weekly*, Vol. 38 (48), November 29, 2003. <[www.epw.org.in](http://www.epw.org.in)>

<sup>5</sup> The Khasis of Meghalaya belong to the Austric-Asiatic family and the only group of people living in India which speak Mon-Khmer language, prevalent in erstwhile Kampuchea. They identify themselves as the descendants of the Seven Huts (*Ki Khun U Hynniew Trep*). To read more on this issue, See, Morning Lyngdoh, "Ethnicity, Religion and Language: A Case Study of the Khasis of Meghalaya", in Kailash S Aggarwal (ed.), *Dynamics of Identity and Inter-group Relations in North East India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999. pp.215-229.

<sup>6</sup> In Meghalaya riots usually occurred mostly during the month of October, hence students call it 'October Festival'. See, Binalaxmi Nepram, *South Asia's Fractured Frontiers*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p.85.

<sup>7</sup> In 1979, Shillong experienced one of the major riots over the celebrations of a Hindu religious festival (goddess Kali), which reportedly turned into a tribal (Khasi)-non-tribal (Bengali) conflict. For details See, Apurba K. Baruah, "Ethnic Conflicts and Traditional Self-governing Institutions: A Study of Laitumkhrah Dorbar", *Crisis States Programme*, Working Paper No. 39, Development Research Center, London, January 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Reuben Lyngdoh and L S Gassah, "Meghalaya: Decades of Inter-Ethnic Tension", *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> KSU came to prominence as a peaceful students' movement for its consistent opposition to the policies of the government and have been operating in the Northeast since early 1990s. Raised the issue of 'outsiders' and is thought to have links with Naga outfit, NSCN-IM. See, "Meghalaya: Troubled Times", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 25-31, 2001.

shut down their establishments on the grounds of not possessing valid trading license. What followed was a bloody riot, fifth in the series, which killed at least thirty people (3 tribals, 23 non-tribals and 4 unidentified), injured 200 more with the damage of rupees 13 lakh worth properties.<sup>10</sup> This time it had crossed the geographical limitations and spread to other parts of the state with a criminal element clearly evident in all these incidents. Vandalism, looting, arsons and subsequent curfews became order of the day. According to informed sources, as many as 900 people were displaced from Nongmynsong area while about 350 persons from Umlyngka and Nongkseh villages took shelter at a relief camp in Jhalupara in the Khasi Hills following incidents of violence.<sup>11</sup>

### Rise of Organized Militancy

Disillusioned with the problem and intermittent violence in the forms of riots and arsons, which failed to pay any dividends; youths of Meghalaya took to arms and went underground. Presently, there are some eight indigenous militant outfits operating from Meghalaya, of which two are proactive: Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC)<sup>12</sup> and Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC)<sup>13</sup> with varied aims and ambitions. While HNLC aims to transform Meghalaya as a province exclusively for the Khasi tribe and

tries to free it from the domination of the Garo tribe, by fighting against the outsiders, the ANVC, on the other hand, aims to carve out a homeland called 'Achik Land' in the areas of Garo Hills comprising the Garo Hill districts of Meghalaya, Garo dominated Nongkhlaw area in the Khasi Hills and the Garo-Inhabited Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam.<sup>14</sup> The other lesser-known independent outfits and splinter groups are People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLF-M) and Hajong United Liberation Army (HULA). PLF-M, an offshoot of AMLA, operates in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Reportedly rechristened as the Achik National Council (ANC), PLF-M's objective is economic development of the Garo Hills, as well as better educational opportunities for the Garo tribe in Meghalaya. It also demands a separate state for the Garos, under the chairmanship of Vincent Sangma. On the other hand, HULA was formed by one Gopesh Hajong, involved in abduction and extortion with the Assam based NDFB in some parts of Meghalaya.

Astonishingly, in 2004 there was a sudden rise in the numbers of newly floated outfits in Meghalaya, despite renewed offensive by the security forces. Some of the outfits are: United Achik National Front (UANF) a Garo outfit and believed to be a splinter of PLF-M, Pnar Liberation Army (PLA), formed due to the unrest in the Chachar Hills of neighbouring Assam, Retrieval of Indigenous United Front (RIUF), Hynniewtrep National Youth Front Tiger Force (HNYTF) suspected to be a special wing of HNLC and last but not the least, Hynniewtrep National Special Red Army (HNSRA).<sup>15</sup>

However, of late though, the Union Government proscribed both pioneer and most powerful of them all— HNLC and ANVC on November 16, 2000, and declared both the underground outfits as

<sup>10</sup> Gurudas Das, "Migration, Ethnicity and Competition for State Resources", in M K Raha and A K Ghose(eds), *Northeast India: The Human Interface*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, p 323.

