

Manipur : Synopsis of Webinar Held on 20 Aug 23

By

Current Affairs & Strategic Analysis Forum (CASA)

Introduction

The above seminar was conducted by CASA with an eminent panel comprising of Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM, PhD (Veteran), Lt Gen K H Singh, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM, PhD (Veteran) and Shri Sanjoy Hazarika, eminent writer, documentary film maker, policy analyst and founder of the Centre for NE Studies & Policy Research.

The webinar was conducted and moderated by Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, former DG Ordnance & former Member Army Tribunal, Kolkata, (veteran), founder of CASA and Lt Gen P R Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, founder of blog site Gunners Shot, visiting professor IIT Madras (Veteran).

As can be seen, all have had extensive exposure to our NE and were thus well suited to discuss the prevailing situation in Manipur and suggest the way forward. India's Look East-Act East policy seems threatened by the sudden ethnic violence that had erupted in Manipur since April-May this year. A growing sense of frustration seems to have gripped all stake holders as talks, enquiries and commissions drag on seemingly without any real outcomes.

Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan

Opening the discussions Lt Gen Chauhan dwelt on the following points in some detail:

1. Origin of Kuki tribals- they have been mentioned in records as being inhabitants of the hill areas of the state at least for 300 years- could be from even longer. They were once known as the Kirat tribe.
2. Reasons for the rise in population of the Kuki in the state where they are almost at par with the once majority Meites cannot be explained by natural births alone.
3. Troubles began with protests led by students and youth over the desecration of memorials honouring the Kuki who perished in the Anglo-Kuki wars of the colonial era.
4. The issue of narcotics has always been there in Manipur since past 20-25 years. Whenever the Army/Assam Rifles came to know of it, the illegal farms were raided and the crops destroyed.

5. The most serious event in the General's opinion was the uncontested looting of arms from state armouries wherein complicity of the state or elements from its law enforcement agencies are suspected. Despite appeals from the Home Minister of the country, very few of the looted arms have been returned /recovered.
6. The issue of SC/ST status for Meites has been played up in the media disproportionately. Meites are not keen to buy land in the hills or to go and live in the hills.

In conclusion the General offered the following suggestions:

- The first step is to end the violence by all sides.
- Energetic steps must be taken by the army/AR/state police to get the looted weapons back.
- The NE is known for its activist groups comprising women, youth etc. They are conspicuous by their absence in Manipur in recent weeks. Efforts must be made to get youth groups, women's groups, etc to come forward and be proactive in curbing violence. The state agencies must give them all support.

Sanjoy Hazarika

The eminent influencer from Assam was invited next and he made the following points:

1. Fixing of responsibility & accountability topped his concerns.
2. Recovery of looted weapons was next. Here again he stressed on the fixing of accountability where large quantity of weapons simply got looted despite the large presence of security forces.
3. Central Govt must take stock of the overall impact of the disturbances in the state and its impact in the region and our Look East-Act East policies. Without peace and access to border areas no trade, movement of people or investments can be expected.
4. Narcotics was not a new problem. The present and past govts must be held accountable.
5. Approx 60000 people are in relief camps as their homes and properties have been destroyed. They need food, health care and medicines. They have to be rehabilitated at the earliest. People have not only fled to other parts of the NE but to other parts of the country also.

Lt Gen KH Singh

The final speaker for the webinar was Gen KHSingh who spoke from ground zero-Imphal. He made the following points:

1. Currently general violence levels are down but for some sporadic incidents. Both groups appear to be tired. Emotions remain high. Triggers can be expected from any side. Army and AR have done a great job in the very difficult times.

2. Both the Kuki and Meitei sides heavily armed. Despite recovery of about 1000 of the looted arms, approximately 3-4000 still remain unaccounted for. The strength of SOO (Suspension of Operations) camps have been lessened by about 40%. Governance remains crippled. Displaced people must remain the top focus for the authorities.

3. Poppy cultivation has been going on since the '70s. The coup in Myanmar about 2-2.5 years ago and the crack down on the eastern end of the Golden Triangle, Thailand by the US/West, has caused the fulcrum of the drug trade to the Western end of the Triangle- India's NE states, particularly Manipur, due to reasons of ethnic similarities and easier trans-border trafficking routes as compared to Nagaland, Mizoram etc. The drug industry is estimated to be in the region of 60-80 crores per annum. Earlier poppy was sent to Myanmar for processing. Now it is processed locally. Bulk of the profits from this illegal trade goes to anti-national elements.

