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THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST COUNCIL OF NAGALAND – KHAPLANG (NSCN-K)

On 4 June 2015, a coalition of Indian separatist rebels ambushed a convoy of Indian troops, from the sixth Dogra Regiment, in the country's north-eastern state of Manipur, India, killing at least 18 soldiers and seriously injuring 12 others.

The soldiers were on patrol when they came under fire from rocket-propelled grenades, assault rifles, and machine guns. The attack marks a further escalation of the conflict against the Indian army in the country's northeast. Indian intelligence stated it suspected the involvement of the Myanmar based *National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang* (NSCN-K) and the *United National Liberation Front*, a Manipuri rebel group, in the joint attack. Shortly after, a press release from the NSCN-K stated that an elite unit of its guerrillas and those from its Manipuri allies, *Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup* (KYKL) and *Kangleipak Communist Party* (KCP), had carried out the attack to uphold the cause of their sovereignty.¹

In April, the NSCN-K were instrumental, with the *United Liberation Front of Assom* (ULFA) led by Paresh Baruah, in bringing together a number of disparate anti-Indian Government factions to form, on 17 April, the *United National Liberation Front of West South East Asia*.

Other groups that participated in the meeting

in Taga, Sagaing division, were the *Kangleipak Communist Party*, *Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup*, *People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak*, *People's Liberation Army*, *United National Liberation Front*, and *National Democratic Front of Bodoland* (Songbijit faction).²

According to Indian intelligence sources, Chinese intelligence played an active role in encouraging the north-eastern groups to come together on a common platform. The source noted that Chinese intelligence operatives are active in the Sagaing region and weapons are often shipped to the north-eastern groups through the China-Myanmar border. One source, quoted in the *Hindustan Times* noted:

*"The Chinese have promised to provide weapons and logistics to the new grouping as they want to keep things boiling in the northeast in view of their claim on the state of Arunachal Pradesh."*³

Just a week ahead of Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit to India in 2006, Beijing's envoy in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, had claimed that Arunachal Pradesh is a Chinese territory, stating that:

*"In our position, the whole of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory... We are claiming all of that. That is our position."*⁴

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It has long been alleged that China has been providing finances as well as arms and ammunition to the NSCN-K and related factions. Most recently, reports emerged on 26 May 2015 that Indian Intelligence had numerous reports of ULFA Chief Paresh Baruabeing seen in China. Both Paresh Barua and the commanders of the *National Democratic Front of Bodoland* (Songbijit faction) are believed to be staying at the NSN-K headquarters in Sagaing.⁵

The NSCN-K had had a 14-year old ceasefire with the Indian Government that it revoked on 27 March 2015. On 3 May 2015, seven soldiers from the 23 Assam Rifles battalion and one soldier from the 164 Territorial Army Battalion were killed in the Mon district of Nagaland. Ten days later, on the 13 May, it was reported that the NSCN- K had killed nearly 20 security personnel and decamped with 12 weapons during an ambush on 14 Assam Rifles (AR) personnel in Arunachal Pradesh.⁶

Prior to the 4 June attack, India's Intelligence Agency had allegedly intercepted conversations between a retired Colonel of China's *People's Liberation Army* (PLA), Muk Yan Pau Huang, and Tin Ying, a Myanmar businessman who recently set up an arms factory at the China-Myanmar border.⁷ Ying, intelligence officials believe, is a former member of the Burmese Communist Party and Huang is one of his closest aides. Huang is said to be overseeing the day-to-day activities of Ying's factory.

An article in the *New Indian Express* on 9 June 2015 quotes intelligence officials as saying:

*"Ying and Huang persuaded S.S. Khaplang, who is said to be seriously ill, to walk out of the ceasefire. Intercepts indicated that Khaplang was assured of Chinese support if he decides against the ceasefire and continues militant activity in the Northeast"*⁸

The article also notes that the NSCN-K now has more Myanmar cadres that Nagas in its ranks and that:

*"Former Chinese PLA Colonel, Huang is learnt to have played a major role by funding several splinter groups now based in Myanmar and helping Khaplang clinch a ceasefire with the Myanmar government. Khaplang, according to a recent report, is seriously ill and to ensure his hold on the outfit recently expelled two senior ultra cadres, Wangtin Naga and V Tikhak"*⁹

The latest attack on the 4 June signalled that India was no longer prepared to allow attacks from Myanmar on its forces. As a result, on 9 June, the India Government launched a cross-border attack into Myanmar territory targeting two militant camps. The attack, by a unit of India's Special Forces, killed several troops and injured 12 others according to media sources, however it must be noted that Indian intelligence may be behind a number of such reports and their accuracy is

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somewhat suspect.¹⁰ Reports also suggest that of the two camps hit, one was not connected to the groups that attacked Indian forces on 4 June.