<sup>11</sup> Reuben Lyngdoh and L S Gassah, "Meghalaya: Decades of Inter-Ethnic Tension", *op.cit.*

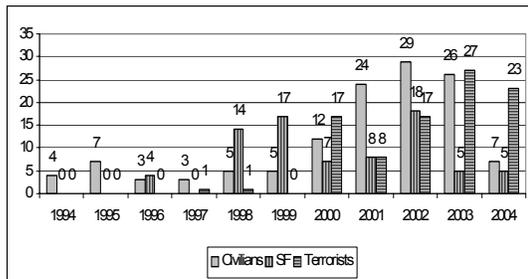
<sup>12</sup> The Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC), a Khasi organization and pioneer insurgent outfit of Meghalaya was renamed Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) after 1992 split in HALC due to inter-tribal antagonisms. Subir Ghose, *Frontier Travails: Northeast, the Politics of a Mess*, MacMilan, New Delhi, 2001, p.237.

<sup>13</sup> The split end was named as Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (AMLA). In December 1995, the remnants of the AMLA rechristened itself as Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC). It is not a secessionist organization. However, the ANVC differs from the other Garo separatist organisation, Garo National Council (GNC), which aims for a Garo State comprising only the three districts of the Garo hills.

<sup>14</sup> Subir Ghose, *Frontier Travails: Northeast, the Politics of a Mess*, MacMilan, New Delhi, 2001, p.237.

<sup>15</sup> For a detail assessment, See, Anirban Roy, "Meghalaya: A Mushrooming of Insurgent Groups", *South Asia Intelligence Review (SAIR)*, Vol. 3(6), August 23, 2004. <www.satp.org>

unlawful associations under the provisions of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. Subsequently the proscription has been extended every year by the Union government primarily for three important reasons: 1) due to the repeated, continuing and ongoing acts of violence and attacks on the security forces and the civilian population by the members of the ANVC and the HNLC; 2) due to constant increase in the strength of their cadres along with continued extortions, collection of funds and acquisition of sophisticated weapons; 3) maintenance of the camps in the neighbouring countries for the purpose of sanctuary, training and clandestine procurement of arms and ammunition.<sup>16</sup>



GRAPH 1: CASUALTIES IN VARIOUS TERRORIST RELATED INCIDENTS, 1994-2004

As the Graph-1 diagram above shows, between 1994 and 2004, 297 persons, including 125 civilians, 78 security force (SF) personnel and 94 militants lost their lives in insurgency related violence in Meghalaya. The fatality Graph shows a vertical rise of militancy over the past seven years, with over 270 people killed between 1998 and 2004.<sup>17</sup> Official sources too depicted somewhat similar picture. A recent report citing state police sources suggested that at least 132 civilians lost their lives while 105 persons sustained

injuries in militancy-related incidents in Meghalaya during the period 1996-2004.<sup>18</sup> In all these years Meghalaya has witnessed an increasing civilian death rate with 2004 as an exception, as compared to the terrorist fatalities, which is alarming and a matter of concern for the security establishment of the state. Again, in recent years the state has become the nerve centre of activities of several militant outfits operating in the northeast region colluding with the homegrown militant outfits.<sup>19</sup> The intensity of militancy could be gauged by examining incidents after the proscription imposed by the Union government. The proverbial 'militant crossfire' has increased immensely in the sphere of ambush killings, abductions for ransom, and extortions. However, more often than not, the vertical rising of the militancy catches both the Centre and State government off guard and often clueless.

**Killing Fields.** The fatality trend shows an increasing civilian death rate [See Graph-1] with a sudden downfall in 2004. In most of the occasion innocent civilians bear the brunt of militancy in Meghalaya. An official report indicated that the Garo outfit, ANVC alone killed ninety civilians and wounded seventy eight others, while the HNLC has killed 36 people besides injuring 24 persons during the last eight-year.<sup>20</sup> During 2001, there were 40 insurgency related deaths that includes 24 civilian deaths. A proactive HNLC in its orgy of violence had gunned down five persons and injured four others during an attack on a business establishment in the capital Shillong on January 5. After three days of the incident, armed HNLC terrorists struck a nationalized bank and killed its two security guards at Mawsynram village on January 9. Again on March 28, two police personnel were killed during an encounter near Jaiaw Longsuing near Shillong. In a major offensive, the proscribed ANVC too gunned down five policemen near

<sup>16</sup> Read the Ministry of Home Affairs Press Release "Achik National Volunteer Council/Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council Declared As 'Unlawful' Dated 16.11.2000 (1) at <http://mha.nic.in/pr1100.htm#16111>. For a full text of the Notification, See documentation section of Meghalaya at South Asia Terrorism Portal. <[www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)>

<sup>17</sup> All Graphs in the article have been compiled from open sources. See, South Asia Terrorism Portal's Meghalaya Data Sheets. URL <[www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)>

<sup>18</sup> *The Shillong Times*, January 17, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> "Garo Hills: New hunting grounds for militants", April 09, 2003, [www.rediff.com](http://www.rediff.com)

<sup>20</sup> *Shillong Times*, January 17, 2005.

