

United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)

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History

The United Liberation Front of Assam, one of the most powerful militant organisations operating in the northeast region, was established in 1979 when anti-foreigners agitation launched by the All Assam Students' Union reached its peak in the state. The front was formed by Paresh Baruah along with associates including Rajiv Raj Konwar alies Arabinda Rajkhowa, Golap Baruah alies Anup Chetia, Samiran Gogoi alies Pradip Gogoi and Bhadreswar Gohain on 7 April 1979, at the Rang Ghar pavilion of the Ahom Kings located in Sibsagar to establish a Sovereign, Socialist Assam through an armed struggle.

The front remained dormant till 1986, except recruiting its cadres between late 1983 to early 1984. Soon after establishing contacts with Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in the year 1986 for training and procuring arms, ULFA went on a fund rising spree through a train of extortion from a circle of traders, businessmen, tea gardens, both Indian and foreign owned, and others. It also set up camps in Tinsukhia and Dibrugarh districts of the state. ULFA maintained close links with the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), which came to power from 1985-90. Its influence was visible in all the state government departments and even the state police department was full of ULFA sympathizers. In view of the growing nexus between AGP government and ULFA and the latter's increasing militant activities in the state, New Delhi imposed President's Rule on November 7. The entire State of Assam was declared a "disturbed area. ULFA was banned under

the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and Indian army launched Operation Bajrang.

From the early 1990s, the front embarked on a more aggressive campaign to further its goal by targeting security forces, blasting rail links, killing political opponents and weakening basic infrastructures. On July 1991, ULFA militants abducted 14 people, including an engineer, a national of (the erstwhile) Soviet Union and demanded huge amount of money as ransom. Throughout the 1990s, the front resorted to many terrorist activities and was able to give the government and the security forces a hard time. Despite launching a number of combing operations against the front by the Indian army in the last 13 years, it remains strong and active in the state. ULFA continues to haunt decision-makers in Guwahati and New Delhi.

Objectives

The objective of this outfit is to bring about unity of the national liberation struggles of the oppressed nations and nationalities all over the world. It aims at forming joint united national liberation struggles with the class struggle of the working people inside the colonial countries. It also aims to include in this front the genuine communist parties of the countries where capitalism has been warm welcome in the name of socialist rule.

ULFA aims at forming an independent Assam through armed struggle against so called the colonial rulers in Delhi. It aims at the formation of the United Front jointly with other insurgent outfits with the following objectives:

- United Front inside the motherland (Unity of national liberation struggles of all the indigenous nations and nationalities of Assam).
- Unity taking northeastern region as the base (for historical, geographical, political reasons).
- United Front taking India as the base (those nations that oppose world colonialism, seek genuine liberation of the people, and recognise the Indian State machinery as their enemy).
- Taking the world as a whole: i. Support to the national liberation struggles of the oppressed nations and nationalities all over the world. ii. Establishing contact with the genuine communist parties that seek change of the political system inside their countries, where capitalism is being tried to be instituted in the name of socialist rule.

Strength

According to the Indian Army sources, the total strength of ULFA is around 3,000, while various other sources put the figure ranging from 4,000 to 6,000. A military wing of the ULFA, the Sanjukta Mukti Fouj (SMF) was formed on 16 March 1996. SMF has three full-fledged battalions: the 7th, 8th and the 709th. The remaining battalions exist only on paper at best they have strengths of a company or so. Their allocated spheres of operation are as follows:

- 7th Bn (HQ-Sukhini) is responsible for defence of General Head Quarter (GHQ).

- 8th Bn - Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong
- 9th Bn Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar
- 11th Bn Kamrup, Nalbari
- 27th Bn Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Kokrajjar
- 28th Bn Tinsukia, Dibrugarh
- 709th Bn Kalikhola

In the past decade nearly 2,5000 (approximate) militants, including about 200 women cadres have surrendered to the government. According to Indian intelligence reports, there could be less than a hundred ULFA women cadres.

Command Structure

The command structure of the ULFA comprises of Arvinda Rajkhowa as the Commander-in-Chief, Paresh Baruah is the Chairman while Pradeep Gogoi is the Vice-Chairman of the front. Vice-Chairman Pradip Gogoi was arrested on April 8, 1998 and is in judicial custody in Guwahati ever since. ULFA General Secretary, Anup Chetia is also presently under detention at the high-security Dhaka Central Jail after his arrest in Dhaka (Bangladesh) on December 7, 1997. Chittaranjan Barua, Sasadhar Chaudhary and Matinga hold Finance, Foreign and Publicity secretaries respectively.

