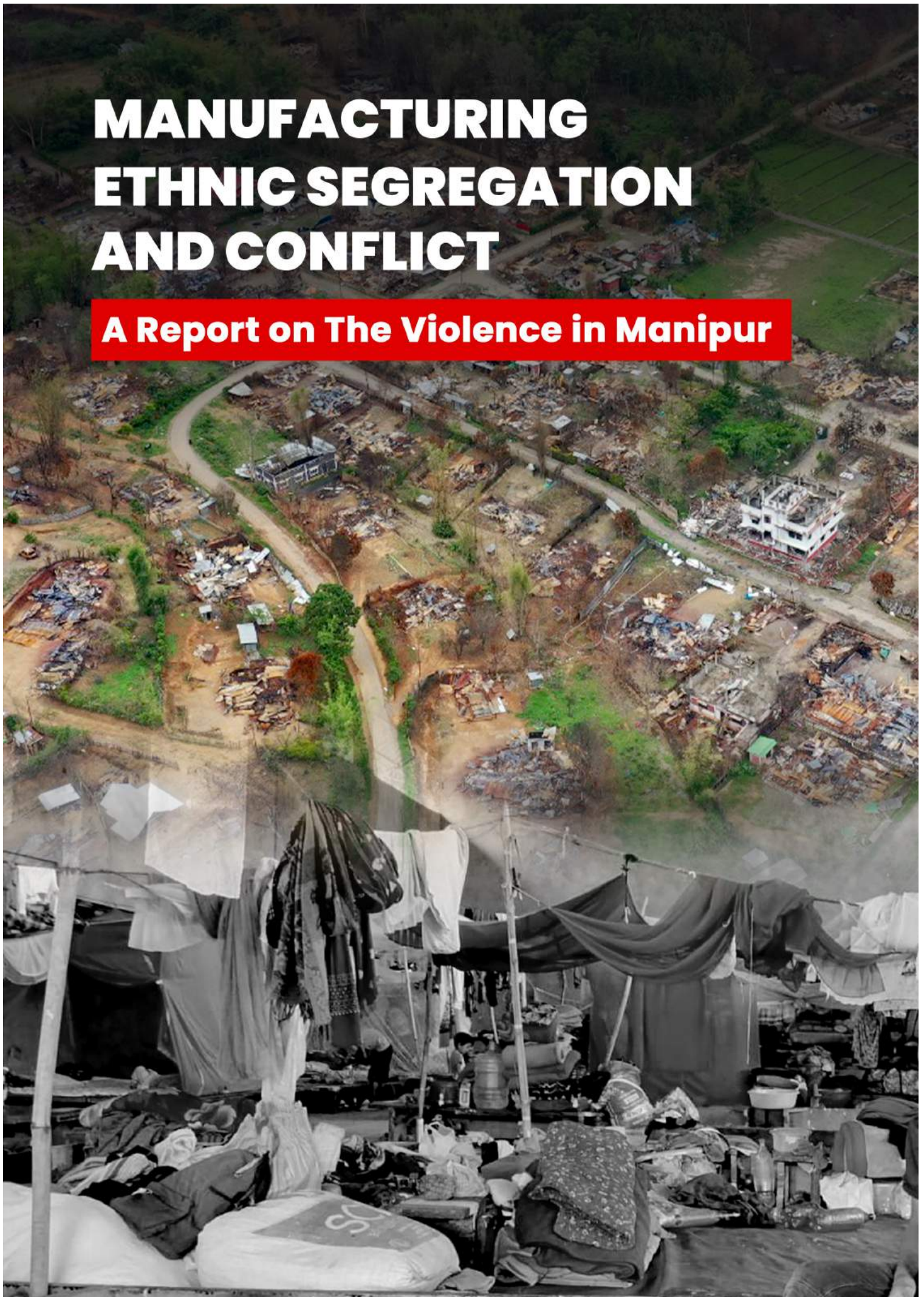


# MANUFACTURING ETHNIC SEGREGATION AND CONFLICT

**A Report on The Violence in Manipur**



# Manufacturing ethnic segregation and conflict: A report on the violence in Manipur

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# Abbreviations

AILAJ - All India Lawyers Association for Justice  
AIPWA - All India Progressive Women's Association  
ATSUM - All Tribal Students Union of Manipur  
COCOMI - Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity  
COTU - Committee On Tribal Unity  
CPI(ML) - Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation  
CSO - Civil Society Organisation  
IRB - Indian Reserve Battalion  
ITLF - Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum  
KSO - Kuki Student Organisation  
MLA - Member of Legislative Assembly  
MOBC - Minorities and Other Backward Classes  
MP - Member of Parliament  
NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation  
NRC - National Register of Citizens  
OBC - Other Backward Classes  
SOO - Suspension of Operations  
SC - Scheduled Castes  
ST - Scheduled Tribe  
UT - Union Territory

## Word of Thanks

The Team would like to offer its deep gratitude to the various Meitei and Kuki representatives and organisations who spent their valuable time sharing their perspective and analysis of the situation.

