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## SIGNING OF PEACE DEAL WITH ULFA

This article covers 'Daily Current Affairs' and the content details of "Signing of peace pact by Central government, Assam government with ULFA faction". This content is applicable in the "Internal Security" section of the UPSC CSE Exam.

**UPSC MAINS SYLLABUS GS-3 PAPER :** Role of non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security

### Why in the News?

On December 29, 2023, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) pro-talks faction signed a tripartite peace agreement with the Central government and the state government of Assam. Several provisions present in the memorandum of settlement are in support of protecting indigenous groups' political and land rights which will also help in the development of the State. But, the Paresh Baruah-led anti-talks faction has not yet signed a peace agreement.

### Important features of the signed peace agreement -

- Representatives of ULFA have pledged -
  - 1) to abstain from violence
  - 2) surrender their weapons
  - 3) take part in the democratic process
  - 4) to protect the integrity and sovereignty of India.
- The government has pledged the investment of approximately ₹1.5 lakh crore in the upcoming years for the development of Assam.
- The Assamese Assembly has 126 seats; now 97 of those seats will be allocated for indigenous people. Delimitation process in future will follow this idea.
- The Indian government's Ministry of Home Affairs will make a time-bound plan to address ULFA's demands, and a dedicated committee will be established to oversee it.

### About ULFA -

- The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is a separatist militant organization founded in 1979 in Assam, a northeastern state of India. It originated from the anti-immigrant All Assam Students Union movement (AASU)
- ULFA was first established to address the perceived political and socio economic problems of the Assamese people. However, over time, the organization evolved to demand that Assam become a sovereign state independent of Indian authority.
- ULFA launched a violent insurgency against politicians, security personnel, and civilians in the 1980s and 1990s. Due to the group's actions, there was instability in the area.

- **Government Reaction:** To combat the increasing violence, the Centre started “Operation Bajrang” in 1990, which resulted in the arrests of over 1,200 ULFA rebels. President’s rule was imposed and implementation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) took place.

### Reasons behind the rise of ULFA and the insurgency in Assam

- **Ethnic and Cultural Identity :** Assam is home to a number of different ethnic communities, and there have always been conflicts between the native ethnic groups/tribes in the region for a long time.
- **India’s Partition and Bangladesh Liberation War :** The 1947 Partition of India and resulting flood of refugees from then East Pakistan into Assam increased the feeling of worry. In addition, a number of Bangladeshi citizens migrated to India after the 1971 conflict.
- **Economic Discrimination:** Region’s underdevelopment and economic imbalances worsened the situation. There is a perception that Delhi is exploiting the resources of North East with developing the seven sisters. Youth dissatisfaction has been further increased by inadequate infrastructure, education, and employment possibilities, hence making them vulnerable to join insurgent organizations.
- **External Support :** ISI of Pakistan had supported the ULFA militants by providing them with training, weapons and money. ISI trained them in terrorist tactics, counter intelligence, disinformation and weapon’s use.
- **Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA):** The presence of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which grants special powers to the armed forces in conflict areas, has been a source of controversy. Critics argue that it has led to human rights abuses and further alienated the local population.

### Importance of Peace Agreement

- **Ensuring peace in Assam :** More than 10 thousand people have been killed from both sides since the beginning of ULFA conflict.
- **Surrender of Cadres :** Over 9000 cadres have surrendered in Assam alone and over 85% of Assam has been lifted out of AFSPA.
- **Economic Development :** ₹1.5 lakh crore investment had been pledged by the government in the peace accord for the development of Assam.
- **Strengthening India’s sovereignty :** ULFA has decided to recognize the supremacy of the Indian Constitution and to work for the integrity of the nation.

### Challenges still persisting after Peace agreement

- **ULFA-I missing :** ULFA-I led by Paresh Baruah, has not signed the peace agreement, which means violence will still exist in the state of Assam.
- **Existing foreign links :** ULFA had links with ISI of Pakistan, other insurgent outfits in the northeast and with many Islamic terror outfits like Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, and Al-Qaeda. It still has launchpads for cross border operations
- **Slow Implementation:** Because of the logistical, political, and social complications involved, it is hard to bring agreed-upon terms into action.
- **Historical grievances :** Deeply ingrained historical grievances about the identity, autonomy, land rights, and socio economic inequality are the main cause of insurgencies in the Northeast. So, saying that a peace agreement will fully address all of these problems is hard.

