

## Statement

*Call by prominent scholars, activists and intellectuals to 'Reduce Rhetoric, Spread Goodwill, not Ill-Will' in Assam*

New Delhi, September 9 -- The riots and violence in Assam have moved away from the headlines of the metro media. But the state – and indeed other parts of the North-east as seen in a recent explosive confrontation in Nagaland over as minor an issue as an alleged theft -- appears to be on a knife edge. It seems to be an unending cycle in a challenging humanscape. The news of the region, for all these reasons, has acquired an international resonance.

Angry rhetoric and mobilization of groups along ethnic, community and linguistic lines have not helped; indeed an already complex situation seems to be in a state of drift with neither the Central or State Government able to assert a sense of decisiveness or win back the confidence of all groups.

As in the past across the country, in such situations, the worst sufferers in the recent riots and violence have been the poor and vulnerable, especially women and children. Rural schools have been converted into relief camps – while giving temporary succour to a large number of people who have fled fear and bloodshed, such a situation also blights the lives of those children who study at these schools.

The situation in the Bodo Territorial Administered Districts remains tense. Lakhs are homeless and fearful of returning. Trauma is writ large on their faces.

In addition, hate speech and abuse of new media has created a situation where tens of thousands fled their places of work and residence, in places like Bangalore and Pune, and returned to the NER. Thankfully, that flow has begun to be reversed. However, instead of merely curbing hate speech, Governments need to firmly handle acts of hatred and racial discrimination.

As has been seen, the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh remains an explosive and unresolved issue 27 years after the signing of the Assam Accord. This surely represents as much a failure of all sides in this process as of the Centre and State Governments.

The undersigned have met at a discussion on the current situation at Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) on Sept. 3, 2012, convened by the Centre for NE

Studies at JMI and are issuing this statement after further discussions.

It is our view that the Centre and state governments must assert in no uncertain terms that those migrants who have illegally slipped across the Indo-Bangladesh border to any part of the country since March 25, 1971 – the agreed cut off date – will be tackled under due process or even through a system of Special Courts to speed up the process. This is a problem facing all of India. This primarily represents a labour flow from Bangladesh, and needs also to be raised with Dhaka.

Tragically, however, passions are whipped up by the use of unverified figures on either side, leading to greater anger, suspicions and fear. There are no easy solutions to this situation in Assam although some of them are known, have been in the realm of discussion and policy framing.

First of all, the Assam Government's decision to update the 1952 National Register of Citizens is welcome – but there are disturbing reports, which say that in all least 10 districts the records are incomplete or unavailable. This has to be fixed by looking at the available data in the Registrar-General's Office in New Delhi.

To complete such a process is in the interests of all groups, including the student unions at the forefront of agitations and counter-agitations.

In addition, we strongly believe that:

- People in relief camps must be assisted to return home, in conditions of dignity and safety
- \* Border patrolling needs to be more robust especially in the riverine areas.
- Tackle the sense of Impunity and Immunity that armed groups have enjoyed
- A deadline must be set for the handing in of illegal weapons and these must be registered and decommissioned (i.e. destroyed)
- Economic cooperation on joint projects on the Bangladesh side of the border could help reduce the flow and make remaining at home more attractive.
- Work Permits, as have been discussed extensively, could be issued to people to come and work in India for short periods but only after the NRC process is completed and ID cards issued to all Indian citizens of the North-east
- All sides must abide by the Constitution and the law.
- The word 'Bangladeshi' must be used to define those who have come post-1971 (the creation of Bangladesh) and should not be used casually to refer to people who are Bengali-speaking or of Bengali origin, whatever their religious persuasion, who have settled in Assam before 1971
- Intimidation and hate speech must be shunned and any group or groups involved in hate acts and incitement to violence must bear the full force of the law.
- State governments need to appoint Task Forces manned by respected

scholars and researchers as well as senior officials to review and verify land records and the ownership of land so that the rights of all who are protected by law remain inalienable. Till date, this has been observed more in the breach: a large number of political conflicts in the region are rooted in disputes over land, territory and natural resources. Yet, in this complex situation, the rights of any one group cannot be protected at the expense of the rights of others.

Land and natural resources are finite; matters are not helped by ratcheting up the political rhetoric.

In closing, we call on all political and other groups at this time to reduce the rhetoric, to help Assam and the region – and other parts of the country as we have seen – pull back from an abyss. The violence of past decades are unacceptable. Today, all sides have the capacity to inflict harm on others. It is time to spread goodwill and end ill will. Otherwise, as we have seen, all of Assam and the NER as well as in a larger sense, India, will suffer irreparable harm.

Signed

>

Najeeb Jung, IAS, Vice Chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI)  
Sanjoy Hazarika, Director, Centre for North East Studies, JMI, New Delhi  
Prof. Binod Khadria, Chairperson, Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)  
Dr. Abdul Malik, Deputy Registrar, JMI  
Prof. Udayon Misr

Prof. Anil Boro, Gauhati University>

Dr. Monisha Behal, Chairperson, North East Network

Dr Bulbul Dhar, Hony Director, Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies & Coordinator MA Human Rights Programme, Department of Political Science, JMI  
Dr. Monica Banerjee, Director, National Foundation of India

Mr. Kishalay Bhattacharjee, NDTV, NE Editor

Dr. Roshmi Goswami, Feminist, researcher and activist on women's issues  
Mr. Suhas Chakma, Asian Centre for Human Rights  
Mr. Jamal Kidwai, Director, Aman Trust  
Mr. Harsh Mander, Centre for Equity Studies  
Dr. Rajesh Dev, Dept. Of Political Science, Delhi University  
Dr. Mujibur Rehman, Asst. Professor, Dr. KR Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies, JMI  
Mr. Helal Choudhury, Advocate, Supreme Court>

Mr. Mirza Rahman, PhD candidate, Indian Institute of Technology, Gauhati

Mr. Mehfuz Islam Bora, C-NES, New Delhi

Mr. Kaisii Kokho, Asst. Prof, Centre for NE Studies, JMI Mr. Kaustabh Deka, doctoral candidate, School of Social Sciences, JNU