Songsak in the East Garo Hills, conniving with the NDFB on August 10.<sup>21</sup>

The following year, 64 fatalities were reported from different theatres of conflict, including 29 civilians, 18 security force personnel and 17 terrorists. On September 9, six police personnel, including Paichon Sangma, Deputy Superintendent of Police, were killed in an ANVC-laid ambush at Chocpot in the Garo Hills. Defending the ambush and killings, the outfit's southern command in-charge and publicity-wing head Sohan D Shira claimed that the incident was in retaliation of the Wakabua Camp raid way back in 1996, which paved the way for a rising militancy in the Garo Hills.<sup>22</sup> This incident came a month after a gruesome massacre of at least 15 persons (mostly Bodos, Bengalis and Biharis) at Raksamgiri in the West Garo Hills district by suspected Assam based ULFA or NDFB terrorists on August 13. Although ANVC's hand has been ruled out, its involvement in the incident remained a mystery.<sup>23</sup> Not far from the site of the ambush, ANVC terrorists had gunned down five persons including the son of Meghalaya Forest Minister Manindra Rav on June 30 at a place between Belguri and Abhirampara near Tikrikilla.<sup>24</sup> In another occasion, ANVC terrorists attacked a Nepali settlement at Tinali near Phulbari in the West Garo Hills district and gunned down three and injured seven others at the site on May 12. Exactly two months before, armed ANVC terrorists killed at least eight persons including four policemen in the same district on March 14.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the HNLC, which has been carrying out its militant activities from neighbouring Bangladesh, was lying low throughout the year. Although HNLC

suffered huge setbacks during counter-insurgency operation in terms of arrests, hideout busts and arms seizures, the actual strength and position of the outfit remained unconfirmed.

In 2003, both ANVC and HNLC geared up their subversive activities in the face of a stepped-up counter-insurgency operation throughout the state and also in the neighbouring states. There were 58 insurgency -related deaths, including 26 civilians, 5 security force personnel and 27 terrorists. In the beginning of the year, ANVC terrorists have killed at least three persons in Songsak, near Williamnagar, East Garo Hills district for allegedly using the outfit's name to extort money from local residents on January 14.<sup>26</sup> Again on March 6, ANVC terrorists ambushed a vehicle of the Border Road Organization (BRO) killing three persons on the spot in the East Garo Hills district and decamped with some seven million rupees and two self-loading rifles (SLRs).<sup>27</sup> In the later part of the year state security forces along with paramilitary forces inflicted major blows to both the outfits. In a joint operation, security forces have killed at least eight ANVC terrorists in two separate incidents in the West Garo Hills on September 26<sup>28</sup> and recovered one AK series rifle with twelve rounds of live ammunition, one Pakistan-made .32 pistol with seven rounds of ammunition, two Chinese hand grenades and some incriminating documents from the encounter site. A day after, HNLC's 'commander-in-chief (Western Command), Delphinus Myrthong alias Khraw was killed during an encounter

<sup>21</sup> I have compiled the terrorist incidents of 2001 largely from the Meghalaya Timelines, 2001 of South Asia Terrorism Portal. < www.satp.org >

<sup>22</sup> See, South Asia Terrorism Portal's Meghalaya Section, especially pages profiling ANVC. [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/meghalaya/terrorist\\_outfits/anvc.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/meghalaya/terrorist_outfits/anvc.htm)

<sup>23</sup> Kalayan Chaudhuri, "Striking at Will", *Frontline*, Vol.19 (18), August 31-September 13, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See, South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Meghalaya; Terrorist Outfits; ANVC. [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)

<sup>26</sup> The deceased were identified as H.N. Marak, S.N. Marak (brothers) and S.R. Marak. A note recovered from them said they were punished for collecting money in the outfit's name. See, "Rebels kill three", <[www.telegraphindia.com/1030116/asp/northeast/story\\_1577342.asp#4](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1030116/asp/northeast/story_1577342.asp#4)>

<sup>27</sup> For detail See, "Three killed in Garo Hills attack", [www.telegraphindia.com/1030307/asp/northeast/story\\_1742665.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1030307/asp/northeast/story_1742665.asp)

