

## SURRENDERING A FAILED POLICY

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As the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance government takes charge for the second consecutive term in New Delhi, it faces a big challenge in addressing the growing concerns of insurgency-related violence in the troubled northeastern states of India. In order to fully understand the complexities of counterinsurgency operations in Northeast India, we need to examine the surrender policy for insurgents followed by the central government through its security forces in the region, and how much this policy has succeeded in bringing back normalcy and peace to Northeast India.

Just before elections this year, the central government announced that it would no longer accept any surrenders from the numerous insurgent organizations operating in Northeast India, and instead employ the security forces to mount operations against them on a war footing. This was decided after a review committee instituted by the central government came out with its report, and suggested that the norms for the surrender of insurgents be made more stringent and that these did have an impact on the overall insurgency situation. It now remains to be seen if the UPA government takes these suggestions seriously and implements them by revising the surrender norms.

The central government's surrender policy in Northeast India has been flawed from the very beginning and to make things more complicated it has employed different yardsticks for different insurgent organizations, given the varying status of peace talks between them. The highest number of surrenders over the years has come from Assam and Manipur, where surrenders, peace talks and designated camps have mushroomed and occupied much of the government's energies and resources. The government has entered into peace talks with the Naga insurgent groups for over a decade now, without any breakthrough and at the same without any respite from the violence, which arises today due to 'peacetime' factional fights. The peacetime operational conduct of the security forces has favoured one faction of the Naga insurgency over the other at varying points of time, and the rules in the designated camps have been very liberal.

The major failure of the surrender policy has been its inefficacy in restoring peace in the region. This has happened due to several inadequacies and loopholes in the policy as well as the manipulations that have occurred relating to the political use of the surrendered insurgents. Insurgent surrenders in recent times have shown that the amount of arms and ammunition deposited at the time of surrenders are minimal compared to their level of operations. These have been seen as token surrenders, either to dispose off the mercenary elements in their organizations, and or of elements who use this medium to avail the benefits of the surrender policy in the form of monetary compensation and lucrative contracts from the government. There have been reports of several insurgent organizations that have formed and then summarily having surrendered, to avail such governmental largesse and this is especially true in the state of Manipur.

The infamous secret killings episode in Assam, where the surrendered ultras were used by the political and security establishment to carry out killings of innocent relatives of active insurgents

of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), and then subsequently eliminated after their job was done, bears testimony to the manipulations that have occurred under the existing surrender policy. The designated camps of various insurgent organizations have indeed become political instruments of manipulation by politicians and security agencies; further, they have been named consistently after blasts have occurred, without any proper investigation. This was particularly evident when the members of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) living in government-controlled designated camps were named by the Assam government as having masterminded the serial blasts in Assam late last year, without providing any substantial proof of their involvement.

Thus, the existing surrender policy has not led to any tangible progress in recent times, but only led to token and fake surrenders. At the same time, the policy has made insurgents potentially willing to enter talks, desist from coming forward to surrender. The recent surrenders of two companies of ULFA's 28th Battalion in Upper Assam, have also fallen into the same trap of perennially unending peace talks and intended manipulations towards undermining them by the state government. This in turn, has led to a sense of frustration and distrust among the surrendered leaders, which may lead them back into the jungles.

It is time the government demonstrates in policy terms, some amount of credibility and willingness towards addressing the demands of the surrendered insurgents and provides a genuine cohesive platform where the insurgents can come to talk, without fearing the manipulation and frustration that have normally accompanied surrenders and peace talks in the region. New Delhi's inconsistent and flawed surrender policy has actually hindered counterinsurgency operations over the years, and created an atmosphere of mistrust among insurgent groups themselves and between them and the government; the ultimate casualties being peace and development in the region and the aspirations of its people.