Genesis of Ulfa-Bodo problem.

The Assam accord was signed in New Delhi on 15 August 1985 by the Home Secretary and the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU), leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. The Government of India pledged to deport immigrants who had settled in Assam after 1971 and disfranchise 1966-71 migrants for ten years. Joining hands with the regional parties AASU formed the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and scored a clear majority in the General Election of 1985. It was for the first time the reins of government passed into the hands of a regional party, a batch of young students turned politicians.

The most formidable obstacle which AGP had to confront was the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The ULFA were initially members of extremist Asom Jatiyabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) who were involved in sabotages and bomb blasts all over the Brahmaputra valley. It had its origin in 1979 at Sibsagar under the Chairmanship of Arabindo Raj Khoma. The ULFA was further strengthened when the Assam Liberation Army joined it. They opposed the hundred years of exploitation of the colonial regime and post independent Indian Government. They were convinced that New Delhi would listen to nothing but an aggressive militant voice. They played a significant role in anti-foreigner’s movement. The ULFA had arms and training from the Kachin Liberation Army (KLA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). In order to fulfil their mission of Swadhin Asom they let loose a reign of terror. Operation Bajrang under V. P. Singh Government and Operation Rhino in 1991 made the ULFA more ferocious. ¹

The Bodos, who belong to the Mongoloid stock, trace their origin to the plains between the Yangtse Kiang and Hwang Ho and claim to be the first inhabitants of present Assam. The Bodos under the inspiration of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, first asserted themselves in 1950s to secure the Bodo language as the medium of instruction at the primary school level. From the very beginning the Bodos denounced the "Assamisation policy of the state government" and the "craze for cultural conquest". After rejection of Assamese, in the 1960s, they carried on violent agitation demanding Roman script for the Bodo language. The Bodos have no scripts of their own. The rejection of the Assamese script and their final adoption of Devnagiri script since 1976 further widened the gulf between the Bodos and the Assamese. Moreover economic exploitation and political domination acted as a catalyst to the demand for a separate tribal state in Assam for the Bodos.\(^2\) To defend their rights and interests in 1967, the Bodos organized the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). In 1973 the Council sought separation of the plains tribal areas from Assam and demanded an Union Territory called Udayachal. It soon relegated to the background on the emergence of the Roman Script Movement (1973-74) followed by a split in leadership. Already All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) emerged in 1984 with the motto "Divide Assam : Fifty Fifty", though the Bodos constitute only a small percentage of the total population. This was later changed to the demand for Bodoland.

\section*{II}

\textbf{Routes of ULFA-Bodo intrusion and Bhutan's dilemma}

The Bhutanese Home Minister, Thinley Gyamshto reminded the 75\textsuperscript{th} session of the Bhutanese National Assembly held in June 1997, that Bhutan shares an open and porous border with India from Sikkim to West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. This border has dense jungles and through this border the people of the two countries are able to cross each other's territories freely. The Indian nationals are given a 15 days


permit for Bhutan which can be extended for another 15 days if required. It is claimed by the Home Minister that for a variety of reasons like tourism, business, a large volume of transborder passage takes place between the Indians and the Bhutanese. Taking advantage of this interstate passage, a number of Bodo-ULFA militants have sneaked into Bhutan and taken shelter in the jungle hide-outs. Since there is large scale crossings by the nationals of the two neighbouring countries, the Home Minister argued, it is very difficult for the immigration and security officials of Bhutan to distinguish the ULFA-Bodo militants from the ordinary Indians. The Home Minister pointed out “the militants from Assam had not established camps in any of the villages in the eastern Dzongkhags but that some of them after crossing the Bhutanese border had established camps in dense forests along Bhutan’s border with India, close to their villages in India”. He regretted the inability of the limited number of Bhutanese security troops to cordon the entire area of the India-Bhutan border. Hence, he said, “It was very difficult for the Immigration Division officials and Security personnel to take effective measures against ULFA-Bodo militants who were well armed and hiding under the cover of dense forests.” He further expressed the view that increase of vigilance on the part of the Bhutanese would be of no remarkable significance since these militants can cross over through other places along the porous border. At the same time it is also difficult to distinguish the vehicles used by the militants for transporting arms and ammunitions to their camps in Bhutan. The militants not only possess a variety of modern weapons they get military training in other countries too. They have abundant resources and manpower.

The militants are using North Bengal as the transit route to proceed from Bangladesh to Bhutan too. Because of the saturated deployment of security forces along the Assam-Bhutan border, and since the Awami League Government of Bangladesh is...