ULFA has a three tier organisational structure namely (i) Central Unit, (ii) District Units and (iii) Anachalik Units. The ULFA has a civil and military wing. The civil wing is headed by Paresh Baruah and military wing of the front is led by Arvinda Rajkhowa. The district units is led by district Presidents/district Commanders respectively. A district is further divided into Anchals which comprise a number of villages headed by

an Anchalik President. For operational purposes, ULFA has divided entire Assam into four zones. Each zone has further divided into four regions.

Training Camps

In 1986, ULFA first established contacts with the then unified National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) of Myanmar for training camps and arms.

Subsequently, the front shifted to Bangladesh its training camps. ULFA's training camps have been functioning since in the Bangladeshi soil since 1989. Its main training camps are located in Mymensingh, Jaintiapur, Joydepur, Adampur, Bhanugach, Sri Mangal, Maulvi Bazaar all located in Bangladesh along the border. Seize documents and interrogations of some arrested militants revealed that the Defence Forces Intelligence (FDI) of Bangladesh had also trained ULFA cadres in Sylhet district.

Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence also however provided training camps for the ULFA militants. Reports indicate that at least 200 ULFA militants received training in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But its main training camps are located in Sandrup Jongkhar, a district in Southern Bhutan that borders with Assam's Nalbari district. According to Bhutan, ULFA has six major camps between Lhamoizingkha and Daifam. However, unconfirmed Indian reports have indicated that ULFA, along with National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), runs more than 30 camps in Bhutan.

However, in the last few years the small kingdom of Bhutan is under tremendous pressure from the Indian government to stop the use of its soil by Indian militant groups. On May 17, 2003, Bhutanese King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk called upon the people to volunteer for formation of a

militia force to counter Indian militant groups ULFA, NDBF and the KLO on its soil. Media report says that the 81st National Assembly of Bhutan adopted a resolution for the last attempt to persuade ULFA, NDBF, and the KLO to close down their camps within this year peacefully failing which terrorist would face military action.

Funding

The funding for the front comes from three sources:

Extortion: The front's main source of income comes from extortion from businessmen, politicians, government employees, industrialists and tea companies. It also indulges in bank robberies and other criminal activities to finance its activities.

Drug Trafficking: It is reported that the front is also involved in drug smuggling. As far back as 1988, one ULFA leader was caught with seven kilograms of Burmese heroin. Drug money had been used to purchase arms at the rate of 50,000 for automatic rifles, Rs 40,000 for pistols and Rs 45,000 for wireless sets.

Income Generating Projects: Apart from extortion and smuggling of drugs the front runs a chain of business establishments in Bangladesh. It has set up a number of firms in Dhaka, including media consultancies and soft drink manufacturing units. Besides it is reported to own three hotels, a private clinic, and two motor driving schools in Dhaka. Paresh Baruah is reported to personally own or has two motor driving schools in Bangladesh, including a tannery, a chain of departmental stores, garments factories, travel agencies, shrimp trawlers and transport and investment companies.

There is no proper source for ULFA's annual budget but according to an accomplished journalist and security

analyst from Guwahati, Mr. Jaideep Saikia's calculations, the ULFA's budget for the year 2001 was a whopping Rs 31 crore plus.

Activities

After lying low for some time during the year 2002, ULFA has begun resuming its terrorist violence. Events of the first three months of the year 2003 indicate that no respite for the people in Assam from ULFA's terrorist activities. It initiated a series of attacks on the vital public installations and civilian targets towards the latter part of the last year, and which continue into the present year, in what appeared to be a concerted bid to re-establish the fact that it is still a force to be reckoned with in Assam. The major attacks in the first quarter of the year included:

- 21 January 2003: ULFA carried out an attack on a security force (SF) camp in the Dibrugarh district, though there were no casualties.
- 7 March 2003: ULFA attacked a police commando barrack in Bongaigoan town. No fatalities were reported in this incident.
- 8 March 2003: ULFA militants triggered an explosion at a five million-litre petrol reservoir at Digboi refinery in the Tinsukia district by throwing mortar bombs, causing property loss estimated at approximately Rs 200 million. On the same day, ULFA cadres also separately damaged a gas pipeline at Kathalguri in Tinsukia. In another incident, ULFA killed two persons at a migrant's settlement and injured six more while escaping after an attack on the Darrangiri police outpost in Goalpara district.

