



Lessons from Mizoram Insurgency and Peace Accord 1986



Brig Sushil Kumar Sharma

About the Author



Brigadier Sushil Kumar Sharma was commissioned into the Indian Army in June 1985. An Alumnus of the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, he is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and has attended the prestigious Higher Defence Management Course at Secunderabad. The officer has served in two UN Mission assignments at Cambodia and Lebanon. He has also attended two security related courses at USA and Russia. He has a wide ranging experience of varied Command, Staff and Instructional appointments. He has commanded an Infantry Battalion in High Altitude Area and a Mountain Brigade in Manipur. He was awarded the “Yudh Seva Medal” for leading the Brigade in Manipur. He was the Deputy General Officer Commanding a Mountain Division in Assam. He has been awarded a PhD from IGNOU for his study on Northeast India, and is presently posted as DIGP, CRPF in the Northeast Region.

Lessons from Mizoram Insurgency and Peace Accord 1986

Signed on 30 June 1986, between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Government of India, the Mizo Accord so far remains the only successful Peace Accord of its kind in independent India's history. The Mizoram accord is also rightly referred to as 'the only insurgency in the world which ended with a stroke of pen', by Security experts all over the world. Mizoram witnessed two decades of insurgency which broke out in 1966 and ended on June 30, 1986 when leader of the MNF, Laldenga signed a Memorandum of Settlement with the representatives of Government of India and Government of Mizoram.

So what worked in the Mizo accord?

The first factor was the MNF's quick adaption to the requirements of democratic politics. It learnt the need to play by the rules, to respect the people's mandate and did not retreat into the jungles when rejected by the people. Peace accords have been signed in other parts of the northeast too; most of them are in tatters, confirming that it is not an accord that brings peace but the process it is a part of. Mizoram got that process right. Thirty years after the Mizo accord was signed, the state remains an oasis of peace in the north-east. The fact that peace has been sustained for three decades is no mean achievement and has only happened because of the determination shown by a highly knowledgeable and educated public, the church, the governments of different parties and civil society.

Topography and Demography

Mizoram is flanked by Bangladesh in the West and Myanmar in the East and South. The States of Assam and Manipur border the North while the State of Tripura lies to the Northwest of Mizoram. Mizoram has a total area of 21,087 square km and population of approximately nine lakhs. In general sense, the term Mizo means a Hillman (Mi-man, zo – hill or high altitude). The Mizo is a generic term, which includes several tribes. The major tribes are Lushai, Hmar, Paite, Lai, Mara, Chakmas and Reangs. The tribes are numerous and sub-tribes are even more. The most popularly known Lushais have dominated the Mizo society for over three centuries. Today, a number of tribes, which may be broadly divided into seven major and many sub- tribes/clans inhabit Mizoram.

Brief Genesis of Mizo Insurgency

Background

Mizoram (Mizo Hill) was a district within Assam till 1972 when it became a Union Territory. A perceived sense of loss of Identity to their Assamese domination together with discrimination in various fields contributed to the Mizo alienation. Delay in abolition of chieftainship, imposition of Hindi and Assamese languages, lack of financial empowerment of the District Council further heightened the alienation. But the spark that lit the flame of insurgency was in major famine called Mautam¹ which stalked the Mizo hills resulting in deaths by starvation, while the Central and State Governments appeared unconcerned; set the stage for an armed insurrection. Laldenga, the former army soldier took control of the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) and led the rebellion against India. The word Famine was dropped and the Mizo National Front (MNF) was formed in 1966².

Operation Jericho

The MNF declared its aim for the creation of a sovereign state of Greater Mizoram, which would be independent from India. The MNF wanted that Greater Mizoram should include the borderline territories of Tripura, Manipur and Cachar districts of Assam. Strengthened by arms and training provided by East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) the MNF launched "Operation Jericho" on February 28, 1966.

Operation Jericho saw 1,500 MNF cadres over-running Lunglei, Aizawl and Champhai areas by beating back the Assam Rifles personnel stationed there, on 1 March 1966, when the MNF declared unilateral Mizo independence and attacked Assam Rifles post at Lunglei, captured the SDO and seized Rs 18 Lakhs from the Govt Treasury. The MNA (Mizo National Army) the armed wing of MNF, was in full control of nearly the whole of Mizoram except Aizawl, when the Govt of India declared the Mizo Hills District as a Disturbed Area and the Army was moved in. And the MNF was declared an unlawful organisation.