3. Translation (in English) of the Proceedings and Resolutions of the 76th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan (20.6.97 to 16.7.97), Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, p.252
4. Ibid, p.253
5. Ibid, p.253
6. Indian Home Ministry’s intelligence reports say that the ISI has succeeded in attracting the ULFA cadres of Assam who are believed to be receiving training from Pakistani army personnel in camps in Bhutan. See “Chicken come Home to Roost”, Economic and Political Weekly. 34, No. 40, (2 October 1999), p.2824.
forcing the rebels to leave Bangladesh, the insurgents are using Bangladesh-North Bengal-Bhutan route to sneak into Bhutan. During the reign of Begaum Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh National Party, training camps and safe houses for these rebels of North-east were located in the jungles of Chittagong Hill tracts, Chhotodamai, Ramnagar, Nagdhari, Bhanugach, Sylhet, Samsenagar, Moulvi Bazar, Rangpur, Satchari and some other places. The camps were reportedly run by instructors of the Bangladesh army who were believed to have contact with the Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI)\(^7\). Thus the insurgents change route to elude forces on the border to enter into Bhutan, according to the Indian sources.

III

Dilemma faced by Government of India to check intrusion

The Director-General of the Border Security Force (BSF), D. K. Arya said that the deployment of the BSF men in the Indo-Bhutan border was taken up in response to a request made by the Assam Government to New Delhi. However misunderstanding developed between the State Government of Assam and the Indian Government when the former’s repeated plea to seal twenty-three entry points from Bhutan could not evoke any response since New Delhi was reportedly not in a position to spare the paramilitary forces additionally required to man the border to check the extremist influx due to the growing involvement of the paramilitary forces engaged in maintenance of law and order within the country. The other difficulty that was revealed was that the paramilitary forces would not be able to crackdown on any camp inside Bhutan’s territory unless there is a specific agreement between India and Bhutan. Moreover under the present circumstances the BSF could only chase the extremists upto the Bhutan border and not beyond that. Although the BSF had deployed three battalions for guarding the open border, but it was facing some problems to man the border in a proper sense. They would require a number of logistic support to prevent the extremist

7. *The Telegraph*, 29 August 1997, p.8
movement and shortage of force is being felt increasingly. The Bhutanese weekly *Kuensel* quoted the Bhutanese monarch as saying that militants entered Bhutan between 1990 and 1992, but the government came to know of existence of camps only in 1996.

**IV**

**Crisis faced by Bhutan on account of ULFA-Bodo incursion**

The infiltration of the ULFA-Bodo militants into Bhutan has adverse effects on Bhutan's socio-economic development. Their presence in Bhutan is a great threat to the security and sovereignty of the country. The militants suspected to be from National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) add new dimension to insurgency in Assam. They kill the Bhutanese nationals, set ablaze the vehicles with Bhutanese registration, raid the houses of Bhutanese traders in Assam and kill them. The peace and tranquility of the kingdom is getting more jeopardised. Bhutan is threatened with warnings of more attacks on the Bhutanese people from the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT), if the Royal Government does not take due steps against the members of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the ULFA taking shelter in Bhutan. Bhutanese officials are abducted by the BLT outfits to pressurise the Royal Government not to give shelter to the NDFB and ULFA men. The BLT claims that both the NDFB and ULFA rebels return to their camps in Bhutan after carrying out hit and run attacks in Assam. The rivalry between the NDFB and BLT is bringing about irritations between the Royal Government and the Assam state government. While the Royal Government is making the BLT responsible for the militant attack on the Bhutanese nationals, the Assam Government on the contrary is putting the onus on the NDFB men. The BLT sees a conspiracy hatched jointly by the Bhutan Government and the NDFB in making the BLT

---

responsible for the attacks on the Bhutanese. Additional Director General of Police (operations) of Assam, G. M. Srivastav reiterates NDFB’s hands in the attacks on the Bhutanese in Assam. “There is no basis in the Bhutan Government’s claims as the BLT is honouring its ceasefire agreement with the state. On the other hand Bhutan is under tremendous pressure from the NDFB… it is obvious that Bhutan is blaming the BLT to appease the NDFB,”12 he added.

The Home Secretary the Royal Government of Bhutan, Dasho Pema Wangchuck expressed the kingdom’s “unwillingness” to launch military operations against the ULFA and the NDFB rebels fearing “serious retaliation against the Bhutanese people by the militants and their supporters”. In an interview to The Telegraph, the Home Secretary says, “The ULFA Bodo militants are Assamese people. Using military force against them will entail attacking and killing Assamese nationals which would create deep resentment among the people of the state towards Bhutan”.13

It is the contention of the people of Bhutan that the fruits of rapid socio-economic development that Bhutan has achieved within a very short time cannot be enjoyed when the ULFA-Bodo militants are disturbing the peace and security of the country. The people of the 202 gewogs in 20 Dzongkhags (districts) and the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce requested the Royal Government to explore all possible ways to resolve the ULFA-Bodo problem at the 76th session of the National Assembly of Bhutan held in June-July 1998. They pledged their full support in terms of material resources and manpower requirements.

