

Thingkho Le Maleha

A Daily Newsletter by KSO Media & Documentation Cell



K Mollen RELIEF CENTRE

K Mollen Village, Lungchong Meiphai Sub-Division, Ukhurul District

Managed by Kuki Students' Organisation Ukhurul District

Total Inmates Registered: 97*

■ Male: 50

■ Female: 47

VILLAGES COVERED

S Phailengkot
Khokon
Khamenlok
Ekou Mullam
Changsan

*As on 19th October, 2023



KUKI VICTIMS' UPDATE

As on 01.11.2023



146
DEATHS



200+
VILLAGES BURNT



7000+
HOUSES BURNT



360
CHURCHES &
SYNAGOGUES BURNT



41,425
DISPLACED
PERSONS

Thingkho Le Malcha (charred wood tied with chilli): A war symbol; a pre-arranged secret code agreed upon by the Kukis to inform the people about the commencement of war and on receiving this, one has to remain alert and be ready for the battle.

TRIBAL BODY IN HYDERABAD REMEMBERS VICTIMS OF MEITEI ATROCITIES ON KUKI-ZO



As many as 250 Kuki-Zo in Hyderabad gathered under the banner of Hyderabad Unau Tribal Forum (HUTF) on Friday late evening to honour the lives of people who had been killed in Manipur in the last six months in what they termed as a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing drive.

A candle light and prayer vigil was held at Sharon Church, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad under the aegis of Hyderabad Unau Tribal Forum. The Kuki-Zo community of Hyderabad gathered in hundreds to pay tribute to their martyred kins and honor their sacrifices.

The event started with candle lighting followed by a speech from Rev. Prabhu Das, the Pastor of Sharon Church, who exhorted the gathering not to give up hope in these trying times and to put their trust in God.

In his address, L Lam Khan Piang, president of HUTF

highlighted how the ethnic cleansing drive of the majoritarian state government in Manipur led to the forcible displacement and dislocation of over 41,000 Kuki-Zomi-Hmar-Mizo tribals to different states of India, the burning down of over 7,000 houses, 200 villages, 357 churches and killing of as many as 146 tribals. Prof Piang poignantly recalled how the dignity and rights of women were violated by parading them naked, raped and killed.

The gathering was interspersed by congregational singspiration including the famous song 'Abide with me'-a favourite song of Mahatma Gandhi-where they affirm their faith in God in the midst of darkness where 'helpers fail and comforts flee'. It was also used as a collective resolve to fight for justice and their rights as Indian citizens including their demand for separate administration.

LEADERS OF ZO UNITED, CHURCH FORUM CONVENED JOINT MEETING

The leaders of Zo United and Lamka based Church leaders convened a joint interactive meeting at EBC Centenary Hall, Dorcas Veng, New Lamka on the theme "Moral Reconstruction," "Christmas Advisory" and other impending issue besieging the Kuki-Zo Society.

Addressing the gathering, Albert L. Renthlei, Convenor Zo United, said the ethnic cleansing against the Kuki-Zo people has resulted in the arson of more than 200 villages, destruction of more than 7000 houses and more than 360 Churches razed to the ground. More than 94 Church office and quarters were destroyed and loss of more than 146 innocent lives. The ethnic cleansing has resulted in

displacing more than a thousand people, denting our people lives physically and spiritually too, he added.

However, the assistance from our Mizo brethren in Mizoram is praiseworthy and the Zo United will keep on working towards our desired goals with the help of our Mizo brethren, he said. Though no concrete solution was adopted during the meeting, all the agenda pertaining to moral reconstruction and Christmas were kept forth for further discussion. The meeting was attended by members of various CSO leaders.

ECO-BLOCKADE JUST FOR INTERNET BAN IS COMPLETELY UNJUSTIFIED: DIPU GANGMEI

Nungba MLA and Hill Areas Committee Chairman Dipu Gangmei has termed the ANSAM economic blockade as unjustified and said that he does not endorse the economic blockade called by All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM), in a post on X (formerly called Twitter).

He also stated today in this time of crisis the ANSAM apathy to the sufferings and pain faced by our fellow brothers and sisters of our state has been manifested.

'My conscience is pricked by such a senseless, miniscule mindset,' he said. He further said, the term economic blockade itself is anathema to peace and prosperity of the society. We all suffer irrespective of which community we belong to. This economic blockade just for internet ban is completely unjustified.

Urging ANSAM to be realistic and practical the BJP MLA said, "Our government is willing to announce Assistant Professors result but ANSAM refused till internet ban is lifted".

Meanwhile, several vehicles remained stranded in both the National Highways connecting Manipur as the economic blockade called by All Naga Students Association Manipur (ANSAM) followed in the footsteps of the blockade imposed by Kuki Students Organisation (KSO), GHQ.



