



The Kuki-Zomi insurgency in Manipur nearing settlement

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Abstract: Ceasefire with 'Kuki' and 'Zomi' ethnic armed outfits in Manipur commenced as a military initiative sidelining the state government following the signing of SoO between the Indian armed forces and eight Kuki and Zomi outfits on 01 August 2005. It became official with the signing of tripartite agreement on 22 August 2008 between the conglomerate groups of Kuki and Zomi outfits, the State Government and the Centre with definite ground rules. However, Kuki and Zomi outfits under SoO have quite often violated the ground rules. Since the signing of the SoO, it continued to extend from time to time, the latest being the signing for extension of another one year with effect from 31 August 2017. On 25th November 2015, the KNO and UPF have unanimously decided to pursue common political objectives which would be nothing less than a 'State status' within the constitution of India. The new Manipur Chief Minister, N Biren Singh, also gave his assurance in the floor of the assembly that both the Centre and State governments would start dialogue with Kuki (and Zomi) militants under SoO agreement and find solution to the armed movement within a time frame. With it, the solution seems to be within sight. SoO being the first ever peace initiative involving the state government, it should pave way for substantive dialogue towards durable solution of the Kuki and Zomi insurgencies. Successful resolution of the Kuki and Zomi insurgency Government of India would invite the willingness of other outfits which still eludes the peace talks offer.

Keywords: Ceasefire, Ethnic, Internecine, Kuki, Manipur, Zomi,

Introduction

Suspension of Operation (SoO) with the 'Kuki' and 'Zomi' armed groups in Manipur was preceded by 'Cessation of Operations' agreement with the union government which comes into effect from 01 August 2005. Later in July 2006, Shri Okram Ibobi, the incumbent Manipur Chief Minister (CM) on 15 July 2006 while clarifying that the state government was unaware had stated, "*I am totally blind in this matter and more so on the conditions maintained between the concerned underground group and the army.*"¹

It mirrors the murky manner with which SoO began as the state government was being sidelined and not taken into confidence though law and order is a state subject. It was the army which

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initiated the move of suspending the operation against the Kuki and Zomi armed outfits. Previously Ceasefire under SoO was between the Indian army and central paramilitary forces and some armed groups belonging to Kuki and Zomi communities. The Ministry of Defense in a press release dated October 7, 2005, disclosed that eight 'Kuki' and one 'Zomi' militant group in Manipur had entered into an informal 'ceasefire' with the Union Government. 'Cessation of operations' agreements was concluded with these groups with effect from 01 August, 2005.²In connection with it, the Manipur CM stated that the ceasefire between the "Indian security forces and some Non-Naga insurgents" was not acceptable as it lacks the state government's consent. Further he stated that the state government would form modalities and concrete ground rules for holding dialogues with insurgents groups operating in the state.³

Pursuit for State Recognition

Kuki National Front (KNF) had issued a threat that "if the ruling state government did not apply the SoO (Ceasefire) pact in the state between Kuki revolutionaries with Center there shall be no room for Congress (I) in the forthcoming state election (Ninth Manipur Assembly Election, 2007) in the Kuki dominated hills in the state". The outfit spelled out that it would ban any Congress (I) workers, candidate and campaign in the Kuki dominated areas.⁴The Kuki Liberation Army (KLA) /Kuki Liberation Organization (KLO) also had stated that despite entering into SoO with the Indian army and the central security forces, the congress led state government refused to recognize and endorse the SoO agreement. KLO also alleged the state government for not taking any initiative of approaching the centre to start a peace talk. On these grounds, the KLO had imposed ban on the candidates of the ruling alliances who were contesting the elections.⁵The outfit also carried out bomb attacks at the residence of Minister, Ph. Parijat and the President of Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC), MrGaikhangam. The Kuki and Zomi armed outfits which entered into the said informal ceasefire include Kuki National Organization (KNO)/Kuki National Army (KNA), Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) / Zomi Revolutionary Organization (ZRO), KLA/ KLO, Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), Kuki National Front – Zogam (KNF-Z), Kuki National Front- Military Council (KNF-MC), etc.