The Trade and Industry Minister of the Royal Government of Bhutan, Khandu Wangchuck apprehended that trade and industrial activities would be affected in twelve Dzongkhags stretching from Kalikhola to Daifam.14 All movements of vehicles, passengers, commercial and industrial goods through Assam would be exposed to high risks. He pointed out that whenever there are political problems in Assam, the militants call for strikes which bring the movement of the vehicles to a complete halt. “Last year

12. The Telegraph, 3 January 2001, p.8
13. The Telegraph, 3 January 2001, p.8
14. The twelve districts are : Dagana, Tsirang, Sarpang, Zhemgang, Trongsa, Bumthang, Samdrupjongkhar, Pemagatshel, Trashigang, Trashi Yangtse, Mongar and Lhuentse, comprising of 120 gewogs.
(1997) when the Royal Bhutan Police in Samdrupjongkhar arrested a Bodo militant for extorting money from the business community, the people of Assam retaliated by blocking all roads to Samdrupjongkhar causing much inconvenience to both the government and the people.\textsuperscript{15} At the 76th Session of the National Assembly held in June-July 1998, the Minister of Trade and Industry cautioned the Royal Government that in case Assam decides to restrict the movement of Bhutanese vehicles through Assam, the only link between India and Bhutan would be through Phuntsoling. In such a situation, the Minister added, “All our exports and imports through other routes would be affected. In addition the Kurichu and Dungsam projects which are manifestations of the most cordial and friendly relations between India and Bhutan, with a total investment of over Nu 8000 million and which would make substantial contributions to our country’s development, would also be affected”.\textsuperscript{16} The Minister said that in 1995 from Kalikhola to Daifam the Food Corporation of Bhutan (FCB) auctioned cash crops worth Nu 39 million excluding the cash crops directly sold by the farmers to Indian traders which if added might double the volume of the sales conducted by the FCB. Likewise the FCB auctioned Nu 45 million worth of cash crops in 1996. Hence the Minister warned the Assembly, “In the event the trade routes are disrupted, not only will our policy of enhancing the income of our people through development of cash crops be affected but all our development of government and private industries will be hampered. In addition, the import of commodities which are not available in the country like essential food items, and petroleum products would also be affected”.

The Chief Operations Officer, the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA), Goongleon Gongma Lam Dorji said, that in his forty-one years of service in the Bhutan Army he could not recall a more serious threat to the country’s security. “Even the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962, although it caused great concern and difficulties to us, did not harm our country which has remained peaceful since then”. The armed militants’ continued presence in the kingdom is a serious security risk to the country, as remarked by Lam Dorji. He apprehends that, “their continued presence could also affect the close

\textsuperscript{15} Translation (in English) of the Proceedings and Resolutions of the 76th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, June-July 1998, Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, p.327

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p.327
friendship between India and Bhutan because they are committing terrorist and criminal acts in India and escaping to the camps they have established in Bhutan". The officer expressed his concern that some Bhutanese citizens by camping and transporting supplies and food rations for the militants are further undermining the security of the country. To deal with this sort of assistance, he suggested that the National Security Act of 1992 should be applied.

According to the Home Minister, Lyonpo Thinlay Gyamtsho, the presence of the north-east Indian militants in Bhutan is the greatest threat to Bhutan. He says, “The ULFA are militants fighting for the independence of Assam from India, while the Bodos are fighting for the creation of a separate Bodoland state for themselves. The two militant groups are therefore fighting against the Government of India”. Hence he is concerned that “since Bhutan is a very small country, there is every possibility that our country will be affected, as the saying goes, when elephants clash, ants get trampled under their feet. Just as they have intruded into Bhutan without any regard for its territorial integrity, they are unlikely to leave Bhutan willingly and peacefully. On the other hand, any attempt to evict them forcefully would be very costly”. The ngolops commit crimes from the camps of Nepal and falsely malign the Royal Government. The Home Minister asserts, “There is every possibility that these ngolops who have been making every effort to undermine the security and sovereignty of the kingdom will seize the opportunity and join hands with the ULFA and Bodo militants to harm our country”. It is a concern of the Royal Government that the ULFA-Bodo militants suspected to be hand in glove with the ngolops are murdering, looting and terrorising the Bhutanese people. It is also suspected that the people of eastern district of Bhutan including the business community are assisting the militants by selling food and providing transportation at high rates. It has been reported that the militants are offering Nu 500 for one chicken or Nu 1000 for a sang of meat.  

17. Ibid, p.331  
18. Ibid, pp.332-33  
19. Ibid, p.333  
20. Translation (in English) of the Proceedings and Resolution of the 75th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, June-July 1997, Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, p.259
However in this context, the Royal authority distinguishes between the southern Bhutan ngolop problem that arose in 1990 and that of the ngolops who were against the Bhutanese laws (Tsa-Wa-Sum), concentrated in the three eastern districts of Bhutan since 1997. A few of these eastern ngolops (about 129 people)\(^21\) are of great concern for the Royal Government. According to the Royal Government, it is this group of eastern ngolops who had taken bribes from the ngolops residing in the Nepal camps to incite the people against the kingdom. The Government of Bhutan suspects that these ngolops are helping the ULFA and Bodos in various ways. The King thus clarifies that although there are six eastern districts from Kurtey in the north to Samdrupjonghkar in the south, not all people in these districts can be called as ngolops, suspected of aiding the militants of north-east India and also aiding the ngolops residing in Nepal camps\(^22\). This categorical distinction made by the King is a reply to the allegations from some sections of foreign media that all the eastern Bhutanese are aiding these militants and giving them shelter.

