

Abuses in Nagaland: Protesting rights violations

by [John Sundquist](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

When an ethnic group is being persecuted, it is often hard to determine whether people's religious or human rights are being violated. This is certainly true of the Nagas, a group of 2 million people living in India's northeast. This tribal group, once headhunters, is now more than 90 percent Christian. The majority are Baptists.

Experts estimate that nearly 300,000 Nagas have been killed during their 50-year struggle with India, in what one journalist calls "India's dirty little war." Today the Nagas feel they are battling with India for their cultural and religious survival.

When Bill Richardson, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, traveled to South Asia in April--a trip that included talks with China and India's leaders--the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. requested that he make the plight of the Nagas a part of his agenda.

We contend that in isolating the Nagas and treating their culture and faith with disdain, India has dealt with the Nagas very much the way China has treated Tibet--and China has received widespread criticism for its Tibet policies. World opinion might prompt the Indian government to formulate a lasting peace accord with the Nagas. But few know about their situation. India has restricted access to the region for years.

Though India forced missionaries to leave Naga territory in the late 1950s, American Baptists maintain close relations with the Nagas. Their dedication to Christianity has created a remarkable society and a self-supporting and self-propagating faith. The Nagas have established educational programs which have produced a literacy rate of about 66 percent in the region--nearly four times that of India's other regions. They have created effective health care programs, and they train and send missionaries into India and Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Though India has not tried to interfere with the Nagas' practice of faith, Indian troops have shown disdain for the Nagas' churches and religion. At various times India has stationed as many as 100,000 troops in the region--approximately one soldier for every eight Nagas. Naga groups have resisted, and bitter battles have broken out. Sometimes the conflict appears to be a struggle over religious rights, at other times a more generalized struggle against oppression.

Last December I was part of the 125th anniversary of Christianity in the region known as Nagaland, a four-day celebration for which 120,000 people gathered in an outdoor tabernacle. I appealed to Naga leaders and their factions to continue to strive for peace. Fervent and tearful prayers followed. But though we can speak directly with Naga leaders, we can address India's leaders only through Richardson and other diplomats.

We wanted Richardson to know that the Nagas are a vital Christian community and nation facing severe pressure from the Indian government. Though Hindu nationalism is growing in India, neither economic pressure nor the threat from another religion is the Nagas' primary concern. Rather, it is the massive number of military troops stationed in their territory. Until a recent cease-fire agreement, these troops were free to shoot civilians and soldiers suspected of opposing the government. This left a huge opening for abuse. The troops have burned entire villages, raped women in churches, and then burned the churches. Because Nagaland has been declared a "special situation" under Indian law, the Nagas have no legal recourse in the face of such abuses.

Many denominations and faith groups are struggling with how to approach issues such as these in former mission areas where Christianity has taken root. Working its way through the U.S. Congress right now is the Freedom from Religious Persecution Bill, which would hold accountable nations that persecute religious minorities. Some of the bill's provisions call for the denial of aid and even sanctions. But the bill could create more problems than it solves, perhaps increasing the pressure on already persecuted religious minorities.

That it is often difficult to distinguish between religious persecution and human rights violations also may make this bill unwise. Different cultures may have different perceptions about what violates religious rights, but all condemn murder, torture and rape. We want those violations to be recognized and acknowledged, and violators to be held accountable. We want India's government to be aware that its

actions in Nagaland are under scrutiny.

We hope that Richardson's recent visit will help India move away from violence and toward a lasting peace with the Nagas. And we hope that he will take India's violation of the Nagas' rights as seriously as he takes China's human rights violations.