

THE NORTH-EAST

THE HUMAN TRAGEDY

It is a war without end, a no-win situation in which nobody can provide answers to some questions: How long will this go on? Which side will eventually prevail? What is the cost to the nation in money, matériel, men?

This war has no name. It is more an endless series of skirmishes than a sustained military confrontation. Yet, this war has been raging intermittently for 26 years in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

It is also a terrible human tragedy, a tragedy that flings soldiers trained to battle with the enemy's identifiable army against tenacious opponents who are Indians—and yet foes.

Trapped between the two sides are the ordinary civilians—the villager, the simple government employee, the middle-class town inhabitant. For them, the future spells strife, bloodshed, terror and hatred.

IT IS a journey into the heart of darkness, a sadness made sharper by the cold highland air. The sun rises far earlier in these regions than anywhere else in the country, and the nights are full of jungle sounds. At every step these sounds grow in cadence, filling unfamiliar ears to bursting; the darkness seems to hide a thousand men with hungry guns.

The tension swirls around all the time, and the Nagas, the Manipuris and the Mizos, accustomed to laughter and quick song, used to their own strong identities, nevertheless harbour deep fear—and anger. Every night-time knock heralds danger—either the hunted guerrilla demanding shelter or food at gunpoint, or the harried soldier bursting in to ransack the house in pursuit of his quicksilver quarry.

The steep jungled hills that tumble pell-mell through the region provide ideal terrain for the guerrilla. 'Civilisation' in the western sense came late to these hills, in the

late 19th century, and it has not yet supplanted the older—and equally civilised—order.

In 1956, when Angami Zapu Phizo lit the fires of revolt in Nagaland, the Indian Army was sent in to quell the flames. Unaccustomed to jungle warfare, fed with the doctrines of counter-insurgency gurus like Frank Kitson and Robert Thompson, men who brewed mistakes committed during the Malayan counter-insurgency into disaster in Vietnam, the army behaved more like a garrison force, charged with the task of bringing fierce aliens into line.

Many mistakes, dictated by whimsy and caprice, were committed in the years afterwards, but the Nagas, the Manipuris and the Mizos recognise that they are still seen as uneasy partners in a strained marriage. And insurgency has a way of incubating an endless sequence of mistakes.

Over the years, the tragedies of these states have become as commonplace as

those elsewhere in India. But truth has been a casualty of this war, too, and bloody counters between the guerrillas and the security forces' today merit only scant space in the national press.

Meanwhile, the nation has been pouring in more and more troops into the areas. Dozens of rebel leaders are either in prison, or dead, or have come "overground". Nagaland's Phizo and Mizoram's Laldenga are in exile in the West. But the war continues.

The tragedy is immeasurable, and the brutal truth is that Assam, and Khalistan, affect the national psyche more only because they provide vital supplies of oil, tea, timber and food. In contrast, the Centre complains of pumping in untold crores in aid into Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, and of subsidising their unproductive economies.

Delhi's perception of the 'far North-east' is warped by its geographical distance



When a jeep-load of soldiers bursts into a little house in



MANIPUR

Death's Wings



FEAR is an infectious disease. It slowly invades the bones, setting off shudders when an army Jonga screams to a halt in the middle of an Imphal street, soldiers spewing out with

sub-machine guns at firing position. A little-boy figure sits in the Jonga, olive-green cap pulled low over his face. "He's our latest informer," says the young, impatient Major. The informer has pointed a finger at a passer-by. The passer-by is stopped and searched, his shirt ripped open, his protests stilled with a slap. The informer, a diminutive youth only 19 years old, stares back at the crowd that collects, his eye holding a mixture of defiance and terror. The crowd marks him: he has become a stooge, he was not brave enough to stand up to interrogation. But the informer is young, and many of Imphal's youngest and best men have been claimed by the underground. Back at the army camp atop the Singamei hillock in the centre of Imphal, the boy stumbles off the Jonga. His hands and feet come into view: they are chained together.

Fear and suspicion have become Manipur's pseudonyms. The army jawan is ostensibly helping Manipur's civil authorities curb a law-and-order problem. But the soldier is a human being: his uniform does not turn him into a machine. He remembers other soldiers killed by urban guerrillas who whipped out guns from innocuous sling-bags, in broad daylight.

At very tense moments, fear acquires a distinct smell, and when a jeep-load of soldiers bursts into a little house in a shadowy lane to search for a hidden rebel, the smell hangs in the air. "There was this rebel we were chasing," recalls a jeep driver. "It was horrible; he knew the lanes very well. When the havildar caught up with him, the boy coolly shot him through the heart. He was like a tiger."

The soldier in Manipur is an itinerant fisher of rebellious men, and the men he hunts are fish at home in their own waters. The soldier's image of Imphal often consists of sudden encounters with the guerrillas, or the stifling life of the barracks, or a blur of faces as a convoy whips through the streets. "I get bad dreams," confides another soldier, looking nervously to see if his officer is within earshot. "I know there will some day be a bullet for me."

How did all this begin? Is Imphal

and the distinct smell of fear hangs in the air

the capital. Nor are people elsewhere in the country very concerned about what happens in these distant regions. Shaped by centuries into close-knit, insular lives, the North-easterners of Mongoloid stock are painfully aware of how they are often taken to be foreigners in other parts of India. Ignorance only deepens their sense of isolation.

These warped perceptions boil over when mediocre bureaucrats from other parts of India—more often than not on 'punishment postings'—are sent to administer these remote areas. Such men have treated their posts like colonial outposts.

All the people in this region have proud tribal histories, traditions of valour, pride and pride. For them, India represents only a brown colonialism that replaced the white colonialism of the British. To them, India ideally means a dignified existence, secure in values that have been pieced together over centuries. What they demand is

sensitive partnership and peace, not vassalhood and bloodshed.

It is an impossible situation. The young Naga, Meitei or Mizo who studies in universities outside his region still wants to return to live among his people. But unemployment and anger quickly build up, and self-respect finally seems to flow only from the barrel of a gun.

The mistakes run deeper. Saner minds in the army speak feelingly about the web they are entangled in. Corruption, abysmal economic development, and thoughtless destruction of traditional societal values have provided insurgency its best encouragement.

As the heat increases, the security forces, guns at the ready, cannot distinguish between the people and the rebels, and the civilians in turn cannot distinguish between one soldier in uniform and another. What is happening to all the actors in this interminable tragedy? INDIA TODAY Correspondent CHAMTANYA KALBAG set out to find out.

