

Government's dual policy for northeast separatists attracts criticism

The issue of ongoing peace talks between the government and various separatist groups in the northeast has triggered a debate, with experts and rights leaders questioning why [New Delhi](#) was willing to talk to some groups while rejecting offers for discussions with other outfits.

'As far as holding peace talks or entering into a ceasefire is concerned, the central government should have the same yardstick for all militant groups in the northeast and should not adopt a dual policy,' Tapan Lal Baruah, chairman of the Centre for Development and Peace Studies (CDPS) and former Assam home commissioner, told IANS.

The debate began after the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) last week made public their charter of demands submitted to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The charter clearly mentioned that their demand for the 'right to self-determination, sovereignty and independence was legitimate' and be addressed to solve the conflict.

The NDFB, an influential separatist group in Assam fighting for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribe, entered into a ceasefire with New Delhi in 2005 and is now on the verge of holding formal talks with the government.

However, the centre has rejected the idea of holding talks with the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which has expressed its willingness for discussions and even said that sovereignty or independence was not the main demand but just part of the agenda.

'If the central government can enter into a ceasefire and then hold talks with the NDFB even after knowing very well that sovereignty and independence was part of their demands, why can't New Delhi begin talks with the ULFA?' asked Dilip Patgiri, leader of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chhatra Parishad, a powerful students' group.

Analysts have pointed out instances of New Delhi holding talks with the two factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) even though both the groups have openly said their demand for sovereignty still exists.

'The demand for sovereignty still exists and will exist. There can be no compromise on that,' Kughalo Mulatonu, leader of the NSCN (Khaplang) faction, told IANS.

'The central government should have a uniform policy with regards to peace talks. You cannot have separate yardsticks for one militant group and a different parameter for another,' said CDPS director Wasbir Hussain.

'Since the NDFB and the two NSCN factions have not given up their sovereignty demand but the central government is talking to them, I think the same policy needs to be adopted for beginning talks with the ULFA,' he added.

Both the centre and the state have repeatedly rejected talks with the ULFA on the ground that sovereignty was non-negotiable.

'Discussing sovereignty does not necessarily mean the government would have to concede their

demands. Why not discuss the issue and let both sides argue and debate the matter at the negotiating table,' said Anjali Daimari, a noted rights campaigner.

'Let the ULFA and the government sit for talks and let the two parties share views and try to resolve the issue. Everybody has the right to express themselves,' said Brindaban Goswami, president of Assam's main opposition Asom Gana Parishad.

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