The ANSAM blockade is regarding the continuance of mobile internet ban in Naga dominated areas and non-declaration of interview results of Assistant Professors in DM University despite assurances from the state government, while the KSO blockade was for withdrawal of state forces from Moreh. As the ANSAM economic blockade was enforced, several vehicles including those ferrying essential commodities lay stranded on the highway. Meanwhile a release issued by the Police Control Room said that the movement of 238 vehicles along NH 2 Imphal Dimapur road with essential items were ensured. The release further said, strict security measures were taken up in all vulnerable locations and a security convoy was provided in sensitive stretches in order to ensure free and safe movement of the vehicles.

BIREN GOVERNMENT EXTENDS MOBILE INTERNET BAN FOR 3 MORE DAYS

The Manipur government on Sunday announced an extension of the mobile internet ban in the state for an additional three days, until November 8, 2023. This decision comes as part of ongoing efforts to maintain law and order in the region.

The Manipur Home Department issued an official statement, citing concerns about the potential misuse of social media and anti-social elements spreading images, hate speech, and hate video messages. The government expressed apprehension about these elements inciting

public passions and posing a serious threat to the law-and-order situation in Manipur.

The notification by Commissioner (home) T Ranjit Singh stated that the state government would explore the possibility of opening mobile towers on a trial basis in district headquarters that have not been affected by the ongoing law-and-order crisis. If successful, this measure will be replicated in other areas where the security situation has improved.

UNREPORTED STOLEN MANIPUR POLICE VEHICLES RECOVERED

On November 1 at around 6:00 PM, suspected Meitei radicalised groups numbering about 700 stormed the 1st Bn. Manipur Rifle campus through the North Gate No.1 in SUVs mounted with sophisticated weapons with an intent to snatch arms and ammunition from DGP Pool Arm Kote and Unit Pool Arm Kote (Quarter Guard), 1MR.

During the loot, one Bolero and one hard top Gypsy for IGP (prisons), two numbers of Gypsies along with one walkie talkie set attached to the vehicle of Superintendent Manipur Central Jail Imphal, one Gypsy assigned to QRT, one hard- top Gypsy assigned to senior FO and one Gypsy assigned to escort of SP Sajiwa were taken away by the radicalized group.

However, in an attempt to conceal their incompetency, the Manipur Police did not report anything about the seizure of Police vehicles by the armed



Manipur Police @manipur_police
Today (04.11.2023), Imphal-West District Police recovered 04(four) vehicles (Bolero-01, Gypsy-03), which were taken away by armed miscreants from the vicinity of jail road on 01.11.2023, from different places of Imphal-West.

9:47 PM · Nov 4, 2023 · 37.2K Views

radicals nor did the media house of Imphal valley.

Yet, the Manipur Police social media handle on Sunday reported the recovery of four vehicles (Bolero -1, Gypsy - 3). The Manipur Police social media handle reported that the four vehicles were taken away by armed miscreants from the vicinity of Jail Road on November 1, from different places of Imphal West.



SouthAsia Solidarity @SAsiaSolidarity · Nov 3
#Manipur protest happening now at Indian High Commission. 6 months and still no justice for the victims of #BJP and #BirenSingh's terror campaign against the #KukiZo tribal community. @UnauWelfareInt @MillionWomen



WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING: THE NEW DISGUISE OF RADICALISED MEITEI ARMED PERSONNEL AND MEITEI MILITANTS

Reports of 6th Manipur Rifles personnel attired in Indian Army camouflage along the highway to Moreh has surfaced on social media platforms. The personnel seen therein reportedly belong to 6th MR battalion which is presently stationed at Ukhrul. The use of state force personnel at any area irrespective of their official operational area and place of posting for the sole purpose of annihilating the Kuki-Zo community by the state government renders it impotent to the tribal groups. The police and state forces' administration have totally failed to maintain the conduct of its personnel, while the personnel have failed to uphold the oath of service and conduct administered to them.

In another similar instance, a Meitei civilian posted a photo of himself fully clothed in tactical gear with the caption "Eshor na chanbiduna IRB khanjare, free salary da" meaning "I've been employed in IRB by god's grace with free salary". This is just one of many such happenings where Meitei civilians are often drafted in to the Manipur state forces without the due process of law and recruitment policies. The state security apparatus has functioned at their whims and fancies with utter disregard for the established law and mandates governing such institutions. The state machinery has employed differing tactics to gain access to Kuki-Zo areas where their acts of abuse, killing and looting in the name of combing operations have prompted the tribal community to debar their presence in their areas.