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed analysis of the counter insurgency operation, See, Bibhu P. Routray, "Meghalaya: Shutting Down the Industry of Terror", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol.2 (11), September 29, 2003. <[www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)>

near Nongstoin in the West Khasi Hills district.<sup>29</sup>

However, year 2004 has witnessed less number of civilian and security force casualties vis-à-vis terrorist fatalities. Out of total 7 civilian fatalities in the year, a single incident on December 1 claimed five lives when suspected Assam-based NDFB terrorists killed them at Amguri in the West Garo Hills. Besides this incident involving 'not a home-grown' outfit, Meghalaya witnessed three security force casualties out of total five in the year by the handiwork of another intruder outfit, ULFA. On January 21, three police personnel were killed and seven others were injured by Assam-based ULFA terrorists at Rangshipara bordering Assam. In September 6 at least eight ULFA terrorists were killed in an internecine clash at Tikrikilla in the West Garo Hills district. All the above-mentioned incidents proved very well the rising activities of other northeastern outfits in Meghalaya, pushing the 'home-grown' to play a second fiddle. Even reports of ULFA recruiting Garo youths for their cause was reported in the late 2004 when ANVC softened its activities in the state prior to the cease-fire agreement between the ANVC and the Union Government. Nevertheless, both ANVC and HNLC were not completely inactive in the process and incidents of extortion, arrests, and surrenders have been in the headlines throughout the year.

**Abduction/Extortion.** Meghalaya witnessed some of the high profile hostage crisis in the recent years that has been the '*modus operandi*' of the underground elements operating in the state. The prime motive is to milk the rich hostage for sustenance. The volume and collection of ransom has remained at a high level, primarily targeting the coal trade and other business establishments in the state. While the monetary transactions are not always reported in the media or established by the police, in most cases the involvement of ANVC is overtly clear.

Reports published citing police sources indicated some 163 civilians and three security personnel have been abducted since 1996. The ANVC alone has abducted 116 people during the period; the HNLC had been responsible for 35 abductions. Although the official figures of the total amount looted by the HNLC has been put at Rs 1,49,96,084 and that by ANVC at Rs 99,52,540, security forces believed that the actual figures could be more.<sup>30</sup>

It is imperative to discuss some of the high profile 'abduction for ransom' in recent years in Meghalaya especially to understand the ground situation. On December 19, 2002, ANVC terrorists have abducted medical practitioner P. Bezbaruah in Williamnagar, East Garo Hills district that took the whole administration into a rough ride.<sup>31</sup> He was reportedly freed after some 20 lakh rupees (INR) were paid as ransom through informal channels following negotiations between the relatives of the abducted doctor and the ANVC. Even the State police refrained from meddling in the negotiation process. In the same year, on March 1, ANVC terrorists have abduct two persons including a leading businessman from Chibinang, West Garo Hills. No detail of monetary transaction was revealed after their safe release.

During 2003, ANVC was involved in at least three major incidents of abduction for ransom. In the beginning of the year, armed ANVC terrorists abducted four persons including the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau Assistant Director, Deben Singh Rana at Damalgiri, near Tura in the West Garo Hills district on February 26, but could not hold them for long as hostage as security forces rescued them

<sup>29</sup> "HNLC 'c-in-c' Khraw killed near Nongstoin", *The Sentinel* (Guwahati) September 28, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> *The Shillong Times* (Shillong), January 17, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> In this hostage crisis, though ransom was the prime motive, Intelligence sources informed that the doctor's abduction was due to some difference between him and his co-workers at the District Medical establishment. It indicates the collusive ties of ANVC with the civilian set up in the state. See, "Bezbaruah may be freed on ransom", *The Sentinel* (Guwahati), December 31, 2002.

soon after their abduction.<sup>32</sup> Again ANVC terrorists colluding with NDFB terrorists abducted six coal exporters and a customs official from Customs station at Ghasuapara in South Garo Hills district on February 28. They were released after more than 30 days of captivity. ANVC and NSCN-IM terrorists have abducted another Customs official, L H Faihriem from Larchat area in West Khasi Hills on October 9, demanding one crore (INR) for his safe release. However, the family members have reportedly confirmed that they have already paid Rs 3 lakh as ransom for his safe release but yet to see the official in person.<sup>33</sup>

In 2004, a fortnight long high profile 'abduction for ransom' drama was reported in the month of June. The suspected outfit ANVC denied its involvement in the abduction of D. Satyan, District Forest Officer of Balpakram National Park (BNP) as the outfit's publicity secretary, Arist Sengsrang Sangma issued a statement saying the outfit did not have any connection with the incident. Though the State government denounced any ransom for his safe release on July 2, the police has confirmed ANVC's involvement and indicated that the relatives of the abducted DFO paid Rs 4.5 lakh for DFO's release.<sup>34</sup>

Another issue that has been plaguing Meghalaya is extortion. It is widely believed that any sort of demand from the militant outfits like HNLC and ANVC has to be fulfilled and no law enforcer or constitutional authority can protect those who do not pay up. In most cases defaulters were simply eliminated.<sup>35</sup>

Besides both these outfits, extortion activities are carried out by Assam based United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) militants in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya.