- 16 March 2003: On ULFA's Army Day, six civilians were killed and approximately 55 others injured in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast under a passenger bus on National Highway No.7 in the Goalpara district.

Such attacks suggest that ULFA's capability to strike remains intact; that it has good stockpile of weapons; and that its cadres are mobile and can strike at places far away from their bases in Bhutan or Bangladesh. The series of attacks also reinforces the groups consistent rejection of any plausible peace process.

Casualties

The front lost many of its cadres in the past one decade. From 1992 to 2001, 855 cadres of the front were killed by the Indian security forces.

Popular Support

ULFA draws its main support from the upper Assam districts of Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Karbi Anglong, Golaghat and Sonitpur. Many of the ULFA leaders are from these districts. A large number of ULFA cadres have been recruited from the upper Assam districts and hence their presence is quite strong in these areas. In the west, its activities and presence is low. The western districts of Assam is dominated by Bodo militants. In the districts of Kokrajhar, Barpeta and Darrang ethnic Bodo rebels such as NDFB and Bodo Security Force (BSF) militants have strong control over the areas. In the Southern parts of Assam, ULFA has also a low presence. The front cannot take up any activities in lower Assam districts due to lack of support base. In July ULFA went on a recruitment drive from these districts, however it received poor response from the youths and they

showed their unwillingness to join the front.

The front is losing its popular support because of hostile terrorist activities. Kidnapping, liquidation of common people, assassination of political opponents have caused much disenchantment among the Assamese people and their support base is beginning to dwindle in the state. The popular mood among the people of Assam is towards a negotiated settlement. Public meetings were held all over the state to issue appeals to the front to rejoin the mainstream. The pressure exerted by the military operations and the built-up public opinion took its toll on the militants morale. A section of ULFA cadres laid down their weapons en-masse before the state government in March 1992.

On ULFAs raising day (April 7, 2000) common people came out of from their home and peace rallies were held all over the state for the first time. Even newspapers carried editorials condemning the ULFA for its violence, claiming that the people were now totally against its ideology. The Director General, BSF while speaking to the IAS officers course at IIC, New Delhi on October 16, 2000 stated that the ULFA has really broken up because now people are not with them.

Another set back to the ULFA came in the form of the rejection by the people of Assam of the outfit's demand for plebiscite in Assam on the issue of sovereignty under the supervision of the UN observers. As much as 70 per cent of the state's 1.4 crore voters defied the ULFA's call for 1999 Lok Sabha poll boycott and exercise their franchise. The organisation today seeks meaning in methods and motives other than the ideologies by which it came into existence on April 7, 1979. The banned outfit is looking out soft targets to spread its terror. A rather dismal picture of an

organisation which was formed to bring Aikya, Biplap and Mukti to the Assamese people.

Areas of Operation

ULFAs organisational structure is divided into four command zones and the districts under each are.

East Districts	West Districts	Central Districts	South Districts
(Purb Mandal)	(Paschim Mandal)	(Madhya Mandal)	(Dakshin Mandal)
Lakhimpur	Dhubri	Darrang	Hailakandi
Jorhat	Kokrajhar	Anglong	NC Hills
Sibsagar	Bongaigaon	Nagaon	Cachar Hills
Tinsukia	Goalpara	Moirigaon	Karimganj
Dibrugarh	Barpeta	Dhemajiri	
Bokajan of Karbi	Nalbari	Part of Sonitpur	
Anglong	South Kamrup	North Kamrup	
Golaghat			
Part of Sonitpur			

Internal Linkages

ULFA maintains close strategic links with the National Democratic Front Bodoland (NDFB). Presently, NDFB works in tandem with the ULFA. Both outfits have also set up camps in Bhutan after were driven into the Bhutanese foothills by a major Indian military offensive in 1990-1991. Sometime in 1999, the ULFA and NDFB formed a coordination committee for launching a united struggle.

Recently it has joined hands with the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) to carry out joint operations in the areas dominated by immigrants.