According to the Home Minister, the presence of ULFA-Bodo militants in Bhutan has become a “major irritant” in the otherwise excellent Indo-Bhutan relation. At the same time the minister laments that the ULFA-Bodo militants are Assamese people with whom the Bhutanese people have for centuries shared a common border and maintained very close relations. “Any military exchange between the Royal Government and the ULFA-Bodo militants may result in retaliations by the 25 million people in Assam, to the many Bhutanese citizens and vehicles that have to travel on a daily basis through Assam. These are indeed major dilemmas for any country, let alone a small landlocked country like Bhutan,”\(^23\) commented the Home Minister.

The Finance Minister recalled that the implementation of the Seventh Five Year Plan was seriously threatened by the ngolop problem. The Bodo-ULFA problem poses a serious threat to the implementation of the Eighth Plan, for which the Royal Government has apportioned a budget of Nu 30,000.00 million excluding NU 18,000

\(^21\) Translation (in English) of the Proceedings and Resolution of the 76th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, June-July 1998, Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, p.322.

\(^22\) Ibid, pp.322-23.

\(^23\) Ibid, pp.333-334.
million earmarked for special mega projects. Even service facilities established during the earlier plan period, according to the Minister, “would be disrupted.”²⁴ He however pointed out that “given the explosive nature of the problem it would be best to seek a peaceful solution. Any other approach could create difficulties for the parties concerned”.

The Bhutanese Government has shifted the Royal Bhutan Polytechnic from Deothang to Kharbandi due to the presence of the ULFA-Bodo militants in the area. *Kuensel* (20-26 May 2000) quoted the King as saying that the decision to ‘relocate’ the Polytechnic has been taken ‘because of the seriousness of the situation and the possibility of the students and staff getting kidnapped by the militants’. Dao Panjo, Counsellor in the Bhutanese embassy in New Delhi told *The Telegraph* over phone about the new location of the polytechnic in Phuntsoling district bordering West Bengal. It has been shifted from Deothang, in Samdrupjongkhar district situated across lower Assam’s Nalbari district. The number of army personnel deployed in the districts have been increased due to “growing security to the country”, according to the embassy sources. The *Kuensel* quoted the Home Minister, Thinlay Gyamtsho as saying that though the militants have been repeatedly asked to leave the country, “but it appears that they intend to stay until they fulfil their objective of independence of Assam”.²⁵

---

**Issues in dispute between India and Bhutan**

The ULFA-Bodo militants are Indian citizens from Assam and their increasing presence inside Bhutan’s borders constitute a serious threat to the security and sovereignty of the kingdom. The members of the Bhutan’s Legislative Assembly therefore at its 76th session pointed out that as the ULFA-Bodo problem is India’s

---

²⁴. Ibid, p.337  
²⁵. *The Telegraph*, 3 June 2000, p.9
internal problem, so it is the responsibility of the Government of India to resolve the problem with their own people, as the saying goes, “the wound in one’s mouth should be taken care of and treated by oneself.” Furthermore the Royal Government does not see any reason to offer any advice to India about her internal problem, but wishes that India resolves her own problem and ensures that there is no threat to a friendly neighbouring country and its people. Otherwise the Home Minister accuses that “until such a solution is found Bhutan will continue to face the spillover effect of India’s internal problem. It is in relation to this internal problem of India spilling over into Bhutan with all its attendant threats to our national sovereignty, that we must try to find a mutually satisfactory solution through dialogue with the Government of India. In this regard, the Indian Government is fully appreciative of how much we value the close friendship between our two countries”.26 Disappointed and dissatisfied by the remarks of the Defence Minister and Home Minister of India and the Assam state government that Bhutan has given shelter and allowed training camps for the insurgents, the Home Minister categorically revealed at the 76th session that “Bhutan has neither invited the Bodo-ULFA militants nor is it a willing host to them”.27 He continued, “the truth is that the Indian security forces have chased the Bodo and ULFA militants into Bhutan which could not stop them. This has undermined the territorial integrity and sovereignty of a small and peaceful neighbouring country like Bhutan”.28 The Royal Government alleges that the Indian security forces are continuously harassing the Bhutanese people travelling through Assam. Disclosing his dilemma while addressing the 76th Assembly the King said, “...their camps are inside Bhutan while their people live in the bordering state of Assam which has population of 25 million. Although they are armed militants, if any of them are killed in Bhutan, the Bhutanese security forces will be blamed for killing the Indian citizens, and all Bhutanese will face the repercussions in Assam”.29

The Government of India alleges that despite the King’s assurance to Indian leaders that the kingdom would not allow its territory to be used by anti-India forces, the rebels

