

Centre, Assam sign pact with ULFA faction

Cadre have agreed to surrender arms, vacate their camps, engage in democratic process, says Shah; tripartite settlement govt's success, significant for Assam's peace, he adds; nearly 10,000 people lost their lives in the Assam agitation; 97 out of 126 Assembly seats would be reserved for indigenous people and delimitation would follow this principle

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

The Union Home Ministry and the Assam government signed a memorandum of settlement with the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) on Friday.

Home Minister Amit Shah said the "tripartite settlement is significant for Assam's peace", and the government had achieved success in eliminating all the violent groups in the State.

'Golden day for State'

"It is a golden day for Assam's future. Assam and the northeast have endured violence for decades. ULFA cadres have agreed to surrender arms and ammunition, vacate their camps and have decided to join the mainstream and engage in the peaceful democratic pro-

cess established by law and maintain the integrity of the country. Since 1979, all those who were killed were the country's citizens," the Home Minister said, adding that the total number of such cadres stood at 700.

Mr. Shah said a time-bound programme would be made by the Home Ministry to fulfil the demands of the ULFA and a committee would also be formed for its monitoring.

Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla said that over the years, several rounds of negotiations were held with the ULFA which had culminated in the peace agreement.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that since 1979, nearly 10,000 people lost their lives in the Assam agitation and "many families till today have no answers why their sons and husbands were killed and those who



Peace deal: Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma with members of the pro-talks United Liberation Front of Asom faction in New Delhi on Friday. PTI

killed were also not aware why they were killing people". "The Home Ministry took a decisive step to negotiate with the ULFA and bring closure. This accord will fulfill the aspirations of

people. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach has brought peace to Assam," Mr. Sarma said.

He said only 15% area in Assam remained under the Armed Forces (Special

Powers) Act (AFSPA).

Mr. Sarma said doors were open for the Pareth Baruah faction of the ULFA to join the talks. "One of the conditions put by Pareth Baruah was the fulfil-

ment of the present accord; he will initiate peace. Now that we have reached this far, I believe that we will be able to complete the rest of the journey. Talks will continue."

Key points

He said the key points of the peace accord were that 97 out of 126 Assembly seats in Assam would be reserved for indigenous people and the future delimitation exercise would follow this principle. "This will address the question of political insecurity of the people of Assam," the Chief Minister said.

He said ₹1.5 lakh crore investment had been pledged in the peace accord and constitutional safeguards would be ensured by protecting land rights and putting restrictions on migration from one constituency to another.

A 16-member delegation of the ULFA, headed by

Arabinda Rajkhowa, was present at the signing of the peace pact at North Block on Friday. The group joined the peace talks in 2011 when it signed the suspension of operation (SoO) with the MHA and the Assam government.

The other faction led by Pareth Baruah, known as ULFA-I, has not joined the peace process. Baruah is said to be in China and has support of 100 cadres who mainly operate from the Myanmar border.

The ULFA was born during the anti-foreigners movement of 1979 demanding a sovereign State for the Assamese people after several Bengali speaking people crossed over to India post 1971 coinciding with the Bangladesh Liberation War.

Sasadhur Chowdhury of the ULFA said at the meeting, "this will bring lasting peace and development in Assam."

Indian Navy unveils new epaulettes for admirals

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement during the Navy Day celebrations in Sindkhurdurg on December 4, the Navy unveiled the new design of epaulettes for admirals, with the octagon in the new design drawn from the naval ensign and inspired by *rajmudra* of Chhatrapati Shivaji.

The Navy said the new design is a "true reflection of our rich maritime heritage" and reiterates the "resolve to do away with *Ghulami ki Maansikta*".

The Navy is also set to rename some of the ranks now in British nomenclature to reflect an Indian connection.

"Adoption of the new design reaffirms our commitment to the two pillars of *Panch Pran - Virasat Par Garv & Ghulami ki Mansikta se Mukti*," the Navy said on social media platform



Rank symbols: The epaulettes are the true reflection of maritime heritage, the Navy said. X/INDIANNAVY

'X'. "*Bharatiya Nausena* embracing *Bharatiyata* in letter and spirit."

The new epaulettes have the golden Navy button top, followed by an octagon, an Indian sword and a telescope crossed, followed by stars indicating the ranks.

In his remarks at the Navy Day celebrations, Mr. Modi said by seeking inspiration from Chhatrapati Veer Shivaji Maharaj, "Bharat is moving forward leaving behind the slave mentality". "I am glad that now

a glimpse of the legacy of Chhatrapati Veer Shivaji Maharaj is also going to be seen in the epaulettes worn by our Naval Officers. The new epaulettes will also now be similar to the insignia of the Navy," he stated.

In September 2022, during the commissioning of the first indigenous aircraft carrier *INS Vikrant*, Mr. Modi had unveiled a new Naval ensign. He had also said that the Navy would rename its ranks "in line" with Indian traditions.

ISRO all set to launch XPoSat, 10 other payloads on Jan. 1

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), following a landmark 2023, will ring in the New Year with the launch of the PSLV-C58 X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XPoSat) mission on January 1.

The PSLV will launch XPoSat along with 10 more payloads and the rocket is scheduled to lift off at 9.10 a.m. from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota.