Thanks also to the conflict-displaced persons who are in the Relief Camps who, despite being in deep distress, spoke of their travails and loss.

In these dark times, the Team was glad to meet moderate voices that are able to empathise with the losses and suffering of both communities.

It is reflective of the situation that most requested the Team not to identify them in the Report and accordingly, the Team has avoided naming them.

# Executive Summary

On May 3rd of this year, a violent conflict broke out between two ethnic communities, the Meiteis and the Kukis, in the north-eastern state of Manipur. Since then, the conflict has left over 175 persons dead, thousands injured, and over 60,000 persons displaced and residing in relief camps across the valley and hills of Manipur.

An early internet ban in the State, partisan media coverage and lack of accountability and information from the government meant that people outside the State were left with no credible sense of events unfolding on ground in Manipur. As violence raged in Manipur with no political solution in sight, CPI(ML) Liberation constituted a Team of 8 persons consisting of CPI(ML)Liberation leaders, representatives of All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA) and All India Lawyers Association for Justice (AILAJ), and an independent feminist activist, who visited Manipur from 10th to 14th August, 2023. The objective was twofold: to understand the prevailing socio-political situation in the State, and to meet and extend solidarity and goodwill to the impacted people in Manipur.

The Team visited various affected areas in the valley districts of Imphal and Bishnupur, and the hill districts of Kangpokpi and Churachandpur. The Team met persons from all walks of life in Manipur including victims of the violence residing in relief camps, representatives of civil society organisations, prominent political leaders, legal professionals, media professionals, retired bureaucrats, a senior police official and Smt. Anusuiya Uikey, the Governor of Manipur. The Team also visited Guwahati and met displaced Kukis who had fled from Manipur following the breakout of violence.

This Report is the Team's endeavour to present to the larger public, the grave situation persisting in Manipur, with the hope that they will join their voices to demand for justice in the conflict-ridden state.

1. The violence has taken a substantially higher toll on the Kuki population in the State, in terms of the deaths, injuries, displacement and loss of properties, which the Kukis believe, reflects their subjugated position in Manipur's polity. Kukis point out to decades of discrimination they have suffered at the hands of the Meitei-dominated State, and the under-development of the hill regions, which they and other Tribals primarily inhabit. They juxtapose their situation to that of the valley, where the Meiteis reside, which has seen massive development and growth in infrastructure in the last several years. The Kukis believe that they are being demonised by the State and the Meitei community for no reason other than to capture their traditional lands and rich natural resources in the hills. They claim that the three planks of this demonisation of the Kuki community rests on the false narrative pushed by the Biren Singh government of the Kukis being illegal immigrants, forest encroachers and poppy cultivators. The Kuki community strongly believe they have

a natural claim over the hills by virtue of being its original inhabitants, confirmed by their status as heroes who fought the British. There is anger that despite having such a rich legacy, they have been short-changed since Indian independence. As far as the violence on 3rd May, and its aftermath is concerned, the Kukis say that while the all-Tribal rally in different hill areas against attempts to grant Scheduled Tribes (ST) status to Meiteis was peaceful, there was a conscious attempt to trigger violence by torching the Anglo-Kuki war memorial gate at the entrance of Churachandpur by Meitei chauvinist groups. Most Kukis believe that the attacks on them were pre-planned and orchestrated by the Arambai Tenggol and the Meitei Leepun with full support of the state government, and came at a time when the Union government was days away from declaring 6th Schedule status to the hill areas of Manipur. They believe that the pre-planned targeted manner in which barbaric violence of this scale that they faced, as also the loot and destruction of their properties and religious places, is nothing short of a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing.