## Way forward

- **Peace agreement with ULFA-I** : Signing the peace deal with ULFA-I is necessary to fetch the fruits of peace deal.
- Monitoring the peace agreement's implementation and ensuring the timely implementation of projects without corruption
- Facilitating integration of former ULFA'S members in the mainstream society after their vocational training.

## Prelims Question

Q1) \_\_\_\_\_ is one of the traditional Assamese dances characterized by its rhythmic footwork, hand movements, and vibrant costumes?

- a) Sattriya
- b) Bihu
- c) Kathakali
- d) Odissi

Answer: a) Sattriya

Q2) The ancient temple Kamakhya, situated in Guwahati, is dedicated to which Hindu goddess?

- Lakshmi
- b) Durga
- c) Kali
- d) Saraswati

Answer: b) Durga

## Mains Question

Q) What is the reason behind the existence of insurgency in the northeast even after developmental efforts by the government? What are the steps taken by the government in attenuating this insurgency?

Himanshu Mishra

## RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT 2005

UPSC MAINS SYLLABUS GS2 PAPER: STATUTORY, REGULATORY AND VARIOUS QUASI-JUDICIAL BODIES

### WHY IN THE NEWS?

In light of criticism faced after revealing the **cost of selfie points** installed at railway stations in reply to an **RTI application**, the Indian Railways has tightened norms for Zonal Railways in furnishing information under the **Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005**

### RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT 2005:

1. It sets out the rules and procedures regarding citizens "**Right to Information**" held as an integral part to realize Fundamental rights under **Article 19 (Freedom of Speech & Expression)** & **Article 21 (Right to dignified life)**.
2. Under the provisions of the act, **any citizen of India** (*and not any foreigner residing in India*) can request information from a "**Public authority**".
3. "Public authority" under the RTI Act 2005 includes:
  1. **Constitutional** authorities (executive, legislative & judiciary)
  2. **Statutory body** created under the Act of Parliament or State legislature

3. Any such body created by the **order** of the government including bodies “owned, controlled or **substantially financed**” by the government
  4. Any Non-Government organizations (NGOs) or “private institutions” which receives **over 95%** of their infrastructure funds from the government
  5. Any **privatized public utility** companies (as held by Supreme court in **Sarbjit Roy case**)
  4. Any such information sought by citizen in “public interest” shall be provided expeditiously or **within 30 days time limit**
  5. Additionally, if the information is sensitive and involves matter related to a **petitioner’s life and liberty**, then it shall be provided **within 48 hours**
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#### SHORTCOMINGS OF THE RTI ACT 2005:

1. **Restricted Information disclosure:** Wide public information dissemination is barred by laws such as Official Secrets Act 1923, Civil Service Conduct Rules 1964, Indian Evidence Act 1872 etc.
  2. **Section 8 of the Act** itself provides **exemptions** from the disclosure of Information such as those affecting National security, trade secrets etc
  3. Various **Security agencies** which deals daily with citizens are also exempted from the purview of “RTI” under **2nd Schedule of the Act** such as: RAW, Aviation research centre, Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, Central Economic Intelligence Bureau, CISF etc
  4. It violates Individual’s **Right to Privacy** as upheld under **KS Puttaswamy Judgement 2017**. For example, Supreme Court’s recent judgment held the court as “public authority” under the Act but distanced the information related to conduct of Judges on the ground of the Right to Privacy.
  5. At the same time, the large corpus of **Private bodies** such as Corporates fall outside the purview of the act
  6. **Exclusion of Political parties:** CIC in 2013 held that National parties such as Congress, BJP & CPI are “public authorities” as they are “substantially” funded indirectly by the Central Government or State Governments:
    1. However the Right To Information (Amendment) Bill 2013 **removed political parties** from the scope of the law.
  7. **Curbing voice of activists:** As per the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) data, RTI activists faces repeated threat of repeated attacks and are physically and mentally harassed.
  8. **Red tapism:** Many RTIs are rejected due to *excessive bureaucratic requirements* to avail the information:
    1. For example, more than **60% of RTI appeals** made to CIC in Delhi are rejected on the basis of “not written in English”, lack of index or listing of inaccurate dates.
    2. This whole cumbersome process **disenfranchise the “common people”** of the country to seek information related to the quality of governance
  9. The State Information Commissions (SIC)s are facing huge backlogs of the cases due to the **shortage of available staff and rising vacancies**.
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#### STEPS TO TAKE TO REFORM RTI ACT 2005:

