

Thingkho Le Malcha

A Daily Newsletter by KSO Media & Documentation Cell



Dorcas Veng

RELIEF CENTRE

YPA Hall, Dorcas Veng

Managed by Village Authority & Young Paite Association, Dorcas Veng

Total Inmates Registered: 111*

■ Male: 58

■ Female: 53

VILLAGES COVERED

Imphal Area
Heirokland, Sadar Hills
Nakhujang, Sadar Hills

*As on 6th September, 2023



KUKI VICTIMS' UPDATE

As on 16.10.2023



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.

KIM REBUKES BIREN: A NOTION OF SEPARATE NATION IS TRUE IN RELATION TO SECESSIONIST MEITEI OUTFITS

Appropos to the interview made by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh to the Times of India newspaper, the Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) has stated that the brazen statement of N. Biren Singh that the 'Manipur violence was planned years ago to press for separation nation', is against every evidences and facts.

"The audacity and impenitence of the Chief Minister of Manipur N. Biren Singh is exasperating," it said.

The Kuki Inpi Manipur, an apex body of Kuki tribes, rather claimed that the notion of "Separate Nation" is true in relation to the secessionist movements of the Meitei terrorist groups and Meitei radicals who have actively been involved in anti-national activities such as the attacks on Indian Security Forces, the boycott of Independence Day and Republic Day, the burning of the Indian National Flag and the rising voice for an Independent Kangleipak - an Independent Meitei Kingdom.

In its press statement on Sunday, KIM said, "The notion of "Separate Nation" as Biren Singh has supposed can only suggest his inherent tendency to subvert the rule of law and defies all constitutional consciousness."

On the Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration, it stated that the demand for a "Separate Administration" from the Meitei-dominated Manipur State is a legitimate constitutional provision and to misinterpret it otherwise is an open defiance of the sanctity of the Constitution of India.

KIM stated that the root cause of the May 3 mayhem in Manipur was the mindless prejudice and illegitimate predilection for the persecution of the Kuki-Zo people by the Meiteis-led Manipur state leadership -the adoption of chauvinistic policies, the discrimination, oppression, and alienation of the Kuki-Zo people and the subsequent radicalisation and militarisation of the Meiteis chiefly under organisations such as the Arambai Tenggol and Meetei Leepun.

"Further, the violence was in-fact pre-planned as Biren Singh suggested. The violence was pre-planned by the radical Meitei groups under the banners of Arambai Tenggol and Meetei Leepun and in tandem with the Meitei-led Manipur State Government," said Janghaolun Haokip, Secretary Information and Publicity, KIM.



In fact, these Meitei radical groups have started harassing and abusing the Kuki-Zo people since May 2 in the name of counter-blockade, while the immediate trigger of the conflict was the killing of one Pastor Sehkhohao Kipgen at Kangvai by the Meitei radicals on the evening of May 3, he said.

Haokip also stated that the allegation of a pre-planned attack in the name of a peaceful rally was utterly confounding. For the record, the peaceful rally was organised by the All tribal Students' Forum Manipur (ATSUM), and therefore his allegation is baseless, he added.

KIM said: "Despite the audacious and repeated attempts of Biren Singh and the popular Meitei leadership to avoid and alter substantial evidences and facts, the ongoing conflict in Manipur is indubitable that it is a state-sponsored and pre-planned ethnic cleansing against the Kuki-Zo people."

Speaking of Zoramthanga, the incumbent Chief Minister of Mizoram, Biren Singh alleged Zoramthanga of speaking on the Manipur conflict for political mileage. Contrasting to Biren Singh's opinion, KIM said that the Kuki-Zo people are immensely grateful for all the humanitarian aid extended by people from all over the country in a time when our community is facing an existential crisis.

SEGA ROAD FIRING CASE: MAIN ACCUSED BARISH SHARMA ARRESTED

A team of Manipur Police has arrested Manoharmayum Barish Sharma, son of M. Balaraj of Wangkhei Ningthem Pukhri Mapal, who is the main accused of gun firing incident at Sega Road Khwairakpam Keikai in which 5 person including a woman sustained bullet injuries.

Barish Sharma is also known for his notorious activities against the Kuki-Zo people even before the ethnic violence began on May 3. In the wake of the Manipur mayhem, he was one of the radicalised Meiteis who instigated violent activities against the Kukis and deeply involved in the ethnic cleansing pogrom.

Barish Sharma and his gang groups are also alleged to be involved in burning of the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Gate at Leisang village, Lamka.