**Countering Terror.** The security forces have achieved substantial success in choking the lifeline (arms and finance) of militancy especially during the last two years. Despite the fact that a vigorous counter-insurgency operation initiated not before the year 2000, the relative success is well reflected in the number of terrorist fatalities and arrests after that period. [See Graph-2] During 2002, HNLC had received some major setbacks. On November 27, a Special Operations Team (SOT) of Meghalaya police busted one HNLC hideouts following the arrest of two ultras in Lower Lachumiere area and in Mawlai Nongpdeng near, Shillong. The recovered arms cache included 591 rounds of M-16 ammunition, two Chinese made hand grenades, a .32 pistol, 5 rounds of SLR ammunition and an AK-47 magazine.<sup>36</sup> Earlier in the same month the state police had unearthed one of the largest arms seizures from a hideout at Khlaw Roman and seized 460 rounds of M-16 and 169 rounds of AK-47 ammunition, two Chinese-made grenades, one round of SLR 7.62 (self loading rifles), .27 bore cartridges and three rounds of .303 ammunition.<sup>37</sup> This seizure was considered significant as the chairman Julius K Dorphang and general secretary Cheristerfield Thangkhiew of HNLC are from the same locality.

<sup>32</sup> "ANVC kidnaps top SIB officer, rescued", *The Sentinel* (Guwahati), February 28, 2003,

<sup>33</sup> "Abducted Customs official's family paid money to rebels: Police", *The Shillong Times* (Shillong) Dec 08, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> As per media reports the initial demand was Rs 10 lakh and the group commander of the ANVC involved in his abduction was initially reluctant to reduce the amount. See, "Relatives paid Rs 4.5 lakh for DFO's release, says Police", *The Shillong Times*, July 3, 2004. <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/A-3-july.html>

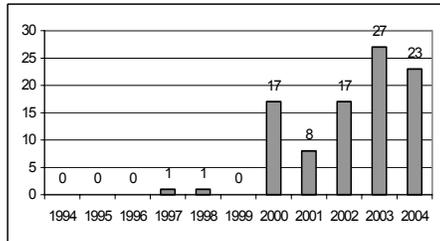
<sup>35</sup> For a focussed and well-documented analysis on extortion in Meghalaya, See, Sashinungla, "Meghalaya: Extortion Dynamics", *South Asia*

*Intelligence Review*, Vol.2 (40), April 19, 2004. <[www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)>

<sup>36</sup> "Arms, ammunition recovered in Shillong", *The Sentinel* (Guwahati), November 29, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> "Meghalaya police raid rebel den, seize arms", [www.telegraphindia.com/1021102/asp/northeast/story\\_1346920.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1021102/asp/northeast/story_1346920.asp)

**GRAPH 2: TERRORIST DEATHS IN COUNTER-INSURGENCY INCIDENTS/OPERATIONS  
TERRORIST RELATED INCIDENTS:  
1994-2004**



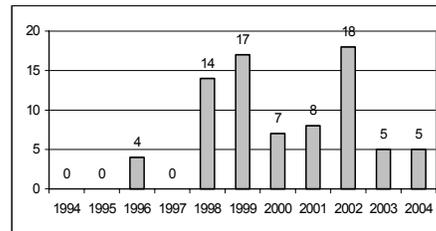
There was a couple of fatality incidents involving ANVC in the year too. On June 11, two ANVC terrorists were killed during an encounter at Amarsang village, under Borsora police station limits in the West Khasi Hills district. Following the encounter SFs recovered two AK-47 rifles, one SLR, a Chinese rifle, two 12-bore guns and a large quantity of ammunition from the site. In a separate encounter with ANVC terrorists at Dareng block, in South Garo Hills district on the same day, police recovered Rs 1, 54,000 in cash and some electronic equipment from the encounter site.