It must be remembered that the Assam Rifles on September 18, 2023 wrote to Manipur Police saying "It is reliably learnt that few Meitei miscreants with the help of Valley Based Insurgent Groups (VBIGs) have acquired many used TATA 407 from the civil market and have converted them to resemble the TATA 407 vehicles being used by Assam Rifles". It may also be pointed out that the Indian Army tactical camouflage uniform is readily available at civilian shops and could be acquired with no sweat. With the ongoing Mission Moreh of the Meitei community (From the CM, the T titular King and VBIGs to all state forces, AT and ML combatants) and the occurrence of such deceit, it is of grave concern to the Kuki-Zo community to put their trust in any and every central security personnel and convoy wearing Indian Army attires.

Unofficial employment of unofficially trained civilians as state force personnel, abuse of military provisions for use in annihilation of a certain group is deeply concerning and thus require proper scrutiny by the concerned authority, be it the Ministry of Defence or the Home Ministry who have the operational and administrative controls respectively over the Assam Rifles. It also breaks the longstanding trust between the tribal groups and the central forces and will generate unnecessary misunderstandings between the two parties at a time when a deeper understanding and communication is the need.



Personnel of 6 MR in army camouflage



Meitei militants disguised as an IRB personnel

FROM BUTCHER TO POLICE COMMANDO: BIREN HAS DONE IT

Manipur state administration has been changed drastically after the ethnic violence broke out on May 3, 2023. Thanks to the ethnic cleansing pogrom on the Kuki-Zo people, the Meitei Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, has done it all by promoting various unemployed Meitei youth to the rank and file of Police commandos within a span of six months, devoid of due process of law.

One instance of such cases has been exposed on Saturday. A chicken seller from Moreh just before the Manipur mayhem began on May 3, is now seen in police commando camouflage uniform, suggestively being deployed amongst the 'Combing Operation Team' in Moreh.

Social media users identified the fake Police commando as one Thangjam Lanngamba, a butcher from Meitei community in Moreh Bazar, donning Police commando uniform posing with sophisticated weapons. Every denizen of Moreh knows very well that though he has donned a Manipur Police Commando uniform and carries weapons, he is not a Manipur Police Commando.

This exposè represents a great concerning situation in Manipur amidst high tension between the warring communities. This sheds light on the prevailing lawlessness in Manipur, where every Meitei civilian can become a police commando within a fortnight and collaborate with Manipur police to target the Kuki-Zo people. This is yet another piece of evidence why the Kuki-Zo community cannot trust the Manipur police commandoes, and constantly demanded against their deployment in Kuki-Zo areas.

As seen here, there is no discernible difference between Manipur police and Meitei militants, such as Arambai Tenggol and radicalized Meitei. They are working together. The accusations against Manipur police towards looting, robbery, torturing the Kukis have a reason, and that reason is evident here.

This case further emphasizes the lack of trust that



the hill people have in the Manipur police and their strong opposition to their presence in their areas. The blurred lines between Manipur police and Meitei militants, such as Arambai Tenggol and radicalized Meitei, reveal a disturbing lack of law and order in Manipur and indicate that Manipur police is no longer a state police force, but Meitei Police derived mainly from radicalised youth of Arambai Tenggol, Meitei Leepun and valley-based terrorists.

Why has the Manipur police transformed into what is perceived as a Meitei Police force, and what processes have facilitated this transformation?

How do leaders like Biren Singh and his cabinet colleagues utilize the Manipur police as a private Meitei militia, and why is the state police being used to target the Kukis?



ANALYSIS

MANIPUR: A LAND OF SETTLED GRIEF

HARSH MANDER

Manipur, literally the ‘jewelled land’, today is the theatre of a full-blown civil war of the kind that free India has not seen. Civilian populations on both sides flaunt sophisticated modern weapons including assault rifles, light machine guns and mortars. Even five months after the conflagration began, the combat shows no sign of an end.

It is rare for even a day to pass without the rattle of gunfire and bombs and news of fresh deaths and injuries. The state of Manipur is effectively partitioned, the valley emptied out of the last of its Kuki residents, as the Kuki dominated southern hills are of their Meitei inhabitants. The border between the valley and the Kuki dominated part of the hills – guarded and patrolled by military and paramilitary personnel of diverse stripes and uniforms – is mutually impenetrable for people of the two respective warring communities.

Women’s groups successfully blockade for weeks the passage of army trucks carrying food supplies for soldiers in the hills. No rations have been supplied by the state government for patients and students in the medical college in the hills. Teachers, doctors, nurses and even police persons have been reallocated (or have fled) on ethnic lines to the two sides of this border: it is unsafe for Kuki public servants to work in the valley, as it is for Meitei public servants to work in the Kuki dominated part of the hills.