According to report received from Police, Manoharmayum Barish was arrested from near his resident locality on Saturday at around 11:30 pm.

It may be mentioned here that the JAC form against the gun firing incident has been demanding the State government to arrest Manoharmayum Barish



Sharma, who is the main accused of the incident.

During the meeting held a few days ago between CM N. Biren Singh and representatives of the JAC, Biren had assured the JAC to arrest Barish as per his crime and also informed them that Barish was not the president of BJYM and has no more relation nor a part of BJYM.

Notably, Barish Sharma was earlier arrested and jailed on May 27 under section 25(1-A) Arms Act Prisoner. He was later released on bail on June 4.

INTERNET BAN ISSUE: ANSAM TO BEGIN AGITATION BY PICKETING GOVT OFFICES IN HILL AREAS

Irked by ignorance and withholding of the competent authority in depriving the rights of the people, the All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM) has announced to launch picketing of Government Offices in the hill districts of Manipur from Oct. 24, 2023 to Oct. 25, 2023 as its first step of agitation.

ANSAM has been demanding to immediately lift the order of internet shutdown and restore internet connectivity in the peace area of the state, and to declare the result of the interview held in the month of September, 2021 for the appointment of 190 Posts of Assistant Professors (145 + 45 ST Special Drive) for government colleges of Manipur at the earliest.

In its press release issued on Sunday, ANSAM said that it was irked by the ignorance and withholding of the competent authority in depriving the rights of the democratic citizens despite of the repeated plead to the central government and state government for having failed to respect ANSAM's ultimatum and assurance given by the Chief Minister of Manipur pertaining to blanket banning of internet in the state and representation submitted for declaration

of result for recruitment of Assistant Professors (contractual basis) for government colleges in Manipur.

The All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM) had earlier made an ultimatum to the government through media on 17th October, 2023, giving five days of dateline to materialising its demands.

The Naga student body stated that it acknowledged the efforts of Government authorities to condemn the protracted conflict and restoration of peace in the state of Manipur. At the same time, it also expects the government to address the long overdue grievances of the public.

The Association warned that it might also intensify the agitation if the legitimate demands are not fulfilled.

ANSAM appealed the constituent units and sub-ordinate bodies to strictly enforce the proposed agitation in their respective jurisdictions. It also appealed the government officials and general public for utmost co-operation and understanding during the course of the agitation.

FACISTS STILL RULE MEITEIS' KANGLEIPAK; SANE MEITEI MAN BRUTALLY TORTURED, FORCED TO RETRACT HIS WORDS

Another disturbing video of Arambai Tenggol's brutality has again emerged on a social media platform, highlighting the savagery and barbaric nature of the radical group.

A viral video of a man, who claimed Meiteis are such an unrecognized tribe in India, who have no origin and no concrete history except their own small plot of land, was tortured and forced to withdraw his statement.

It is often seen in the Imphal valley that Meitei fact-speakers or sane Meiteis are frequently tortured, intimidated and compelled to withdraw their statements.

India is one of only a few countries that has yet to ratify the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Inhumanity and has also failed to uphold its citizens' fundamental rights.

Truth-tellers in the biggest democratic nation usually face torture and death threats in addition to the destruction of free speech. It may be noted here that the Arambai Tenggol goons in the past have also resorted to violence among the Meitei Society by subduing the freedom of speech enshrined in the Constitution of India.

Notably, former Cop Th. Brinda and Social Activist Babloo Loitangbom were also made to retract their words under duress. A man speaking in support of the former cop was also thrashed severely by this radical group, forcing him to tendered an apology.

Such action of silencing dissidents depicts the failed law and order situation in the Imphal valley, where Arambai



Tenggol goons run the show, taming anyone speaking against them, were served with undue justice. The Arambai Tenggol goons are supposedly given a free hand to carry out their vicious action without any hindrance.

It is now clear that facists rule the Meiteis' Kangleipak in such a way that the Arambai Tenggol, Meitei Leepun and insane Meira Paibis reign supreme in Imphal valley and anyone speaking against their wishes will be slapped with threat, coercion and intimidation.



If honor were profitable, everybody would be honorable

— Thomas More



NEWS ANALYSIS

Biren's Hypocritical Claim on Achieving 90% Peace Has No Bearing on the "Two States" Status of Erstwhile Manipur

N. Biren Singh's mystifying claim on achieving 90 percent peace in the State is nothing but an extraneous digression in the already divided state of communally charged erstwhile Manipur, where the two warring parties are far from mingling each other once again in the near future.

