

Bodo rebels involved in ethnic cleansing: Assam government

Authorities in Assam Monday said the violence over the weekend that killed 32 people and injured more than 100 was systematic ethnic cleansing perpetrated by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), a rebel group fighting for an independent tribal homeland.

'The violence in the three districts of Darrang, Udalguri and Baksa was not due to clashes between the tribal Bodos and immigrant Muslims, but a planned ethnic cleansing by the NDFB to drive out all non-Bodos from the area,' Assam government spokesman and Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma told IANS.

'We have already arrested four NDFB cadres Sunday with weapons who were involved in killing a woman and a child in Baksa district,' he added.

There have been several incidents of arson overnight with panic stricken villagers fleeing their homes.

'Miscreants set ablaze a cluster of homes in about three villages late Sunday, although there has been no fresh casualty,' a police official said.

More than 600 homes have been burnt since Friday, when clashes first broke out, and at least 60,000 people have fled their villages in an area controlled by the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), a politico-administrative structure, formed after [New Delhi](#) signed a peace accord with the militant Bodoland Tiger Force in 2003. The BLT is now a disbanded outfit with its former members now heading the BTC, an autonomous body.

The former BLT and the NDFB are at war for territorial supremacy with bitter fratricidal clashes between them in the last four years claiming more than 100 lives. But the NDFB, currently in a ceasefire mode with New Delhi since 2005, has not given up its demand for an independent Bodo homeland with the Bodo community in a majority in the three violence-hit districts in northern Assam.

'This is not a clash between Hindus and immigrant Bangladeshi Muslims as projected, but a systematic pogrom by the NDFB as many of the people affected by the violence are genuine Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus, common Bodos, besides a few Adivasis (tea plantation workers) as well,' the minister said.

The NDFB is a majority Christian outfit with the outfit's top leader Ranjan Daimary believed to be operating out of Bangladesh.

'We are investigating reports of the involvement of the NDFB in the clashes and if proved we shall be forced to call off the ceasefire,' Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said.

'Strict orders have been issued to the security forces, including the army, to shoot at sight anybody found indulging in violence,' he added.

Of the 32 killed, 15 died in police firing, while the remaining were killed in clashes with armed mobs carrying bows and arrows, spears, machetes, and even guns.

'The NDFB cadres used light machine guns and other sophisticated weapons in targeting non-Bodos,' the police official said.

Sarma said miscreants from various communities were trying to take advantage of the situation by indulging in arson with a view to looting properties.

'In the final analysis this is not a communal clash,' he said.

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