As recommended by the **2nd Administrative Reforms Commission** (2nd ARC) report:

1. Organizations performing the nature of “**public duty**” as performed by Government agencies shall be *brought within the purview of the act*.
2. Provisions of restricting acts such as **Official Secrets Act 1923 & Evidence Act 1972** shall be amended to provide “**maximum & reasonable**” transparency.



3. As per the recommendations of the **Shourie Committee, Section 5 (1)** shall be amended to make provisions of OSA 1923 applicable only to those information *that compromise national security*.
4. All organizations listed in the Second Schedule (exemptions) shall appoint a **Public Information Officer (PIO)** and *Suo-motu disseminate information* in interest of the public.
5. **Section 12** of the Act shall be amended to expand the Selection committee for Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) to include **Chief Justice of India (CJI)**.
6. Similarly, a Selection Committee at the State level with the Chief Minister, Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of the High Court shall be appointed.
7. To fill the **huge vacancies** that mired the working of the Commissions, the Government shall constitute State Information Commissions (SIC) in all states **within 3 months**.
8. Further, **Regional offices** for CIC in states & SICs in districts shall be created for wider disclosure of the information. Creation of **Public Records Offices** can also be taken in this direction.
9. At Least **50% of the members** of the Information Commissions shall be drawn from “**Non- Civil services**” background for diversification in the approach of working of commission.
10. Also for *wider reach to the public*, the disclosed information shall be made available in **all scheduled languages (22)** and revised periodically to keep it up to date.
11. Further, **Liberalizing the payment methods** to seek information to ensure uniform payments across the country shall be taken.

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#### **PRELIMS PERSPECTIVE: CENTRAL INFORMATION COMMISSION (CIC):**

1. It is a **statutory body** created under the Right to Information Act in 2005.
2. It acts upon the **complaints** from those individuals who have *not been able to submit information requests* to a Central Public Information Officer or State Public Information Officer (PIOs).
3. It consists of One Chief Information Commissioner (CIO) & **10** other Information commissioners (ICs).
4. CIO & ICs are appointed by the **President of India** on the recommendation of a committee which consists of: **Prime Minister** as Chairperson, the **Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha** and a Union **Cabinet Minister** to be nominated by the Prime Minister.
5. Right to Information Act 2019 has further increased bureaucratic control by giving power to the Central government to set the **salaries and service conditions** of Information Commissioners at central as well as state levels.

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#### **WAY FORWARD:**

Transparency is a fundamental **pillar of the democratic form** of Government as in the words of John Maxwell; “**Transparency breeds legitimacy**”. Right to Information Act 2005 is a monumental step to instil transparency in the government functioning. It aims to inculcate a culture of **openness, accountability & participatory governance**. Thus effective implementation of the RTI Act 2005 is *sin quo non* for sustaining healthy democracy, for which above mentioned reforms are pertinent.

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#### **UPSC PRELIMS 2024 PRACTISE QUESTION:**

##### **Q: Consider the following agencies:**

1. Aviation Research Centre
2. Directorate of Revenue Intelligence
3. Central Economic Intelligence Bureau

4. Central Industrial Security Force

**How many of the above mentioned agencies are exempted from the purview of Right to Information Act 2005 as listed in the 2nd schedule of the Act:**

- a. Only one
- b. Only two
- c. Only three
- d. All four

**ANSWER: d.**

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**UPSC MAINS 2024 PRACTISE QUESTION:**

**Q: "Recent amendments to the Right to Information Act will have profound impact on the autonomy and independence of the Information Commission". Discuss. (2020 Question)**



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**Suyash Rai**