¹ *Mautam* (Mizo for "bamboo death") is a cyclic ecological phenomenon that occurs every 48 years in the north-eastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur. During Mautam, a species of bamboo, flowers at one time across a wide area and is followed invariably by a plague of black rats in what is called a rat flood. This occurs as the rats multiply in response to the temporary windfall of seeds and leave the forests to forage on stored grain when the bamboo seeds are exhausted, which in turn causes devastating famine.

² Subir Bhaumik, "Insurgency in India's Northeast, Conflict, Cooption and Change" July 10, 2007, available at <http://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/14239/uploads>, accessed on June 10, 2016

Military Operations and Peace Negotiations

By March 2, 1966, MNF had captured several smaller towns south of Aizawl. Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopters tried to induct army reinforcements but were fired upon by MNA snipers. So, on March 5, the IAF used heavy machine gun fire and incendiary bombs were dropped on suspected insurgent positions. The MNA melted away into the surrounding gorges, forests and hills, to camps in Burma and the then East Pakistan. This was the first— and only — time that the aircraft of Indian Air Force (IAF) were employed to attack insurgents in India. It helped in clearing Aizawl and other cities of the MNA, but did not finish off the insurgency, which would last for another 20 years.³

As a strategy to deny population support to the insurgent and provide protection to the villagers, grouping of villages also called protective and progressive villages was carried out between 1967 and 1969, roughly 80 per cent of the Mizo population were moved (of the 764 villages that existed in the Mizo Hills at that time). It did enhance the security forces' control over the population, but it alienated the locals and fuelled the insurgency.

Due to the sustained counter insurgency operations, the MNF, which was outlawed in 1967, was weakened severely; its leaders were forced to operate from the adjoining Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and were ousted from there following Bangladesh's liberation in 1971. Even as the insurgency raged, the Indian government extended amnesty to the insurgents from time to time. The quest for a negotiated settlement of the Mizo conflict was a tortuous process which suffered frequent setbacks⁴.

In 1974, Laldenga expressed his willingness to discuss a solution to the problem within the Indian constitution in a letter written to the then prime minister Indira Gandhi. India could have struck a deal with him then, ie 12 years before the accord was eventually signed. However, it did not happen. Hopes of negotiations appeared again in 1984 and Laldenga returned to India. However, the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi on 31 Oct 84, the day the late PM was scheduled to meet Laldenga, delayed the process again.

Negotiations continued in 1985, and in July, 1986, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi went to Mizoram for a 72-hour goodwill tour as a follow up to his

³ Abheek Berman, "Air attacks in Mizoram, 1966 - our dirty, little secret" The Economic Times, February 10, 2013, available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-02-19/news/37179679_1_mna-chhinga-veng-air-force accessed on June 10, 2016

⁴ Sudha Ramachandran, "Peace lessons from northeast India's oasis" Asia Times, July 08, 2011, available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MG08Df03.html accessed on June 10, 2016

Mizo Peace Accord. Laldenga became the joyful leader of the interim government and Chief Minister. With the surrender of arms by the Mizo National Front guerrillas, after 20 years of strife, the Indian government conferred statehood on the territory of Mizoram on August 7, 1986⁵. Elections for the first Mizoram Legislative Assembly was held on 16th February, 1987 and Mizoram became a full-fledged State from 20th February, 1987.

There was opposition to the Mizo Accord, with critics condemning it as “buying peace from armed rebels” rather than seeing it as a victory for national interest⁶. However, since the signing of the Peace Accord by MNF, Mizoram has remained peaceful. There was an understanding in which Lalthanhawla the then, Chief Minister agreed to step down and pave way for Laldenga, the MNF Chief to become Chief Minister. Mr Laldenga had pledged to bring the MNF into the mainstream of the Indian polity and irrevocably committed it to strive for a strong and united India. As agreed, Mr Lalthanhawla stepped down to become Deputy Chief Minister and Laldenga took over as the new Chief Minister of Mizoram. That was the beginning of MNF as an over ground political party in Mizoram and all the cadres of the MNF were rehabilitated in due course⁷ in his State.

Mizoram Accord 1986⁸

The **Mizoram Accord** was signed between the Mizo National Front and the Government of India on June 30, 1986. The official document entitled *Mizoram Accord, 1986, Memorandum of Settlement* was the landmark that restored peace and harmony in the state. The signatories were Laldenga, leader of the movement, R. D. Pradhan, Home Secretary, and Lalkhama, Chief secretary.