The ten Kuki members of the legislative assembly were unable to participate in the record eleven-minute-long legislative assembly session because the government could not ensure their safety. These ten Kuki MLAs, including eight from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), expressed

their despair in a public statement: “Our people can no longer exist under Manipur as the hatred against our tribal community reached such a height that MLAs, ministers, pastors, police and civil officers, laymen, women and even children were not spared, not to mention the destruction of places of worships, homes and properties.” To live amid the Meiteis after the violence, they declared, would be “as good as death”.

The anguish of a retired Lieutenant General of the Indian Army living in Manipur is even more palpable. “The state is now ‘stateless,’” laments Lt Gen Nishikanta Singh. “Life and property can be destroyed anytime by anyone just like in Libya, Lebanon, Nigeria, Syria, etc.”. This spurred a former chief of the Indian Army General Ved Malik to respond, “Law & order situation in Manipur needs urgent attention at [the] highest level”.

Manipur – an ethnic mosaic

The current battle between the Meitei and Kuki people centres on competing claims of indigeneity, belonging and non-belonging: about which people are indigenous to Manipur, and who are outsiders. There is no dispute that the Meitei people are native to the Manipur valley, and the Nagas to the hills. But the Kukis insist that they too have long been inhabitants of the Manipur hills, and are not “foreigners” from Myanmar as is now claimed. The three main ethnic groups in Manipur have historically clustered in different parts of the state’s geography – the Meiteis in the valley, the Kukis in the southern hills and

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the Nagas in the northern hills. But there has not been, before the 2023 combat, an absolute, hostile segregation of the communities. In places dominated by one ethnic group, there have grown minority settlements of the other community. And barring interludes of internecine violence, the three communities have lived together with peace and goodwill. It is this long history of inter-ethnic peace that the 2023 warlike clashes threaten to destroy.

The Meitei are the dominant group in Manipur, in population share (53%) as well as politically and economically. They reside mainly in the Imphal valley, which comprises just 10% of the state's geography. The Meitei trace their ancestry in the Imphal valley at least to 2000 years back. The kingdom was ruled by one of the longest unbroken dynasties of the world, the Ningthouja, from 33 AD. The name Manipur came later. The kingdom was Kangleipak, renamed in 1724 by the king now converted to Hinduism, who chose the Sanskrit name Manipur. The boundaries of the kingdom sometimes included the surrounding hills, and went so far as the Irrawady river in Myanmar. But for the greater part of its history of two millennia before the arrival of the British, it was confined to the valley.

The rulers and people of the Imphal valley followed the indigenous animistic faith of Sanahism until the 18th century. The king in 1704 converted to the Hindu faith, and large sections of the people also adopted the Vaishnavite faith.

The Naga and Kuki-Zomi are not two homogenous tribes but are clusters of many tribes, listed as 34 Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the Indian Constitution. The Nagas, 17% of the population of present-day Manipur, inhabited the northern hill ranges for almost as long as the Meitei people in the valley. The Kukis, around 26%, are admittedly of more recent origin, but how recent is a matter of current dispute. The first archival mention of the Kuki in Manipur is in British colonial records in 1777. It is alleged that the British encouraged the settlements of the Kuki people in the hills of Manipur to provide a counter to the more aggressive Naga tribes, but it is also true that the Kukis were enemies of the colonial British and therefore colonial writings cannot be taken at face value.

Apart from these three large ethnic clusters, the valley also is home to Muslim Meitei (called Pangal) who are believed to have migrated in the 17th century from Sylhet, and now are 8% of the state's population, and also the Gurkhas and immigrants from mainland India.

After Manipur was invaded by Burma in 1819, the king reached out to the British for protection and Manipur

became, between 1826 to 1891, a protectorate of the British, and from 1891 a princely state of the British Empire. It signed an annexation treaty with India in 1947, and merged with the Indian union in 1949.

It is interesting that before its annexation, the briefly independent state of Manipur had passed the State Constitution Act in May 1947, the first of its kind in Asia. The king two years earlier had converted Manipur into a democratic constitutional monarchy. The constitution was progressive in its representation of various communities: it created three categories that it termed General, Hill and Mohamaden (Muslim), and provided for elections to the legislature for these three groups in the ratio of 30, 18 and 3 respectively. Another interesting fact of this history is that when the legislature of Manipur passed a resolution opposing the merger of Manipur with the union of India, the Speaker was a Kuki, TC Tainkhan.

Manipur – a site of entrenched violence

It is not as though violence is new to Manipur. The state witnessed some of the earliest insurgent movements in North-East India, of both Naga and Meitei militant groups, not long after the merger of the princely state of Manipur into the union of India in 1949. Kuki militant groups rose only from the 1990s.