The following year, 2003 too witnessed similar kinds of arms seizures and busting of financial wings, mostly of HNLC's, in large numbers. Flush with the success of the last year, Meghalaya state police had recovered large number of arms and ammunition, including an M-16 rifle, a semi-automatic rifle, 41 rounds of M-16 ammunition, and 15 rounds of 7.62 ammunition from an HNLC terrorist at Distar Marbaniang, in the East Khasi Hills district on January 29. Further, the outfit received a series of jolts when police unearthed arm dumps in the successive operations in February and March 2003.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> On February 5 and 12, two HNLC arms dump were unearthed near Wahumkhrah River and Wahingdoh near Shillong respectively. In total, two AK 56 rifles, an AK 47 rifle, four carbines, a stengun, 48 bullets of M-16 rifle, 48 rounds of AK series and 103 rounds of hunting rifles among unspecified quantity of ammunition were seized from the dumps. Again On March 22, SFs recovered three AK 47 rifles, 24 rounds of live cartridges and five magazines with the

Although Meghalaya Police achieved substantial success in unearthing both ANVC and HNLC 'finance cells in 2003, the busting hardly could deter the outfits to maneuver freely in the state. On May 4, Meghalaya Police have unearthed an ANVC 'finance cell' at Asimggre village, under Garobadha police station in West Garo Hills district and seized many incriminating documents indicating to an extortion racket being run by the outfit in the area.<sup>39</sup> In the first week of June, police had apprehended four HNLC terrorists including the general secretary of the finance wing, Fulster Rani, and a week after the arrest, Meghalaya police has achieved another breakthrough by arresting his trusted accomplice, Paul Lyngdoh at Nongthymai with some money, two foreign-made wireless sets, 25 rounds of 9 mm pistols and ammunition.<sup>40</sup>

**GRAPH 3: SECURITY FORCE PERSONNEL CASUALTIES IN VARIOUS TERRORIST RELATED INCIDENTS, 1994-2004**



In 2004, though both the major outfits maintained a low profile due to massive offensive initiated by the security forces, there have been reports of continuous militant activities by other smaller outfits or splinter groups. The offensive proved fruitful which facilitates made the atmosphere a little calm after a series of surrenders of HNLC cadres and ANVC's truce with the government later in the year. Nevertheless, a proactive and a better-trained security forces have managed to reduce the damage brunt during CI

arrest of two HNLC cadres. See, South Asia Terrorism Portal; Countries; India; States; Meghalaya; Terrorist Outfits; HNLC. www.satp.org

<sup>39</sup> "Police busts ANVC finance cell", *The Shillong Times* (Shillong), May 6, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> "Top HNLC cadre in police net", *North East Enquirer*, Vol. 2 (6) June 22 — July 6, 2003.

operations in the early years in Meghalaya.

### Probing the Nexus Politics

What makes the insurgency sustain in Meghalaya? Is it a case of 'elite manipulation'?<sup>41</sup> As observed elsewhere that insurgency is 'politics by other means' or a vital instrument for politics, it is widely perceived that politicians and political parties, along with the bureaucracy have a 'symbiotic' relationship with the underground terrorist outfits in the Northeast India. The former keeps the underground elements in good humour and alive only to strengthen political base in the region.<sup>42</sup> The North East Study Group (NESG), under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has held politicians, bureaucrats, the police force and insurgent outfits responsible for the collapse of the administrative machinery in the region. While the NESG claimed that politicians allowed insurgent outfits to raise taxes, and the executive and bureaucracy also used the insurgency for their own interests. It further stated that "a parallel system of governance", created by the insurgents and aided by the ministers, legislators, the bureaucracy and the police force in the states of Northeast India, had led to the collapse of the district and the block administrations in the Northeast.<sup>43</sup> Arguably, covert or overt ties between mainstream legislative politics and underground insurgent politics are not uncommon in the region.

The situation has become more volatile than expected during recent years in Meghalaya. Although there are some

instances of overt relationship between some politicians and insurgent groups, a clear instance of patronage and linkages remain buried deep down due to poor investigations and lack of political will. Even the image of bureaucracy is tarnished on several occasions due to its connivance with underground elements. Of course, due to the perennial political instability and vendetta among the political parties, the cadres of the two insurgent groups — ANVC and HNLC — have been able to carry out their activities and operations with the blessings of political elites.<sup>44</sup> Again, it has been argued that the nexus in the form of 'assistance' to the terrorists is not always for political gains but for their 'social commitments' towards their fellow brothers.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, of late, both the underground outfits came under immense pressure to limit their activities, but it is the ANVC who, as believed, is replenishing all the setbacks with the political patronage in the state.

The flurry of events came to limelight after the then Chief Minister, F A Khonglam brought the issue when he cited on October 5, 2002, that at least four ministers from the Garo Hills had been 'maintaining covert liaison with the ANVC, and adds that they belong to the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).<sup>46</sup> Even the ANVC c-in-c Jerome Momin has confirmed the proximity between the politicians and the insurgents when he informed the media on 17 October that certain politicians had used the outfit's name to win elections in the past. However, the Chief Minister had never disclosed the names to the utter apprehension of the political parties involved.