External Linkages

The front maintains close relations with many militant organisations of the northeast and other groups from Myanmar. The Kachin Independent Army has traditionally been providing support to all the undergrounds in the Northeast. As per LT. Gen. V.K. Nayyar, ex Governor of Manipur, there have been confirmed reports of KIA and NSCN providing training and weapons to ULFA. But it came under pressure of joint military operations of the Indian and Myanmar Army in April-May 1995. The ULFA and the NSCN (K) along with People's Liberation (PLA), and the Northeast Students' Organisation (NESO) have formed an umbrella organisation which calls itself the United Liberation Front of Seven Sisters with an aim of carrying out violent activities in the Northeast.

In 1989, The Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) was set up, which included NSCN-K, ULFA, UNLF, United Liberation Front of Bodoland, Kuki National Front (KNF) (all from India) and Chin National Front (Myanmar). It is also reported that the front has close nexus with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam. The LTTE is reported to have trained various ULFA cadres in explosives handling. The ISI is known to have training to the ULFA especially in terror tactics, counter intelligence, disinformation and the use of weapons. Paresh Baruah and a few others were issued passports by Pakistan for their visit to Singapore, Thailand and other countries. Through these links the ISI is able to funnel money to the ULFA. Several madrassas/mosques sponsored by the ISI in the Sylhet and Cox's Bazaar areas are being utilised to cache arms

procured from Thailand and Myanmar. The External Affairs Ministry confirmed that several top leaders of the outfit including its chairman, commander-in-chief have procured foreign passports through fraudulent means with the assistance of the Pakistan High Commission in Bangladesh.

ULFA has also established a strategic alliance with United Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur in August 2002. Reports hold, ULFA and NDFB procure arms from UNLF. The link between ULFA and UNLF became visible when the latter in a statement on July 17, 2002 indicated that the killing of three security forces in Assam's Cachar district by Manipur People's Army 'armed wing of UNLF was carried out at ULFA's behest. Reports indicate that ULFA, the Manipur people's Liberation Front (MPLF) a conglomerate of three militant groups United Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) active in Manipur, and the Tripura People's Democratic Front (TPDF), a front outfit of all the Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), operating in Tripura under a common platform have launched a 'Coordinated Regional Military Offensive for liberation of the Region from Indian colonial occupation,' code name Operation Freedom.

ULFA and other militants groups from the Northeast maintain links with the militants of Kashmir and Punjab. It also in touch with many other organisations engaged in struggles in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and other states of India.

The ULFA chairman attended the annual session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Population in Geneva in 1997. In the same year, a four-member delegation of the ULFA including the chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, general secretary Anup Chetia and the foreign secretary Sasha Choudhury went to

Geneva and tried to enter the Unrepresented Nations Peoples Organisation (UNPO). But the permanent representative of India in the United Nations Smt Arundhuti Ghosh objected to the presence of the ULFA leaders in the meeting and raised the issue of the killing of social worker Sanjoy Ghosh by the ULFA. Finding themselves in a tight corner, the ULFA leaders were forced to leave Geneva. Its attempt to enter the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization was blocked by the Government of India.

Many of the surrendered ULFA have joined the security forces and are working in the state and central forces. The combined onslaught of the SULFA and the security forces took their toll on a already-weakened ULFA. The SULFA has become an effective fighting machine and served as an important tool for counter insurgency in the state of Assam.

Of late, ULFA has spread its tentacles in West Bengal's northern districts. It has established strategic alliance with the Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO). Security forces believe that it was the ULFA that propped up and got the KLO formed in December 1995. The ULFA's alliance with the KLO gives it access to certain KLO controlled corridors that provide the rebels from the Assam a bridge linking their bases in Bhutan with hideouts in Bangladesh.

Publications and Website

Swadhinata (Freedom) is the mouthpiece of the front. ULFA and three Northeast insurgents launch websites www.geocities.com/CapitalHill/Congresses/7434/ulfa.htm in October 1999.

SULFA

Surrendered ULFA cadres are known as SULFA. The former Chief Minister of Assam Hiteswar Saikha played a major role in splitting the front. Saikha bestowed blue-eyed status on the surrendered boys, granting them all kinds of proper and improper favours. Very soon the term syndicate, referring to its mafia-style mode of operations, became synonymous with the SULFA, coined by the local media, took on a pejorative connotation.