2. On the other hand, Meiteis too have suffered deaths, displacement and destruction of properties and a dozen religious places. The State's narrative, echoed by most Meiteis, is that while the immediate trigger for the conflict was the High Court order recommending that the State consider extending Scheduled Tribe status to Meiteis, the larger reason behind the conflict, is the Kuki backlash to the State government's clamp down on illegal infiltration of Kukis from Myanmar, the attempts to stop illegal forest encroachments by Kukis and the war waged on drugs by the State government targeting Kuki poppy cultivators. Underlying this narrative of the conflict, is the strong belief that Meiteis are original inhabitants of Manipur, while the Kukis are late-comers. They believe that the violence was entirely orchestrated by the Kuki community and SoO militant organisations. They argue that the violence on 3rd May was started by the Kukis, who, in the name of the protest march against the High Court order and granting of ST status to Meiteis, attacked government offices at first, and then after staging the arson at the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Gate at Leisang Village, went about vandalising, burning and attacking the homes of Meiteis in numerous villages in Bishnupur, Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Moreh, etc. This enraged the Meitei community, which thirsting for revenge began to spontaneously retaliate against the Kukis in Meitei dominated areas. They also believe that the illegal infiltrator Chin-Kuki militants are at the forefront of the attack on the Meiteis, and that they are heavily armed, and that the Kukis are engaged in continued heinous killings of Meiteis, arson and destruction of Meitei homes and religious places compelling retaliatory violence from outraged Meitei mobs.
3. Analysing the stark geographical, economic, and ethnic differences between hill and valley regions is crucial to understand the ongoing conflict. The disparity in development between the hills and valley, is a serious socio-economic-political issue in Manipur. This has been accentuated by the lopsided and valley-centric policies of the BJP government. For instance while the state projects a war on drugs, there are reports of the state's complicity in

promoting the drug cartel. In addition to these elements, are the underlying economic factors including control over land, and unlocking of precious mineral potential in the Hills which have animated the conflict.

4. The battle in Manipur is being fought not simply over competing ethnic claims to Manipur, but also over the production of historical “truth”. The recent spate of violence is nothing but a manifestation of struggles over claims to autochthony and belonging. It is apparent that the current BJP regime, by deploying its basic formula of divisiveness, has opportunistically taken advantage of historical differences to further its political ambitions and entrench its communal agenda in Manipur's society and polity.
5. The situation in Manipur today, is of complete ethnic segregation of the two communities, Kukis and Meiteis. There are no Kukis left in the Valley and similarly no Meiteis in the Hills. The Imphal valley and the Hills today stand divided by a "border". There are bunkers on either side of the "border" manned by armed squads from the two communities, while the state security forces are stationed in between to man the border. An undeclared blockade by Meitei organisations, has been enforced to prevent the movement of relief material, medical supplies and essential supplies to the hills by the Government agencies and armed forces. This blockade is adversely impacting thousands of conflict-displaced Kukis in the relief camps in the hill districts. Indeed, the Kukis living in the villages and towns in the Hills too are suffering the devastating impact of this blockade. The Kukis, on the other hand, have periodically blockaded the national highways that restrict supplies to the valley, and impact the mobility of Meiteis out of the Valley. The blocking of the highways leaves a flight out of Imphal as the only way to leave Manipur.
6. The broader ethnic segregation witnessed in the region between the hill and valley also plays out in relief camps. The camps in the Hills were either run by local civil society organisations, NGOs, churches or on support from local politicians with little or no State support. Most have poor infrastructure, are overcrowded, have poor living conditions, lack proper sanitation, have limited access to medical supplies and personnel, and are unable to provide proper nutrition to displaced Kukis living in the camps. The relief camps in the valley are run by local clubs, CSOs and philanthropic organisations, with varying levels of state support and have their own share of problems including overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and livelihood insecurity. Access to medical services is also in a much better situation given the proximity to the vast medical infrastructure in the valley. However, attention has to be paid to the nutrition deficit in the diet in the relief camps and to the needs of children, senior citizens and the infirm. It is a matter of grave concern that the situation persists even three months after the outbreak of the violence.
7. It is noteworthy that the Government has facilitated the admission of Meitei displaced students into schools and colleges in the vicinity of the relief camps thereby ensuring



continuing of their education. In stark contrast, the education of the Kuki students both in the relief camps and in the hills is under serious crisis and immediate steps need to be taken to ensure that their education is resumed.

