

Report on

## **Seeking Our Collective Peace**

*The Northeast India Diaspora Looks into Solutions for Peace and Development in the Region*

**Date:** 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012

**Time:** 9.00am to 5.00pm

**Venue:** Conference Room 1,  
India International Centre, IIC, Lodi Estate, New Delhi-110003

### **Organised By**

Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, Mindfields : Journal of Ideas and Learning, The Northeast Today (TNT) and Control Arms Foundation of India

**Supported By:** Heinrich Boll Stiftung

On 30th of June 2012 the event "Seeking Our Collective Peace: The Northeast India Diaspora Looks into Solutions for Peace and Development in the Region" took place at Conference Room No 1, India International Centre, 40 Max Mueller Marg, Lodi Estate (Near Lodhi Gardens), New Delhi-110003.

The event was jointly organized by Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, Mindfields:Journal of Ideas and Learning, The Northeast Today (TNT) Magazine and Control Arms Foundation of India supported by Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF).

Many people come out from the Northeast Indian states (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Sikkim) due to lack of job opportunities, higher education or the latent presence of violence in their region. Most of the people go to metropolitan cities, like Bangalore, Chennai or New Delhi, within India while some travel overseas. Within India many of the Northeast Indians have to face prejudices, sexual harassment and racism while in their homeland several violent conflicts continue. The conference "Seeking Our Collective Peace - The Northeast India Diaspora Looks into Solutions for Peace and Development in the Region" wants to analyze the state of the Northeast Indian Diaspora within and outside India and create a platform for them so that they can have a greater engagement within the peace process in the Northeastern region.

Eminent attendees and panelist of the event included Mr B G Verghese, Renowned writer, Magsaysay Awardee & Visiting Professor, Centre for Policy Research; Ms Patricia Mukhim, Editor, The Shillong Times and Member, National Security Advisory Board; Dr Anuradha Chenoy, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Mr Sudeep Chakravarti, Author of Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land; Mr Pradyot Deb Burman, Chairman & Editor, The Northeast Today (TNT) Magazine ; Ms Binalakshmi Nepam, Founder, Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network; Mr Luke Haokip, Publisher, Co-Founder & Co Editor, Mindfields ; Dr. Ajailiu Niumai, Associate Professor; University of Hyderabad; Mr Utpal Borpujari, Film Critic, Film Maker and Artistic Director with Eleanora Images; Ms Elizabeth Imti, Assistant Professor; Fazal Ali College Nagaland; Jyotsna Chatterji, Director & Secretary, Joint Women's Programme; Ms Teresa Rehman, Editor, The Thumb Print; Mr Karma Paljor, Business Editor, CNBC

TV18; Ms Barnali Das, Senior Project Advisor, National Mission for Empowerment of Women; Ms Rita Manchanda, Programme Director, South Asia Forum for Human Rights; Ms Lianboi Vaiphei, Asst Professor, Delhi University; Mr John Hingkung, Forum Admin, Stop Discriminating People From North-East India online Forum; Mr Oinam Goldflag, Social Activist, Manipur.

The panel started with a statement from Ms Binalakshmi Nepram who said she does not trust politicians. The failure of almost all invited politicians except Mr Pratyot Deb Burman - who is a politician from Tripura - to attend the panel brings a negative light on the state of politics in Northeast India and in India in general. This meeting was the first of its kind concerning the Northeast Indian Diaspora and that it is the brainchild of the Head of HBF India, Dr. Axel Harneit- Sievers. This event draws reference to the African Diaspora who engages very delicately in institutionalizing peace in their respective homelands.

Almost all panelists agreed that the Diaspora wants to contribute something in the form of material or intellectual support but doesn't know how because they don't know who to ask and who to address.

All persons from the one of the eight Northeast Indian states living outside the region in "Mainland India" or abroad constitute the Northeast Indian Diaspora. The skepticism of the Northeast Indian Diaspora was also mentioned. There is a notion within parts of the Northeast Indian community that too often academics meet together in air-conditioned rooms, talking much about the conflict but with no results or substantial progress made concerning the region.