---

26. Translation (in English) of the Proceedings and Resolution of the 76th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, June-July 1998, Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, pp.341-42
27. Ibid, p.342
28. Ibid, p.326
29. Ibid, p.338
of north-east continue to have free run in the kingdom. According to the Government of India, the militants were provided safe sanctuary in 1991 by the Bhutan Government in return for their support for terrorising the Lhotshampa refugees to leave Bhutan. Reportedly the Indian Home Ministry's offer of "safe passage" to the ULFA through Indian territories, if it evacuates Bhutan and shifts to Myanmar was turned down by the ULFA.\textsuperscript{30} Samdrupjonghgar serves as an entry and exit point for rebels based in the camps inside Bhutan and is the hub of anti-India activities. Maintenance of the record of visitors in the various town hotels by the Bhutan Government has not affected the movement of the armed rebels in the hotels of Samdrupjonghgar. Most of the hotel rooms are occupied by the members of these outfits who are not even hesitant in disclosing their identity. Pleading anonymity sources said that the militants move openly with arms and bodyguards, yet the Bhutanese police do not disturb them or intercept them. The rebels use Samdrupjonghgar as a base for ensuing supply and logistics to their camps at Sukhuni, about 66km from the border. The insurgents use Bhutan's registered vehicles to carry ration, medicines and other requirements of these camps which house around 600 to 700 armed rebels. The ULFA has two main camps called the 'council headquarters' and the 'general headquarters' in the hilly tracks of upper reaches of hills. In the lower part they have self styled 'battalion headquarters'. Samdrupjonghgar which is one of the district headquarters of Bhutan, is also an important township for ULFA rebels to transmit their orders and messages for their cadres operating inside Assam. Sources in the town said the militants maintain cordial relations with Bhutanese residents in order to avoid any protest from their part. To win their confidence the locals are given financial help also by the militants.\textsuperscript{31}

Indian security agencies are anxious about the Bhutan Government's decision to introduce a bus service between Thimphu and Dhaka through Meghalaya, that is, through Nakugaon in Bangladesh and Dalu in Meghalaya. For Bhutan the proposed route via Nakugaon is the best possible option because not only it is a shorter route than the one via Burimari, but it also leads to the eastern part of the Himalayan kingdom where majority of the Bhutanese live. Besides this there is virtually no infrastructure


\textsuperscript{31} The Asian Age, 18 October 1998, p.3.
along the cargo route via Burimari. However Indian security agencies are wary about the possibility of militants misusing the bus service. “It will be very difficult to control the movement of militants from Bangladesh to Bhutan once the service is launched. After all anyone can board the Dhaka-Thimpu bus without travel documents. Militants and even ISI agents can masquerade as citizens of either Bangladesh or Bhutan and avail of the bus service. This can be dangerous”, an Indian intelligence official said.32

At the initial phase of the ULFA-Bodo problem, Bhutan was suspicious of Indian interference to drive out the militants from the jungles of Bhutan. This suspense about India on the part of Bhutan was directly expressed when in the 75th session of the National Assembly it was said, “As both Bhutan and India were members of the Non-Aligned Movement and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), it would be against the principles of these organizations for the Indian army to enter Bhutan to flush out the Bodo and ULFA militants”.33 The Royal Government always showed their desire to solve the problem of insurgency on the basis of friendship and cooperation with India. The Bhutanese Government argues that whenever the Indian army carried out operation against the militants, the latter entered Bhutan easily through the dense jungles through the eastern and northern districts, and used the inaccessible areas as hideouts. As the border check points are established only on the main roads, the militants entered through other areas and hence attempts to stop their entry by blocking the roads were quite futile. Without any sort of indulgence on the part of Bhutan, the Royal Government asserts that they entered Bhutan illegally through the border. The District Councillor, the Chimis informed the 75th Assembly that Bhutanese travelling from Samdrupjonghkar to Phuntsoling via Assam face great difficulties due to numerous security checks conducted by the Indian military personnel.34

The 75th session of the National Assembly is of the opinion that while militants crossed over into Bhutan because of the porous border, it is not possible for Bhutan to use force and drive them out at will. The only permanent solution Bhutan thinks

32. The Telegraph, 22 May 2000, p.9
33. Translation (in English) of the Proceedings and Resolution of the 75th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, June-July 1997, Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, p.257
34. Ibid, p.257
was for peace to prevail in Assam. Already in order to curb the threat from the anti-social elements - ngolops and the militants, Royal Government has sought the cooperation of the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. Yet the members of the 75th National Assembly wanted that Bhutan must urge the Central government of India and the State government of Assam to resolve the ULFA-Bodo problem.  