4. While talking to militant groups like the Nagas, or any other groups, Govt must also keep in mind the issue of national security since China's activities in Myanmar are well known.

5. From the brief review of the situation, it must be clearly understood that the troubles in Manipur have nothing to do with religion. Nor is it about a tribal versus non-tribal issue. Half of the area of Manipur valley (19 PS areas out of 39 PSs) have no AFSPA. Violence has taken place both inside and outside the AFSPA areas. However, sporadic exchanges of gunfire are mostly in AFSPA areas.

The way forward can be divided into two parts- Short Term and Long Term. Some of the Short Term measures mentioned by the General are:

- Disarming of the armed civil populace and militants on both sides in a near simultaneous campaign.
- Records of SOO groups exist only up to 2008. For 15 years thereafter there are no records of new recruitment and of induction of arms. These records must be updated and the groups must be made to answer for specific SOO violations.
- Unified HQs must re-frame rules for engagement in line with the envisaged end-state. Roles for each component of the SF must be specified. Army's role be clearly defined to avoid what is policing in nature.

- Civil Society Organizations, Peace Committees must be recast and reactivated with full Govt support. Dialogue is the only way forward.
- SOO groups violating the terms of their agreement must be dealt with seriously.
- Accountability must be fixed faster. People must be made to fear the law if they wilfully violate its conditions. In the border areas the state must come down with a heavy hand on any illegal activity.
- Politicians must receive firm instructions from the Centre.

In Long Term measures the General included the following:

- The peace-talks with various groups lasting over 15-20 years breeds distrust among all stake holders. The interlocutors from both the state and the Centre should have possible end state in mind. Treatment of multiple groups differently could result in more problems in the future.
- The rules for FMR (Free Movement Regime) were very clear- 48 hours & 16 Km. The process must be enforced strictly. Identity cards must be made compulsory for any crossing. Illegal entries must be identified and dealt with as per law.
- Whatever solution is agreed upon the process must be transparent and operated without bias or favour.
- False promises must not be made. The Manipur Assembly had passed resolutions for creation of District Councils with possible devolved powers. These must be followed up.
- A clear vision for the NE must be promulgated widely and adhered to. Security architecture of the region must be reviewed in the light of evolving threats. The spectacle of state police forces fighting each other over territorial disputes does not inspire confidence in the public.

The moderator then succinctly summarized all the points made by the three panelists. He cited the example of how poppy cultivation has been eliminated by the Taliban in Afghanistan and how this was a reason why the rule of law is sought to be upended in our NE so that the Golden Triangle continues as the main source for drugs despite the coup in Myanmar and crackdown in Thailand. The expansion of the drug menace in our NE is axiomatic.

Questions & Answers

The panel took up some of the more interesting questions from the audience:

1. Answering a question about who is best suited to disarm the public, Gen Shokin opined that the first requirement to be met was to hammer out

an agreement. The rest would follow. Clarity on the status of the armed forces must be clearly defined including the imposition of AFSPA in buffer zones. He further estimated that about 20-30000 weapons are floating around in the hands of hot-blooded youth in the 32 lakh sq km of Manipur. Civil society organizations and youth organizations must be encouraged to come forward to resolve the issue.

2. Shri Sanjoy Hazarika too opined that the issue must not be seen as only pertaining to Manipur. It has wider ramifications in the wider NE as well as having international security dimensions. There is a need to differentiate between illegal immigrants and refugees. The latter are protected by international conventions and blind application of the FMR must not be resorted to. NRC has been a flop in Assam and it will do no better if introduced into Manipur. Initially our NE states including Manipur were transit routes for drugs going to other destinations. Then a community of local users was created. Now the whole industry has taken root in sensitive border states. During the recent visit by our PM to the US the outcome document had a paragraph that called for release of political prisoners etc. The Myanmar junta took this up very seriously and we had to reassure them that there had been no change in our policy. Myanmar, egged on by China could be tempted to fish in troubled waters and create more strife in our NE states.
3. A question related to the Karan Thapar show spoke of the feasibility of creating a 'Kukiland'. Every one was of the opinion that further breaking up of the NE states was not going to solve the problem- the demands for separate states would be endless.

Conclusion

Everyone was agreed on the following:

1. A different approach was needed. Repeating the old methods over and over again is unlikely to give us a different result.
2. Earlier actions were based on very different parameters.
3. The Manipur problems have both national and international dimensions.
4. No affected section of society is today happy at the way the search for a solution is progressing.
5. So far the restive Nagas have stayed away from the Meitei – Kuki clashes. If they chose to take sides then the situation is likely to go completely out of hand.