Luke Haokip, Editor of Mindfields, wants to bring all the different ideological streams from the Northeast together under one umbrella organization since most writing just goes to waste and fails to result in anything. There is a persistent problem of bringing the different political factions of the Northeast together. Factionalism and communalism are two of the main causes of the conflict and also the reason for the weakness of the different stakeholders who want to bring peace to the region. Only an institution which brings together the different political views has the capacity to create as much pressure on the state and national governments as needed, so that they will implement policies which will strengthen the peace process in the region.

Mr. B. G. Verghese and writer Sudeep Chakravati emphasized the need for economic initiatives and development to bring peace in the North East. Development and peace go hand in hand, this would improve the social welfare of the Sister states. As the economical and intellectual middle class elite, the Diaspora must join hands with their friends and families in the North East; start businesses there and engage with the government of the region. There's also a need for bigger economic projects. Sudeep Chakravarti pointed out that an industrial corridor project which would connect all seven sister states and their neighboring countries together, would bring enormous economic benefits for the region and also would create a stronger common political bond between all states. There are spurts of reactions from the people but no sustained efforts especially linking people from the area with the diaspora.

Voices of caution also had their say. Mr. Pradyot Deb Burman warned that big economic projects can be used as a tool of ethnic cleansing and also for creating new vote banks by the government. He reminded the audience that the Dumbur Dam project which was started in the 1970s and has already been shut down, generated only 4 MW of power displaced more than 5000 tribal families. The only gainers of this project were the Bengalis in the Congress-led Tripura government and Bengalis in the urban areas. The displaced tribal population also created a new vote bank which could be exploited by local politicians.

Also, the Look East Policy, formulated by the Indian National Government, will only benefit the already rich, as Prof. Ajailiu Niumai, Hyderabad University, interpolated. This would change if the Northeast Indian states, with the help of the Diaspora, would formulate their own agenda for its own benefits.

An audience member remarked that an open border with neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar would increase the influx of migrants from the respective countries. Hence ethnic clashes could be increasing, too. Mr Pradyot Deb Burman countered that even closed borders could not stop illegal immigration from Bangladesh or Myanmar but open borders would help the farmers to sell their crops legally to the nearby villages in neighboring countries, which would be far easier to approach than Kolkata or Delhi, thus increasing the welfare of the small people of the region.

Nevertheless the discussion often acknowledged that a more practical handling of Northeast India through economic and political reforms is a better instrument to solve the conflict than an emotional approach.

On several occasions the panel pointed out the lack of a coherent group strategy from the Northeast due to the inner- factional conflicts. The Northeast has to start to speak with one voice and try to co-operate with each other. As an example for bad communication between the states the cases of Tripura and Meghalaya were mentioned. While Tripura is handling the matter of refugees from Bangladesh very well by co-operating with the Bangladesh government, Meghalaya has still immense problems to manage the situation. There is no sign of co-operation between the Chief Ministers of both states for working out this problem together. But not only state to state communications have to improve, also inter- communal differences between different local communities have to stop.

This idea of a coherent Northeast can be strengthened if people from the Northeast and in the rest of India will get rid of their ignorance of each other. Even within the Northeast, the different tribes and ethnic groups know less about their own history, not to mention the respective histories of the other communities. Mr. B.G. Verghese was strongly encouraging to create an integrated History of the Northeast which should introduce the heroes and the cultural heritage of the region to the people of the Northeast and the rest of India. This should help to build up an image of a proud and culturally rich Northeast which brings its own positive share of a likewise culturally rich "Commonwealth of India". An example for collecting and creating such cultural treasures was presented by Journalist Teresa Rehman, who actively tries to promote a different image of the Northeast, far away from the stereotypical images of war and bloodshed. She reports from the "Sadou Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samity " which is a voluntary women's literary organization which invites women to write small poems, lullabies and small stories, thus

1. empowering women through education and culture thus increasing their confidence and strengthening their self respect
2. developing self expression through creative work and contribute positively to Assamese language, literature and culture.
3. publishing and preserving valuable books written by women writers

Such organizations help to bring the local context, in this case the Assamese context, to a wider national or even global audience.

