

India's NE is storm's eye of insurgencies

IMPHAL — A minister in the northeast Indian state of Manipur was sacked this month because he went to a polo match.

The minister was not dismissed for taking time off but because he went with only two bodyguards instead of his usual jeepload of machine-gun carrying policemen.

"We are fighting against insurgents in Manipur," the state's Chief Minister Rishang Keishing told Reuters. "The minister disobeyed security rules. He had to be punished."

Keishing and his ministerial colleagues have arguably the most dangerous job in the world. Manipur's rebels in the past few years have killed 32 of 40 men on a "hit list" which Keishing heads.

The region is just one of four northeastern states where rebel groups wage a guerilla war for independence from sanctuaries in bamboo and

teak jungle in neighbouring Burma and Bangladesh.

At least 50,000 soldiers of the Indian Army and another 25,000 paramilitary troops are stationed in the strategic region operating with sweeping powers to shoot suspected rebels on sight, search hideouts and destroy ammunition caches.

Years of counter-insurgency operations have failed to end the bloodshed and in recent months there have even been signs of a step-up in guerilla activity.

Last January Yangmaso Shaiza, a former Manipur chief minister, was shot dead by rebels of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in the state capital Imphal.

In mid-March 15 spectators were killed and 35 wounded during a shoot-out between

paramilitary troops and rebels at a volleyball match in the same town.

Intelligence sources said Shaiza was killed because he opposed the growing hold of rebels over his home district on the Burmese border. The volleyball incident erupted after rebels killed one paramilitary soldier and wounded four others.

by

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Keishing said that 108 civilians had been killed over the past six years and even when a rebel is captured he is often freed.

"We cannot find judges willing to head special courts to try the guerillas," Keishing said. "No witness will give evidence. Police have had to release 530 rebels on bail over the past two years. Most went

straight back to the jungles to fight."

A senior army officer said the hands of security forces were also tied because guerillas mainly operated from hideouts in Burma, receiving weapons training from Burmese rebels there.

"The local population sympathises with the rebels and so most of them slip back into

Burma after a raid," the officer said.

He said Manipur's Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in particular was a well-trained group whose leaders received indoctrination in China's autonomous Tibet region.

Indian Home (Interior) Minister Prakash Chand Sethi told parliament last March that the rebels in the north-east re-

ceived help from foreign powers but he did not identify the countries.

Sethi also warned that insurgent groups in the region were trying to coordinate their activities, posing a greater threat.

China has insisted over the last five years that as part of its efforts to improve relations with New Delhi it no longer gives training to the rebels.

"But the border between Manipur and Burma is very porous and China's Yunnan Province is only 14 days march," Keishing said.

Posters all over Manipur offer rewards of up to 50,000 rupees (US\$5,000) for information leading to rebel arrests.

But there is little help from the local population who look on the army as outsiders. "Our real battle is to win the hearts and minds of the people," an

army officer said.

The insurgency is fed by spiralling unemployment in the underdeveloped region, which mainly relies on massive grants of aid from the federal government.

"When the young northeastern travels to other parts of India, he brings back images of development and prosperity which cannot be fulfilled here," Manipur's Chief Secretary D.N. Barua said.

Official sources say they believe the recent spurt in guerilla action is linked to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's preoccupation with events involving sikh extremist violence in Punjab state.

"A lasting peace in the northeast seems a distant possibility," a Manipuri historian said as he looked out of his window at army jeeps bristling with guns. — **Reuter**