Signing of SoO Agreement

The SoO between the conglomerate groups of KukidndZomi outfits namely, the United Peoples' Front (UPF), and the KNO, State Government and the Central Government was signed at Delhi on 22 August 2008. The state Cabinet presided over by the Chief Minister gave its approval to the said SoO agreement signed within the framework of Indian Constitution after the State Government rejected demand of the Kuki outfits for Kuki homeland or Zalengam to ensure the



territorial integrity of Manipur.⁶ Since the signing of the SoO, it continued to extend from time to time. The latest one being the signing for extension of another one year which came to effect from 31 August 2017.

Profile of the Armed Outfits

While the KNO represents 11 groups, the UPF represents eight outfits. After a series of turns and negotiations and brain storming sessions, the ground rules for the suspension of operations between the Government and Kuki armed groups were signed on 22 August 2008. In it, Joint Secretary in the Union Government in charge of Northeast appended his signature on behalf of the Government of India (GoI) while the state government of Manipur was represented by Principal Secretary (Home). Eight members each from the UPF and the KNO also signed the SoO.

KNO comprises of 11 different Kuki and Zomi armed ethnic outfit. They are Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki National Front-Military Council (KNF-MC), Kuki National Front-Zogam (KNF-Z), United Socialist Revolutionary Army (USRA), ZouDefence Volunteer-KNO (ZDV-KNO), United Komrem Revolutionary Army (UKRA), Zomi Revolutionary Force (ZRF), Hmar National Army (HNA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (Unification), Kuki Liberation Army (KLA-KNO) and United All Kuki Liberation Army.⁷ While the UPF represents eight outfits which include Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), Kuki National Front-P (KNF-P), United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), Hmar Peoples' Conference/ Democratic (HPC-D), Kuki Liberation Army (KLA/KLO), Kuki National Front-S (KNF-S), etc.⁸

The main objectives of the KNO/KNA is to bring together all the Kuki-inhabited areas separated by 'artificial boundary' created in 1935, specifically in the Kabaw valley of Myanmar and the Kuki inhabited areas in the hill districts of Manipur under one administrative unit called 'Zalengam' (Land of freedom). In case of the eventuality of such integration not materializing, the KNA aims at the creation of two Kuki states: one within Burma i.e. 'Eastern Zalengam' and the other within India, 'Western Zalengam'. The KNA has an estimated strength of 600 cadres armed with an array of weapons like AK-Series, G-series, M-series and 60mm mortar.⁹ ZouDefence Volunteer (ZDV) was said to be formed in 1997 however its existence came to be known in 2003. ZDV strives for maintaining their intermediary "Zou" identity without aligning to either the "Zomi" or the "Kuki". KNF was founded on 18 May 1988 with the objective of the demand for Kukiland which consisted of the districts of Churachandpur, Chandel, parts of Tamenglong and parts of Senapati¹⁰ and to defend the Kukis from the atrocities and brutalities of the "anti-national Naga activists". KNF split in 1995, with one unit identifying itself as the "presidential faction" and the other as the "military council". The former again



split into Samuel faction (KNF-S) and Zougam faction (KNF-Z). The total cadre strength of the outfit (inclusive of all factions) is estimated to be between 400 and 500.¹¹ United Komrem Revolutionary Army (UKRA) was formed on 23 October 2004 to protect the interests of the Komrem community.¹²

KRA was formed in December 2000 by a group of disgruntled cadres of the KNF-MC faction with purported objective of securing a "separate State" for the Kuki tribe within the Indian union. It has approximate cadre strength of 250. National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) was instrumental in training and arming the KRA cadres.¹³ KLA was formally re-established in 1993 with the sole objective of safeguarding the political interest of the Kukis and their inhabited areas which purportedly claimed to have inherited from the Kuki ancestors.¹⁴ Hmar People's Convention-Democratic (HPC-D) is an offshoot of the political party, HPC, which came into existence in 1986, spearheading a movement for self-government in the north and northeast of Mizoram. The Mizo Peace Accord of 1986, failed to address their demand of a 'Greater Mizoram' integrating all areas inhabited by Hmars in Mizoram, Assam and Manipur under a single administrative unit. Since April 1987, the HPC waged an armed struggle for autonomy. However in 1992, HPC representatives and the Government of Mizoram mutually agreed signed a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) at the Mizoram capital Aizawl on July 27, 1994, for establishing the 'Sinlung Development Council' and subsequently, 308 HPC militants surrendered along with their arms. HPC-D was formed by a section of the HPC cadres who were dissatisfied with the implementation process MoS. The purported objective of the outfit over the years has changed from an autonomous district covering the north and northeast Mizoram to an independent Hmar State (Hmar Ram) consisting of the Hmar inhabited areas of Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. The cadre strength of the outfit is estimated to be between 100 and 150.¹⁵