The militant groups are organised around ethnic lines of the three main ethnic clusters of the state – Meitei, Kuki and Naga. Their demands have ranged from independence from the Indian state to various grades of self-rule within the Indian union, and they have targeted both the Indian state and other ethnic communities within Manipur. While the Nagas and Kukis fought a bloody series of ethnic battles in the 1990s resulting in more than 400 deaths, 2023 sees the first major clash between the Meitei and Kuki people. (Kuki leaders recall that Kuki chiefs sent 300 volunteers to support the Meitei king in his opposition to the merger as proof that the Kuki people were historically not enemies but supporters of the Meiteis).

The Naga militant groups have engaged in extended peace negotiations with the Indian government in recent years. The government of India entered into a Suspension of Operations agreement with the Kuki militant groups in 2008. The Meitei groups have not been part of any peace agreement. The present chief minister Biren Singh has not hidden his closeness – and some suggest active patronage – to the Meitei militias Arongal Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, who have reportedly played a major role

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in the present conflict.

One indicator of how deeply entrenched the violence in post-merger Manipur is that although Manipur is home to just 0.2% of India's population, as many as 38% of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) cases in the country registered between 2014 and 2020 were in Manipur.

Data from the National Crimes Research Bureau reveal that in this period while the highest number of cases registered under the UAPA were in Manipur (2,595), this was followed quite distantly by Jammu and Kashmir (1,202) and Assam (1,071).

Today there are an estimated 30 militant groups in Manipur, but for many years most of these have been dormant – the Naga groups in long drawn-out peace talks with the Indian government, and the Kuki groups in a tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement. Some operate from across the porous border in Myanmar.

What lit the fires in Manipur in 2023?

Given this long history of internecine and anti-state conflict in Manipur ever since its merger with the Indian union, what had contributed to the unprecedented ferocity of the present combat?

Most accounts begin with the Manipur high court ruling for suggesting ST status for the Meitei, the state-wide protests by Kuki organisations against this, and violent counter-protests by the Meitei. But these actually were only the matchsticks that lit a fire for which the fuel had already been dangerously (and wantonly) spilt.

The paramount responsibility for pushing Manipur, and with it the country, to the brink must rest most on the shoulders of the chief minister, N. Biren Singh, for his open unapologetic partisanship, his frequent resort to deliberately provocative public statements and actions, and for his wanton refusal to disarm, charge and arrest those openly spreading hate and lethal violence. And with him, the union government is responsible for not reining him in, or better, replacing him, and for not ensuring that sufficient forces are deployed to disarm the civilian populations and ensure the safety of all people of every identity.

Even when he was in the Congress, he became infamous (or popular, depending on who was making the evaluation) for his anti-Kuki rhetoric. These became more strident in the run-up to the midsummer bloodbath of 2023, and in the months after it broke out. Outlook India spoke to many people, including BJP Kuki MLAs, who described the chief

minister as “prejudiced” and “anti-Kuki”. Even Meitei commentators like Pradip Phajouban said that the chief minister's provocative discourse over the last two or three years made the Kukis “very sensitive, pushed to the wall”.

The first strand of his rhetoric is to stigmatise the Kuki people as “illegal immigrants” and “foreigners”. This is an obvious canard, as pointed out by the Editors' Guild in their report after visiting the state, because the decennial censuses from 1901 to 2011 have not shown any unusual rise in the non-Naga tribal population. The military coup in neighbouring Myanmar led Chin minorities to flee into neighbouring states like Mizoram and an estimated 4,000 to Manipur. But it is unfair to use this to tar all Kuki residents as illegal foreigners.

A second part of the “othering” discourse led and fuelled by the chief minister is of Kukis being “poppy cultivators” (or worse, narco-terrorists) engaged in transnational drug trade centred in Myanmar, responsible for the spread of drug addiction like a silent epidemic across the valley.

There is no doubt that vast tracks of fields in the hills grow poppies, and that the majority of poppy farmers are Kuki. But successive state governments, including the present one, have done little to halt this cultivation. People estimate the volume of the illegal drug trade in the state at around Rs 50,000 crore (incidentally much higher than the entire budget of the state); and there is no credible claim that the processing and trafficking of the drugs are enterprises operated and owned by Kuki people. The responsibility for the massive illegal drug industry lies elsewhere, including with powerful men and women in Imphal and Delhi.

While all of this unfolded, the temperature of hate propaganda in the popular discourse against the Kuki people was also raised dangerously. There was, for instance, a systematic attack on the history of Kukis in the Sangai Express, the largest circulated newspaper in Manipur. A new joint organisation of the Meitei and Tangkhul people called the ‘Federation of Haomee’ demonised the Kukis. To all of this, the chief minister and his government never reacted. These too were preparatory to the current violence.

