

# SILENCING THE GUNS

For years, Manipur has faced strife due to militancy and gun violence. Binalakshmi Nepram has made it her mission to fight against arms proliferation, work for which she was awarded the Sean MacBride Peace Prize for 2010 **BY JAUYMINI BARKATAKY**

*"I will not carry a gun....  
I'll carry your books, I'll  
carry a torch, I'll carry a  
tune, I'll carry on, carry  
over, carry forward,  
Cary Grant, cash and  
carry, carry me back to  
Old Virginia, I'll even  
hari-kari if you show me  
how, but I will not carry  
a gun!"*  
*Hawkeye, M\*A\*S\*H,  
Officer of the Day*

**S**ome of you will remember the famous American sitcom that was based on a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (M\*A\*S\*H) deployed in Korea during the 1950s. When Hawkeye (played by the legendary Alan Alda) utters these words, he clearly states his distaste for guns and violence. Though the circumstances under which he says them might be comic (it is a sitcom after all), the underlying meaning is clear – guns and violence are things that should be abhorred.

Thirty-six-old Binalakshmi Nepram is not an army doctor but her fight against guns and violence is an exemplary statement of her personal belief. A writer and civil rights activist, she has been instrumental in bringing issues of small arms proliferation to the forefront in the country. She is the Founder of Manipur Women Gun Survi-



vors Network and currently the Secretary General of Control Arms Foundation of India.

On 23 September 2010, Nepram was awarded the Sean MacBride Peace Prize for the year 2010. The prize was given at the Nobel Peace Centre in the Norwegian capital, Oslo.

Born on 19 October, 1974, in Imphal, the capital of Manipur in northeast India, Nepram comes from a family of four sisters and three brothers. She says that she owes it to her parents, Yensembam Ibemhah Devi and Nepram Bihari, and the Manipuri society to curb the use of weapons. "I was born on Manipur's soil, which

has seen a struggle by the people for our right to live. In spite of many difficulties, my parents never ceased in their struggle to raise me and my other siblings to be humane people, who are true to ourselves and do our best for the society that has nurtured us."

Nepram is the secretary general of India's first civil society organisation working on conventional disarmament called Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI), a non-governmental organisation that was co-founded by her in New Delhi, in 2004. The aim of the foundation is to address issues related to proliferation of small

arms and light weapons as they affect civil society, particularly women, children and the elderly. CAFI also focuses on informed debate, particularly on policies related to security in the subcontinent. .

Her work involves lobbying with Indian disarmament officials, parliamentarians and thinktanks. In a bid to take her movement to the mass level, Nepram and her team have made three films – *Gun Wars and Drug Deaths* (2003), *Gunning for Control* (2006) and *The Story of the Manipuri Women Gun Survivors* (2008) on gun control issues.

Northeast India has par-

ticularly faced tethnic-based armed conflict since the late 1940s. The region is home to more than 70 major population groups and sub-groups, speaking approximately 400 languages and dialects. Violent and vociferous demands by different ethnic groups for independence and for new states in the northeast have been made for the past five decades. No other region of India, South Asia or the world has seen such a proliferation and mushrooming of militant outfits, which now form a complex matrix.

Nepram, who grew up in the region, once considered these conflicts as a natural part of life. "It was only after I came to New Delhi that I realised that the situation back there was anything but normal," she says. Her accidental discovery of a 1997 UN document titled *Trafficking in Small Arms and Sensitive Technologies* changed her life. "That book, combined with a white paper on small arms written by the Canadian government, inspired me to research the origins of armed conflict and its proliferation."

A two-year-long research, led to her book *South Asia's Fractured Frontier* (New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002). Nepram found that 57 types of small arms had flooded northeast India in the past few years. The effect of small arms proliferation has been alarming. Reports suggest that young people have taken to the path of violence, resulting in death, decay and destruction. Every year, 300,000 people are killed because of small arms.

A year earlier, in 2001, the United Nations had already addressed the issue of small arms and light weapons when it launched the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (UNPoA). It has become a dead paper for many countries, but for Nepram it was the bedrock on which she has based her



Nepram receiving the Sean McBride Peace Prize from Tomus Magnusson, President of the International Peace Bureau



Nepram is pushing for countries to adopt the International Arms Trade Treaty

## MWGSN was formed to help women like **Rebika Akham**, whose lives have been **put into peril** because of **gun killings** of a husband, father or son

action against guns. She has organised meetings in Manipur, Delhi, Jammu, Mumbai and Chennai to attract attention to the paper. However, even as India kept submitting report after report to the UN on the small arms issue claiming that it is adhering to UNPoA, they never really translated into any real action on the ground.

Disillusioned, Nepram mobilised civil society and in 2004, co-founded CAFI.

### THE DIRECT ACTION ROUTE

Another area of Nepram's work against armed violence takes the form of direct intervention in the lives of women gun survivors. In 2007, she launched

the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN), the first of its kind in South Asia to offer assistance to the victims.

MWGSN was born out of an incident that took place on 24 December, 2004, when Nepram witnessed the aftermath of the killing of 27-year-old Buddhi Moirangthem in Wabgai Lamkhai village of Thoubal district, southeast of Imphal. As she describes the incident, "A group of three gunmen had dragged Buddhi from his car-battery workshop. Within a matter of minutes they shot him dead. Till date, his 24-year-old wife Rebika Akham does not know who the killers were and why

they killed her husband." The incident left a deep impact on her. Nepram and some other people donated ₹4,500 to buy a sewing machine for Akham. This was the first ever intervention by MWGSN. Nepram says, "MWGSN was formed to help women like Rebika Akham, whose lives have been put into peril because of gun killings of a husband, father or son."

MWGSN, according to Nepram, helps women survivors of gun violence to find ways to heal scars left behind by decades of living under the shadow of a gun. It assists them to set up small-scale entrepreneurial units and is also working towards building sustainable livelihood measures for gun-affected women. It also helps women gun survivors to open bank accounts and provides small loans of ₹3,000 to 9,000 (USD 75 to 225). With this money, women are able to set up a business involving silk reeling, weaving, fishery or mushroom farming.

### THE ACCOLADES

Nepram's efforts haven't gone unnoticed. In December 2005, she was selected by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) as a Researcher for Landmine Monitor 2006. Nepram is also leading India on the issue of anti-personnel landmines and the banning of cluster bombs. She has published several articles and papers in both national and international journals on issues relating to armed violence, small arms proliferation, peace processes, women and peace building, and has written three books.

Nepram firmly believes that the youth and women have a powerful role to play in establishing a more peaceful world that is free of conflict. Through research, writing and work she lives out her dream of striving for a world that is free of all gun violence. ♦