ZRA was formed in 1997 as an armed wing of ZRO which was formed in 1993. The purported objective of the ZRO/ZRA is to protect the interests of the Paite community from the 'onslaught of any community or group'. It further attempts "to bring all the Zomipeople, divided by artificial State boundaries in various countries, specifically in Myanmar (Chin State), India (Manipur and Mizoram) and Bangladesh (Chittagong Hills Tracts), together under one administrative unit, a 'Zogam', which means 'land of the Zomi' under the Indian Union".¹⁶ ZRF was formed by a group of Paites defected from ZRA. USRA was formed by Vaiphei cadres who defected from ZRA to uphold the dignity and identity of the Vaipheis. United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) was formed on March 29, 2000 with the purported objective of upholding the interests of the Kuki community and forming a separate Kuki state called 'Kukiland'.



The Negotiation Process

In the later part of December 2008, after the completion of four rounds of meetings on the SoO between the Kuki and Zomi ethnic outfits led by the KNO and the UPF, the JMG of the government finalized the process for issue of Identity Cards to around 1745 cadres out of a total of 2519. At a meeting held on 19 December 2008 a list of 500 cadres of KRA, 377 cadres of KNF-P, 419 cadres of UKLF, 111 cadres of KLA, 717 cadres of ZRA, 250 cadres of KNF-S, 110 cadres of HPC and 45 cadres of ZDV have been proposed by the Kuki groups for official recognition. 23 numbers of designated camps operating under different Kuki militant groups have also been proposed for official identification. The said meeting between the JMG and the KNO and UPF was attended by the State Principal Secretary Home, Deputy Director of Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau (SIB), Colonel Sanjay Gupta of GS (HQ) Inspector General Assam Rifles (IGAR)-South; Mr. Rakesh Dhakarwal, Commandant, Central Reserved Police Force; Lieutenant Colonel D Mishra, GSD (Int), 57 Mountain Division; KMS Rao, Assistant Director, SIB; Major S Jung, HQIGAR (S) and seven other representatives from the KNO and UPF.¹⁷

With the signing of the tripartite agreement, SoO came into force initially for a period of one year with the provision that it could be extendable on the basis of mutual agreement and understanding. The KNO spokesman, Dr. Seilen Haokip took SoO as a pre-requisite to political dialogue's commencement.¹⁸ While voicing on behalf of the KNO he stated that the tripartite agreement was a structural necessity. He exemplify by stating that the Joint Monitoring Group comprising representatives from GOI, KNO and the Government of Manipur will be dealing with issues related to the field or the ground rules. JMG are going to be responsible for monitoring the activities of KNO's cadres and the security forces. JMG is an administrative body, which will take decisions pertaining to the camps and ground issues; it is not going to be responsible for making political decisions. However this was not KNO's preferred model. Instead KNO would want GoI to engage in dialogue with them and referred to the Manipur state government any relevant issue as and when necessary. A Joint Monitoring Group headed by Principal Secretary (Home), with a representative each from the UPF and the KNO had also been formed. Issuing of identity cards to all the cadres of the two groups by the government, payment of Rs. 2000 to each cadre monthly for maintenance as well as identifying and building the designated camps. The cadres will not be allowed to move out of the designated camps with arms and all the designated camps will be located at a good distance from the national highways as well as international boundaries, and strict adherence to the rules so laid down are some significant points of the ground rules. As per the agreement, the enforcement of the ground rules would be the responsibility of the state government with the help and assistance of the central police organizations, Assam Rifles and Army deployed in the state of Manipur.¹⁹