But even more than this hate discourse, what triggered further existential insecurities and fear among the Kuki people were a series of imperious public actions clearly targeted at them.

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Important among these was what could only be described as the weaponising of provisions and powers of the state government under the Hills Area Committee Act of 1972. The Kuki people continue to resort to their customary modes of shifting cultivation in the forested hills as they have for centuries, moving from one forest habitat to another.

The Editors Guild reports that without following proper procedure as laid down in this Act, “the N. Biren Singh government declared parts of Hills as ‘reserved’ and ‘protected’ forests and ‘wetland reserves’. All land ownership documents within these areas were cancelled and a drive started to evict them in December 2022”.

What fuelled Kuki anger more “is that the forest surveys, inquiries, evictions and demolitions were carried out only in the non-Naga inhabited tribal areas, once again leading the Kuki community to believe that it was being singled out”.

This led inevitably to violent confrontations in the early months of 2023 between the state authorities and the Kuki-Zo community which had been living in these villages. A committee of the state government headed by the chief secretary on April 3, 2023, cancelled all land/property deeds and recognition of villages within the designated reserved and protected forest areas, without any rehabilitation plan for the evicted tribal population.

There was then the chief minister’s highly publicised “war on drugs”. Experts tell us that in this highly lucrative transnational drug trade, the “drugs of choice are: heroin, brown sugar, prescription painkillers, cough syrups and Yaba or WIY (“World is yours”) pills”.

The government’s exclusive focus was only on poppy growing which targeted the poorest poppy cultivators, many of whom are Kuki, to the wilful neglect of “the other components of the drug trade, the smuggling of synthetics to Myanmar and the smuggling in of drugs and their distribution through Manipur”.

In yet another series of openly provocative official moves, in March 2023, the state government peremptorily withdrew from the tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the Kuki militants.

This was effectively a ceasefire, which was suddenly, summarily and unilaterally terminated, without explanation or discussion with the Manipuri people.

The government then went on to remove the application of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) selectively only from the Imphal Valley and not the hill districts. As the Editors Guild notes, this was obviously partisan because “the Kuki insurgent groups were in peace talks with the

Union while the Meitei insurgents active in the Imphal Valley were outside any process of negotiation for peace”.

To make matters worse, the chief minister made no secret of his closeness with Meitei militias like the Arambai Tengol, even on occasion posing for photographs with the militants. “In retrospect, this was seen by the Kuki-Zo tribals as a partisan move in preparation for violence against the Kukis, which came a few weeks later”.

It was against this background that the provocation and rage of the Kuki people can be understood against the decision of a single-judge bench of the high court. Tellingly, the state government did not appeal against the court’s directive. This was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.

Tribal student organisations resolved to organise protest marches in all district headquarters on May 3 under the conciliatory theme ‘Come Let Us Reason Together’.

Rallies were held in 10 of the 16 districts of the state. But in some of these rallies, clashes broke out between people of the two communities, and the state exploded in flames. The same night, homes and churches of Kuki residents of the Imphal valley were vandalised and burnt by radical gangs of Meitei young men, killing many including women and children.

In the next few days, massive counter-rallies were organised by the Meiteis, including women who often blocked attempts by security forces to rescue people and protect shrines and property. Killings and horrific acts of sexual violence followed. The clashes quickly spread to the hills where armed mobs destroyed villages and homes of the Meitei people. Burning down of almost all the Meitei settlements in Churachandpur and Moreh by the Kuki militants further triggered the cycle of violence.

Five months later, as I write this, the killings continue with numbing constancy. At least 200 people have been killed, an uncounted number are injured and by the chief minister’s own admission, there are “hundreds” of complaints of sexual violence. Almost 60,000 people have been rendered homeless as Kuki homes and habitations in Meitei majority areas, and Meitei homes and villages in Kuki majority hill tracts have been destroyed and razed to the ground.

While both communities have both perpetrated and suffered horrific losses of life and property, it would be fair to underline that the losses are much greater among

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the Kuki people, probably because of tacit or open state support. At least 300 churches have been vandalised and burnt down.

Through all of this, the state has remained culpably absent from the discharge of its constitutional duties. The governments of India and Manipur are unable (or unwilling) to disarm civilian populations and militant militias, and to charge, arrest and prosecute people responsible for horrific murders and rapes, the looting of armouries, and the burning and looting of homes and villages, in which no one was spared: the home of even a union minister of Narendra Modi's cabinet was burned down in Imphal.

The state is also absent from its duty to extend relief to the 60,000 internally displaced people whose houses and villages have been razed, resulting in a colossal humanitarian crisis in what has become a war zone. The might of the Indian state seems singularly unequal to the challenge of restoring peace and security in this tiny but enormously sensitive frontier state that shares a long border with Myanmar.