His concept of peace might be relevant in the Meitei dominated valley area so long as he can somehow control his cohorts from indulging in violent activities. In the Hill areas, the fact is that peaceful environment exists as long as the radical groups of Arambai Tenggol, Meitei Leepun and valley-based terrorist outfits discontinue attacking the Kuki-Zo indigenous community.

Speaking on the sidelines of the 132nd Manipur Police Raising Day on October 19, the Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh had said that there would be total peace in the State and 90 percent already has been achieved. He also reportedly alleged that there were some elements who did not want to restore peace. Here, the chief architect of the ethnic violence must know that the insane Meitei populace, guided by his State machineries, are the ones who are still indulging in instigating genocidal action towards the peace loving Kuki-Zo population.

One must note that a shadow government is in existence in Kuki-Zo dominated areas and will continue to do so until the Government of India officially grant or recognise the political demand of UT with legislative power. Biren Singh no longer has the authority to comment on the affairs of Kuki-Zo land.

It is a well known fact that the state of Manipur has been totally disintegrated- emotionally, demographically, socially and physically. Physical land separations have been created through buffer zones; the Meiteis defend their ancestral lands and Kuki-Zos defend theirs. In such deep divides, the only viable option left for the Government of India to bring permanent peace in the

region is to formalise or recognise the legitimacy of political or economical separation of administration for the Kuki-Zo people under the Constitution of India.

As truly said by Rahul Gandhi, the status of Manipur is no longer a State but two States. Thus, for achieving everlasting peace between the two neighbouring States, the already separated entity must be accepted and formalised.

On returning or recovering of looted weapons, Biren Singh had said that some of the arms and ammunition looted from the state police have been returned, and many have been recovered during combing operations conducted by combined teams from both hills and valley districts. However, Biren did not provide facts and figures of the recovered weapons. As per the latest government report, only 1344 of the 6000 looted weapons were still recovered.

Biren Singh also spoke about the issue of drug abuse and said the 'War on Drugs' campaign was not against any individual or community, but to safeguard and protect the present and future generations. Before, campaigning 'War on Drugs', Biren must reintrospect and perform evidence-based investigations into his inner circles for achieving drugs-free society, rather than living in his world of rhetorics and hearsays.

As per reports, the drugs syndicate in Manipur is huge and is considered a whooping INR 70,000 crores as per some estimates which is double than the entire GDP of Manipur. The drug business (Value-wise) of Manipur mainly constitutes Chemical drugs (65-70%), Opioid drugs (15-20%) and Cannabis (5-10%). Such alarming figures cannot prosper without the help of politicians in the highest hierarchy and the agents from the valley-based terrorist outfits in Myanmar. Mentioned may be made that the former police officer, Th. Brinda had alleged the involvement of the Chief Minister himself in illegal drugs syndicate in the State.



NEWS ANALYSIS

Biren's Hypocritical Claim on Achieving 90% Peace Has No Bearing on the "Two States" Status of Erstwhile Manipur

On the morning of July 19, 2023, my phone kept alerting me to WhatsApp messages, as it had done during the previous three months following the eruption of violence along ethnic lines in India's northeastern state of Manipur. This time was different. It was a video accompanied by the following message: "If your blood doesn't boil seeing this barbaric and inhuman treatment of fellow human being by Meitei goons, your conscious [sic] is equally morally dead. Period."

Before I could open it, other messages started pouring in, asking if I had watched the video. Others warned against circulating it over social media and messaging apps. Meanwhile, the 26-second clip of two women being paraded naked on the streets by a mob of men—groping and molesting the two while walking through paddy fields—had already gone viral. The incident recorded in the clip, however, was over two months old.

On May 3, after the state's highest court recommended that Manipur's dominant Meitei community be included among the country's Scheduled Tribe—a constitutional list that guarantees affirmative action for those included—the state's hill tribe groups carried out mass rallies in protest. The same day, an attempted arson of a Kuki war memorial and the fire set on Meitei villages by unidentified individuals led to state-wide clashes between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo tribes. The two women, belonging to the Vaiphei community that is part of the larger umbrella of Kuki-Zo tribes of the Northeast, were assaulted by the street mob a day later.