According to a NSCN-K spokesman, "*None of our camps were attacked, we suffered no casualties.*"¹¹ Reports also suggest that the Special Forces unit went almost 11 km inside Myanmar, 5 km farther than what had been initially planned. That said however, the Myanmar Government was quick to deny that the attack took place on their soil. Zaw

Htay, Director of Myanmar's presidential office posted on Facebook:

"According to the information sent by Tatmadaw battalions on the ground, we have learned that the military operation was performed on the Indian side at India-Myanmar border." he said. *"Myanmar will not accept any foreigner who attacks neighbouring countries in the back and creates problems by using our own territory."*¹²

THE FORMATION OF THE NSCN-K

A split in what was then the *National Socialist Council of Nagaland* (NSCN) created the NSCN-K. The NSCN was originally formed on January 31, 1980, by Isak Chisi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah, and S.S. Khaplang. The group soon attacked Indian Army outposts and convoys and also embarked on a number of robberies. However, differences began to emerge when the Indian Government began to make peace overtures to the group. Disagreements between the three leaders finally resulted in splitting the NSCN into two factions, one led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu (NSCN-IM), and the other by Khaplang (NSCN-K). Reportedly, over 200 rebels died in the fighting as the two groups separated.¹³

Although both were involved in a formal peace process with the government of India, large scale

fighting between the two factions and frequent assassination attempts continued. The situation was made worse when, in 2011, Khaplang was impeached because, according to the then NSCN-K, General Secretary Kitovi Zhimomi:

"He opposed the Naga reconciliation process initiated by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation. Two months ago, Khaplang asked us to withdraw from the Covenant of Reconciliation signed by him... Khaplang is no more associated with the group. He is alone and can't force us to go against the will of the Nagas, who want peace, unity and reconciliation. His true colours were exposed when he opposed peace and reconciliation. He had also directed all NSCN-(K) members not to attend the highest level of meeting convened by the FNR".¹⁴

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The *Forum for Naga Reconciliation* (FNR) was created to assist in bringing all different factions together to find a peaceful solution to the Naga issue. Because of the impeachment, the NSCN-K Indian based army commander General Khole was elected president. According to Zhimomi:

*"Ours is a political problem and we will have a political solution. Peace within the Nagas alone will be insignificant if we do not sit with New Delhi. For now, we are focusing on the Naga reconciliation. We will talk with the Centre after resolving the problems with the Nagas."*¹⁵

The NSCN-K blamed the FNR's Rev. Dr. Wati Aier for

the split with Kughalu Mulatonu, the 'Envoy to the Collective Leadership' of the NSCN - K also accusing Rev. Dr. Wati Aier of sending NSCN-IM cadres into Myanmar to attack the group resulting in 10 dead on the NSCN-K side, and 50 on the NSCN-IM side.

In a further twist, Khaplang then decided to expel not only Khole and Kitovi but also several other ministers from the NSCN-K's *Government of the People's Republic of Nagalim* (GPRN) for conniving with the unification group and for their anti-party activities. As a result, Khole and Kitovi formed the India based NSCN-KK and have distanced themselves from the NSCN-K in Myanmar.

MOTIVATIONS

As can be seen, although the NSCN-K is based in Myanmar its primary motivation is conflict with the Indian Government over its attempt to create a united Nagaland that is to include parts of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, consequently they have primarily fought the Assam Rifles (AR) and other Naga factions and not the Myanmar Army. That said however, it also claims parts of Sagaing Division, where the group is based, as being part of a united Nagaland, and it seeks total independence for Nagaland consisting of parts of India and Myanmar joined together.

