



Why We May Never Know The Whole Truth About Army's Myanmar Ops



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THE BLOG

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STR VIA GETTY IMAGES

In this photograph taken on June 4, 2015, weapons of the Indian army personnel who were killed by militants lie at the scene of an attack on a military convoy in a remote area of Chandel district, about 120 kilometres (75 miles) southwest of northeastern Manipur's state capital Imphal. Heavily armed rebels in India's restive northeast killed at least 20 troops on June 4, police said, in one of the area's worst such attacks in years. AFP PHOTO (Photo credit should read STR/AFP/Getty Images)

Two units of Special Forces of the Indian Army were airlifted to carry out "surgical strikes" inside Myanmar following a [deadly ambush](#) on the 6th Battalion of the Dogra Regiment in Manipur close to the Myanmar border on 4 June, 2015. They claimed it was the worst attack in 33 years. It killed 18 and injured 15. Some of the injured are in serious condition.

Truth, it is said, is often the biggest casualty in a conflict. Information from conflict zones is always contested and there is never a definite means of ascertaining the truth. Remember Bhutan 2003 when the Indian Army "helped" the [Bhutanese Royal Army](#) in flushing out 38 militant camps? Operation All Clear apparently disbanded all militant bases of Indian separatist groups operating out of Bhutan, but not a single picture emerged from there. And while I was on the ground every single day, there was no way of ascertaining what



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Similarly, we will never quite know exactly how successful the operations of the Indian Army in Myanmar were. Some sources said 20 militants were killed; others said the number lay between 50 and 100.

The Army claimed two camps were busted, and while they "neutralised" the camp near Moreh, they found the one in the Northern region had already been vacated.

Firing continued for 45 minutes in which they claim a

"significant" number of militants were killed.

I recall Operation Summer Storm launched in the Loktak Lake in Manipur in 2009. It killed 12 militants and was considered one of the most successful operations in India. So, what is the measure of success in counter-insurgency operations? If it is numbers then in the current context it is not quite satisfactory. If it is about sending a message across that India can cross over and strike at will then perhaps it means something. For the first time since Operation Golden Bird of 1995 there is an official confirmation of an operation across the Myanmar border and that in itself is an assertion that India will target militants aggressively. It is a huge diplomatic victory of sorts to have persuaded the Myanmar government for such an operation. It took decades. The Indian forces reportedly informed Myanmar Army only after the first shots were fired keeping in mind the proximity and understanding NSCN(K) has with Myanmar.

The other truth that has been distorted is the "ambush" on the soldiers itself. The two images from the site, one of an Army vehicle and another of the charred bodies of soldiers, fail to convince that it was an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) attack. RPG is an anti-tank weapon and would have ripped the vehicle apart and that was not the case. Besides an explosion from a high explosive projectile would have extinguished any fire and not charred the bodies as the pictures clearly show.

So what really happened? Clearly the vehicles were not following the "standard operating procedure"; there were no QRT (quick reaction team) vehicles leading the convoy, neither was their back covered. The soldiers were proceeding on leave and without adequate combat preparation. In all there were four vehicles --

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two 2.5 tonne trucks (one leading and the other at the rear) while two ALS 7 tonne trucks



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soldiers did not die due to the blast. Those who survived the explosion were butchered with machetes and then set on fire with the fuel they were carrying. This explains the image of the charred bodies. Col Singh has accused the Army bosses of complacency and not having taken adequate interest after the ceasefire with NSCN(K) was abrogated. The massacre, he says, could have been averted.

These were not the only lapses. Reportedly, intelligence inputs warning of an attack were ignored. The CO (Commanding Officer) was on leave and the second-in-command had taken an advance party to Chandigarh. The de-inducting of the unit was left to junior officers who did not even have a ROP (road opening party) in place.

This is not good news for the Army, and raises questions on the manner in which it is being managed.

"The perception that India will go to any extent to protect its territory, but not really its citizens must change."

There is other bad news in store as well. Following NSCN(K) or the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) walking out of a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government, there is a renewed spurt in violence and news of the major militias of the northeastern region forging an alliance. In the absence of any clear counter-insurgency policy or an understanding of intra-ethnic clashes or even identity

politics, this bloodletting is unlikely to stop anytime soon.

At the same time Manipur's governance has not shown any signs of recovery; its police are moribund and corrupt and its political leadership lacks the will to resolve the issues at hand.

Where does one go from here?

Given that India has finally secured Myanmar's nod for operations, they should go all out in exercising the military option. Even in Bhutan's "All Clear" most top leaders had escaped to Dhaka before the raids. This time they should be able to choke the escape routes.

Winning has never been easy in these tropical jungles. "Neutralising" some camps or forcing militant surrenders will not resolve core issues. Negotiation is a thankless, difficult and tricky art but is the only way forward.



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ambush hadn't taken place? Would they have struck the camps in Myanmar if civilians had been killed? Perhaps not. That is because India looks upon its citizens in Jammu and Kashmir or the northeast with suspicion and the concept of securitisation is only for the "majority community" or "mainland India". This must change. R N Ravi, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, is one of the best options we have to change this perception and push forward a draft resolution. As the interlocutor for Naga talks, a former Special Director of the Intelligence Bureau and an erudite northeast hand, he is especially well equipped to lead interventions in this region.

For me, however, the biggest takeaway from Tuesday's counter-attack is a very positive one. They did not target civilians as they have done in the past, only to further perpetuate the cycle of violence.

*Kishalay Bhattacharjee is a senior journalist. His book **Blood on My Hands: Eyewitness Accounts of Staged Encounters** is forthcoming by HarperCollins Publishers India, August 2015.*

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