In some ways, these conflicts in Manipur demonstrate the Indian republic's complicated politics of ethnic identity and claims for constitutional protection. Demands for affirmative action by regionally dominant groups is not unusual in India, as seen with the Pateldars in Gujarat, Marathas in Maharashtra, and, more recently, the Pahadis in Jammu and Kashmir. With regards to the Meiteis, who converted to Hinduism in the 18th century, its socially weaker sections already had access to the constitutionally defined Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and Economically Weaker Sections. These categories enable access to affirmative action as well as select government grants and scholarships. The demand to also be included among the Scheduled Tribes was initially a fringe cause within the Meiteis, with the Hindu Brahmins (the priestly caste at the top of the Hindu caste pyramid) of that community least open to the idea of being degraded to the status of a 'Hao' (tribal people). However, the project gained steam with the revival of the indigenous Meitei faith Sanamahism in the last few decades. The return to their indigenous roots has emboldened their belief that they were short-changed by the government, which didn't recognize them as a 'tribe' after Manipur was annexed by the Indian Union in 1949.

The crisis has been further compounded by internet restrictions in place since May 4. Far from the state government's stated intention to control "the spread of disinformation and false rumours through various social media platforms," lack of access to the internet has

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resulted in a flood of fake news and rampant disinformation, where genuine footage documenting violence has often been depicted as ‘fake’, and where unverified rumors have been deployed to instigate sexual violence. In a civil conflict where the state government has unabashedly shown its loyalty to the majority ethnic community and the federal government has maintained the status quo, both physical carnage and the information wars are far from even-keeled. In this, Manipur has proved to be another troubling illustration of the Indian authorities’ habit of curbing internet access in regions seeing widespread conflict, where a choked information ecosystem has helped the powerful and hurt the politically weaker sections facing majoritarian violence.

Background of the May violence

In the months leading up to the May violence, a concerted campaign was already being led by Manipur’s Chief Minister Biren Singh, who hails from the ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), against the minority Kuki-Zo tribes, who were peddled as the key culprits of the underground drug industry and portrayed as ‘illegal immigrants’ from neighboring Myanmar. Although the Kuki-Zo tribes make up only 16 percent of the population, Singh had been stoking majoritarian Meitei sentiments of the tribes’ “sudden” decadal growth, particularly in the wake of the refugee crisis from coup-hit Myanmar, with no recent census data to back it up. This is despite the neighboring state of Mizoram, where the dominant population has stronger ethnic ties to the Chin refugees, bearing a much greater brunt of the refugee population. In light of the Meitei’s dominant demographics (they are over 50 percent of Manipur’s population) compared to their relatively smaller territorial spread (they occupy roughly 10 percent of the state that is in the valley), the chief minister preyed on the community’s insecurity over limited resources and supremacist notions of cultural superiority.

By all accounts, viral, unverified social media messages and rumors of Meiteis being beaten, killed and raped in the Churachandpur hill district in part triggered the attacks in the valley. Subsequently, civilians, senior government officials, politicians, and judges belonging to the Kuki-Zo tribes from the valley were targeted. This led to retaliatory attacks on the Meiteis in the hill districts, although in much smaller numbers compared to officials and families from the tribes in the valley. Internet connections across the state

of Manipur were switched off a day after violence broke out, which has killed more than 180 people thus far—with casualties growing by the weeks—and displaced more than 70,000 from their homes and localities, reducing them to ghost towns.

A police complaint filed on May 18 in response to the public assault against the two women furnishes some details about the incident. An armed mob of up to a thousand persons belonging to Meitei youth organizations entered the B.Phainom village in the hill tribal district of Kangpokpi, where they vandalized and looted personal property. Seeking to escape the violence of the mob, five residents of the village, including the two women, fled to the forests; they were later rescued by the state police, only to be apprehended by the same mob that snatched them from police custody.

“All the three women were physically forced to remove their clothes and were stripped naked in front of the mob,” the complaint noted, adding that “the younger brother who tried to defend his sister’s modesty and life was murdered by members of the mob on the spot.” Even before the video of the attack on the two women in Kangpokpi appeared on social media, the incident had been reported by two online news portals—on June 1 by, Newslick, and on July 12 by The Print—as part of the coverage of the sexual assaults during the Manipur violence. However, it was finally the graphic video that brought national attention to the state like it hadn’t in the last three months.

