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Joint operations against ULFA:

For some time, there have been reports in the Press that the Indian army is planning to launch joint operations along with the Bhutanese armed forces to remove the ULFA and BODO camps in southern Bhutan. These camps 21 in number (17 of ULFA and 4 of BODO) provide safe havens for the two militant outfits who carry on depredations in India and return to their camps. The Indian security forces have generally avoided "hot chase" beyond its borders out of respect for Bhutan's sovereignty

The Asian Age of October 26 said that the government of India is all set to launch an "unprecedented" crackdown on ULFA militants hiding in Bhutan, in keeping with the new policy of "zero tolerance" for terrorism.

There are reports (Asian Age) that the plan for military operations against the camps has been finalised and is awaiting clearance of the cabinet committee on security

The plan envisages the deployment of three divisions of Indian army and three battalions of Bhutan army and will be coordinated by the Tezpur based 4 Corps. The Bhutanese battalions will be used for cordoning off strategic areas and to seal entry and exit points. The Bhutanese component had been under training for this task for the last one year.

The report also said that the Indian Air Force will be roped in to provide air cover.

In our earlier updates we had mentioned the visit of ULFA leaders to Thimpu. Probably two rounds of talks by the Bhutanese authorities with top ULFA leaders had not brought any positive result and hence the launching of the joint operation.

In another report of Asian Age of November 8, it is said that the government of India has cleared the proposal for "sustained operations" against ULFA. This will be part of Operation "Rhino" and the army is ready to launch the operation in two weeks.

This joint operation will succeed if

- * the army is in a position to clinically remove the ULFA posts.
- * it takes measures to ensure that the ULFA militants do not come back and set up other posts in the region.
- * if the Bhutan army has the capacity to take the responsibility of ensuring the safety of the area from the militants once the Indian army leaves.
- * if the population in the area where the operations are intended, cooperate with the government.

In our view none of the conditions will be fulfilled in this joint operation. The Indian army cannot remain indefinitely and the Bhutan army is in no position to take on the responsibility of keeping the area free of militants. Above all, after having evicted over 130,000 Bhutanese of Nepali origin from southern Bhutan, what sympathy or cooperation would the security forces get to clear the area of militants?

It was thought that the approach of Bhutan King to persuade the ULFA ,militants to leave Bhutanese territory voluntarily was the best course. There were also indications that ULFA has plans to reduce their presence in Bhutan. It is not clear why the joint operations are being taken up now. If India's concern is the stability of Bhutan (the King is still the unifying factor in Bhutan), the best option would be to let Bhutan King use his persuasive skill (this he has in good measure) to let the ULFA leave the territory voluntarily, rather than force a joint operation on him.

The Refugee Question:

There are indications that the governments of Nepal and Bhutan are trying to come to an understanding on the vexed refugee question outside the formal bilateral talks that have been going on for a long time. The official paper of Bhutan, Kuensel reported that "Bhutan and Nepal have moved forward on the problem of the people in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal." The statement of Dr. Mahat, the foreign minister of Nepal, during his visit to Thimpu in connection with SAARC meeting assumes significance. We quote. "There has been some progress . . . We will have to work a little more to find the basis for a solution but we have covered some new ground. We understand each other's perceptions much better, each other's problems much better and there is a desire, on both sides, to find a solution. I am very optimistic about finding a solution to this problem very soon."

This statement is quite in contrast to the strong statement Dr.Mahat issued soon after the completion of the eighth round of talks at Kathmandu earlier.

There are reports to indicate that Bhutan has agreed to take back a mutually agreed number of refugees back on condition that issue is closed for ever. The question will be one of numbers and there is also the question of taking such decisions behind the backs of the refugees.

It is not clear as to what prompted the Bhutan government to change its rigid stand. But a change of heart is welcome for the stability of the sub continent and for the refugees themselves.

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