⁵ L. Memo Singh, “The Mizo Accord” The Imphal Free Press, June 25, 2014, available at <http://ifp.co.in/page/items/21852/the-mizo-accord>, accessed on June 10, 2016

⁶ L. Memo Singh, “The Mizo Accord” The Imphal Free Press, June 25, 2014, available at <http://ifp.co.in/page/items/21852/the-mizo-accord>, accessed on June 10, 2016

⁷ Deepak Dewan, “The Secret Agreement : Courtesy of North East Sun, January 15, 2010”, available at <http://cmmizoram.nic.in/download/files/Articles/The%20Secret%20Agreement.pdf>, accessed on June 10, 2012

⁸ “Mizoram Accord 1986, Memorandum of Settlement”, Satp, available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/mizoram/documents/papers/mizoram_accord_1986.htm, accessed on June 10, 2016

Summary of Memorandum of Settlement

The MNF agreed to a timeframe, to bring all their underground personnel with their arms, ammunitions, and equipment, out of their hideouts to ensure their return to civil life, abjure violence and to help in the process of restoration of normalcy. The MNF assured that it would not extend any support to the Tripura National Volunteers(TNV), People's Liberation Army of Manipur(PLA) and any other such group by way of training, supply of arms, providing protection or in any other matter.

The central Government assured that it would take steps for the settlement and rehabilitation of the MNF underground personnel after considering the scheme proposed in this regard by the Government of Mizoram regarding payment of exgratia amounts to heirs/dependants of persons who were killed during disturbances in 1966 and thereafter in the Union Territory of Mizoram. The other major provisions included :

- a. Conferment of Statehood on the Union Territory of Mizoram.
- b. No act of Parliament would apply in respect of Religion or Social practices of the Mizos / Mizo customary Law or procedures / Administration of Civil and Criminal Justice involving decisions according to Mizo customary Law, / Ownership and transfer of land, unless the Legislative Assembly of Mizoram by a resolution so decides.
- c. The Inner line Regulation, as was in force in Mizoram, would not be amended or repealed without consulting the State Government.
- d. The rights and privileges of the minorities in Mizoram as envisaged in the constitution would continue to be preserved and protected and their social and economic advancement would be ensured.
- e. The State will be at liberty to adopt any one or more language for official purposes
- f. Establishment of a separate University in the State.
- g. Mizoram would be entitled to have a High Court of its own.

The question of Unification of Mizo inhabited areas of other States to form one administrative unit was raised by the MNF delegation. It was pointed out to them, on behalf of the Government of India, that Article 3 of the Constitution of India describes the procedure in this regard but that the Government cannot make any commitment in this respect.

Lessons, Issues and Recommendations

Need For Flexibility during Negotiations

For an accord to be successful there is a need to have flexibility among the parties during negotiations. During the negotiation for Mizoram Accord, compromises and concessions were made by both sides in the final round of the talks. The MNF gave up its demand for a Greater Mizoram and Lalthanhawla then Mizoram's Chief Minister stepped down as part of the agreement to allow Laldenga to become the new chief minister. Such flexibility and understanding would also be expected from other insurgent leaders like the NSCN (IM)'s T Muivah and ULFA(I) leader, Presh Baruah.

Sincerity and Commitments for Implementation of Accord

The MNF, as per the provision of the Memorandum of Settlement laid down their arms, ammunitions' equipment etc. and refrained from violence from the day of signing the memorandum. They did not extend any kind of help to any other underground organizations. The MNF has till date, remained faithful to its commitments, thereby making the memorandum of settlement, the most enduring and the only surviving peace settlement that has ever been signed by the Government of India with any underground organization in the region. The Government of India also, on its part, has given statehood with special status to Mizoram, suspended counter-insurgency operations and established a Central University⁹. So the lesson is loud and clear – sincerity and commitment of all parties is a must for the success of an accord.

