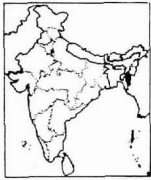


Mizoram

Laldenga's War-dance



Events in Mizoram seem to be moving inexorably towards a resumption of insurgency. The cease-fire agreement, which came into effect at midnight on July 31 last year, has never seemed more fragile than it is now. As the indecisive talks with Mizo National Front (MNF) President Laldenga near the end of their sixth year, the MNF has stepped up its extortion of 'donations' from both Mizos and *vais* (outsiders) in the tiny north-eastern union territory.

On November 16, Laldenga wrote to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, threatening to return for good to his underground headquarters in Burma's Arakan Hills if she did not meet him within 10 days. Laldenga had returned from a second visit to his headquarters in mid-September with a fresh set of 20 proposals, after the MNF's National Executive Committee rejected the Government's own package of peace proposals. Mrs Gandhi replied to Laldenga just before his ultimatum ran out, asking him to resume talks with her personal envoy, G. Parthasarathi. When INDIA TODAY met Laldenga last fortnight, he had three rounds of talks with Parthasarathi, and seemed satisfied at the progress made.

Impossible Demands: Beneath the diplomatic talks, however, ran an undercurrent of frustration. Laldenga has stonewalled the peace talks continually with his "impossible demands", as a Home Ministry source puts it. The Government is willing to grant Mizoram statehood and order fresh elections. But Laldenga wants a very special "constitutional status" for Mizoram, bordering on total autonomy. In addition, he wants the immediate dismissal of the Mizoram ministry, led by Brigadier Thenpunga Sailo, and the appointment of an "interim government" which he himself will lead. Another of his demands is the inclusion in the would-be state of all Mizo areas in the contiguous states—Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and even Burma and Bangladesh.

At the root of the imbroglio is an evident difference of approach between South and North Blocks: the prime minister's secretariat and the Home Ministry. Sticking to the logical position that the Sailo Ministry is a legally elected one and that its dismissal would amount to a virtual sell-out, the Home Ministry terms Laldenga's demands "suicidal". Undoubtedly, Laldenga's demands of an interim MNF government and merger of Mizo-dominated areas outside the state would lead to a constitutional headache.

And the only explanation for Mrs Gandhi's unwillingness to take a stronger line with the MNF leader is that a Laldenga at the negotiating table is better than one in the jungles of the Arakan. Nor has Mrs Gandhi forgotten that her promises to Laldenga in 1976, when she offered him safe conduct to talk peace, were unilaterally set aside by the Janata administration.

Overt Violence: Significantly, as the stalemate continues, the perpetration of overt violence has shifted to the hands of militant members of the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), the apex student body in the union territory. A MZP agitation against the director of agriculture ended in the month-long detention of 100 students two months ago. On October 28, two state buses were rolled off a cliff and completely destroyed. A week later,



Sailo (left) and Laldenga: mud-slinging

the Pachhunga College in Aizawl was gutted in a mysterious fire. Mizoram government officials allege that MZP activists are behind the violence, and that they are taking up cudgels on behalf of the ceasefire-bound MNF.

Mizoram-watchers were therefore astonished when the prime minister met Thangtinkhuma, 'patron' of the MZP, in Delhi on November 6. Thangtinkhuma openly professed support for Laldenga and demanded the immediate dismissal of the Sailo ministry. "The prime minister is bestowing legitimacy on the MZP's blackmailing tactics," fumed Sailo.

Intelligence sources say that the MNF is actually recruiting hundreds of MZP members and arming them in the eventuality of a resumption of insurgency. On his part, Laldenga seems fully prepared for a return to arms. "Talks with Parthasarathi are by no means official," he says. "Tomorrow, the Government can turn around and reject any agreement reached with him by saying he holds no official rank." Parthasarathi, when contacted by INDIA TODAY, refused to comment on the talks. "Anything I say now may

be used against the Government," he said. "I do not want to jeopardise my chances."

Amnesty Demand: Laldenga wants statehood to be preceded by a general amnesty for all MNF personnel, even those under detention or on bail on cognizable offences. "Without an interim MNF government, the talks will be called off," he threatens. "It is not easy for us to dissolve our underground government." "MNF men coming overground have to be protected from the revenge of people whose relatives they may have killed," says Laldenga. He alleges that by hunting and harassing MZP boys, the Mizoram Government is driving them into insurgency. He is confident of winning a "landslide victory" if elections are held.

Laldenga is furious with Union Home Minister of State Yogendra Makwana because he publicly said that he was free to go anywhere. "But I am not free to move around, I live in a gilded cage," says Laldenga. His wife filed a habeas corpus petition in the Supreme Court last fortnight, asking for the release from detention of her brother and his two teenaged daughters, who had been arrested on suspicion of having links with the arsonists. "Sailo wants to enrage me, drive me into violence," says Laldenga, "and thus remain forever in power."

On his part, Sailo accuses Laldenga of trying to hold his government to ransom. "Everybody is sick and tired of this man," he says, "every official, every minister in Delhi. Laldenga is trying to make things intolerable for me. I can only hope and pray that wisdom will eventually prevail in Delhi."

Bluff: The MNF leader makes no bones about his preparedness to return to war with the Government. It is well known that MNF men have steadily accumulated arms, provisions and money. "If I return to the jungle, I cannot guarantee peace," threatens Laldenga. "If the stalemate continues, I shall set out for my underground headquarters, come what may. And if the Government tries to stop me, that will be an immediate signal for the resumption of fighting."

It is clear, therefore, that if Laldenga's demands are not conceded by the new year, the Mizo problem will acquire a renewed urgency. The rebel leader appears to be turning the screws on the Government at a time when it is besieged by many pressing problems, chiefly Khalistan. In the end, Mrs Gandhi may not yield an inch. Her tactics seem to be aimed towards stalling Laldenga long enough to weaken him. Home Ministry officials, however, seem confident that if his bluff were to be called, and Laldenga were allowed to return to his underground headquarters, any resumption of insurgency could be finally, and ruthlessly, stamped out. Their major fear at the moment is that Laldenga may prove too wily for even the prime minister.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG