

# A Cause For Concern

*On March 1, 1966, a group of Mizo rebels armed with rifles and automatic weapons overthrew the police pickets and captured the treasury and armoury at Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram. The author analyses the Mizo insurgency and traces the birth of the militant Mizo National Front (MNF).*

**T**he Mizo insurgency is, in many ways, an enigma. It defies analysis in the usual terms and if, behind its unique facade, there are the age old reasons for disruption and unrest, they are certainly not *prima facie* obvious.

Insurgencies normally breed in an atmosphere of economic and social exploitation, of racial and ethnic tension or through sustained pressures on the means of sustenance: be they agricultural or industrial. Armed insurgencies further require at least some forms of repression of the popular sentiments, especially through the use of the police or the military. Perhaps a leadership might sustain itself on pure ideology, but the rank and file invariably need the motive of oppression.

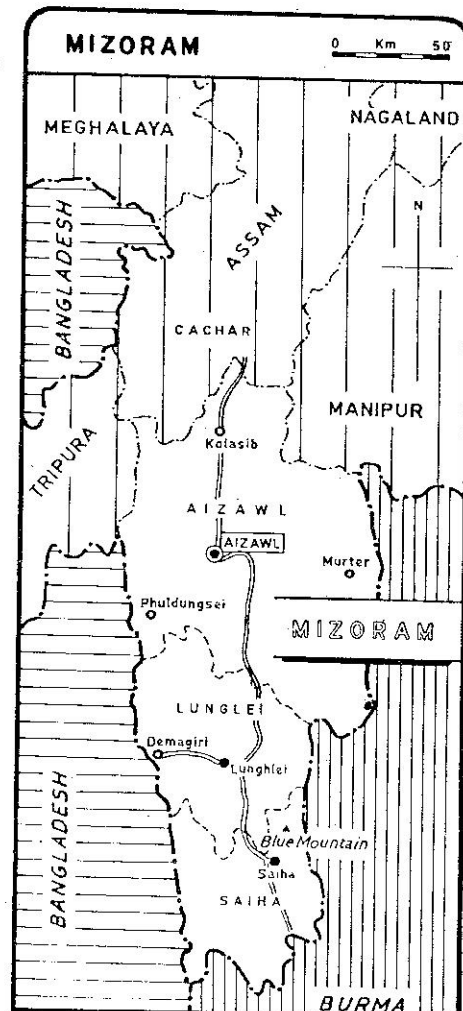
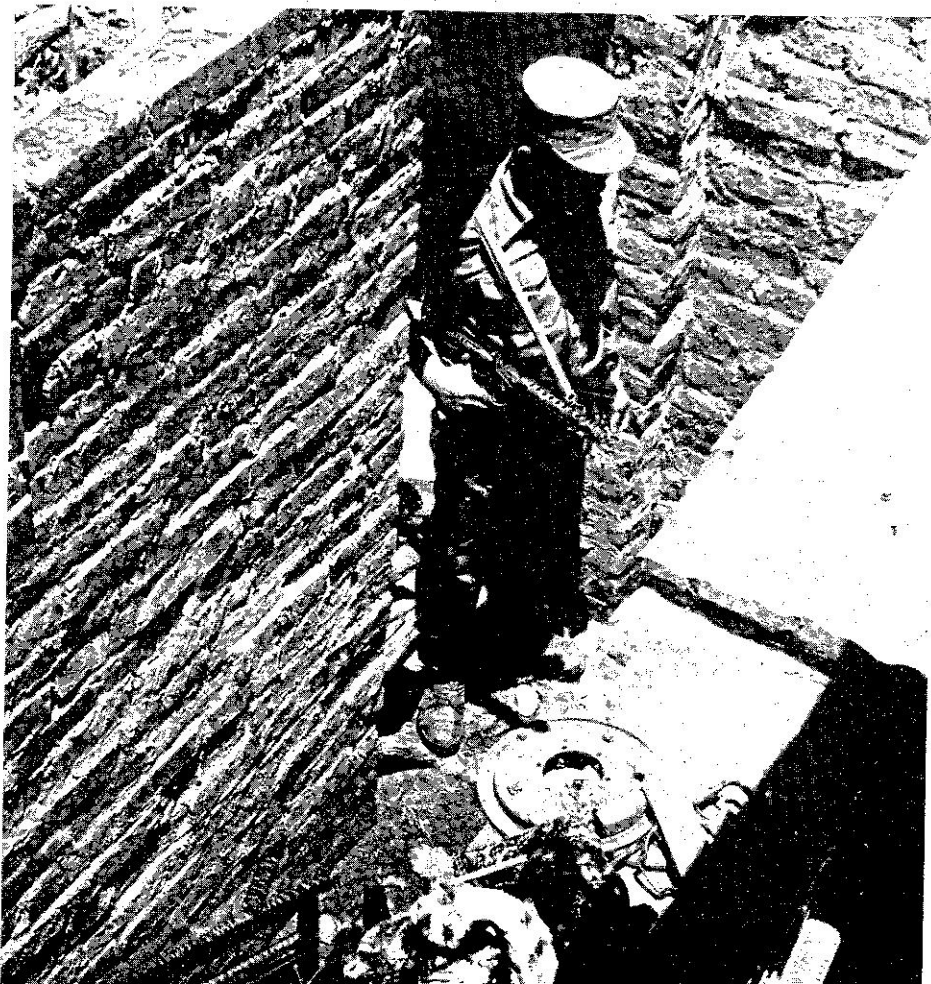
Mizoram, in the middle sixties, then the

Mizo Hills district of Assam seemed to have none of these ingredients, at least not in sufficient quantity to justify what happened, and it was certainly much better off than many of the neighbouring areas. Yet, in 1966, a section of the Mizos revolted and launched what we can call the first phase of the insurgency.

On the first of March, 1966, the Mizos attacked various towns and government establishments. The Mizos, who were armed with rifles and automatic weapons, had remarkable success. They quickly overran the police pickets, mostly manned by a few men of the Assam Rifles, and captured treasuries and armouries: their two main targets.

In the first sweep they attacked the armouries at Champhai and Lunglei,

*An Assam Rifle soldier inspecting a house ravaged by Mizo insurgents.*



capturing both, and in Lunglei they also captured the SDO, a young IAS officer. He was made to walk all the way to East Pakistan but, fortunately, not seriously harmed. Within a week all the major towns of Mizoram were under the control of the MNF, only Aizawl held out.

In Aizawl, only the Assam Rifles area, in the centre of town, was still in the hands of the authorities. Most of the local population had fled to the neighbouring villages, and just as well, for soon the Indian Air Force came into action and Hunters strafed the streets and the neighbouring forests.

One of the few local inhabitants who stayed back remembers that apart from life and limb the greatest problem was to get food. Though things were somewhat better in the neighbouring areas, the situation became critical once the Air Force extended its operations and the Indian Army started advancing.

This sudden attack by the Mizos and their

Immediate success raised a furore in the Assam Assembly and in the Parliament. Perhaps it was this, along with the suddenness and the severity of the attack as also the fact that the Assamese and the national leaders felt let down by Laldenga and the MNF, that led the Government to take the fateful decision of ordering the armed forces to quell the insurgency. Once this had been ordered there seemed no other way for things to go except as they did.

Apart from airlifting troops, dropping paratroopers and strafing the insurgent strongholds, the main military task was left to the column of troops that advanced from Silchar, via Kolasib, to Aizawl. It was the task of this column to take the towns enroute and to clear the route: a task they performed with professional efficiency and speed. From Aizawl they were divided into two, one proceeding towards Champhai, South-east of Aizawl and on the Burma border, and the other going south to Lunglei. After capturing these towns and clearing up the roads, a mopping operation was taken up and the insurgents chased and harried all over the place. Most of them, including Laldenga, escaped into East Pakistan and some crossed the Burma border into the intractable Chin Hills.

A large number of the rebels retreated to Sangau, a small village on the Burma border. Here, however, they were chased by the security forces and after a fierce and bloody battle they retreated again, this time taking shelter in the forests of Phawnpui, otherwise known as Blue Mountain, which is the highest peak in Mizoram. Phawnpui has, in Mizo mythology, an important role and the spirit of Phawnpui is worshipped as a protector.

I climbed to the top of Blue Mountain in 1977 and saw, still preserved, a stone plaque with the words "Long live the Mizo National Army", signed by various officers of the underground insurgent forces and dated the new year, 1967. I can imagine those young boys and girls, shot at, chased by confusingly superior forces, falling back as a last resort to the mythical protection of Phawnpui, bewildered at the debacle of a battle so gloriously started.

The only thing that remained to be done was the grouping of villages, perhaps a Vietnam inspired scheme, and that was taken up with the new year. Hundreds of outlying villages were grouped into village centres along the main roads, and called PPVs (Protected and Progressive Villages). Thousands of Mizos were made to leave their villages and their traditional ways and to shift into one of these controlled communities. So ended the first phase of the insurgency.

From here on things moved with a mesmeric inevitability. The people were, for the first time thoroughly fed up. The fear,

which was obviously fresh in their minds, soon evaporated and was replaced with bitterness and anger as the stories of atrocities, some true and many fictional, made the rounds and the Indian Armed forces, or, for that matter, India itself, began to be looked at with loathing.

To separate truth from fancy, in these matters, is not always easy. I spent many months, in fact years, talking to various people and gathering information by which these allegations could be confirmed or



*Laldenga: the man behind the movement*

rejected. It is obvious that quite a lot took place. In Champhai I was shown the place, at the edge of their magnificent rice valley, where an officer of the Indian Army allegedly shot dead, in cold blood, half a dozen local Mizos who had been acting as his porters, and all because some insurgents fired at the officer. The officer, on whom the local people kept tabs, was killed, I was told, in the Bangladesh war.

Similarly, in Khawzawl, a small town enroute Champhai, I was shown the house of a girl who had been taken for 'questioning' by the army, or so it was alleged, and who was kept for two days in a castle like post at the top of a hill, which I visited.

Numerous tales of rape, and torture, of people being taken away for questioning never to be seen again, of killings justified as operational casualties and of abuse and looting were told in hushed whispers. Even if most of them were fictional, no one could deny the violence done to the feelings of the simple village folk who were forcibly evicted from their villages, their dwellings often

being razed to the ground with the plea that they would otherwise be used by the underground. The Mizo, who for centuries had been free to roam his mountains and, indeed, was nomadic by nature, was suddenly confined to the stifling PPVs where, even to leave the perimeter of the village he had to have a special security pass. The agriculturist, who loved his land and felt lost without his *jhums*, the only way of livelihood he knew, was denied his right to cultivate and was made to watch the seasons go by sitting in his curfew bound hovel. The PPVs, in short, disrupted the total life of the Mizo, whether it was economic activities or his social commitments or his traditional way of living and eating: he was denied it. Which people, leave alone the Mizos, could tolerate this for long. An interesting collection of 'curfew songs' came into existence at this time and the Mizos, who are exceptionally musical, whiled away their evenings and gave pent to their feelings by singing and composing these. A study of these would show any sincere investigator the anguish of a people.

Lest the impression be created that all this violence was one sided, I hasten to add that the MNF and the MNA were not exactly inactive. Security forces were regularly ambushed and individuals were often treated with unimaginable cruelty by the insurgents. The lives of all officers were constantly in danger and even the Lt.-Governor was ambushed and injured. I remember inviting some officers, even as late as mid-seventies, for dinner at the Aizawl circuit house. Each of them, without exception, arrived along with a heavy armed guard who were obvious by their physical presence right through the evening.

An officer of the security forces, ruminating many years later, told me that there was no way in which he could prevent his boys from avenging the death or torture of one of their comrades: to have been too strict in these matters would have led to demoralisation and even, perhaps, mutiny.

The lives of average Mizos were no better. A school principal once told me that, in those days, if you were friendly with the underground you were constantly harassed by the authorities. If, on the other hand, you were sympathetic to the security forces, the MNF branded you a traitor and you were in danger of your life. Those who tried to remain uninvolved, and thereby neutral, were looked at by suspicion from both sides! Such was the dilemma.

Whom can one blame? Surely not the security forces, for when one introduces the army into the sort of situation that prevailed in Mizoram, it is foolish to expect that the niceties of behaviour will not be forgotten. The average Indian soldier belongs to a socio-economic milieu that reinforces his natural antipathy towards seemingly alien

culture and religion. He does not have the education or the background to look at things in broad perspectives and, thereby, to control his anger and his sorrow. He is, in Mizoram, far away from his home and his family and he must act the way he imagines best to protect his life and to avenge the life of his slain village friend, who will never be seen again by his mother or his wife. This is a matter of honour for him.

Similarly, can a democratic government survive if it does not, firmly and immediately, quell insurgencies of the sort that it was faced with in Mizoram. Besides, China and Pakistan could well be expected to exploit any weakness of the Indian Government, and surely that would be disastrous.

Where, then, does the blame lie? Surely with the factors that allowed the situation to come to the brink, and then beyond, of an armed insurgency. For once the first shot had been fired, not much could have been otherwise.

Mizoram in the sixties, or the Mizo Hills district of Assam, as it was then, did not seem to present the socio-economic picture usually associated with armed insurgencies. For one, there was a remarkable homogeneity of the population, 98.1% of the population being tribals and over 95% being Mizos. None of these outsiders were in sensitive positions, their control over commerce, agriculture or property being minimal. Besides, the non-Mizos were mainly in Aizawl and either in the government or spread out among various petty occupations.

Similarly, the density of population in the sixties, in Mizoram, was less than 13 per sq km: nearly the lowest in India. Land was held in the traditional Mizo manner, it belonging to the whole community and vested in the name of the chief. The Mizos were overwhelmingly occupied in agricultural, and mostly practised *jhumming* or shifting cultivation. The people tilled their own land, sharing the produce in accordance with individual needs. The institution of agricultural labour was entirely absent and the 1961 census of Mizo Hills district records that there were only *eight* agricultural labourers in the district, though the total population was well over two lakhs. The same census records that there were less than nine hundred people engaged in manufacturing other than household industry, only three hundred odd in construction work and a little under eight hundred in trade and commerce. It puts the number of cultivators at nearly eighty five thousand, out of a total work force of about ninety seven thousand.

Admittedly, by many economic standards Mizoram was woefully backward, its only saving grace being its exceptionally high



*A Mizo family and a group of locals at Sangau*



literacy rate of nearly 55%. However, considering its isolation and the tribal way of life prevalent, backwardness in Mizoram, at least then, could not be measured in terms of GNP or industrial productivity. The Mizo, traditionally, was self sufficient, each village growing all that it needed and going to the absurd length of having their separate tea bushes. Their only contact with the outside world was to get salt: the only essential commodity that the Mizos did not have.

Over 97% of the Mizos were Christians, and practised their religion freely and without any constraints. There was no background of religious tension as, in fact, there ought not to be, given the overwhelming numerical superiority of the church.

No other evidence of exploitative social or economic relationships could be seen and the only charges that were bandied about were the perfidy of the Indian Government and, correspondingly, of the Mizo leaders. The Mizos claimed that they had been assured

the option of seceding from India, ten years after independence, if the people so wanted. The Government, they claimed, was not living up to its promise. The government claimed that the Mizo leaders had promised to behave themselves and not to arm the people or to consort with foreign powers, but that they broke their promises. In the circumstances, whatever the promises, it appears naive for either side to have expected their being honoured.

But this is neither here nor there. One cannot deny that there was an insurgency, and an armed one, in Mizoram. Surely it must have some tangible causes and surely these are capable of definition.

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