The group is said to be able to field between

1000 and 1500 troops, however, it does not have a regular standing army, but has made military service of three years mandatory for everybody in the area that it controls.¹⁶ The NSCN-K are based in northern Lahe and Nanyun townships in Sagaing adjacent to Lohit district in Arunachal Pradesh down to Tuensang in Nagaland and have primarily relied on taxing opium farmers to support its operations.¹⁷ According to one correspondent travelling to militant camps in Myanmar in 2012, the camps of all these groups were located close to each other at several locations in northern Sagaing Division, both in the hills and the Hukwang Valley.¹⁸

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On 9 April 2012, representatives from the NSCN-K met with the Myanmar government's peace negotiators, and a five-point agreement was made, the terms were:

- 1/ Cessation of armed conflict with the Myanmar army April 9, 2012**
- 2/ Opening of a liaison office by NSCN-K at Khamti to facilitate further talks**

- 3/ Coordination among both sides for carrying arms beyond their agreed jurisdiction**
- 4/ Freedom of movement of unarmed NSCN-K cadres within Myanmar**
- 5/ Holding of sustained negotiations.**

THE PEACE PROCESS

What the NSCN-K hopes to achieve from the peace process is hard to assess. Although they are prepared to enter a ceasefire with the Myanmar Government, their overall political objective is largely unobtainable in its current form. The NSCN-K wants an independent Naga State carved out of Sagaing Division. They have made it clear to the *National Ceasefire Coordinating Team* (NCCT), that although they are prepared to sign a Nationwide Ceasefire Accord, they will most likely not take part in any future political dialogue.¹⁹

The 2008 Constitution actually designates a self-administered zone consisting of three townships, Leshi, Lahe and Namyun townships. The official designation was announced by decree on 20 August 2010,²⁰ and the zone is now administered by a Retired Naga Army officer from the Myanmar Army.²¹ However, the NSCN rejects the creation

of the administrative zone due to the fact that there was no consultation with the local Naga Community.²²

The recent cross-border attack into India has further highlighted the need for the Myanmar Government to reign in the NSCN-K and it has been alleged that the Myanmar Army has taken a role in supporting the group and other Indian militant organisations. Myanmar's Government needs to reconsider its position in relation to allowing the NSCN-K to operate on its soil, the existence of the NSCN-K in Sagaing can only further destabilise the country and damage relations with India.

Notes

- ¹ ‘Delhi orders massive operations after Khaplang hit’, India Correspondent, *Mizzima*, 5 June 2015.
- ² ‘Nine militant groups of NE form united front with Chinese blessings’, Rezaul H Laskar, *Hindustan Times*, 24 April 2015.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ ‘Arunachal Pradesh is our territory: Chinese envoy’, *Rediff India Abroad*, 14 November 2006.
- ⁵ ‘Fugitive ULFA chief PareshBarua spotted in China’, *Rediff News*, 26 May 2015.
- ⁶ ‘Nearly 20 killed, 12 weapons seized in Arunachal ambush claims NSCN (K)’, *Nagaland Post*, 16 May 2015.
- ⁷ ‘China Gunrunner Behind Ambush on Army Convoy’ Yatish, Yadav, *New Indian Express*, 9 June 2015.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ ‘Myanmar strike: Seven dead bodies recovered, less than a dozen injured, say official sources’, Pranav Kulkarni, Praveen Swami, Vijaita Singh, *The Indian Express*, 12 June 2015. It must be noted that casualty estimates vary in media reports from 7 – 35 killed.
- ¹¹ ‘Indian rebels deny ‘significant casualties’ Indian Correspondent, *Mizzima*, 11 June 2015.
- ¹² ‘Myanmar denies India killed rebels inside its territory’, AFP, 10 June 2015.
- ¹³ ‘NSCN(K) rules out split after Khaplang ouster’, *Times of India*, 17 June 2011.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Email correspondence with Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 15 June 2015. See also ‘Rendezvous with Rebels’, Rajeev Bhattacharyya, Harper Collins India, 2014.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ ‘Why the Formation of a Common Platform by Insurgent Groups from the Northeast Should Give the Government Cause for Worry’, Rajeev Bhattacharyya, *The Caravan*, 8 May 2015.
- ¹⁹ Personal Conversation with NCCT Member, 10 April 2013.
- ²⁰ <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90851/7112811.html>
- ²¹ Personal Phone Conversation with NCCT member 24 April 2014.
- ²² Ibid.