Kaybie Chongloi, a Kuki journalist based in Kangpokpi District where the incident took place, told me that no one knew of the existence of the video until the previous day when a driver noticed Meitei men watching it on their phones. “He had asked them to share the video via Bluetooth, and that’s how we got to see it for the first time,” said Chongloi. By the next morning, he added, the video had been widely shared across WhatsApp and social media platforms. It also compelled Prime Minister Narendra Modi to finally break his silence on Manipur, almost three months after the violence, calling the crime “an insult to the entire country.”

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Skewed media landscape

Since the outbreak of violence in early May, a steady stream of photo and video footage has appeared on social media, showing private residences and villages being burned down, even capturing the collusion of state police in these incidents. Meanwhile, pieces of disinformation have been shared by verified Twitter handles of socially influential figures with global platforms. This includes, for example, Licipriya Kangujam, a young climate influencer managed by her alleged 'con man' father, and Binalakshmi Nepram, a women's rights activist and recent scholar-at-residence at Harvard University. On May 4, soon after the violence started, Kangujam shared the video of a burning residence saying "illegal immigrants are burning the houses of our Meitei indigenous community in Manipur". Hours earlier, however, Tonsing S, a Kuki-Zo scholar at Michigan University, had already shared the same video, showing a Kuki-Zo residential locality in the state capital of Imphal, from where his family had recently been displaced. Kangujam has also shared videos showing disruption and mayhem, which she squarely blamed on 'illegal immigrant' and 'poppy cultivating' Kukis.

Meanwhile, although seen advocating for peace on national television, Nepram has also been culpable in spreading misinformation, with a clear prejudice against the Kuki-Zo tribal groups. This includes sharing fake news on landmines allegedly placed by an armed group in a Manipur village, despite the information being debunked as false (reverse-image lookup found that the photos used in the story were from Jammu and Kashmir). She has not yet removed the tweet. More generally, Meitei-owned outlets and journalists from the community, who dominate the media landscape in the state, have been accused of being compromised, heavily toeing the state line, which is against the Kuki-Zo tribes.

Apart from the accounts of these well-known personalities, several blue check-marked accounts have surfaced on Twitter since May, thanks to Elon Musk's new policy on paid accounts which abandons its previous verification process, which have furthered disinformation campaigns. Take, for instance, a right-leaning website with the twitter handle @dintentdata that shot to limelight during the Manipur violence ostensibly as a "fact checker". Its origins and ownership are unknown but the account has toed the Manipur state government's narrative, as illustrated in a thread that called Kukis "illegals" migrating from

Myanmar who had weaponized themselves to target the Meitei community. In the initial weeks, the running narrative on illegal immigrants and the Myanmar crisis dominated the coverage of the violence in mainstream Indian media outlets like Deccan Herald and India Today as well as in international publications like The Diplomat and the Washington Post.

Unequal internet ban

As I reported for Nikkei Asia in July, vast amounts of disinformation have emerged from the Manipur crisis not only because of an internet ban but due to its uneven nature: it has offered privileged access to businesses and media close to power, mostly in the valley. Dedicated internet services remained selectively available to particular businesses in the valley and government offices, with the approval of the home department. Notably, in the midst of an internet ban, members of Manipur-based right-wing Meitei groups, such as Meitei Leepun and an armed militia, Arambai Tenggol, have been posting inflammatory hate speech on their social media accounts. "Refrain from creating chaos at Imphal, we can no longer attack them here," announced Korounganba Khuman, the militant leader of Arambai Tenggol, on his Facebook account. Written in Meitei Lon, he added, "We have a plan, which you'll hear about in two days' time. Let's work together on this. Let us fight with all our might for our land and identity." No action from the state government has been initiated on such open invocations of violence against the Kuki-Zo communities.

Meanwhile, Meitei Leepun's founding leader Pramot Singh went on national television (in an interview with veteran journalist Karan Thapar in The Wire), threatening to "blow away" the tribals from the hills. In the past, Singh has been associated with Akhil Bhartiya Vishwa Parishad, the student wing of the Hindu nationalist militant outfit Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Both groups—Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun—have been openly endorsed by Chief Minister Singh and Leishemba Sanajaoba, the titular king of Manipur and a member of the upper house of the parliament.

On July 25, Manipur state authorities lifted the ban on broadband services while retaining several severe

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restrictions. This included blocking social media websites, virtual private network (VPN) services and WiFi hotspots, while allowing for the physical monitoring of subscribers by concerned officials. Those seeking to access the internet under these conditions were required to sign an undertaking agreeing to the enforced monitoring by officials. After nearly five months of ban, mobile internet access was resumed by the state government on September 23, only to be soon suspended for the next five days amid protests after photographs showing the allegedly deceased bodies of two missing Meitei students surfaced online. The state government confirmed their death in a statement, but their bodies remain missing at the time of the publication of this story.

