PEACE PROCESS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND MILITANT GROUPS OF NORTHEAST INDIA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON SUSPENSION OF OPERATION PACT BETWEEN KUKI MILITANT GROUPS AND GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to throw lights the progress of Suspension of Operation pact between government and Kuki tribal militant groups. Since the last few years peace process had been started between Indian government and some militant groups operating in the northeast India. Kuki tribal militant group are one of the rebel groups of Manipur involved in the peace process with the union and Manipur government by signing Suspension of Operation agreement. On August 22, 2008 the government of India and Manipur government had signed Suspension of Operation Agreement with various Kuki tribal militant groups under dual common platform called Kuki National Organization (KNO) and United People’s Front (UPF) with the objective of political dialogue.

KEYWORDS: Kuki, militant, peace, tribal

INTRODUCTION

The north eastern region of India is known for its militancy. The region comprises of eight states is inherited by plethora of tribes who have a unique history and culture. Since a few decades the northeastern states of India have been torn by different brand of tribal and non-tribal militant groups who are demanding sovereignty, independent province, autonomous state and state within the framework of Indian constitution, etc. to protect and preserve their unique history and culture.

However, the union government has taken up peace initiative with various militant groups and brings a new development in the region. The development in militancy torn northeastern states of India that may be visible at present is that the Union government has ongoing ceasefire agreements with several militant groups in different states of the region. The oldest one with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) dates back to July 25, 1997 and the second with National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) on April 28, 2001. In Assam, the following militant groups have ceasefire agreements with the government: Adivasi Cobra Militant Force (ACMF) since September 19, 2001, DimaHalimDaogah (DHD) since January 1, 2003, the United People’s Democratic Solidarity
Since May 23, 2002, Birsa Commando Force (BCF) since August 14, 2004 and the National Democratic Front of Bodol and (NDFB) since May 25, 2005. The Alfa and Charlie companies of the ULFA's 28th Battalion are also on a ceasefire with the government since June 24, 2008.

Similarly, in the state of Meghalaya, the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC) has had a ceasefire agreement with the government since July 23, 2004. In Manipur, the Government has signed Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the Kukitribal militant groups who are under dual common organization called Kuki National Organization (KNO) and United People’s Front (UPF) on Aug 22, 2008. It is under this development, effort to study Kukimilitant group with special reference to Suspension of Operation is carried out in this paper. The materials used to build the present paper were largely based on primary sources.

**Birth of KukiMilitant Groups and Their Objectives**

The Kukis are known tribal groups in the northeast region of India. They are found sparsely settled in six provinces of the region with a high concentration in Manipur state. At present there are more than ten militant organizations among the Kukis who are fighting for creation of Kuki State or Kukil and within the constitution of India.

The birth of Kuki insurgent groups may be traced back to late 1980s. Kuki National Front (KNF) was the first Kuki tribal militant group founded on 18th May, 1987 under the leadership of PuNehlunKipgen at Molnoi Village in Burma (Myanmar) to protect and promote the interest of the Kuki community with the proclaimed objective of creating a separate Kuki state ‘Kukiland’ for the Kukis. The proposed Kukiland according to KNF is contiguous of Manipur Nagaland and Assam. It comprises of the whole districts of Chandel and Churachandpur and parts of Ukhrul, Senapati (Sadar Hills), Tamenglong districts including a portion of Imphal valley, Thoubal and Bishnupur districts and also the Kuki inhabited areas of Nagaland and Assam. KNF operates in the hill districts of Manipur particularly Sardar Hill (senapati),Churachandpur, Tamenglong and Ukhrul district.

