In Assam the meek shall become fair game
An account of a visit to Karbi Anglong and reflections on the disturbances in the district.

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Gleanings from Regional Press

......People continue to suffer in Karbi Anglong, geographically the country’s largest district at 10,434 sq km. According to the deputy commissioner (district collector) of Karbi Anglong GD Tripathi over 45,000 people have taken shelter in relief camps. Many of them, he said come to the camp, leaving everything behind fearing more retaliatory attacks from rival tribes. Says Gunamoni Haflongbar (71), a Dimasa farmer, who lost two family members when Karbis burnt down 50 houses in the Walingdisa village under Doldoli outpost of Dhansiri area: “What will I go back to? There is nothing left there, not even my clothes.”

At the relief camp, half-clothed children scamper around aimlessly as elders look for a way to salvage their lives. Food is in short supply; drinking water is scarce; medical treatment is non-existent since the administration is nowhere to be seen. In any case, it is not easy to reach the area. A 50-km drive can take more than three hours since the retreating monsoon is in full flow. As dusk dissolves into night, the fear returns to haunt relief camp inmates. “If we have to die, we will die, what can we do,” Prafulla Artoasa (55), farmer of Haflongbar village, says.

Prisek and Charchim, unknown places from a far-flung sub-division of Karbi Anglong. Today, these two spots are a ‘must-see’ for every visiting VIP, hacks and photographers. It was at Prisek that a group of bloodthirsty men attacked the Karbi houses and killed five persons on October 17. Those who survived describe how a month-old infant was snatched from the mother’s arms and hacked to pieces in front of the wailing mother. Not that the woman escaped death. She was shot too.

A few km ahead of Prisek, at Charchim the scene is ghastlier. Slippers lie strewn on the road. Bloodstains are clearly visible all around. A totally burnt bus (No. AS-09-3896) lies on the road. This is one of the two buses that were stopped by the same group of killers. Twenty-one Karbi passengers were killed, most of them with sharp weapons. One of the buses was then set on fire. Even after a week, the smell of burnt flesh and steel is inescapable. Ratan Bey, Karbi driver of one of the ill-fated buses, who saved himself from being hacked to death that fateful date by pretending he was a Nepali, cannot get over the nightmarish vision when gun-toting militants separated Karbis and either burnt them alive or hacked them to death. “I saw infants’ throats being slit and their bodies thrown inside the bus. I have not been able to sleep since then,” Bey breaks down, narrating the harrowing experience.

The road to Prisek and Charchim is now empty, patrolled by columns of Army, reluctantly pushed into a duty that is not theirs in the first place. Till 10 days ago, tribal villagers were busy harvesting rice, maize and vegetables grown on small plots on the undulating hills. Now there is no one to tend the fields and stray cattle feed on the ready crops. The camps are brimming over. Dimasas and Karbis, peaceful neighbours till the
other day, now stay in separate camps. But a common thread of misery and a bleak future binds them thanks to the militant groups of professing to protect their interests. As an old, grizzled gaon burra (village headman) of one of the burnt down villages, hesitantly says pleading with us not to mention his name: “We villagers have no quarrel. It is the ‘boys,’ (meaning the gun-toting militants) who are playing their games and victimising us. Will they feed us now,” he asks in anger tinged with sadness.

Politics may have clouded the judgement of the administration but the fact remains that militancy has played the biggest hand in the carnage. The clash between United People’s Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) - a group that claims to be the messiah of the Karbi tribals, and the Dima Halam Daoga (DHD) - which wants a separate state called Dimarajy exclusively for the Dimasa tribals, with the area covering the entire North Cachar Hills, portions of Karbi Anglong, and even the entire district of Dimapur in Nagaland, has resulted in the grim situation in Karbi Anglong. “Karbi Anglong historically belongs to the Dimasas. Our ancestors ruled over Dimapur, the present Karbi Anglong hills and NC Hills and even a large portion of the Cachar district in the Barak Valley,” says Dilip Nunisa, chairman of the DHD, which has been in a ceasefire with the government since December 23, 2002.

Since the ceasefire, the 450-odd armed cadres of this outfit have been confined to five designated camps, one of which is located in the Dimasa-dominated Dhansiri area of Karbi Anglong. The UPDS, which too had signed a ceasefire agreement with the government on May 23, 2002, has been demanding removal of the DHD camp from Karbi Anglong district. This dispute has been on for more than two years now.

The September 26 incident of murder of three Dimasa auto-rickshaw drivers added to the already existing tension. “While the government failed to anticipate trouble and adopted a laid-back attitude, different forces looking for an opportunity, simply stepped in,” says Holiram Terang, a veteran Karbi MLA and leader of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), a political party that has both Karbis as well as Dimasas as its members. Terang blames the Congress government for not reacting promptly, but refuses to name any group for the violence.

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Tension prevails in Karbi Anglong

The tension continued to spread in Karbi Anglong with the discovery of seven more bodies and the possibility of more being found. Several more bodies were reportedly found by villagers. Meanwhile, Governor Suchitra meets with the situation, urging all to remain calm. The governor also visited the villages where the bodies were found, expressing her condolences to the bereaved families.

The situation has escalated further with the discovery of more bodies. Villagers reported finding additional bodies in the area, leading to widespread panic. The government has urged all to remain calm and cooperate with the authorities.

The tension continues to rise, forcing the authorities to take stringent measures to ensure public safety. The local administration is working round-the-clock to provide relief to the affected families.

The governor has reassured the people that all necessary steps are being taken to conduct a thorough investigation and ensure justice for the bereaved families. The administration has also appealed for the cooperation of all to maintain peace and order in the area.