8. Furthermore, the economic destitution caused by the violence and displacement has resulted in serious impoverishment and financial insecurity for the Kuki displaced persons. The displaced Meiteis in the relief camps in the Valley too are facing a livelihood crisis and are trying to find work around the camps. It is helpful that the local clubs and philanthropic organisations have started livelihood training programmes to Meitei displaced persons in some of the relief camps.
9. Across camps in both the hills and the valley, displaced persons residing at relief camps are overcome by overwhelming grief of having lost their homes and livelihoods. People shared with the Team poignant stories of fleeing from violence, hiding in the forests and the arduous journeys they undertook to reach the relief camps. Almost all conversations ended with people sharing their fear and uncertainty about what the future holds for them.
10. As far as a political solution is concerned, the Kukis have taken a clear stand that separate administration is the only way out. Their demand is for Union Territory (UT) status with an elected legislature to be given to the Kuki-dominated hill districts. On the other hand, the Meitei community demand the withdrawal of Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with the Kuki militant groups, protection of territorial integrity of Manipur and strict action against forest encroachments, Kuki militancy and poppy cultivation as a precondition for any dialogue.
11. Beyond the intense division and hatred that the present conflict has created between the two communities, is the unanimous view that the Government, be it the Centre or the State, stands to blame for this conflict. Indeed, the BJP, with Modi at the Centre and Biren Singh in Manipur, have overseen the complete decimation of Manipur's social fabric resulting in entire communities being totally ethnically segregated into distinct parts of a State.
12. If the ongoing conflict is evidence enough that Chief Minister Biren Singh has proven thoroughly incompetent and reluctant to put an end to the violence, then the prioritisation of foreign visits over a visit to Manipur by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and his conscious silence, reveals grave apathy towards the people's suffering in Manipur. The twin-BJP governments at the State and Centre, are squarely to blame for the current situation in Manipur and are trying to escape accountability for the situation, by fanning hatred between the two communities. Divide and rule is the clear policy; twin-BJP governments have orchestrated an ethnic divide, which they will communally exploit. The Chief Minister of Manipur himself has fanned the otherising narrative against Kukis by legitimising war-

mongering terminologies such as 'illegal infiltrator'. Rather than governing Manipur based on constitutional principles of unity of people, the BJP-led government did what it is best at, that is to widen existing fault lines in a society and feed a chauvinistic narrative.

13. The resolution of this crisis ought to be considered within the broader context of restoration of peace in the state, and fixation of accountability on the twin-BJP governments. Accountability must start from the top, and Chief Minister Biren Singh, who has not only overseen but has fed into the polarising narrative that culminated in such unprecedented violence and segregation must resign. This government has no legitimacy whatsoever to continue.
14. Peace is possible on the basis of justice and reconciliation. For any political solution to emerge, restoration of peace and normalcy is a must and the first step in this direction is the fixing of accountability on the BJP government in Manipur. Further, it is in the interests of all that further hostilities are ceased, to ensure that the suffering masses in the relief camps can be properly taken care of, and the dead lying in the mortuaries are given a dignified burial, as a gesture of moving forward from the conflict and towards a resolution to the present impasse.

September 2023

# I. Introduction

The nation watches in dismay, as violence and suffering engulf Manipur, as the conflict between two ethnic groups, the Meiteis and the Kukis, which broke out on May 3rd, 2023 continues unabated. According to an official report submitted by the Manipur government to the Supreme Court, the number of deaths since the conflict broke out stands at 142, and the number of people displaced at 54,488. Since these figures were presented to the Court on 10th of July, violence has continued leading to more deaths, injuries and conflict-induced displacement.<sup>1</sup> With an ongoing ban on mobile Internet, the relative lack of media access and unbiased reporting on the conflict and its origins, and a general vacuum of government accountability, credible information on the on-going situation is difficult to access.

Against such a backdrop, CPI(ML)Liberation constituted an eight-member Team to visit the state from 10th -14th August 2023, to express its concern about, and offer solidarity with, the people of Manipur. The Team consisted of CPI(ML)Liberation leaders, representatives from All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA), and All India Lawyers Association for Justice (AILAJ) and an independent feminist activist. They were: Clifton D' Rozario (CPIML Central Committee member and Party State Secretary, Karnataka), Krishnaveni (All India Progressive Women's Association), Du. Saraswathi (Dalit rights activist and prominent cultural activist, Karnataka), Sucheta De (CPIML Central Committee Member, Delhi), Bibek Das (CPIML Central Committee member and Party State Secretary, Assam), Pratima Engheepi (CPIML Central Committee Member and AIPWA leader, Karbi Anglong), Avani Chokshi (AILAJ and CPIML activist), Madhulika T. (AILAJ).

