

Introduction

Thanks to Rini Kakati, Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS) for organising the event. FASS is doing excellent work for the revival and development of North-East of India including hosting events, lectures and cultural programmes. In my talk today, I will explore obstacles to peace and development while outlining ideas and action plans which will provide boost for safety and the growth of the North East region.

India is a region of diversity - multiple religions, dialects and tribes, each with its distinctive culture and history and this manifests in the seven plus one (eight states¹) of the North-East of India. The region is not only rich in flora and fauna but also for its natural resources and minerals. Assam, one of the largest state in North-East India is famous for tea production, oil fields, rich biodiversity, and for natural resources like limestone, bamboo and timber. It is a region which stands largely on the periphery of India's geography. It is fair to say that the region has suffered isolation and ignored politically and economically for the last 60 years by successive Indian Governments.

Violence and Political Unrest

The North-East of India, consisting of eight States with a population of 45 million, spread over a 263,000 square kilometre area, and wedged between Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China's Tibet region, is a turbulent frontier. Insurgency and ethnic strife have plagued the region for the past 60 years, retarding progress and economic activity. Even a cursory look at the socio-political dynamics of the region would reveal that lack of livelihood opportunities, despite immense natural resources, have bred insurgency, and insurgency, in turn, has hindered growth. The cycle, if anything, is vicious with ongoing armed separatist insurrections for more than six decades, and, of course, ethnic aspirations taking the form of violent uprisings. The politics of identity lie at the heart of the bigger part of the conflict in the North-East.

The heavy and privileged status of the Indian security forces in North-East India, as well as seemingly discriminatory treatment against North-East remains factors that contribute to tensions in the region.

The region's geo-political relevance cannot be understated. The shadow of China looms large — Beijing still claims much of the territory of Arunachal Pradesh as its own and has ramped up its investment and infrastructure along the contested border with India, while nationalist Chinese websites routinely urge China's leadership to capture the North-East away from India. Various insurgent groups — from ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) to separatist factions in the state of Nagaland — have ties to a host of regional

¹ Eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura and the Himalayan state of Sikkim.

actors, ranging from sympathetic rebel ethnic militias in Burma to both Pakistan and Bangladesh's military intelligence agencies.

The Indian government has faced criticism in which it has been looking at the North-East as an issue of territorial security rather than development per say. The fear of a growing Chinese influence, as well as, increasing cross-border terrorism in the region are some of the factors cited as reasons for India in its attempt to open the region.

The alienation felt by many North-Easterners is in part a consequence of the region's distance — both geographic and cultural — from the rest of the country. The lands that it comprises fell under British colonial rule in the mid-19th century and eventually were amalgamated into a pluralist, multilingual newly independent Indian republic. It's the most complex place in Asia. The region has 220 ethnic groups packed into a triangular shape of land linked to India by just a tiny corridor. A legacy of poor governance, weak local leadership and volatile, violent politics has seen it lag drastically behind the rest of the country. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act giving army special powers to make arrests and make searches without warrant is affecting the civil liberties of the people. It is the same draconian military law that New Delhi has in place over Kashmir, is in effect over stretches to the seven North-Eastern states where numerous fractured, armed, anti-government movements still operate. A climate of apprehension and insecurity has stymied development, prompting hundreds of thousands to seek employment in India's main cities.

It is a region where the major conflicts have long been about separate identities and homelands. It is volatile as insurgent groups routinely extort money from bureaucrats, shopkeepers and professors. Kidnappings are frequent. Trucks on highways are often stopped by competing local powers and either have their cargo confiscated or are allowed to pass after paying a "tax".

The Strategy for Peace –Dialogue, Integration and Improvement of Law and Order

Peace and development go hand in hand. There can be no development without peace and similarly there cannot be lasting peace without development. So it is essential that we have peace in the North East for economy to grow leading to prosperity and harmony in the area.

The problems North-East and its 45 million people are facing can be solved with concerted plans for developing industries and the region's currently woeful infrastructure. If the poverty remains people have got nowhere to go and there is nothing for them to do, which then becomes a breeding ground for insurgents.

Violence and conflict has a devastating effect leading to unrest and terrorism. The importance of good governance and institutions that guarantee the Rule of Law and free speech are important to carry forward the growth agenda.

North-East region of India should have increased civil society engagement and participation in the region with regard to conflict prevention. Various stakeholders in the region, public, civil society, activists, state representatives, journalists, media should contribute to the promotion and integration of the region. Democratic political culture and civic education for promoting peaceful coexistence among the diverse ethnic groups, based on the principle of our common humanity should be followed as a matter of priority.

There are number of immediate measures that the Indian and the local government, Businesses and civil society needs to take which are below:

Diplomacy and Improving Law and Order are needed for development. India has to clamp down on extortion and corruption which are scourges which hold in thrall millions of people condemning them to exploitation, servitude, poverty, indignity and misery. We still have to see if the monetising by the Indian government will result in clamping down corruption. However, one thing is certain that it has brought untold suffering to millions of people across the country without any of their fault.

