

# Dangerous conflagration

The clash between Assam and Mizoram's police forces was clearly avoidable

Following a dangerous and avoidable escalation of an otherwise dormant border dispute, five policemen and a civilian from Assam were killed in the Mizo border town of Vairengte in clashes between police from the State and their counterparts in Mizoram, on Monday. The sequence of events, beginning October 2020, suggests that what began as skirmishes between residents close to the disputed border between Assam's Cachar and Mizoram's Kolasib districts has snowballed into a violent confrontation between police and residents. The events point to a failure of the constitutional machinery, empowered to de-escalate tensions at the border. The presence of central paramilitary forces should have helped maintain the peace, but it is curiously not the case. Besides, Assam and Mizoram are governed by the BJP and its ally, the Mizo National Front, respectively, and are part of North-East Democratic Alliance, of which the Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma, is a founder-convenor. The political bonhomie should have allowed the respective Chief Ministers to tamp down border tensions and to return to the status quo through joint fact-finding teams, involving the administrative officials in maintaining the peace over the border issue. Instead, both Chief Ministers have been exchanging allegations on Twitter, seeking the intervention of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, and using videos to tell a story that suited their version of the events – a farcical means of communication. This also occurred just days after both Chief Ministers (along with others) met with Mr. Shah to discuss the resolution of inter-State border disputes. The unfortunate loss of lives has led to hardened stances, with Mr. Sarma announcing that Assam would deploy “4,000 commandos to guard its border”, even as Mizoram's Chief Minister Zoramthanga has maintained that the casualties followed from the Assam police's actions.

Sectarian tribalism has been the bane of the North-eastern States, with underdevelopment acting as a catalyst in complicating knotty issues over land and other issues in the region. There is no sure-shot and quick solution possible to the border disputes between various States without a spirit of give and take and a civic engagement brokered by the Union government. But for that to happen, governments should, first, not condone violence of any kind and restrain partisans engaging in such activity in their respective States. A resort to one-upmanship will only prolong the disputes and harden stances. The Home Ministry must ensure that the Assam-Mizoram border situation is first subject to de-escalation and steps taken to return to the status quo that prevailed before the skirmishes began in October 2020 with the cooperation of the respective States.