The Team visited various affected areas in the valley districts of Imphal and Bishnupur, and the hill districts of Kangpokpi and Churachandpur, and met persons from all walks of life in Manipur including victims of the violence residing in various relief camps, representatives of civil society organisations, prominent political leaders, legal professionals, media professionals, retired bureaucrats, a senior police official and Smt. Anusuiya Uikey, the Governor of Manipur. The Team also met at Guwahati, displaced Kukis who had fled there after the conflict. The Team discussed its preliminary observations with the press in Imphal, Guwahati, Kolkata and Patna (Copy of the preliminary release of the Team is attached as **Annexure - I**).

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<sup>1</sup> The death toll has now crossed 175, while the number of injured keeps mounting, as fresh waves of violence break out. At the time of finalising this report (14th September), just a days after the 11-minute Special Assembly session in Manipur, in which Chief Minister Biren Singh moved an obituary reference and proposed a two-minute silence to honour those killed, fresh bouts of violence have regularly broken out resulting in more deaths.

## II. Manipur State and Society

Post the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, the princely State of Manipur underwent drastic administrative changes and for all practical purposes, was under the rule of the British.<sup>2</sup> With the lapse of paramountcy, Manipur became independent on 14th August 1947. In the same year, independent Manipur adopted a Constitution titled the "*Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947*"<sup>3</sup>, which provided for a state assembly based on joint electorate. The Maharaja remained a constitutional head and governance of the state included representation and participation of the hills people along with other communities.

V. P. Menon, who worked closely with Sardar Patel to help integrate the princely states with India, wrote<sup>4</sup> about the integration of Manipur with India: "*Manipur is bounded on the north by the Naga district of Assam; on the east by Burma; on the south by Burma and the Lushai Hills, and on the west by the district of Cachar. The hill tribes fall into two main sections, Kukis and Nagas, the former name being the generic term applied to tribes whose home is in certain defined mountain tracts.*"

After merging with India, Manipur was initially a Union Territory, as a Part "C" State in the First Schedule to the Constitution, and was administered by the President. In 1971, the existing north-eastern states were reorganised under the provisions of the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971, and the present state of Manipur was formed comprising the territories previously under the Union Territory of Manipur. In the same year, Article 371C was inserted in the Constitution, empowering the Parliament to constitute a Committee of Legislative Assembly for the Hill Areas of the State, and requiring the Governor to make an annual report to the President regarding the administration of the Hill areas of the State. Article 371C also provides executive power to the Union to direct the State in matters of administration of said areas. Pursuant to this, the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971 was enacted by the Parliament, which was replaced by the Manipur Hill Areas Autonomous District Council Act, 2000.<sup>5</sup>

Manipur, consists of two geographically distinct regions - a small and oval shaped valley at the centre covering 2,238 sq. kms. which accounts for the 10% of the total area of the state, encircled by nine hill ranges on all sides, which comprises 90% of the total geographical area of the state i.e., 20,089 sq. kms.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Goshwami, H. (2019). "History of the People of Manipur": p. 195