Kuki National Army (KNA) was the second kuki underground group formed On 24, 1988 at Jangmol-Dingpi in the Indo-Burma border under the Commander-in-Chief of late ThangkholunHaokip to restore Zale’n-gam, the Kuki nation to its state of former glory when self-rule prevailed among Kuki people. Kuki National Army (KNA) is the armed wing of the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), which describes itself as a revolutionary movement based in the ancestral territory Zale’n-gam (Land of freedom) of the Kukis. The KNA
claimed that Zale’n-gam comprises the contiguous region in Northeast India, Northwest Burma (now Myanmar), and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. The main objectives of the KNA is to bring together all the Kuki-inhabited areas separated by artificial boundary created in 1935, specifically in the Kabaw valley of Burma (now Myanmar) and the Kuki inhabited areas in the hill districts of Manipur under one administrative unit called ‘Zalengam’. In case of the eventuality of such integration not materializing, the KNA aims at the creation of two KukiZalengam: one within Burma i.e. ‘Eastern Zalengam’ and the other within India, ‘Western Zalengam’. The outfit has, however, tried to fulfill its objectives within the framework of the Indian constitution. KNA operates in the hill districts of Manipur, kachar district of Assam and kabaw Valley in Burma (Myanmar).

Following the birth of kuki National Front (KNF) and Kuki National Army (KNA), various militant groups such as Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), United OldKuki Liberation Army (UKLA), Kuki Revolutionary Front (KRF), United Socialist Revolutionary Army (USRA), Kuki National Front-Military Council (KNF-MC), Kuki National Front-Zougam (KNF-Z), etc. emerged among the Kukis with the aim to protect their inhabited areas, culture and their territorial rights from outside influence. At present, these Kukitribal militant groups are under the umbrella of common bilateral platforms called United People’s Front (UPF) and Kuki National Organization (KNO).

Suspension of Operation Pact

The historic tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement was signed between the Government of India, Government of Manipur and Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People’s Front (UPF) in New Delhi on 22nd August 2008 under a certain set of ground rules. The Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement was signed by DS Poonia, Principal Secretary (Home) and Naveen Varma, Jt Secretary (North-East), Ministry of Home Affairs on behalf of the Central and Manipur Government respectively.

On the side of Kuki insurgent groups, the SoO agreement was signed and inked by Lalminthang Vaiphei, Vice President, Defence Secretary T.S. Haokip, Cabinet Members T.S. German Kuki and Josua Kukifrom KNO while the signatories from the UPF include its General Secretary T.S.Thangboi Kipgen, members H.Celvin, T.L. Jacob Thadou and David Hangshing. The primary objective of Suspension of Operation pact was political dialogue.
The period of Suspension of Operation agreement was one year only but can be extendable according to the progress of its implementation.

To safeguard or oversee the implementation of the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement, a committee called Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) was formed amongst the signatories. The proposed Joint Monitoring Group(JMG) was supposed to be headed by the Principal Secretary (Home), Government of Manipur, Inspector General of Police (Intelligence) Manipur; Department of Home Ministries; CPO’s, Army, and the UG groups.

In analysing the terms of the agreement, the Security Forces viz, the Army, Para-military Forces and the State police were not to launch any operations, neither could the UG groups were allowed to undertake offensive operations either by violent or non-violent acts. The important ground rules, set for the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement signed between the Government of India (GoI), Government of Manipur and the Kukimilitant groups are as follows:

- The constituents of UPF and KNO will abide by the Constitutions of India, the laws of the land and the territorial integrity of Manipur,
- They are barred from committing all kinds of atrocities, extortions and demands,
- Construction of designated camps,
- Depositing of arms under a double locking system,
- Financial assistance in the form of monthly stipend for the cadres of KNO and UPF,
- Submission of the list and the photographs of all cadres along with their bio-data
- Issuing of Identity Cards to all the cadres of KNO and UPF.