Concerned over the rise of terrorism on both sides of India-Bhutan border, whenever India took initiative to drive out the militants from the Bhutanese soil, Thimphu showed reluctance to allow Indian forces to enter into Bhutan. Probably apprehensive that India might infringe Bhutan’s internal sovereignty at the pretext of driving the militants from Bhutanese hideouts, the Home Minister, Thinlay Gyamtsho in his four day visit to Guwahati in May 1993 said, “So far our government has no official reports about hideouts of Bodo Security Force or the ULFA in Bhutan. But if the India Government provides us with specific information, we are prepared to cooperate with them”. Moreover Bhutan has put conditions on India’s anti-ULFA-Bodo drive. These conditions are: 1) Bhutan will allow combing operation in Bhutan against the Bodos provided India gives prior information to Bhutan and gets prior permission; 2) Bhutan will allow Indian forces to enter its territory only in case of “hot pursuit” of insurgents. Whenever India urged the Royal Government to take initiative to weed out the terrorists, Thimphu had argued that lack of trained forces has forced it to desist from taking action against the militants. At the same time India’s help to Bhutan to raise special security force to fight the militants has run into rough weather following Bhutan’s demand that special forces be trained for more than three months period and that it be given sophisticated AK-56 rifles instead of AK-47s. 3) Paramilitary forces cannot crack down on any camp inside Bhutan unless there is a specific agreement between the two countries in this regard. Under the present circumstances, the Border Security Forces can only chase the extremists upto the Bhutan border and not beyond that; 4) The Royal Government referred to the consensus at the SAARC Summit for a collective offensive against terrorism and said that

contemplated joint operation against it could be taken up in the spirit of SAARC declaration.\textsuperscript{38}

Indian officials think that Bhutan’s reluctance to give the go-ahead signal to Indian forces for an offensive against the militants may be prompted by domestic compulsion. Perhaps the Bhutan Government feels that its involvement in the operations will turn the insurgents’ anger against the Royal Government who may carry out similar violence in Bhutan.\textsuperscript{39}

However due to the new conditions put by Thimpu, the training of the special force by India did not materialise. To circumvent the present stand of the Royal Government, Indian officials planned to carry out clandestine operations against the insurgents and inform the Royal Government after it has been completed.\textsuperscript{40}

VI

Bhutan agrees to joint India-Bhutan military operation

The Royal Government has reportedly served “quit notices” to the top leadership of the militants pointing out that the presence of their cadres was affecting peace and tranquility of the country.\textsuperscript{41} “We have made it known to them that we will not tolerate any further encroachment on our sovereignty and any activity in our territory,” said the Foreign Minister, Lyonpo Jigme Thinlay. He said that Bhutan Government does not want to go in for military action but might be forced to do so. “This is a sensitive subject and one would not like to speak openly about it. But the fact is the Government of Bhutan looks on military options as the last resort. We can get ULFA to leave our country but our first option is to request them to leave,”\textsuperscript{42}Thinlay said.

\textsuperscript{38} The Statesman, 15 May 1997, p.16
\textsuperscript{39} The Telegraph, 17 January 1997, p.16
\textsuperscript{40} The Telegraph, 17 January 1997, p.6
\textsuperscript{41} The Telegraph, 15 July 1999, p.9
\textsuperscript{42} The Times of India, 31 May 1999, p.7
Bhutan had set 15 June 2000 as deadline for the ULFA and NDFB leadership to hold their third round of talks with the government. The leaders however did not participate in the proposed talk citing security risks. During the second round of talks with the Bhutan Home Minister in May 1999, ULFA informed the Royal Government that ULFA would not leave Bhutan for at least another one and a half year. So with the failure of the dialogue between the Bhutan Government and Paresh Baruah, Commander-in-Chief of ULFA, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck finally gave his consent through the 78th National Assembly in session, in 2000, to India’s two-year old request for launching a joint Indo-Bhutanese military operation against them. The Deputy Chief of the Indian Army, Lt. General S. K. Jetley visited Bhutan on 14 September 2000 to discuss the strategy of joint Indo-Bhutan military action. The tentative period for launching the operation was set from October 1999 to March 2000. According to *The Assam Tribune*, the counter military plans prepared by the Indian Army was cleared by the Cabinet Committee on Security headed by Prime Minister, Defence, External Affairs, Home and the Finance Ministers.\(^43\)

About 2000 personnel of the Royal Bhutan Army were specially trained by the Indian Army.\(^44\) Bhutan has created a contingency fund of Nu/Rs. 937 million to deal with any emergency arising from the repercussions to military action against the rebels. Bhutan had set the following conditions prior to the joint operation to thwart the likely retaliation by the militants. These are:

i) The operation once launched should not be abandoned for political dialogue, it should be a fight to the finish.

ii) The sanitation of the Bhutanese territory should be properly maintained and full protection to life and property of the Bhutanese people should be assured.

iii) It must be ensured that Bhutan is not subject to economic blockade.

iv) There must be no harassment or harm to the Bhutanese in the operation area.


v) Care must be taken to ensure that once the insurgents are flushed out, they do not return.\textsuperscript{45} The \textit{Khathmandu Post} (17 November 1999) comments that “the entire Bhutanese apparatus is wholly engaged in army operations against the north-east rebels and also with damage control initiatives.” However Bhutan’s demand for complete sanitisation or elimination of insurgents or ensuring their non return are unrealistic. At the same time political dialogue amidst operation cannot be rejected outright.

