



ASSAM PEACE PACT - GOVERNANCE

Q. Enumerate the backdrop of vulnerabilities in the security of Assam vis-a-vis immigrants and explain scope of the recent tripartite agreement in ensuring peace in Assam. (10 marks, 150 words)

News: The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)'s pro-talks faction signed a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement with the Centre and the Assam government

What's in the news?

- The ULFA pro-talks faction was led by its chairperson Arabinda Rajkhowa.
 - This faction joined peace talks with the government on September 3, 2011, after an agreement for Suspension of Operations was signed between it and central and state governments.
- The hardline faction of the ULFA headed by Paresh Baruah is still not part of the peace accord.
- A major development package will be given to Assam under the agreement with ULFA
 - The **ULFA was formed in 1979 with the demand for a "sovereign Assam"**.
 - Since then, it has been involved in subversive activities that led to the central government declaring it a **banned outfit in 1990**.

Historical background:

- **Fear of 'outsider':**
 - Assamese people have their own, unique culture and language, and a strong sense of identity.
 - Starting in the 19th century, however, as the region's tea, coal and oil economy attracted migrants from all over, the indigenous population started to feel insecure.
 - This was further exacerbated by the Partition, and the subsequent exodus of refugees into the state from the erstwhile-East Pakistan.
- **Assam accord 1985:**
 - The competition for resources skyrocketed, resulting in a six-year long mass movement. Eventually, the Assam Accord, seeking to "find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam" was **signed in 1985**.
- **Radical faction formed ULFA:**
 - However, amidst all this, a group of more radical thinkers, led by Bhimakanta Buragohain, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetia, Pradip Gogoi, Bhadrishwar Gohain and Paresh Baruah formed ULFA on April 7, 1979.



- **Aim of ULFA:**
 - The founders of ULFA wanted to establish a sovereign Assamese nation through an armed struggle against the Indian state.
 - For over 44 years, this 'struggle' has been chequered with kidnappings and extortion, executions and bomb blasts, leading to tragic loss of life in Assam and beyond.
- **The Indian state's response** has also been unsparing. In 1990, the Centre launched **Operation Bajrang**, leading to the arrest of 1,221 ULFA insurgents. Assam was declared a '**disturbed area**', President's rule was imposed, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (**AFSPA**) was invoked.
- **Surrendered ULFA:** In 1992, one faction, later christened as Surrendered ULFA (**SULFA**), offered to surrender and engage in dialogue with the government. Later, **SULFA** would allegedly carry out "secret killings" of ULFA insurgents and their family members, on behalf of the state government.
- **Link with other insurgent groups:**
 - ULFA has links to other insurgent outfits in the Northeast and Myanmar, as well as Islamic terror outfits like Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami and Al-Qaeda. Paresh Baruah, ULFA's self-styled military chief, reportedly met Osama Bin Laden.
- **Support to Pakistan:** It also has links to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (**ISI**), which has reportedly trained ULFA insurgents in the past.
- **Camps and bases in border countries:**
 - ULFA has survived, in some part due to help from outside India. It still has camps in Myanmar, and previously had camps in both Bangladesh and Bhutan.
 - Lying deep in jungles and hilly areas, these camps act as launchpads for cross border operations, as well as shelter after the fact. Insurgents also use them as training bases for new recruits.
- **Previous peace talk attempt:**
 - In 2005, the ULFA formed an 11-member 'People's Consultative Group' (**PCG**) comprising noted intellectuals and Jnanpith awardee author late Indira Raisom Goswami.
 - The committee mediated three rounds of talks before the ULFA walked out of the discussions and unleashed a new wave of terror.
- **Pro talk faction led by Rajkhowa:**
 - Some ULFA commanders like **Arabinda Rajkhowa**, 2008 onwards, would again strive for peace talks with the government.
 - However, **Paresh Baruah** was staunchly opposed to talks, and consequently "expelled" Rajkhowa from the outfit in 2012. The Rajkhowa-led pro-talk ULFA faction also "expelled" Baruah, paving the way for the last major split in ULFA.
 - While Baruah floated his own ULFA (**Independent**), the majority of the outfit joined the peace talks under Rajkhowa.
 - The pro-talks faction, in 2012, submitted a 12-point charter of demands to the central government, which was finally responded to earlier this year.



- This was followed by a round of discussions between Rajkhowa's faction and the Centre in April, and the tripartite peace agreement on 29th December, 2023.

Key provisions of the tripartite peace deal:

- Provisions in the constitution for the protection of indigenous communities;
- Reservation of 97 assembly seats in Assam for indigenous people.
- The declaration of annual Assam floods as a "national priority."
- Financial packages for militant rehabilitation;
- Examination of citizenship lists to identify undocumented immigrants;
- More independence for Assam in matters of security, culture, and economy;
- An Indian Institute of Management (IIM), new railway lines, and more national highways worth around ₹1.5 lakh crore were part of the deal, and that outsiders cannot procure land within a 5km radius of iconic structures in the state.

Significance:

- **Shift in Government's approach:** The peace deal signifies a shift in the government's approach. In 2005, the Indian government for the first time agreed to discuss core issues raised by ULFA, including sovereignty. The accord is not only a resolution to insurgency but also a crucial step towards addressing long-standing concerns that have plagued Assam.
- **Peace in Assam:** This peace deal is certainly a step in the right direction and will contribute to the peace and development of Assam.
- **Mainstreaming the hitherto violent groups:** The pro-talks faction of ULFA agreed to renounce violence, surrender all arms, disband the organization, and join the democratic process.
- **Development and Prosperity of Assam:** The pact paves the way for lasting progress in Assam and envisions a future of unity, growth, and prosperity for all.
- **Unity and Integrity:** The peace deal, along with other recent peace accords across north eastern states, ensured integration of north-east with mainland India.

Criticism

- **Not a Complete Deal:** The anti-talk faction didn't join the agreement. The hardline faction of ULFA, led by Paresh Baruah, remains outside the peace agreement. Baruah, reportedly residing along the China-Myanmar border, poses a continued challenge to achieving comprehensive peace in the region.