Here, one doubtful point may be seen on the ground rules set forth in the SoO agreement i.e. territorial integrity of Manipur. It is very much doubtful on the ground that the involvement of territorial integrity of Manipur signifies abandoning of their (KNO and UPF) dream of Zalen-Gam (Land of freedom) or Autonomous Tribal State for their primary objective are Zalen-Gamor Autonomous Tribal State which are supposed to be primarily carved out from the political boundary of the present Manipur state. Therefore, there is a great debate among scholars, academicians and leaders among the Kukis. Many voices have been raised and discussed as the signing of the SoO involved abandoning their dream of Zalen-Gamor autonomous tribal state. However, Kuki Revolutionary groups under the umbrella of KNO and the UPF, in spite of the set ground rules on Territorial Integrity of Manipur, has signed the document by upholding a different perspectives. Some of the viewpoints are analysed as under:
First, the Kuki insurgent groups are of the view that the State or Manipur Government has nothing to lose or gain once the political dialogue got under way. Aaron Kipgen, the Secretary General of the Kuki National Front (KNF) in this regard has stated, “the hill areas of Manipur are not under the ambit of the State Government and that there is a specific location for establishing Kukiland (Kuki state) within an outlined map” (The Sangai Express 28th Nov. 2009).

Second, the Kuki militant groups are of the opinion that prior to the British incursion on Kuki inhabited areas; the Kukis were living independently in their ancestral land, called Zale’n-gam (Land of freedom). PS Haokip in his article “the Zale’n-gam and Kangleipak Equation” (www.kukination.net) has put forth that Kangleipak/Imphal valley (Manipur) which comprises 10 per cent of the present State of Manipur and Zale’n-gam were in peaceful co-existence. He maintained that kangleipak and Kukiland existed side by side and the former was occupied by the Meiteis and the later by Kukis.

The Kuki tribal militant groups have also claimed to have begun asserting for the restoration of their ancestral land since 1917 (Kuki Rebellion, 1917-1919). It was with this aim and view, the Kuki insurgent groups’ were keen to sign the accord despite knowing the fact that the ground rules under SoO includes maintaining the territorial integrity of Manipur. Rather, they propagated that maintaining territorial integrity of Manipur has been the desire and aspiration of the Kukis since the very beginning of their movement.

Third, they are also of the opinion that, Kangleipak (Manipur) and Zale’n-gam (Land of freedom) were in peaceful co-existence with mutual respect for territorial integrity and that the inhabitants vis-à-vis the Meiteis and the Kukis were living peacefully in their own respective territories without any interference in each other’s internal affairs. This may be well visualised from the events that have occurred in 1891 (Khongjom war) & 1917–1919 (Kuki war of Independence) in which the Meitei-land (Kangleipak/Manipur) and Zale’n-gam/Kukiland were subjugated and conquered successively i.e. one after another.

Lastly, they also vehemently assert that the ‘Kukis are a Nation’ having a distinct ethnic and socio-cultural identity and has every right to self-determination, i.e. freedom to decide their own future, which would be possible only when political autonomy (self-governance) is granted to them within the fabric of the Indian Constitution.
Progress of Suspension of Operation and Stage of Political Dialogue

So far the given ground rules of SoO agreement is concern, it may be observed that despite minor differences between the security forces and the cadres of KNO and UPF, the latter are strictly adhered to the Suspension of Operation (SoO) rules since its implementation with the hope for table of political dialogue. It can be seen that the rate of killing, encounter, casualties, kidnap for ransom, extortion, demand, and so on which are daily headlines of local news has been considerably declined from the implementation of Suspension of Operation. Depositing of arms under double locking system had also been carried out in practiced. It was Kuki National Front (KNF) among the underground groups under Suspension of Operation (SoO) pact who first deposited arms in the double locking armoury at their designated Ebenezer camp near Koubru Range in Sardar hills area of Manipur in the presence of top security officers and government officials in 2010.

On the part of government, construction of designated camps, giving a sum of rupees three thousand to the cadres of KNO and UPF as a monthly stipend or rehabilitation package, issuing of identity card to cadres of KNO and UPF, etc. are carried out in practiced. Construction of designated camps like, Camp Ebenezer, Gamnom camp, Muvanlai camp, Camp Sinai, Nazareth camp, Samusong Camp and so on are completed and inaugurated.