\section*{VII}

\textbf{Reversal of India’s stand}

Whatever may be the discourse and deliberations regarding joint operation or the parleys between the Indian Foreign Minister, Jaswant Sinha and Indian Chief of Army Staff, General V. P. Malik with their Bhutanese counterparts through visits, in the finality, adopting “a hammer and anvil strategy”, the joint operation is still under consideration of both the governments. Because of the ramifications involved both countries have exercised restraint on the implication of such a joint effort. “A joint operation is not something that can happen at the drop of a hat. There are several factors which have to be taken into consideration. Therefore the best thing is that we wait for the situation. We will go by what the two governments decide”, said Lt. General D. B. Shekhatkar.\textsuperscript{46} Both the countries know that following the joint operation, the Army of Bhutan would not be able to match the modern fire power of the rebels. India had to hold back the plans of flushing out the militants from Bhutan as an effort was under way to bring about the long awaited ceasefire in Assam. So the joint operation at that juncture, according to the Government of India, would sound the death knell for a prospective ceasefire and it would be construed as centre’s unwillingness to give peace a chance in Assam to the oppositions and to the Assam government.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} The Telegraph, 11 April 1999, p.7.
\textsuperscript{47} The Telegraph, 12 April 1999, p.6.
The Centre would have to play a crucial role in all negotiations as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act was in force. Realising this, the surrendered ULFA (SULFA) had petitioned Delhi regarding the ceasefire negotiations in April '99. They had even urged the Chief Minister and the Governor of Assam, Prafulla Mahanta and General (retired) S. K. Sinha respectively to consider unilateral ceasefire in case the ULFA did not respond to the offer. The plan to drive out the rebels hiding in Bhutan concerned mostly the ULFA and Bodo militants as both factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) had already made truce with the security forces in Nagaland. Since the NSCN is perceived as the "guiding force" behind insurgency in "north-east, the blueprint of the ceasefire policy with other groups is likely to be based on the Naga model".48

VIII

Bhutan's policy regarding ULFA - Bodo problem

In spite of the contention between the two neighbouring countries on the joint strategies to flush out the north-east insurgents from the soil of Bhutan, Bhutan for its own national interest has resorted to some indigenous policy-making to combat the ULFA-Bodo problem.

First, the District Councillors in appreciation of the King said that the King "has taken full responsibility to resolve this problem and every possibility is being explored to this end". The members of the Assembly pledged to "firmly support any step taken by the Royal Government even at the cost of their lives." Nevertheless the members suggest that the "Royal Government should try to resolve the problem through dialogue with the Government of India".49

48. The Telegraph, 11 April 1999, p.6

49. Translation (In English) of the Proceedings and Resolution of the 76th Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan, June-July 1998, Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan, Thimpu, pp.318-20
Secondly, it was decided that if peaceful solution was not possible, a portion of the Eighth Plan budget should be used to purchase arms and militia training should be given to all men ranging from the age of 18 to 60 years. At the 78th (June-July 2000) session of the National Assembly, the decision to impart militia training to the people wanting to volunteer their service in the areas affected by the Bodo and ULFA, like the militia training in the 1990 *ngoklop* uprising, was taken. The women too would be trained to deal with security threats in the kingdom in future. The Assembly however resolved that instead of training militia volunteers for temporary service, it would be more productive if interested people were recruited and properly trained to join the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) as regular soldiers. The Chief Operations Officer of the RBA, Goongleon Gongma Lam Dorji told the Assembly that initially since the King was concerned about the safety of the people, he had commanded the army not to mobilize militia volunteers. The militia are trained for just two or three months and are therefore exposed to serious danger if they are deployed in high risk situations. However, the RBA Chief suggested that since 1990 uprising the conditions have changed. The number of troops has been greatly increased to deal with the ULFA-Bodo militants “Today the RBA boasts of fourteen wings as against eight before. Although the RBA could train 800 recruits every six months, there are only 450 recruits currently under training.”50 The duration of the training has been reduced from nine months to six months intensifying the training. The RBA has also applied for a partial freeze on retirement and troops are being pensioned only on grounds of health and old age.51 Dorji requested the Assembly to help the RBA by encouraging more young men to join the army.