After the violence began, the state government ticked the mandatory boxes, by ordering a curfew and directing District Magistrates to issue shoot-at-sight orders in extreme cases. But in practice, none of this was enforced.

The state government has done nothing to prevent men brandishing modern and presumably unlicensed weapons from patrolling the streets, nothing to disarm them, and nothing to investigate, charge and detain those named in police complaints for murder, rape and arson. Bunkers lined with sandbags manned by heavily armed men have come up on both sides of the "border" of a state that has been effectively partitioned.

Close to the checkpoints along this border are clusters of women groups, the Meira Paibi (revered for their iconic protests against killings and rape by army personnel) on the Meitei side, and Kuki women groups on the other.

The state police and paramilitary forces in the state have also been perilously divided on ethnic grounds. The local police is largely Meitei and does not hide their partisanship. The Assam Rifles, a paramilitary formation controlled by the Indian army is being stigmatised for performing its duty of protecting the Kukis.

There is a long history of this: the Meitei version is that the Assam Rifles and Kuki militants partnered in counter insurgency operations against Naga and Meitei insurgent groups; and that Kuki militants under the Suspension of Operations agreement draw a monthly salary from the

Government of India.

The Assam Rifles, in turn, sent a legal notice to a Meitei leader for his allegations that the Assam Rifles was partisan. The Manipur police filed FIRs against Assam Rifles soldiers for allegedly blocking their way with armoured vehicles, helping Kuki militants to escape, feeding into the popular Meitei narrative that the Assam Rifles soldiers are shielding Kuki "narco-terrorists".

The Assam Rifles argue that they are being pilloried only because they escorted endangered Kuki people to safety, and patrol the border blocking Meitei militants from executing killing missions into the hills.

Meitei groups led by the Meitei Paibi have been demanding the withdrawal of the Assam Rifles from all of Manipur, and in the course of their protests locked the gates of central government offices. Whatever may have been their role in the present conflict, it must be acknowledged that the Manipuri people have long hated the Assam Rifles. It was, for instance, the rape and brutal murder of a Meitei woman Thongam Monorama that led to the iconic protest by women of the Meitei Paibi in 2004 when they stripped naked before the headquarters of the Assam Rifles.

Meitei groups also met defence minister Rajnath Singh to press this demand. The chief minister assured representatives of the Meitei Paibi that the Assam Rifles would indeed be withdrawn from the state in September. Meanwhile, the state cabinet ordered the replacement of the Assam Rifles with the local police in manning a crucial border checkpoint.

In this background, the initiative by Union home minister Amit Shah, after his sole visit to Manipur after the violence broke out, to establish a unified command of police and paramilitary forces under the chief minister was still-born. The prime minister has not visited Manipur even five months into the conflict, and, until the no-confidence motion against his government in Parliament, did not make any public appeal for peace in Manipur, barring a 30-second statement condemning the sexual violence. He brushed aside all demands to dismiss the state government or at least to replace the chief minister.

There are also questions about the role of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in stoking majoritarian sentiments among the Meitei people. In recent years the valley has witnessed the rise of "Meiteism" – a concerted effort to revive Meitei identity, religion and culture often aligned

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with Hinduism”, and a Meitei sub-nationalism often converging with Hindutva nationalism.

Within this revival is a strong assertion of indigeneity and primary belonging – the idea that Manipur is the land of the Meitei, and they are threatened by the alleged growing numbers of Kuki tribes of Christian faith. There is also fueling a narrative of alleged proselytising by the Christian church.

Analysts sometimes compare the Manipur violence of 2023 to the Gujarat communal carnage of 2002. The comparison is apt only up to a point. In both, the state government was aggressively majoritarian and the leadership bellicose in its communal or ethnic partisanship; in both, the state government did nothing to protect the targeted minorities, and to extend relief or to secure to them legal justice; and in both, the state leadership was stubbornly protected by the Union government. But the resemblance ends here. Imagine Gujarat in 2002 if the Muslim victims also fought back and both sides were armed to their teeth with weapons of modern warfare.

And this brings me to what is arguably the state government’s most culpable contribution to converting what could have been a bloody ethnic battle of the kind that the state has seen too often in the past, into a civil war – the looting of armouries.

On the day of the march, and repeatedly after it, Meitei mobs stormed police armouries and absconded with an estimated 4,000 modern weapons including assault rifles, long-range guns, 51 mm mortars and half a million bullets. There is no evidence that the Manipur police, most of them of Meitei identity, used any significant force to prevent this pillage, which has continued to recur. It is alleged that Kuki police persons in the valley permitted a similar looting of arms, but on a much smaller scale.

To date, only a small fraction of these arms have been recovered. It is this plunder with impunity of state armouries that has armed large civilian populations with lethal modern weapons on an scale unprecedented in independent India.