For orbital experiments

"ISRO's PSLV-C58 Mission is to launch XPoSAT Satellite into an eastward low inclination orbit. After injection of XPoSAT, the PS4 stage will be re-started twice to reduce the orbit into a 350 km circular orbit to maintain in 3-axis stabilised mode for Orbital Platform experiments. The PSLV Orbital Experimental Module-3 experiment will be executed meeting the objective of 10 identified payloads, supplied by ISRO and IN-SPACe," the ISRO says on the upcoming mission.

XPoSat is the first dedicated scientific satellite from ISRO to carry out research in space-based polarisation measurements of X-ray emission from celestial sources.



XPoSat will study space-based polarisation measurements of X-ray emissions from celestial sources. FILE PHOTO

It carries two payloads – POLIX (Polarimeter Instrument in X-rays) and XSPECT (X-ray Spectroscopy and Timing). POLIX has been developed by the Raman Research Institute and XSPECT is by the Space Astronomy Group of URSC, Bengaluru.

Payloads from start-ups

The PSLV will also launch 10 payloads developed by start-ups, educational institutions and ISRO centres. Among these payloads are Dust Experiment (DEX) by PRL, ISRO; Fuel Cell Power System (FCPS) by VSSC, ISRO; Si-based High Energy Cell by VSSC, ISRO; Radiation Shielding Experimental Module (RSEM) by TakeMe2Space; and WESAT by the LBS Institute of Technology for Women.

A quiet reprieve

India did well to work its channels with Qatar away from the limelight

The decision of the Qatari court of appeals to reduce the capital punishment handed down in October to eight former Indian naval personnel is a major reprieve for the men and their families, and spells relief for the government that has been pursuing diplomatic channels for leniency. While the detailed judgment is still awaited more than 24 hours after the pronouncement, the upholding of the conviction is a disappointment, and the government and the men's families must now reassess their legal strategy and evidence of their innocence before filing a review petition with Qatar's Court of Cassation, the highest in the system. If all avenues of judicial appeal are exhausted, the government will have three options. First, to continue to press for a review of the conviction with Qatar's ruling Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. If that fails, the men could appeal for clemency and ask for a pardon, that Qatar's rulers have given in the past. A third option would be for the men to serve out their terms in India, once the length of incarceration is clarified, according to a 2015 bilateral Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons. However, this option would require them to accept the conviction cannot be reversed. Through this process, the government must be seen to be pursuing diplomatic and political efforts at the highest level, to convey the extent that the men are a priority for India.

It is significant that the development comes after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first public outreach to the Qatari leadership – he met the Emir on the sidelines of COP28, on December 1. Whether such a political outreach, or a high-level mission to Doha, would have been more productive earlier, after the men were first arrested in August 2022, is a moot point now. It is commendable that New Delhi, in contrast to its stand with Canada over its allegations, has chosen not to react to the case with public rhetoric, especially the kind of targeting of Doha seen in some sections of the media, a move that would have been counterproductive. If the case implicating the men is in any way connected to India's intelligence services, then it is important to consider an appropriate review of any operations that could jeopardise Indians overseas. New Delhi has also done well by not allowing the case to become hostage to the growing tensions in the region, over the continuing bombardment of Gaza by Israel. It is hoped that a consistently calibrated position, careful of Qatar's sensitivities, and coupled with a quiet, but determined push, would bring the eight Indians back home safely.

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Rift over relief

Criteria for awarding disaster relief must laid down clearly

The recent spat between the Central and Tamil Nadu governments over flood relief after two spells of heavy rainfall in the State has been disheartening for those struggling to rebuild their lives. The duel between Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and State Minister for Youth Welfare Udhayanidhi Stalin over semantics should not have arisen, with the focus and energy devoted to ensuring the return of normality to the southern districts of the State that were overwhelmed on December 17 and 18. Fortunately, better wisdom prevailed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurance to Chief Minister M.K. Stalin of the Centre's support. Mr. Stalin, had, prior to this, in a meeting with Mr. Modi in New Delhi, sought interim relief funds of ₹7,033 crore and a final relief fund of ₹12,659 crore for the damage caused earlier by Cyclone Michaung to the Chennai area. He also wanted ₹2,000 crore from the PM's National Relief Fund (for the southern districts). The State has sought ₹21,692 crore in total from the Union government.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had earlier carried out an aerial survey over the Chennai area and announced the release of the second instalment of ₹450 crore to the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF). The Centre has also sanctioned ₹500 crore for a flood mitigation project in Chennai. The State is now awaiting a fresh central announcement after visits by inter-ministerial teams to the affected areas. As Ms. Sitharaman pointed out in her press conference, the central government does not declare any natural disaster a national disaster. It is only after an assessment by its team that any natural disaster is classified as a disaster of severe nature – as seen in the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand and 2018 floods in Kerala. In such a case, there is additional financial assistance from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF). So, there is no question of calling the floods in Tamil Nadu as a "national disaster". The central government should ensure clear guidelines when it comes to relief. It should also consider revising its position on excluding long term or permanent restoration works from the ambit of the SDRF/NDRF. There must be an open debate on the suggestion by a parliamentary committee in March 2021 that States hit by severe disaster be permitted to use more than the 25% flexi-fund component of centrally sponsored schemes to carry out post-disaster permanent restoration works. As micro, small and medium enterprises get no relief under the norms of the two funds, the Centre should ensure relief to this sector, which employs nearly 1.4 crore people in the State. Finally, the Centre must consult cyclone-vulnerable Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and Gujarat and formulate new norms on disaster management that would leave no room for political controversy.