The agreed “Ground Rules” demands all the parties to stick to the conditions that admit them into the SoO group. Exercising any sort of military might, particularly by the armed groups, is bound to be seen as violation of the contract that they have mutually entered into. On the part of the armed groups, it appears that none would immediately choose to stand in the way of the peace process in their quest to walk the talk towards securing “political solution”. In this connection the KNO spokesman stated that the main purpose of SoO was to engage in political dialogue to find a political settlement for the Kukis within the constitution of India. Calvin H, member of the UPF also asserted that “despite the stand of the Government of Manipur” for territorial integrity, “there is no binding clause in the constitution that says the boundary of the state cannot be changed”.²⁰

UPF’s convener of the Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) TL Jacob Thadou stated that the armed groups are adhering to the agreed conditions of the “Ground Rules” in good spirit. He said that the armed groups have been pragmatically engaged in a learning process that requires them to make peace, build confidence and resolve differences. Further he said, the preparations, thus far, have been held in a positive atmosphere with certain progress, though without definitive agreements for the political talks. Commander of 59 Mountain Brigade, stated on 27 November 2009 that the tripartite SoO pact signed between the Central Government, the State Government and Kuki militant groups were still in transitory phase and no political dialogue has been initiated as yet.²¹

Violation of SoO and Internecine Wars

The Kuki and Zomi ethnic armed outfits despite being in SoO with the State and the Union government continued to engage in extortion, fratricidal turf wars and internecine factional clashes, kidnapping for ransom, intimidating the civilians, interference in developmental programmes, and influencing the outcome of the Autonomous District Council (ADC) election 2010 results through sheer coercion. An amount of Rs. 21,48,095 was released for the purpose of payment of compensations to the land owners affected by the land acquisition for the construction of the ICP at Moreh. From the compensation amount, KNA/KNO maintaining cease fire trust under SoO imposed diktat that they will cut 57 percent of the compensation amount received by the land owners. Out of the compensation amounts KNA/KNO had collected Rs 17, 76,000.²²In this connection the Integrated Check Post - Joint Action Committee (ICP-JAC) had earlier on 04 April 2010 demanded the Chandel district administration that distribution/payment of compensation should be delayed until the KNA was permanently driven out from ‘Moreh’ and Chandel District. The KLA on 17 November 2009 while declaring its decision to no longer go along with the KNO/KNA alleged the later of repeatedly



violating the ceasefire ground rules in the name of KLA in the form of levying taxes, extortion, kidnapping, etc. to blacklist the KLA.²³

On April 2010, there were reports of villagers of BungbalKhullen, Seichang and Suongthel areas in Senapati District fleeing their respective villages following continued clashes between suspected rival Kuki militants under SoO. A particular outfit under SoO had on 27 May 2010 spelled out that contractors who have violated the outfit's instruction of seeking prior permission would not be entertained for undertaking works under the Pradhan Mantri Gram SadakYojana. The same outfit abducted the chief of Kom village, Thayong in the Senapati District and imposed a fine of Rs. 100000 for not attending a meeting of village chiefs of the area and eventually released on payment of Rs. 80,000. KLA despite in a SoO agreement locked up the Imphal-Guwahati passenger bus from outside at a place near Dimapur and set it on fire with 32 passengers still inside on October 2008 because of the bus owner's failure to pay their "tax" demand. It resulted in the death of two passengers.²⁴ On 2 June 2008, the United Committee Manipur in a memorandum submitted to Manipur Governor, blamed the SoO agreement signed with the Kuki militant outfits for the rising crime and unchecked violence in some parts of the State. It stated that due to the improper implementation of the truce details there were unrestricted and open extortions being carried out along with abductions for ransom which had become routine further adding that the Imphal-Moreh Sumo service was suspended due to monetary demands imposed by the KNA on the transporters. Cadres of the Kuki and Zomi armed outfit under SoO was found in the fraudulent withdrawal of Rs.4.54 Crores of public fund in between 03-14 October 2010 from the Churachandpur branch of United Bank of India.²⁵ KNA allegedly intimidated the voters belonging to Kom community in Sagang and Tuibuong areas in Churachandpur District and at Moreh area in Chandel District and disrobe them of their right to vote in the Autonomous District Council (ADC) held in May 2010. During the year 2013 to 2017 (till 01 October), internecine clashes involving the outfits under SoO have resulted to 19 death casualties and three injured.²⁶

