Truce-time death dance

Wasbir Hussain *

“It’s sort of a free for all. The killings must stop,” said veteran Karbi politician Holiram Terang, president of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). That Karbi Anglong district has degenerated into Assam’s lawless territory became clear when a group of armed marauders waylaid a passenger bus, dragged out the Karbi passengers and brutally hacked 22 of them to death. Mission accomplished, the raiders, believed to be Dimasa militants and their supporters, torched two Karbi villages, killing up to 15 people. That means, 37 people were killed on a single day, taking the toll in the three-week-long orgy of violence in the 10,500 square kilometre stretch to at least 70. Revenge attacks were only natural. So, Monday night, it was the turn of angry Karbis to raid Dimasa villages. Several Dimasa houses were torched.

A definite pattern is evident in the recent violence. Though they seem unconnected on first sight, the origin of the latest troubles can be traced to a grenade explosion on September 24, at Parokhowa, near the adjoining central Assam District town of Nagaon, in which eight persons were injured. It was a random attack near a market, and not directed at a particular community. But two days later, on September 26, bodies of three auto-rickshaw drivers, all of them belonging to the Dimasa tribe, were found near the town of Manza. This was the turning point. On October 3, armed men attacked Hemari Terang village, inhabited by Karbi tribes-people, and killed five members belonging to a single family. Another three Karbis were hacked to death with machetes near the village of Dilli, on the road to Dimapur, the commercial hub of the adjacent Nagaland State.

A cycle of revenge attacks continued till October 10. Before dawn that day, hours before Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi’s visit to Karbi Anglong, armed Karbis descended on the Dimasa village of Kheroni, just about 12 kilometers from the District headquarter town of Diphu, and shot five people dead. Earlier, on October 8 and 9, at least 16 Karbis had been killed in separate incidents, the worst being the murder of six Karbis at village Bagmari. After days of lull, on October 15, armed Karbis set ablaze more than 100 houses in two abandoned Dimasa villages in the Lungrat area, about 26 kilometer from Diphu. Tribal leaders told this writer that the pattern was more or less the same in attacks on both Karbi and Dimasa villages - 15 to 20 armed men carrying AK-47 and other weapons would lead large groups of other community members and raid villages inhabited by the ‘rival’ community.

Developments in far-flung districts often go unnoticed, but the situation in Karbi Anglong has long been highly volatile. At least four rebel groups operate in the District, of which the UPDS and a faction of the DHD led by Dilip Nunisa have entered into a ceasefire with the authorities. The UPDS ceasefire deal with the Government dates back to May 23, 2002, while the DHD truce came about on January 1, 2003. Another Karbi group that still remains opposed to talks is the Karbi Longri National Liberation Front (KLNLF), a breakaway faction of the UPDS. Finally, a DHD faction that has not joined the peace process is headed by the group’s founder, Jewel Garlosa. According to Assam Police sources, the DHD faction that signed a truce had 450 listed cadres, while the UPDS has around 150 listed members. Police officials admit that KLNLF has a larger
number of rebel cadres and is ‘quite strong’. The Garlosa faction of the DHD is said to have only ‘a few’ members.

In the case of small rag-tag rebel groups in the North-east, it is often noticed that they do not take much time to close ranks if the issue in question happens to be a turf war against a rival ethnic group. The KLNLF is on record calling on the UPDS to snap the truce and unite with it so that they could jointly fight the Indian authorities and achieve ‘self-determination and self-rule’ for the Karbis. Within this context, it would be incorrect to conclude that only the UPDS has been involved in the attacks on the Dimasas. Similarly, it is likely that both the DHD factions may have lent their support in the raids on Karbi villages.

Since both the UPDS and the DHD are engaged in peace talks with the Government, the leaders of the two groups could be hoping for a solution sooner rather than later. It is likely, consequently, that they have embarked on a strategy to dominate their respective areas of influence, even attempting a sort of ethnic cleansing to drive out members of the other community from the areas of their ‘control’ - tactics characteristic of other groups in the past, which had entered into a settlement with the Government. Moreover, with the State Assembly polls due in April-May 2006, the two groups could be involved in a show of strength to ensure the victory of as many candidates as possible from their respective communities.

Fratricidal violence among ethnic groups has been common in Karbi Anglong district. There have been clashes between Karbis and Khasis, Karbis and Kukis, and other ethnic confrontations in recent years. But, the Karbi-Dimasa animosity, which has led to the present and bloody clashes, has grown in intensity since mid-2004, when tension emerged in the Missibailam area in the District, dominated by Dimasas. The area is close to Nagaland and the tension was over reports that parts of the area was under illegal occupation by Nagas. A magistrate from Assam was killed on July 1, 2004, while leading a team, accompanied by policemen, to evict the Nagas. It was said that Naga rebels, settled in the vicinity in adjoining Nagaland territory, had fired at the Assam team. The impression then was that some Dimasa tribal leaders had permitted the Nagas to settle down, a charge the Dimasas denied. Thereafter, Karbi hardliners started viewing a section of the Dimasa leaders with suspicion, blaming them of compromising their territory.

Unofficial reports indicate that the inaccecssible hill-top hamlets in Karbi Anglong, located close to Nagaland’s Dimapur area, have become a safe haven for a number of small armed gangs, many of which function on a purely mercenary basis. These armed men are apparently used by Naga, Meitei and Karbi rebel groups, including ‘influential people’ in the State. Established rebel groups are believed to use them for their extortion operations, while others possibly use them to settle scores. The District also has a sizeable Kuki population. Unsurprisingly, the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), a rebel group fighting for maximum autonomy for the Kukis, who are spread over Assam and Manipur, is also active in the District. On September 13, 2005, suspected KRA rebels shot eight Karbis dead at village Kangburatisso, 18 kilometers from Diphu. Earlier, in March 2004, KRA rebels had killed 29 Karbi tribes-people in a string of attacks on a single day.

There can be little hope for a permanent peace in the area unless these many groups are disarmed and disbanded. Currently, an effective mechanism even to monitor violations of the laid down ceasefire ground rules by the UPDS and the DHD is lacking. According to the terms of the ceasefire, cadres of rebel groups who have entered into a truce with the Government are supposed to stay put at the designated camps and cannot carry
weapons while going out of such camps. The latest incidents in Karbi Anglong indicate that militants have not only moved out of such designated camps but had also carried and used their weapons. The judicial probe instituted by the Chief Minister has the potential to throw some light on the prevailing situation and the reasons behind the latest mayhem.

On October 10, Chief Minister Gogoi had already removed all doubts surrounding the identity of the marauding groups of armed and unarmed men who were raiding Karbi and Dimasa tribal villages in Karbi Anglong District. Gogoi, after a visit to the District, blamed two rebels groups, the United People’s Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), of ‘violating ceasefire ground rules’. The Chief Minister went to the extent of saying that ‘stern action’ would be taken against the rebel groups, directly implicating them in the latest spate of violence in which civilians were targeted. Despite this, it is surprising that the authorities took so long to take certain basic steps like clamping curfew in the district and giving shoot orders to security forces to keep the killer gangs at bay.

* The author is a well known columnist and the Director, Centre for Development and Peace Studies, Guwahati

What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error, the glory and the shame of the universe.

— Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)