Commenting on the progress of SoO, DS Poonia said the SoO agreement as historic in the process of peace building with Kuki tribal militant groups. One of the designated camps of KNF at Natheljang along Koubru Range of Srdar Hill in Senapati district was formally inaugurated by Chief Secretary himself (DS Poonia) in 2010. Speaking at the occasion, DS Poonia described the inauguration of the designated camp of KNF as historic and said that there has been considerable progress in the tripartite talks involving the Centre, the State Government and the Kuki UG groups under the umbrella bodies of UPF and KNO since it came into effect from August 2008. (Sangai Express Sept. 23, 2010).

The SoO agreement signed on August 22, 2008 was extended by one year on August 22, 2009. The agreement was further extended by 45 days with effect from August 22, 2010. After review of the progress regarding implementation of the revised “Agreed Ground Rules” 2010, SoO was extended for one year with effect from August 22, 2010.

Again, following reviewed of the progress regarding implementation of the revised “agreed ground rules” 2010, SoO meeting was held on August 26, 2011 at New Delhi and agreed to sign the fourth extension of SoO for a period of one year i.e. up to August 2012. Subsequently, another round of tripartite talk involving the Centre, State government and two
umbrella bodies of Kukimilitant groups was held at New Delhi on August 21, 2012 and it was agreed to extend the agreement for a period of three months i.e. up to 22 November, 2012.

However, considerable progress is seen on the SoO agreement, the process of political dialogue was not initiated till November 22, 2012. It may be observed that KNO and UPF had repeatedly requested the Indian government to initiated political dialogue for the primary objective of SoO agreement was political dialogue. However, despite continuous request there had been no positive response except verbal promises from the central government on the process of initiating political dialogue. Therefore, the signatories of SoO agreement (KNO and UPF) are not satisfied with the government for keeping repeated verbal assurances and promises to initiated table of political dialogue without translated into action.

In fact, it is evident that both the central and state government had continuously made verbal promises and assurances to the signatories of SoO to initiated political dialogue without practiced. Interestingly, Inaugurating a designated camp of KNF formally at Natheljang along Koubru Range of Sadar Hills in Senapati district, Chief Secretary DS Poonia has said he was informed that political leaders from central government have given suggestions for initiating political dialogues with the Kuki UG groups which are signatories of Suspension of Operation (SoO). He also mentioned that he was informed about positive feedbacks from political leaders on the progress of SoO and promised to press the political leaders to initiate political dialogue at the earliest.

Again September 23, 2010 it was reported that Chief Secretary of Manipur DS Poonia has said that political dialogue with the Kuki militant groups maintaining ceasefire with the government forces under the tripartite agreement on Suspension of Operations (SoO) will start soon. In September 2010, the then Home Minister P Chidambaram had visited designated camp of Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) called Muvanlai Camp which lies in the southern Manipur district near Burma (now Myanmar) border and promised to initiate political talks. He also said that we (Indian government) have good conditions in which to start a political dialogue with the signatory outfits (under SoO) and try to solve all the issues. ZRA is one of the constituent members of United People’s Front (UPF). “Political dialogue with the 18 Kukitribal militant outfits, signatories to the tripartite SoO agreement will be started at the earliest,”(Sangai Express, Nov. 13, 2010) the Chief Secretary said in the middle of November 2010.
For all these repeated verbal assurance without action, KNO had lost its trust on the government and refused the government’s proposal for further extension of SoO agreement on December 5, 2012 at New Delhi even as the UPF had agreed to the proposal of the government to extend the SoO pact.

An official meeting between the representatives of KNO, state government and Official from Union Home Ministers was held at Delhi (Ashoka Hotel) on 5 December, 2012. At the meeting of the Ashoka Hotel, the representatives of Indian government had proposed further extension. However, the KNO had rejected the proposal for further extension and insisted written assurance from the government for the commencement of political dialogue at the earliest. Therefore, the meeting between the KNO and government was inconclusive because the KNO request for commencement of political dialogue was turn down by the government.

Representative of KNO return from Delhi after the centre failed to respond to their demand for a written assurance that political dialogue under the suspension of operation pact would be began and warned of the possibility of unwarranted and tragic incidents if the Government of India continues to ignore the aspiration of the outfit as Suspension of Operation (SoO).