A marketing professional from Imphal Valley, who asked not to be identified, said that in the early days of the internet ban, people were resorting to all sorts of loopholes: machine SIM cards used for digital payment (apps like Paytm and Google Pay), Vodafone VPN ports, and international E-SIMs like Airalo. "People would use SIM cards bought from other states, since Vodafone sim cards sold out in Manipur very fast at a going rate of INR 2000," he said, speaking from an undisclosed location in the Northeast that he and his family have moved to temporarily. The IT company where his wife works had put her on leave during the shutdown weeks and was threatening layoffs to employees who wouldn't come online.

Sources from the area told me that local broadband providers in both the hills and the valley did not comply with the government order to switch off internet services. SAAG has accessed a copy of a state-government order that notes the "misuse of additional connection on whitelisted/reactivated" internet lines and reports of "accessibility of internet facility" in the Kuki-majority Churachandpur area. No such order was issued against any centers in the valley, even though the government eventually put a curb on all these loopholes.

For five years, India has been leading the global record for the highest number of Internet shutdowns in the world with at least 84 cases recorded in 2022, far higher than the war-hit Ukraine, which saw 22 shutdowns imposed by the Russian military after their invasion of the country. According to Software Freedom Law Centre's internet shutdown tracker, India has seen a total of 759 shutdowns since 2012, with Jammu and Kashmir experiencing the

majority of the bans, and Manipur featuring fourth on the list.

In June, a joint report on internet shutdowns in India, released by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Internet Freedom Foundation, a digital rights advocacy group in India, found that the Indian authorities' decisions to disrupt internet access were "often erratic and unlawful". The report cited a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology report that concluded, "So far, there is no proof to indicate that internet shutdown [sic] has been effective in addressing public emergency and ensuring public safety."

Meenakshi Ganguly, the HRW South Asia director, told me that while authorities have the responsibility to contain the spread of incitement to hate or violence, and to combat disinformation, simply denying internet access can end up further stoking fear and divisiveness. "Without access to credible information, internet shutdowns risk the spread of rumor-based retaliatory attacks, perpetuating the cycle of violence," she said.

Missing outrage

The role of fake news and disinformation in instigating violence, including sexual assaults, against tribal women in Manipur has been well-documented. However, despite videos of these incidents floating online after the breakout of the violence, neither local nor national media reported on it or verified and pursued these leads. Several weeks before the infamous Kangpokpi video of the two women being paraded naked was out, another clip of a Kuki-Zo woman begging Meitei women to let go of her was doing the rounds. Speaking in Meitei Lon, the Meitei women are seen instigating men to rape 29-year-old Nancy Chingthianni, who was later interviewed by the UK-based Guardian, a few weeks before her video went viral again. She lost her husband and mother-in-law to the mob. Chingthianni herself was beaten black and blue until she passed out.

Seeing the video of herself instantly triggered her. "I felt scared like I was back in that moment even though I was not raped," she told me over the phone. When asked how she felt about these videos of herself and the women paraded being circulated online, Chingthianni said it was for the better. "Hoi ka sa, eh; I'm glad that it's

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out,” she said. “Now people know what these Meira Paibis (Meitei civic activists known as ‘women torchbearers’) really did to us.”

While the public responses to the viral Kangpokpi video was welcomed by the Kuki-Zo community, especially as it led to the swift arrest of at least seven of the accused, the heinous crimes against the community have not seen similar reactions. On July 2, two weeks before the Kangpokpi video was released, photos and footage of a severed head perched on a fence went viral on WhatsApp groups, shocking members of the Kuki-Zo community. The head belonged to David Thiek, a resident of Langza village in the foothills of the Churachandpur tribal hill district. He had been defending his village on the day when an armed militia from the valley attacked it. Thiek’s head was severed off and his body burned down to ashes, the remains of which were draped in the traditional shawl of the Hmar tribe that he belonged to.

A few days later, Sang Tonsing, a 24-year-old social worker from the Kuki-Zo community living outside Manipur, saw the screenshot of a photo posted by a Twitter account titled ‘Nongthombam Rohen Meetei’ (now deleted) with the caption, “Killing of meetei by kuki militants [sic]”. The photo showed a man, his face digitally obscured by red brush strokes, holding a machete in one hand and a severed head in another. A copy of the photo downloaded from Twitter shows a time stamp of 5.45 p.m. on July 2, 2023.

