

Assam's bomb squad is back

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Express News Service

SHILLONG, Nov 22.

Assam's bomb squad is back with a bang. And as their latest victims, the general secretary of the Jorhat district unit of the CFM and another party worker battle for their lives in the hospital, the question is who will be their next target.

It is fairly clear now that, as was widely expected, the extremists target in the new round of violence are individuals and not just public property. There is also no doubt that the state law and order machinery too does not have much of a clue to the identity of the key people behind the activity. This was implied in the Governor, Mr Prakash Mehrotra's statement that he was not happy with the working of intelligence machinery in the state.

The Jorhat blast, the latest in the series which began on the eve of the 36-hour bandh, came at 6.30 p.m. on Saturday. Experts say there is no doubt it was a simple case of hurling of a grenade at the district office of the CFM. In this part of the country sun sets early and the assassin made good use of the cover of darkness. The workers of the CFM are not exactly very popular in the Brahmaputra valley given their party's opposition to the movement on the foreign nationals issue.

The CFM has been complaining of intimidation and assaults on its workers. But this was the first instance of a direct bomb attack on one of their district offices and that too in a well-guarded town of upper Assam. This shows the growing cheek of the extremists in spite of all that the law and order machinery

earlier, claimed to have done to subdue them.

But sources would still not regard this as the most significant extremist act of the last week. This was perhaps more grave than the explosion in the house of an Assam MLA in the heart of Gauhati town killing his brother and a maid-servant in that it was a direct attack on a party office.

But what informed sources would find nearly incredible is yet another explosion which blew up the rail track near Bebejia, about 10 km from Nowgong on Saturday. It was just half-a-kilometre from this spot that an entire length of the rail was taken away by miscreants on Thursday night. This was naturally followed by special steps to guard the track. And when the second explosion took place, the stretch damaged earlier was in the process of being repaired.

If the extremists could even penetrate to a stretch of rail under special surveillance and get away with it, something is really very wrong with the government machinery, observers say.

It was only recently that a bomb was discovered in the car of the new commissioner of upper Assam at Jorhat (his predecessor had been assassinated earlier this year). Bombs had been thrown twice in the past at the house of the MLA, Mr Tarini Mohan Barua, whose brother was killed in the Gauhati explosion.

There are still any number of theories as to who, or which organisation could be behind the extremist activity. Evidence thrown up by earlier investigation and information from various sources has suggested in the past that the modus operandi of the

extremists was akin to the sabotage techniques taught to the inhabitants of the border areas by the Special Services Bureau (SSB), a fancy cloak-and-dagger outfit created along the Indo-Tibet border after the 1943 Sino-India war.

Sources say in the post-war euphoria such training was indiscriminately imparted to people without verifying their antecedents and the authorities were too disorganised to keep track of the movements of these qualified saboteurs. But apart from the arrest in March of a former SSB instructor and of some others vaguely connected with the organisation, there has not been any concrete evidence to back the theory.

In any case, while the expertise may have come from the SSB stragglers, they would not be operating on their own and in isolation. They must be part of some underground organisation. The security authorities do not seem to be in a position to name any such organisation with any sense of confidence.

These incidents have now given the Assam scenario an entirely different colour. Coupled with the relative success of the agitators bandh call and also fairly good response to their call for a mass rally on November 10, this should help dispel the impression created in certain quarters that the agitation was dying a natural death and that the people were getting fed-up with it.

The need, sources say, now is for a quick resumption of the negotiations. Apart from saving the people and government, the trauma of renewed bandhs and strikes it might even save a few lives as well.

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