The non-fiction book “Highway 39: Journeys to a fractured land” is also an attempt by Sudeep Chakravarti to bring the stories of the Northeast to an audience outside the region. The same intention has Assamese filmmaker Utpal Borpujari. With the help of audio-visual media he wants to take the stories from the Northeast out to the world. Many of the panel members complained the lack of positive coverage of the Northeast in TV and News although a slight change is noticeable since the last decade. The reason behind this change is caused by the fact that more and more Northeastern Indians are joining media companies and Mr Borpujari assumed that in the next 10 years to come more Northeast Indians will rise in higher levels of decision making within their respective media companies which will have a positive impact on the coverage of the Northeast. Mr Karma Paljor, as an example of a media person with origins from the Northeast, was also present at the panel. He represents one of the positive cases of the Northeast Indian Diaspora who managed to ignore the racist insults and just made a good life for himself by engaging with the local people where he was studying. He says the Northeast Indian community must leave its self-created ghettos in the metropolitan cities of India (New Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai) and start to interact more with the people of their host-region.

Ms Elizabeth Imti sees the necessity for the Northeast Indian Diaspora to be trained outside the homeland because of the lack of educational capacity. But they need to go back to their native land not only as engineers and doctors but also as sociologist and psychologist to help to rebuild their violence torn homeland physically and mentally.

Although there is still no organized, united forum of the Northeast Indian Diaspora, Individuals like Mr John Hingkung created an online Forum where Northeast Indians can discuss and point out the discrimination they have to face within the “Mainstream Indian society”. In Colleges faculty members from the Northeast, like Ms Lianboi Vaiphei, help Northeast Indian students to confront with the prejudices they have to face when they are looking for accommodation, applying for courses etc. .

After almost 8 hours of discussion the panel ends with the concluding remarks of Prof. Chenoy, that this meeting was just the start of a long journey. She pointed out that historically, diasporas have often funded and supported conflict, but she was drawn to speak at this event, because it is a diaspora organising for peace.

Many panelist put their hopes in the documents which will be produced following this panel. They have to reach the stakeholders in the national and regional governments. But the most important lesson learned today is that first the Northeast has to be linked together before it can positively influence the peace process in the region.

After this event, many interesting questions have come to the fore:

1. How do we get the people from the North East living in the big cities to integrate freely in society and not remain in the ‘ghettos’?
2. What can people do if they want to go back or at least contribute to the development of the region?

3. Is our voice (as a civil society gathering) loud enough to be heard by the PM's office?
4. Who stands to benefit the most from the violence and are we ever going to get out of the victimhood syndrome?

Policy tools were discussed with the aim of breaking out of the existing paradigm, namely through investment, media technologies, women's development and avoiding the 'brain drain'. Suggestions for targeted initiatives included information campaigns, scholarships and human capital programs. The call for formation of a Northeast Collective and the writing of a Northeast India People's Vision Document was also made at the meeting.

Messages from Northeast India diaspora community such as European Manipuri Association and North American Manipur Association were also read out at the event. Also statements of Northeast India Diaspora settled as far as Pacific are circulated at the conference.

The event was well attended by students from the universities in Delhi, academicians, and stakeholders and was promised to be just the first in a series of such seminars to promote peace building. The conference was completed successfully with many meaningful views and resolution.

Please find attached below newspaper links regarding the said event. See:

- <http://en-maktoob.news.yahoo.com/remove-weaknesses-institutions-speak-northeast-135313506.html>
- <http://www.morungexpress.com/regional/82605.html>
- [http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news\\_section.Press\\_Release.Press\\_Release\\_2012.Northeast\\_India\\_Diaspora\\_Meet\\_for\\_First\\_Time\\_To\\_Seek\\_Collective\\_Peace\\_and\\_Development\\_20120702](http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.Press_Release.Press_Release_2012.Northeast_India_Diaspora_Meet_for_First_Time_To_Seek_Collective_Peace_and_Development_20120702)
- <http://kanglaonline.com/2012/06/northeast-india-diaspora-seeking-our-collective-peace-event-new-delhi-30th-june-2012/>
- [http://www.poknapham.in/current/Page\\_1.pdf](http://www.poknapham.in/current/Page_1.pdf)
- <http://kanglaonline.com/2012/07/northeast-india-diaspora-seek-collective-peace-and-development-in-the-region/>

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