Suspecting the severed head to belong to Thiek, Tonsing and a group of other social-media savvy friends attempted to verify the photo, beginning with reverse image verification on Google and TinEye. The photo appeared original. Tonsing then began scanning the local Meitei news channels, particularly Mami and Elite TV, since these channels had extensively covered the chief minister visiting the Meitei-dominated Bishnupur district in the valley, bordering the Kuki Zo villages that were attacked. That is when he noticed the same outfit as was worn by the man in the photo: a dark-teal-colored full-sleeved t-shirt paired with brown track pants and a camouflage tactical vest.

“There was no way that another person could be wearing the same exact outfit,” he said. But that wasn’t their only lead. The person seen on the news clip, whose outfit matched with that of the assailant in the photograph,

was eventually tracked on Facebook. He was identified as Mairembam Romesh Mangang, the public relations officer or the security detail of S Premchandra Singh, a Bharatiya Janata Party member of Manipur’s legislative assembly who represented the Kumbi constituency. Tonsing said that they instinctively thought to check the accounts of those associated with the MLA of Kumbi, since it was close to Langza village, where David was killed. “Secondly,” he added, “Kumbi is known to be a hotspot of Meitei insurgent groups where politicians conduct their financial dealings with underground groups.” The screenshot is now part of an investigation into the incident where members of the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun are among the accused. SAAG reached out to Premchandra Singh, the MLA of Kumbi, who did not respond to the request for comment. (This piece will be updated as and when he responds.)

While Tonsing and his friends may have made a plausible case of identification, what remains unexplained is why that photo was leaked online. His guess is one of three scenarios: one, someone from one of the Meitei-run WhatsApp groups carelessly uploaded it; two, there may still be whistleblowers among the Meitei groups who want the truth out; and three, which he thinks most likely, is that this was an attempt to manipulate the narrative in their favor as victims rather than perpetrators of the crime. Either way, he’s certain that more videos would surface once the internet ban is fully lifted. “Nowadays everyone’s got a smartphone and they are filming videos when they go to burn villages. Since these are mobs of 5000-odd people, they can’t control what people are shooting”, said Tonsing.

Meanwhile in the valley, there have been news reports, albeit unverified, of missing Meitei individuals being tortured and killed in viral clips. In early July, hours after two cousins—27-year-old Irengbam Chinkheinganba and 31-year-old Sagolshem Ngaleiba Meitei from Kakching District—had gone missing, a video began circulating which showed two men being slapped and kicked, before being shot from behind. A BBC report noted that another video showing the shooting of a man surfaced two months later. While neither of the videos has been independently verified, the families of the missing two have identified the two men in the videos as Chinkheinganba and Ngaleibav. Similarly, the parents

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of a young teenager, who went missing along with her friend near the hill district, have identified their daughter in a clip that showed a girl being beheaded, allegedly by Kuki assailants. However, when SAAG checked the video, the perpetrators were speaking in the Burmese tongue, and not any of the languages or dialects native to Manipur.

Videos connected to both of these disappearances surfaced only after the clip of the naked Vaipehi women made headlines. In our post-truth era, the conflict is not limited to violence in the buffer zones, but is also a war of perceptions on social media where fake news, morphed footage, and decontextualized information often seek to compound the confusion.

Majoritarian manipulation

Manipur is a state now divided like never before. Ethnic fault lines have always run deep, sometimes deeper and thicker than bloodlines despite enough instances of intermarriage between communities. The murder of a 7-year-old Kuki boy in early June, alongside his mother and his maternal aunt, en route to a hospital through the valley is emblematic of this. Even though the boy's mother and maternal aunt belonged to the Meitei community, the mob made up of Meira Paibis and other Meiteis did not spare them and set the ambulance on fire after the murders.

Local media operating out of Imphal and dominated by journalists from the Meitei community—or owned by politicians of the same community—did not report this incident, just as they ignored several other stories like the seven rape cases registered to date. Forget the tyranny of distance between New Delhi-based national media and Manipur, newsrooms based in the valley often don't go and cover neighboring hill districts. In the present crisis, where Manipur's Chief Minister Singh stands accused of orchestrating the violence against the Kuki-Zo community, with the majority-controlled media not covering the hills, and given only a partial lift on the internet blackout, the scales are tipped heavily against the minority tribes. In early September, in a report on the media coverage of the violence, the Editors' Guild of India lamented how the Manipur media had turned into "Meitei media" and held the internet ban responsible for the media being overly reliant on the state's narrative. Shortly after, two police complaints under sections of defamation, promoting enmity, and criminal conspiracy were filed against members of the

Guild's fact-finding committee. Meanwhile, rather than working to gain the confidence of the Kuki-Zo communities as their political representative, we instead find the chief minister getting into a late-night spat on Twitter, asking a Kuki-identifying user if they are from Manipur or Myanmar.