Improving law and order is important to combat insurgencies and terrorism which has become a global menace. The counter terrorism strategy in the North East should include bridge building between hostile communities and faith traditions, conflict prevention, diplomacy, economic and social aid to address the impact of globalisation and gross economic inequality. In this respect Naga Peace Accord is a step in the right direction and will help the entire North East. However, the progress to implement the agreement is woefully slow and not much progress is visible. It needs an active role by all parties for its implementation. The recent Assam blast in which three army soldiers were killed and four injured is an indication that active action is required to carry forward the peace accord.

A Marshall Plan for Development in North East

A Marshall Plan² is urgently needed to build a Seven Sisters Industrial Corridor (SSIC), something like the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor³ which is a work in progress. The corridor will connect major cities and border points of the state and provide high-speed road and tech connectivity, land for industrial regions, access to ports, financing for start-

² The Marshall Plan (officially the European Recovery Program, ERP) was an American initiative to aid Western Europe, in which the United States gave over \$12 billion (approximately \$120 billion in current dollar value as of June 2016) in economic support to help rebuild Western European economies after the end of World War II

³ The Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project is a planned industrial development project between India's capital, Delhi and its financial hub, Mumbai. It is one of the world's largest infrastructure projects with an estimated investment of US\$90 billion and is planned as a high-tech industrial zone spread across seven states, across the 1,500 km long Western Dedicated Freight Corridor which serves as its backbone.

up entrepreneurs and small businesses, railway links, and security to enterprises. There are many direct benefits of such a plan. The Marshall Plan will enact the following:

- The Marshall Plan will Invest in Infrastructure in roads, railways, financial services and electricity provisions.
- Address inequality which will become an important factor in eliminating insurgencies and building stability in the region.
- Give initiative to the states to work together towards growth - a common tangible and measurable goal
- Spur local development through small scale industries and local entrepreneurs
- Showcase the economic potential of North-East with a high visibility, branded initiative and promotion of rich diversity of the region
- Empower the North-East to be India's ambassador to the South East Asian countries and free to develop direct trade relations with neighbouring countries (Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Myanmar)

A Seven Sisters Industrial Corridor will link all seven North-East state capitals and the border points with Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Myanmar. It will improve interaction and infrastructure for development by boosting border trade and relations, financing the basic infrastructure. It will increase Trade with Thailand and other countries as a partner for improving trade and relations by having a Free Trade Zone Agreement. There already exists cordial relations between Thailand and North-East, about 1 million Indians visit Thailand every year, most of them from North-East. So, this can be easily be turned into a free trade zone for mutual benefit.

If the North East region remains cut off from the rest of India, there is every possibility that it will erupt into ethnic warfare of a kind not seen in India before. And that will be extremely unfortunate for a region that has so much potential.

Way Forward and Conclusion

There is an important role to be played by civil society groups in the peace processes in three areas of India's North-East—Assam, Naga Hills/Nagaland, and Mizo Hills/Mizoram. In order to make the conflicting parties reach middle ground, peace groups and other civil society initiatives associated with the official peace process must develop synergy with other stakeholders. Reforming civil society, holds the key to ensuring its effectiveness in bringing about peace in the North-East. Both the state and civil society have their roles to play in this regard, to contain regions insurgent groups not to gain momentum otherwise there is a danger of a full blown Maoist insurgency to surface.

New opportunities needs to be opened for all living in the North-East. It can be achieved by a large scale programme of development, regeneration and integration need to be carried out so that its inhabitants can live in a conflict free, peaceful and safer place

conducive to the growth of the region. It is time to think big and bold and make progress for the benefit of all living in North-East as a step towards integration with the rest of India.

North Eastern states of India being at the heart of Southeast Asia, peace and development in the region is most important for the overall mutual benefit of all the nation's that share a common destiny. While the Government of India is aggressively pushing Act East Policy, violence needs to be contained for progress to be made in development. The State of Assam is beginning to get several important investors like Hindustan Unilever , Godrej, Patanjali etc to set up new manufacturing units. This new trend is beneficial for peace and development and hopefully it will spread to its neighbouring countries and beyond to different parts of the world. I must say that there is a lot less violence in the North East part of India than before which is a welcoming sign of progress.

There are examples in the world where there is relative peace now after decades of violence, unrest and terrorist attacks, inflicting killings and bringing untold suffering to the civilians, children and women. The Northern Ireland Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement ended the decades long war between the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and the British Paramilitary Forces. The recently concluded Colombia Peace Accord between FARC Guerrilla Movement⁴ and the Colombian Government was concluded after 52 years of infighting resulting over 250,000 deaths and displacement of 8,000,000 people.