Laldenga Undisputed Leader

Laldenga and the MNF themselves grew out of the great famine of 1959. With his fiery oratory and organizational skills, Laldenga first organized the Mizo Famine Front but later converted it into the present-day MNF, which set about organizing a secret parallel government modelled on the American presidential system. He was the undisputed leader of MNF at that time and also during negotiation. Laldenga too, reportedly consulted his comrades at every step of the process. In fact, "Intra-MNF discussions were almost an integral part of the Mizo peace process. This frequent consultations might have delayed the signing of the accord, even

⁹ * Dr Th Siamkhum, "A case study of MNF movement for independence in Mizoram Counter-Insurgency Operation and Human Right Violation " The Sangai Express . January 31, 2015, available at http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=education.Human_Rights_Legal.A_case_study_of_MNF_movement_for_independence_in_Mizoram_Part_6_By_Th_Siamkhum, accessed on June 10, 2016

contributed to Laldenga's repeated backtracking but in the long run, it ensured the accord's survival and acceptance by a broad swath of society¹⁰. For an accord to be a success there is a need to have charismatic, undisputed and dynamic leaders like Laldenga.

Need For Consistent, Inclusive and Open Ended Dialogue

The success of the Mizo Accord can be attributed to the following factors;¹¹

- a. Strong sub-tribal identities amongst the Mizos were effectively diminished during colonial times. So the Mizo's were a more cohesive group.
- b. There were no competing insurgent groups in Mizoram and the government was clear whom to talk to. Laldenga as a leader was accepted by all in the MNF and the accord signed by him was accepted by all.

But clearly the MNF pattern of settlement may not work in a similar manner with other insurgent groups in the Northeast, most of them have fierce leadership disputes and are divided into many factions on ethnic lines. Most of these leaders have lost popular support¹². A greater challenge now exists with the Central and state governments to ensure a consistent, inclusive and open ended dialogue with various insurgent groups and their conflicting demands.

Political and People's Will

Political leaders in the other Northeast's strife ridden states have to understand and rise above their personal and ethnic interests for attaining larger peace in the region. The need is to drop vote bank and ethnic divisive policies by all political leaders, social groups, religious institutes and student bodies to inculcate a feeling of oneness amongst all tribes and inhabitants of the State. The Mizo movement was built on an all inclusive Mizo identity, a regional rather than ethnic identity. By appealing to the

¹⁰ Sudha Ramachandran, "Peace lessons from northeast India's oasis" Asia Times, July 08, 2011, available at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MG08Df03.html accessed on June 10, 2016

¹¹ Vasundhara Sirnate, "Can an Accord End an Insurgency?", The Hindu Centre For Politics and Public Policy, August 7, 2015, available at <http://www.thehinducentre.com/the-arena/current-issues/article7511878.ece>, accessed on June 10, 2016

¹² VR Raghavan "Internal Conflict : Military Perspective' p51 available at https://books.google.co.in/books?id=LgCqCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA52&lpg=PA52&dq=mizo+insurgency+and+mizo+accord+1986&source=bl&ots=UBuEkQhIuX&sig=8ZjTg1DjdQFAtNlu43HIwn4y9Ec&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiL3pWq85_NAhWKJZQKHQtSCfQ4ChDoAQg0MAY#v=onepage&q=mizo%20insurgency%20and%20mizo%20accord%201986&f=false accessed on June 10, 2016

Mizo identity the MNF was able to strike a chord with and mobilize all sections of the population living there. So it was political and people's will which led to the signing and success of Mizoram Accord. The creation of a consistent, inclusive and open-ended process with strong political and people's will is more likely to yield a sustainable social transformation than a single accord or a succession of accords, however well-intentioned they might be,

Speedy and Meaningful Rehabilitation Plan

All the cadres of the MNF were rehabilitated following the accord. There are a large number of Ceasefire and Suspension of Operations militant camps awaiting rehabilitation in other states. The cadres staying in these camps are generally disappointed, demoralized and disillusioned due to the slow pace of rehabilitation and hence involved in illegal activities. A survey indicates that there are approximately 12000 cadres in Ceasefire/Suspension of Operations designated camps in North-eastern States. Some of these cadres have deserted from these camps and joined militant groups. Speed and meaningful rehabilitation of these cadres as was done in Mizoram will contribute to peace in the region.

Effective Counter Insurgency Operations

Effective counter insurgency operations are a pre-requisite for any peace accord to follow. Induction of additional army units followed by sustained counter insurgency operations, put pressure on the MNF. During the 1971 war, Indian Forces dismantled Northeast militant camps including those of the MNF in East Pakistan. This was a big blow to these militants who had moved to Myanmar and East Pakistan. It had a demoralizing impact on these militant groups, which subsequently led to the peace accords. Destruction of Northeast militant camps in Myanmar and other neighbouring countries, in joint operations is the need of the day and essential to bring peace in Northeast India.