Thirdly the 77th Session (June-July 1999) of the National Assembly gave the green signal to the government to evict the militants with military help if peaceful negotiations failed. The decision was welcomed by the Assam government which for a long time had been demanding that Bhutan must take effective measures to throw out the militants belonging to the ULFA and NDFB. The Chief Minister, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta had urged the Centre to render all possible assistance to Bhutan in order to implement the 77th Assembly decision. It has been reported that there are 2500 ULFA and NDFB

militants in Bhutan with their general and command headquarters located in the kingdom itself.\textsuperscript{52}

Fourthly, not only the 78th Assembly had decided to tighten vigilance and security at the various checkpoints to check intrusion and penalise the Bhutanese helping the militants, the Assembly had also authorized checking vehicles belonging to the General Engineering and Reserve Force (GERF) and army as some drivers of these vehicles are suspected to be involved in aiding the insurgents, as quoted by the \textit{Kuensel}\.\textsuperscript{53}

As Bhutan shares a common border with Assam, from the Sankosh river to Daifam or like the Trashiyangtse \textit{Dzongkhag} which borders the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, it was also suggested that the police should check all the travellers at the border check post without exception. Troops were deployed in the Bhutan-Assam border and additionally there are frequent border patrolling especially in the areas having dense forests. Belittling Indian feelings that the King of Bhutan was dilly dallying on the kind of approach his government should take towards the Indian insurgents in Bhutan, the King in April 2001 toured the southern parts of the kingdom and visited the base and training camps of the ULFA and the NDFB. He briefed his experience to the Indian Ambassador of Bhutan and supplied the Indian envoy with a list of names of some top ULFA and Bodo militants and their cadres operating from these camps. India feels that this development is a clear sign of cooperation at the highest level in Thimpu, indicating a positive change.\textsuperscript{54}

Fifthly, once the militants are removed from the kingdom, in order to ensure that no intrusions in future, can take place, the Royal Government has decided to resettle people on the vacant lands along the borders in southern Bhutan.

Sixthly, in case Bhutan is engaged in military confrontation with the militants, the King would first warn the people of the six border districts of Samdrupjonghkar, Trashigang, Trashiyangtse, Sarpang, Samtse, Zhempang to face any emergency situation. In order to compensate for the loss of the farmers of the border districts, the \textit{Kuensel} reported that the King would buy the agricultural produce which the farmers usually

\textsuperscript{52} The Statesman, 11 July 2000, p.2
\textsuperscript{53} The Statesman, 18 July 2000, p.2
\textsuperscript{54} The Telegraph, 6 May 2001, p.6
sell in Assam and divert them to other markets in India. The Royal Government would bear the loss incurred by the people especially if the rebels resort to blockade. Trashigang district alone imports food item worth Nu 49 million from Assam and exports agricultural produce ranging Nu 30-40 million annually. A new storage facility with a capacity of 800 metric tonnes would be built in addition to the godown at Khugma and two others at Trashigang. Similar facilities would be extended to Samdrupjonghkar and Mongar as quoted by the Kuensel.55

Seventhly, the Bhutan Government and the ULFA signed an agreement in Thimpu in June 2001. This agreement contains a written undertaking given by ULFA to Bhutan to remove four of its nine camps in Bhutan and reduce the number of its cadres in the remaining five camps by the year-end. The Bhutan National Assembly endorsed the agreement at its 79th session in 2001 after three days of debate. On the other hand, the NDFB which had also been asked to remove its camps from the country, had said that they intended to leave but could not commit a deadline. The agreement was drafted taking into account the country's security, Bhutan's cordial relations with India and the interests of the people. The Foreign Minister, Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley said that the agreement had removed a major dilemma for the government by setting a deadline. "Therefore it will be understood from today that the National Assembly has given the green signal to the Royal government and the security forces to take up military action against the militants if they fail to comply with the document they have signed...."56

The standpoint of the Government of Bhutan has been well stated by the Foreign Secretary of the Royal Government of Bhutan, Ugyen Tshering in an interview which took place on 9 June 1999. He told me categorically,

"I think the issue is not just to do something. The issue is to try to find a solution to the problem and there are a lot of people who doubt that any kind of immediate military action will resolve anything in the short run. It might just open up a hornet's nest. The best example is Kosovo right now, they thought that few days of bombing would resolve everything. But, it has not... Same thing happened in Lebanon and so

55. The Telegraph, 17 February 2001, p.10
many places, we can name. So the issue is not one. It is still about what are the options left. Obviously there are not many options left. We recognize that also. But, we cannot be a responsible government unless we have exhausted all the options. The other issue is that, the Government of India feel that we have been dragging our feet in allowing the Indian military action. The fact that India has respected this so far and that we should work together on discussions on how to solve it is actually a reflection of the good relations we have. They do have. The Government of India fully respects this sovereign territorial integrity of Bhutan. They have respected our sovereignty and that in any such action something that will be done as a last resort is only after recognising the full consequences of it, not half recognising the consequences and so far as we have been concerned, we are moving near military. But having said, there are not many options.”

The fundamental issue in this context has been clarified by the Ambassador of India to Bhutan P. K. Singh in an interview with me on 8 June 1999. He expressed in no uncertain terms, “We have a common border which is not yet defined. The tri junctions in the east and the west between India, China and Bhutan are not yet defined. So, in every sense of the term economically, strategically and politically our destinies are being improvised. So, I think this is the basic factor in this relationship between India and Bhutan.”