If countries can come out of conflicts and become peaceful then why can't we in the North East? There are always couple of benchmarks which have to be achieved for fighting to be stopped. It needs to be realised by the various factions of insurgents and the Indian Government that neither of them can win militarily. And that is the beginning of engagement of warring parties to end long running disputes and enter into a political process. One important thing to remember is, no peace deal can ever satisfy everybody. However, a good deal can be struck which will be always be better than continuing warfare.

Let us not forget we live in a country which won independence from the British not so long ago in a nonviolent way, a peaceful struggle led successfully by Mahatma Gandhi along with millions of Satyagrahis. Gandhi's nonviolent struggle inspired Mandela in South Africa to win independence and set up a Peace and Reconciliation commission. It also helped Martin Luther King in America to launch the Civil Rights Movement which ended segregation in public places and established equal rights of black people in USA. India's history from Ashoka Maurya to Mahatma Gandhi illustrates that we as a country can work together in peace.

⁴ The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (Spanish: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)

The present Indian Government has a historic opportunity to engage with people of the North East as a whole. This is necessary because a piecemeal approach of addressing the problems of North East cannot be long lasting as conflicts in the area are many fold and inter related and it will only work by the participation of all parties to resolve their differences. There should be a rallying call from civil society and public to urgently work to implement the much talked about Peace Accord with necessary requisite amendments.

To conclude, let me emphasise, that the subcontinent of India has emerged from an ancient civilization, united by a shared history, but sustained, above all, by pluralist democracy. That is a 21st-century story as well as an ancient one in which all religions including Christianity, Judaism and Islam have found place a welcome home in India. It essentially says that India can endure differences of caste, creed, colour, culture, cuisine, custom and costume, and still rally around a unity. In maintaining this unity, all of us, including North-East of India has a vital role to play.

Thanks for listening.

The materials and excerpts have been taken from the following sources:

1. Vijay Mehta's new book *Peace Beyond Borders: How the EU brought peace to Europe and how exporting it would end conflicts around the world* is published in 2016 in print and ebook (both £9.99) by New Internationalist, with a foreword written by Jose Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate and former president of Timor-Leste. The book can be purchased online from www.europeforpeace.org.uk or from Amazon, Kobo, ePub, Apple iBooks and others
2. Vijay Mehta, *The Economics of Killing*, Pluto Press, London 2012
3. Samrat, *In India's North-East, Youth Crave Global Links*, Development
4. Ishaan Tharoor, *India's Northeast: How a Troubled Region May Be a Global Flashpoint*
5. Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*
6. Kaushik Basu, *How to Fix India's Troubled North-East*
7. Philipp Heimerdinger and Tshering Chonzom, *Conflict in North-East India, Issues and Concern*
8. Samir Kumar Das, *East-West Center Washington*, 2007
9. Wasbir Hussain, *North-East India: Sustaining Peace Changing Dimensions*, Bhabani Books, 2012
10. Akshay Mathur, *A Winning Strategy for India's North-East*
11. Shashi Tharoor: *Why nations should pursue "soft" power*, November 2009
12. Vijay Mehta, *Reforming and Strengthening the UN for 21st Century*, SOAS UNA, London, 2016
13. Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Haymarket Books, 2014
14. Klaus Schlichtmann, *A Peace History of India – From Ashoka Maurya to Mahatma Gandhi*, Vij Books, 2016
15. Wikipedia, *Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor*

This speech can be downloaded from www.unitingforpeace.com

Please watch 4D for World Peace film:

“Change the World” – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9GEK4FFrXk>

Vijay Mehta is an author and peace activist. He is Chair of Uniting for Peace and founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity. His books include *United Nations and its Future in the 21st Century* (2005), *Arms No More* (2005), *The Fortune Forum Code: For a Sustainable Future* (2006), *“The Economics of Killing”* (2012) and *“Peace Beyond Borders”* (2016).

The Sunday Times described him as a “longstanding activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment, who along with his daughter Renu Mehta has set a precedent for striving to change the world” (**The Sunday Times, February 01, 2009**).

In 2014, Vijay Mehta’s bio **“The Audacity of Dreams”** appeared in the book form **“Karma Kurry”** published by Jaico Publishing House, India with a foreword to the book by Nelson Mandela.

“Thank you for all you do Vijay – both the organisation Uniting for Peace and yourself are inspiration and give us all hope that both yourself and the organisation can bring a world without a war. Indeed it is possible, even in our own time.” – **Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate 1976**

“This book, *Peace Beyond Borders* by Vijay Mehta, an astute non-European observer, uses this unprecedented, extraordinary experience as the centrepiece of a carefully crafted theory on the construction and maintenance of peace and prosperity on a global scale. It is my hope that many non-Europeans will use it as a source of inspiration as they attempt to carve out long-lasting peace in other parts of the world.”

- **Jose Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate 1996 and Former President of Timor-Leste**