Employment of IAF in Counterinsurgency Operations

The employment of IAF in Mizoram has been widely criticised. The employment of IAF in Mizoram should be seen in the backdrop of prevailing circumstances that time including external support to the insurgents. Employment of IAF does not mean use of fighters and bombers only. History is replete with examples of extensive employment of helicopters and aircrafts for counter insurgency operations have been made in Vietnam, Afghanistan and other recently organised operations

against the ISIS. In the Indian context Mi-8 transport and Mi-25 attack helicopters have been used in counter insurgency operations in Sri Lanka and in support of UN 'peacekeeping' missions in Africa. Presently, very limited numbers of medium transport helicopters have been employed for support, reconnaissance, surveillance, air mobility and casualty evacuation in Central India. With the improvement of technology, helicopters have an important role to play in counter insurgency operations in India. These can be employed for acquisition of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and communication, casualty evacuation, logistics resupply, transportation, troop reinforcements / extraction and in air-to-ground strike and psychological operations.¹³

The air assets are potent force, which needs to be utilized in counter insurgency operations to strike at pin point isolated targets with precision ammunition and speed up, induction of Special Forces to target militant leaders who take advantage of remote terrain and lack of infrastructure. With Security Forces having contained insurgency, striking at leadership, hideouts / camps within India and camps located across international borders is required for larger peace in our country. Needless to say, due care must be taken to avoid collateral damage.

Extension of Security and Development

The strategy of Grouping of villages had its origins in South East Asia, Malaya and Vietnam. The strategic hamlets programme in Vietnam was a failure which was replicated in Mizoram¹⁴. At that time, there was only one road connecting Silchar in Assam to Aizawl in Mizoram. The military plan was to gather villagers from all over, and cluster them along the side of this road called Protected and Progressive Villages (PPVs). This helped in curbing the free movement of insurgents and denied them the population support base. It also struck the heart of Mizoram's economy, destroyed the Mizos' practice of jhum or shifting cultivation and hunting. It remained an unpopular counter insurgency strategy in Mizoram and subsequently banned by Guwahati High Court. Relocation of villages was also tried in Chhattisgarh by Salwa Judum¹⁵ and did not succeed. In the present day context, the population explosion and land awareness has spread the

¹³ Gp Capt GB Menon, "Employment of Helicopters in Counter Insurgency Roles" Indian Defence Review, Vol 29, July 29, 2014, available at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/employment-of-helicopters-in-counter-insurgency-roles/> accessed on June 15, 2016

¹⁴ Michael Maclear, "Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War", (London: Thames Methuen, 1981), p. 88

¹⁵ Salwa Judum (meaning "Peace March" or "Purification Hunt" in Gondi language) is a militia mobilised and deployed as part of anti-insurgency operations in Chhattisgarh, India, aimed at countering Naxalite violence in the region. The militia, consisting of local tribal youth, received support and training from the Chhattisgarh state government.

settlements even into remote interiors. Grouping of villages may not classically work out.

So instead of grouping/relocating villages to deny support to the militants, it is important to extend the reach of security forces, the administration and development to remote areas. This will be made possible by extending infrastructure to remote areas, having composite teams with elements of Security Forces and administration to visit and provide basic necessities to the people in remote areas. Only people willing to be relocated and children keen for education, vocational / specialized training and jobs should be moved out of villages. Care should be taken that their safety, social and religious needs are taken care of.

Conclusion

Every insurgency is different and cannot be viewed with a myopic single approach. There are very useful lessons that have emerged out of the GOI's approach, and commitments of other stake holders which led to a successful resolution of the Mizo insurgency. Insurgencies in different regions have different dynamics. Our approach has to evolve over a period of time after taking due consideration of successful templates like that of the Mizoram Accord besides taking into account local dynamics, the constantly changing nature of conflict and perceptions of the people. A multi pronged approach aimed at addressing socio-economic factors, political, military, resettlement, employment of the masses and infrastructural developmental aspects thus need to be given due deliberations in formulating any strategy towards a lasting resolution of insurgency situations.

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media fields have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organization to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelize fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its establishment, VIF has successfully embarked on quality research and scholarship in an effort to highlight issues in governance and strengthen national security. This is being actualized through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive-dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of the VIF form the lasting deliverables of the organisation's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: info@vifindia.org, Website: <http://www.vifindia.org>

Follow us on [twitter@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)