Although at the outset it was suspected to be a political maneuvering on the part of Khonglam to put pressure on the legislators of his coalition government, the following years bared some evidence,

<sup>41</sup> 'Elite Manipulation' approaches hypothesize that desperate political leaders use nationalism to manipulate a passive public so that they can remain in power. For a critical analysis see, Monica Duffy Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003; V.P. Gagnon Jr., "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia," *International Security*, Vol. 19 (3) Winter 1994-95, pp. 130-166.

<sup>42</sup> Kiranshankar Maitra, *The Noxious Web: Insurgency in The Northeast*, Kanishka Publication, New Delhi, 2001, pp 55-63.

<sup>43</sup> "Study blames politician-rebel nexus", [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1030506/asp/northeast/story\\_1940922.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1030506/asp/northeast/story_1940922.asp)

<sup>44</sup> Anirban Roy, "Shadow-boxing in Meghalaya", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. 2 (2), July 28, 2003. [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "Meghalaya house test awaits Khonglam", *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), December 17, 2002.

which reinforced all the earlier allegations. On April 7, 2003, Meghalaya police apprehended two ANVC terrorists at Weiloi village in the East Khasi Hills district while they were travelling in the official vehicle allotted to the former Legislator and Senior NCP leader Adolf L. Hitler Marak. After two months of intense debate and investigations, Meghalaya Police arrested Hitler Marak at Laban in Shillong for his alleged links with the ANVC on June 27. A can of worms soon opened up when Marak informed that the Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga requested him and P A Sangma to persuade ANVC leaders to come to the negotiating table. It took a new turn when the issue of unauthorized mediation didn't go down well with the ruling Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) government, which threatened to take action against the so called facilitators. The blame game began with the NCP claiming that the arrest was a political vendetta by the Congress-led ruling coalition. By alleging the ruling Congress was only protecting its own members, who have been maintaining close links with the terrorist outfits too, the NCP leaderships had demanded the arrest of the former Congress Minister Kopin Chandra Boro, accusing him of maintaining links with the Assam-based terrorist groups who killed his wife with their help. During the last week of July, after getting a tip-off, Police have arrested four suspected NDFB terrorists from the residence of Boro near lower Lachumiere in Shillong.<sup>47</sup> Later, one Amulya Rabha, a surrendered ULFA terrorist who was arrested from Boro's residence has confessed before the police that Boro had paid him and three of his friends to kill his wife and further said that he was paid Rs. 11,000 for carrying out the murder.<sup>48</sup> Boro was taken to custody but the case seems

to be freezing due to the lackadaisical approach of the state government.

Although the Chief Minister D D Lapang has indicated in June 2003 that the ruling coalition MDA, would invoke the provisions of POTA (Prevention of Terrorist Act) if necessary, to deter politicians from developing nexus with proscribed underground outfits operating in the state, the situation hasn't changed so far. Most recently all eyes are again on the NCP and its leader, P A Sangma when the ANVC itself called for Sangma to mediate peace<sup>49</sup> with the Union Government with or without the prior permission of state government. The State CM, D D Lapang termed this development as a proof of Sangma's link with the ANVC as the later was openly backing him in the 2004 Lok Sabha polls.<sup>50</sup> The overt declaration of the Garo outfit raised more eyebrows in the political circle as well.

It's not the ANVC alone who has a link in high places. HNLC too has similar kind of network in Meghalaya. One of the first instances of this alliance came to limelight on October 7, 2002 when the son of a Congress legislator PW Muktieh from Mawhati was arrested from Mawlai, along with five HNLC cadres. The nexus saga plumbed new depth as soon as the State police department has filed cases against as many as 200 businessmen and 31 government officials for extending financial assistance to the proscribed HNLC.<sup>51</sup> The most alarming fact is that all the cases are based upon documentary evidence, seized from its hideouts. Even the Government officials are accused of funding the underground elements by diverting developmental funds to the