In a Kuki militant camp near Henglep in Manipur south district, not very far from the Myanmar's border, spokesman of the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) SeilenHaokip said, "If the government is not sincere and if suspension of operation doesn't mean dialogue, the inevitably we have to resort to other means. These guns are not for decoration, they cost a lot of money and it's an investment because it appears that memorandums and all efforts to this date have had no bearings on the government," he said (Sangai Express Dec. 08, 2012). However, the KNO had decided to wait the government for written assurance till 30 December 2012.

Meanwhile, Kuki State Demand Committee Manipur (KSDCM) had started democratic agitations such as total band, economic blocked, etc. on the second week of December 2012 as a pressure for initiating political dialogue in practiced with the Kuki militant groups under suspension of operation with the centre and the state government. The insistence of written assurance by the KNO for the commencement of political dialogue and the pressure from KSDCM to the Indian government for starting political negotiation had brought a new step in the peace process between the two parties (Kuki militant groups and Government).

On 13 December 2012, Ministry of Home Affairs has issued written assurance to KNO. The official intimation was handed over to Additional ADGP LM Khaute who is a member of Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) and the same had been forwarded to functionaries of KNO.
The written intimation from the centre said that an appropriate officer from Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) would be deputed to Manipur to work out the modalities for the political dialogue with SoO group. A source on January 2, 2013 said that Joint Secretary (North-East) Shambhu Singh was in trusted to finalize the modalities with the Kuki militant groups to initiate formal peace talks at the earliest.

So far as UPF is concern, the first round of formal talk between government of India, government of Manipur and UPF after December 5, 2012 meeting at Ashoka Hotel in Delhi was held at 1st Mr Complex at Imphal on January 3, 2013. The government of India was represented by Ministry of Home Affairs, Joint Secretary (North East in-Charge) Shambu Singh. The Manipur government was represented by Principal Secretary (Home) Suresh Babu, ADGPLM Khaute and CID SP Achin. The UPF delegation was led by its convenor Aaron Kipgen. The first round of formal dialogue deliberated on the feasibility of creating Autonomous Hill state within the political boundary of Manipur. The second agenda was chalking out a ground modality for the dialogue process. The UPF and the government of India also agreed on appointing an interlocutor for necessary communication between the two sides. The UPF had extended SoO agreement till August 22, 2013 for the sixth time at the meeting of Ashoka Hotel on December5, 2012.

Again the government and representatives of UPF had a meeting on 22 February2013 and reviewed the meeting of January3, 2013. At the meeting, Joint Secretary Ministry of Home Affairs Mr.Shambu Singh assured the Kuki militant groups that appointment of interlocutor shall be completed soon.

Though political dialogue is carried out in practice yet, the Indian government has decided to appoint formal Director Intelligence Bureau PC Haldar to head the government team in the political dialogue with the Kuki arm groups expected to be kicking start by near future. At present consensus has been arrived at between the Central Government and the two umbrella organisations of Kukimilitant groups (UPF and KNO) on the appointment of PC Haldar as the interlocutor for the upcoming political dialogue.

**Conclusion**

The Kuki insurgency movement has started right from the late 80s. Since then the journey of political struggle has begun and many revolutionaries have sacrificed and laid down their precious lives. And today several Kuki militant groups under the umbrella organization of KNO and UPF had entered Suspension of Operation agreement with the government.
A lot has been said and written as to whether the So O would materialise or remain an enigma ever since it has been signed. For instance, there has been scepticism on the part of the Center and State Governments’. Commander of 59 Mountain Brigade Brig Anil Chauhan while speaking at the inaugural function of the administrative block of a designated camp called Ebenezer Camp built for KNF at Natheljang said that “tripartite Suspension of Operation (SoO) pact signed between the Central Government, the State Government and Kuki militant groups is now in transitory phase but no political dialogue has been initiated till date”(The Sangai Express, 28th Nov. 2009).

However, recent development has shown that the efforts of Kuki insurgent groups are going to bear its fruits. The much waited political dialogue during seven years of SoO agreement is on its fast track.

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