As violence continues unabated in the "buffer zones" between the hills and the valley, where both communities live in relative proximity, rumors and disinformation remain rampant on both sides. In the din of contrasting narratives laying the blame exclusively on the other side, Spearcorps, an official Indian Army account on Twitter, has emerged as a neutral line for updates on the clashes. After days of speculation over the women-led civil-society group Meira Paibis aiding armed rioters to attack tribal villages by creating road blockades, the Spearcorps posted a tweet noting that "Women activists in #Manipur are deliberately blocking routes and interfering in Operations of Security Forces." The post went on to appeal to "all sections of population to support our endeavours in restoring peace." This new normal is especially significant in a state that has a long history of confrontation with the Indian Army, which stands accused of many human-rights excesses through the application of a special martial law, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Naturally, the dominant Meitei community, its representative media and the state government see the army as biased in favor of the tribal groups, and accuse the armed forces of assisting Kuki "militants".

When I spoke to a source in the army who has been monitoring the security situation in Manipur, he argued that the neutrality of central security forces was evident in their assistance in the speedy evacuation of Meiteis from the hill districts. The only time that the local media had ever portrayed them in a positive light, he said, was when they reported the "rescue" of five Meitei civilians from Kuki "militants" (notably, Meitei attackers are often called 'miscreants' in these reports). "Except that it was the Kukis who had handed over the Meitei civilians to us in good faith," he told me. But that detail never made it in any of the Meitei-run press.

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With such opportunities for solidarity that could have led to a ceasefire on violence and retaliatory attacks now looking increasingly remote, we find the strengthening of the Kuki-Zo tribes' resolve to settle for separate administration away from the Manipur government. To be sure, the disturbing video of the Vaiphei women may have led to police action after weeks of inaction, and it has alerted the country and the world to the scale of violence. But on the home front, the civil war is nowhere near an end. In turn, it only fueled the war over narratives, where Manipuri social media was suddenly filled with posts asking Meitei women to come out with stories of their defilement. On August 9, the first police complaint of a Meitei woman alleging sexual assault was filed in the valley, in which the complainant said she was assaulted by "Kuki miscreants" on May 3, when Meitei houses in Churachandpur were being burned down. "The delay in filing this complaint is due to social stigma," the complaint said.

In the midst of all the suffering and counter narratives, Prime Minister Modi only took cognizance of the video, which he called "an insult to society," while undermining the scale and context of the conflict in Manipur by equating

it to violence in states like Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. Despite the terrible cost that the two tribal women had to pay with their dignity for Modi—and the rest of India—to finally take notice and speak up, he maintained his position as a BJP star campaigner rather than the leader of a democracy.

Apar Gupta, an advocate who founded Internet Freedom Foundation, was apologetic in his tone as many have been while talking to me about Manipur, which happens to be my home state. Beyond the scale of violence that the viral video alone has revealed and the sore lack of access to relief and medical aid for the internally displaced, he sharply questioned whose interest the internet ban had served. "I believe beyond this individual specific instance, the internet shutdown has served the function of contouring our media national narrative," said Gupta.

"Manipur is burning, but we don't care."

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Winter Hearts

It's supposed to be fall,
The season of mists and mellow fruitfulness for all,
Yet here we are cold,
Both the young and old.

The phenomenal concept of fall a beauty,
Now an illusion for us in reality.
Our hearts were turned cold in early May,
Against our will gone are the days
Of laughter, silly fights, friends and family,
All but good old moments now a fantasy.

Five months later it's fall,
And whilst we're still homeless and lost,
The wild aggressors are performing their all,
With their lies and delusions at ALL cost.

The approaching wintry nights has prodded Once again of our homes and
rights encroached, Noel season few weeks away,
How will our winter hearts make do now?

Frost upon the window panes,
Cozy nights with steaming tea and blankets,
Warmth hearts beside a crackling fire,
The winters we had now we desire.

~ Angie Doungel