SoO Groups coming to Common Political Objectives

On 25th November 2015, the KNO and UPF have unanimously decided to pursue common political objectives which would be nothing less than a 'State status' within the constitution of India. They also together forewarned against the formation of any new outfit and stated that any such move should be countered collectively.²⁷ On 2nd March 2007, while speaking for the election meeting at 'Churachandpur'²⁸ Union Home Minister, Shri Rajnath had assured of 'political solution' for the groups under SoO. The new Manipur Chief Minister, N Biren Singh, also gave his assurance in the floor of the assembly that both the Centre and State governments would start dialogue with Kuki militants under SoO agreement and finding a solution to the armed movement within a time frame. With it, the

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solution seems to be within sight. In connection with it, he stated, "The people of Manipur, particularly in hill districts, have had enough of the militant activities due to the prolonged extension of SoO or cease fire. So, we will make sure that a solution to the problem is brought at the earliest ..." The GoI also finally appointed former Director of IB, Dineshwar Sharma as interlocutor to expedite the early settlement.²⁹

Conclusion

The state and the central government shall ensure that those Kuki and Zomi outfits under SoO did not inconvenience the civilians. The KNO as well as the UPF took SoO as a significant step in the right direction and a prerequisite to the commencement of political dialogue. While engaging in SoO, grassroots democracy should be strengthened and the strong presence of state administration should be made felt which otherwise have for so long remained as ungovernable grey areas because of difficult geographical terrains and thriving Kuki and Zomi insurgency. It is hoped that holistic solutions which will not be in collision with the interest of the other communities that could potentially trigger another form of conflict would come into sight in the very near future. To add a caution, if any form of autonomy is to be granted, it should not be community exclusive as the guiding spirit should be that of peaceful co-existence and not of extending sovereignty to one particular ethnic group. Since SoO is the first ever peace initiative involving the state government, it should pave way for substantive dialogue towards durable solution of the hKuki and Zomihydra-headed Kuki and Zomi insurgencies. Successful resolution of the Kuki and Zomi insurgent problems through SoO would invite the willingness of other armed outfits which are still eluding the offer for peace talks.

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2. Rebecca C, Haokip (2007). "The Kuki-Paite Conflict In The Churachandpur District Of manipur". In Lazar Jeyaseelan. *Conflict mapping and peace processes in North East India (PDF)*. North Eastern Social Research Centre. Retrieved 4 February 2014.
3. Pradip Chandra Sarma, *Traditional Customs and Rituals of Northeast India: Arunachal ...*Page 288 Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture "chose to employ the term Chin to christen those on the



Burmese side and the term Kuki on the Indian side of the ... The Mizo of today's Mizoram are the descendants of Luseia, and the Zomi of Manipur are from the Songthu line, and thus all ..."

4. Amy Alexander Burma: "we are Like Forgotten People" : the Chin People of Burma Page 16 2009 "... within Chin State, Chin nationalist leaders popularized the term "Chin" following Burma's independence from Britain."
5. Ramamoorthy Gopalakrishnan - *Socio-political framework in North-East India* Page 149 1996 "Later, the term 'Mizo' created a lot of confusion particularly when the Zomi(Newly formed) National Congress emerged. ... But the problem arose with the use of the term 'Chin' (it is not given due recognition in the List of Scheduled Tribes in Manipur)."
6. History of Zomi T. Gougin - 1984 "In Burma the people like to renounce the term Chin in favour of Zomi. Zomi is becoming more and more popular in Churachandpur district of Manipur adjoining the Chin State of Burma as group identity in repudiating Chin and Kuki.



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