The poisonous harvest of a majoritarian state

In summary, the story that emerges out of Manipur is an extremely grim one. The agony of the Manipuri people is the poisonous harvest of a state that openly treats a segment of its own citizens as enemies. It begins, as we saw, with relentless runaway hate speech by the chief minister himself, which stigmatises the Kuki citizens as illegal foreigners and narco-terrorists. With toxic falsehoods he builds a dark sceptre that haunts the popular Meitei imagination, of a shining Manipur home to the Meitei people for more than two centuries in grave danger of being

overrun by alien immigrants pouring in from Myanmar. These unwanted aliens, according to his “alternative truth”, encroach and destroy Manipuri forests, grow poppies and ravage Meitei youth with their trade in opium and brown sugar.

He then follows this up with a battery of public actions, directly targeting the Kuki minority in the state he has been elected to lead. He declares the forest abodes and shifting cultivation farms, inhabited for many generations by the Kuki people, as illegal and drives a campaign to free the forests from their “encroachments”. He launches a “war on drugs” that targets only the lowest rung of poppy cultivators, mostly impoverished Kuki farmers, leaving unscathed, those engaged in the highly lucrative transnational drug trade.

He suddenly terminates without explanation the virtual ceasefire with Kuki militants, while not disguising his sympathies – and possible patronage – of Meitei militia. He does not appeal against a high court decision to recommend ST status to the Meitei, knowing how much this would stoke fears among the Kuki people and that this would open the doors for Meitei people to lawfully buy lands in the hills, pushing the minority further into the margins. And then his government stands by as militants loot police and paramilitary armouries, arming civilians to fight a civil war against another section of the people of the state.

A land of settled grief

The critically wounded Manipur is a land of profound and settled grief. In relief camps of both communities, people spoke of their agony that their neighbours of generations had turned overnight into enemies. But an even greater sense of loss arose from their conviction that they would never be able to return to the only place they called home. A partition had been accomplished, a border had been drawn on their lands, as impenetrable and uncompromising as the one the country endured in 1947. And even more dangerously, in the hearts of ordinary people.

In the relief camps that we visited in a four-day journey of the Karwan e Mohabbat to the state from July 25 to 28, we found the state virtually absent. Communities pool donations every day to ensure that people are fed. We saw camps in the hills where children were eating just rice water with salt. The Karwan e Mohabbat prepared a detailed report on the immense humanitarian crisis and what the state urgently needs to do. But little

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changes, as residents of the camps are offered little hope and reassurance that they will be able to pick up the broken pieces of their lives in the foreseeable future.

Barely a day passes without people with serious bullet injuries being wheeled into the single medical college in Churachandpur. Prior to the conflict, a one-hour road journey on an ambulance would transport them to the much better-equipped Imphal hospital. But today, this journey is impossible because of the “border” that implacably divides them. They sometimes struggle with a 12-hour mountain road journey to Aizawl, but no life-support ambulance to keep their patients alive through this difficult journey is at hand.

Since the conflict, the state government has halted supplies of food and medicine for patients and medical students. The battered community raises donations not just for the camps, but also to keep the public hospital functioning.

A Wall of Remembrance has been erected in Churachandpur. On it are pasted pictures of every Kuki person who has been killed. You see on the wall faces of small children, women, old people and young men. The wall is surrounded by

empty coffins. Every alternate day thousands of women dress in black and gather around the wall to collectively mourn. For five months, at the time of writing, 96 bodies lie in the mortuaries in Imphal and Churachandpur. The state government has not made safe arrangements for the families to travel to Imphal to identify the remains of their loved ones. And for those in Churachandpur, they long refused to bury them as a mark of their grief and protest.

A gentle pastor in Churachandpur Reverend Jangkhoham Haokip barely finds time to sleep ever since the conflict broke, tirelessly organising food and medicines for the relief camps and hospital, and tending to the injured men brought in each day.

I call him from time to time. One day, he almost broke down. “What do I tell our young people? What solace or hope can I offer? Do I tell them that we must just endure and wait to die? Each day, I search really hard to find some reason to hope. But I just cannot find even a single ray of hope for our future in Manipur.”



THE MEITEI POLICE COMMANDO





Us and Them

They took pride in
Barbarism against the helpless
We took pride in
Humanity for the helpless
The acts segregate us,
It's Us and Them

They wish a lie to be the truth
If they are united.
We know a lie is a lie,
Regardless of us.
The wishes segregate us,
It's Us and Them.

Their mothers cry
For their beloved Rapist sons,
Dying in Zalengam.
Our mothers, for their precious sons
Defending their villages.
The morals separates us,
It's Us and Them.

~Seikang Haokip