<sup>47</sup> The former Minister was arrested for masterminding the kidnap and murder of his wife on June 14 near Lakhapur, Assam. For details see, "Suspected militants arrested from former minister's residence", *North East Tribune*, July 25, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> "Former ULFA militant unmask K C Boro" *North East Tribune*, August 12, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> For a detail account on the controversy over facilitators and nexus politics, See Patricia Mukhim, "Pot-pourri of facilitators", *The Statesman* (Kolkatta), July 26, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> On January 10, 2004, the ANVC at its executive body meeting had extended support to Sangma as facilitator and urged the people of Garos by issuing a statement in a local media on February 3, that the 'people of Garo Hills need to strengthen Purno Sangma's hands'. See, "Purno Sangma's links with ultras proved: Lapang", *North East Enquirer*, Vol 2 (21), February 7 - 21, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Anirban Roy, "Shadow-boxing in Meghalaya ", *op.cit.*

militants' exchequer following 'instructions' from Ministers. As a result, three sitting Ministers in the ruling MDA Government have been brought under surveillance by the intelligence agencies. Officials of the Public Works Department (PWD), Public Health Engineering (PHE) department and the Directorate of Mineral Resources (DMR) feature prominently in the list of those aiding and abetting the extremists.<sup>52</sup> Earlier, the Superintendent of Police, East Khasi Hills, I Nongrang has informed that there was definite proof that certain officials of the PHE who make bills and cheques for Patel Engineering, (the firm involved in the construction of the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme), also supplied a copy of the cheque/pay order to the HNLC, so that the outfit knows exactly what percentage to demand from the firm. He further added that "there must be similar officials in other departments who feed the HNLC all the information they want."<sup>53</sup> This by and large suggested the involvement of the government officials with the HNLC.

#### **Future of Peace**

It is relevant to argue that in Meghalaya the situation has been manipulated by the social elites, including politicians and bureaucracy, while the disillusioned youths have been a pawn in the game of power struggle. With the surrender of senior HNLC cadres, followed by ANVC's renewed vigor for peace talks with the state administration and Union government, a tug of war among the political elites had started in early 2004 in Shillong. The Union Government has also played a part in the chaos that hovered around the efforts to bring underground outfits to negotiating table.<sup>54</sup> Notwithstanding the proverbial shadow boxing, recent developments are considered significant after the September

24, 2003 truce offer by the Meghalaya Chief Minister Lapang to both the proscribed outfits.

Even as the terrorist related killings are comparatively less in recent months, extortions that are the main lifeline of underground activities in Meghalaya, remain rampant. While the Khasi-Jaintia Church leaders (KJCLF) forum, which is reportedly in charge of negotiation with the HNLC outfit, claimed to have persuaded its cadres to return to mainstream, the ground realities are far from clear. On the other hand, the ANVC who had denied the prospect for peace in the state in the past ignoring efforts of Garo Baptist Church (GBC) as official facilitator, inked a much needed tripartite truce agreement on July 23, 2004 among the Centre, State and ANVC.<sup>55</sup> In the light of this development Chief Minister Lapang has appealed to the HNLC to come forward for a dialogue taking the example of ANVC without much headway. However, the initial fear of derailment of the peace process was not there. Earlier, instead of GBC, the 'pampered' ANVC leadership has been opting NCP leader Sangma for any future peace negotiation. This situation led to believe that peace or for that matter 'normalcy' in Meghalaya is still a distant dream as Sangma has stark differences with the present State government, which wants to have a say over the negotiation process.

Apart from political differences, which are too wide to be bridged, Sangma being a Garo has low acceptability among the Khasi politicians in power in the state. It further leaves the negotiation process in the cold. Even though the chance of a lasting peace lurking in the horizon with the taming of the ANVC and HNLC, the

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Also see, "Police mull more action on funding of militants", *The Shillong Times*, July 21, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Patricia Mukhim, "Caught between militants and the government", *The Shillong Times*, June 13, 2003.

<sup>54</sup> "Centre ignores State Government on peace talks with ANVC", *The Shillong Times*, February 1, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> The tripartite ceasefire agreement was signed by Wanding K. Marak, ANVC general secretary, who led the rebel delegation and State Chief Secretary P.J. Bazely and Director General of Police L. Sailo. A.K. Rastogi, Secretary, Border Management in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Rajiv Agarwal, Joint Secretary (Northeast) in the MHA have represented the Union Government. See, Wasbir Hussain, "Meghalaya: Truce on Track", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol.3 (2), July 26, 2004. <www.satp.org>

Union Government cautiously extended the proscription on the former citing their ongoing militant activities, such as collection of funds, extortion, acquisition of sophisticated arms and ammunition and above all, recruitment drives to strengthen their cadres. For the HNLC, the Union Government notification indicated its secessionist objective, with other subversive activities like intimidation, extortion and looting of civilians for collection of funds for the organisation.

Nevertheless, both the militants and politicians, who are 'not so strange bedfellows' are calling the shots in Meghalaya politics while taking the peace to ransom. While the patronage politics takes its toll on the overall governance of the state, the elusive peace is still at a distance.

\* \* \* \* \*

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