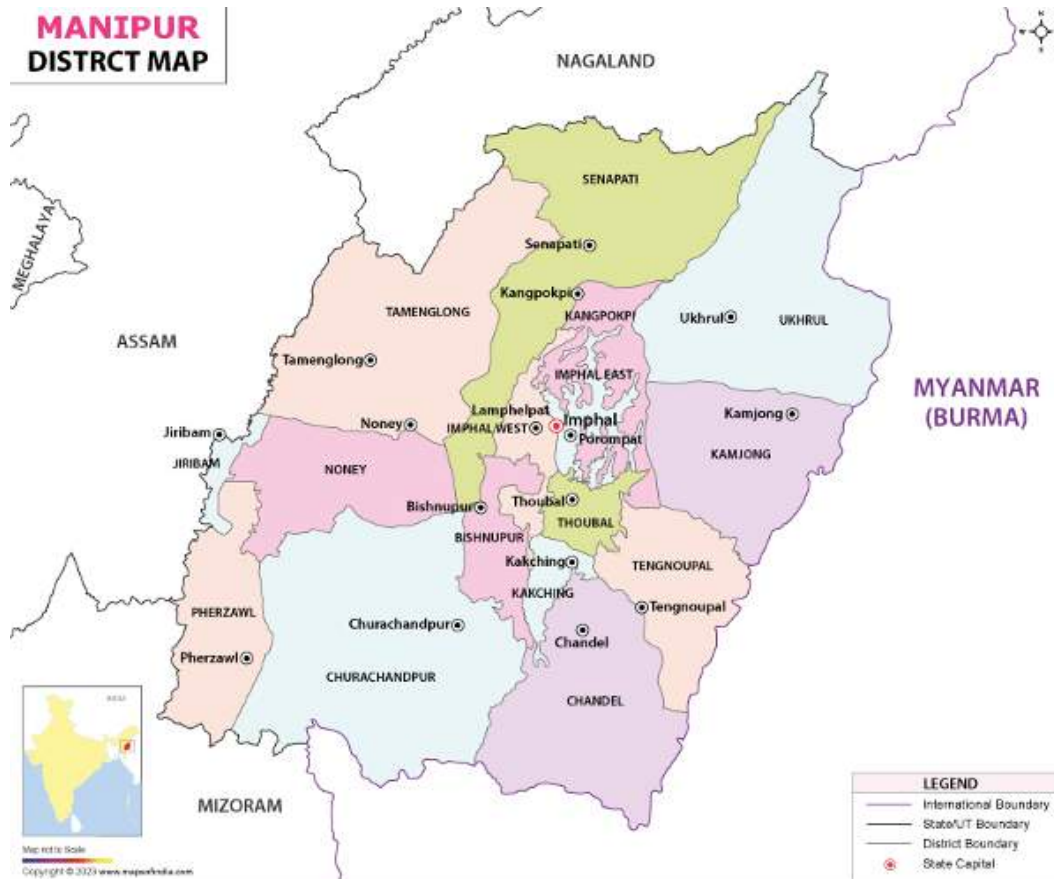
<sup>3</sup> Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947. Available at: [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/IN/COHR\\_IND\\_UPR\\_S1\\_2008anx\\_Annex\\_IV\\_Manipur\\_State\\_Constitution\\_Act%2C\\_1947.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/IN/COHR_IND_UPR_S1_2008anx_Annex_IV_Manipur_State_Constitution_Act%2C_1947.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Menon, V. P. (1955). "The Story of the Integration of Indian States": p.273

<sup>5</sup> NEA News Service. "Sixth Schedule in Manipur." The North-east Affairs. July 3, 2023. Available at: <https://thenortheastaffairs.com/sixth-schedule-in-manipur/>

<sup>6</sup> Government of Manipur. Economic Survey, 2020-21: p.i

The state is divided into 16 districts of which 10 districts are predominantly Tribal districts while the rest are inhabited by Meiteis.<sup>7</sup> There is a high incidence of people migrating<sup>8</sup> from the poorer and less developed hill region to relatively better-off and developed valley areas for employment opportunities and educational purposes. The reverse is generally rare. The stark geographical, economic, and ethnic differences between hill and valley regions, provide a major context for the ongoing conflict.



To analyse the conflict, an understanding of Manipur's ethnic and religious make-up is crucial. As per the 2011 population census, the population of Manipur is 28.56 lakhs.<sup>10</sup> Manipur is a multi-ethnic state with Meitei Hindus being the majority. They constitute 41% of the population (including 3.41 % scheduled castes communities)<sup>11</sup>. The Muslims, colloquially known as Pangals or Meitei Muslims, constitute about 8.39% of the total population. According to leaders of the Meitei Christian community, the Meitei Christian population is about 1.25 lakhs, and as per

<sup>7</sup> The Valley districts are Kakching, Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal, Bishnupur and Jiribam, the Naga dominated hill districts are Tamenglong, Noney, Chandel, Kamjong, Ukhrul, Senapati and the Kuki dominated districts are Churachandpur, Tengnoupal, Pherzawl, and Kangpokpi according to the report available at <https://ukhrultimes.com/unc-condemns-cold-blooded-murder-of-maring-naga-woman-by-arambai-tenggol-demands-justice-within-48-hrs-12-hrs-total-shutdown-in-manipur-naga-areas/>

<sup>8</sup> Supra note 6: p. 5

<sup>9</sup> Map available at <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/manipur/manipur.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Supra note 6: p. ii

<sup>11</sup> Scheduled castes are Loi, Yaithibi, Dhobi, Muchi or Rabidas, Namsudra, Patni and Sutradhar

Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), a Meitei organisation, the number of Meitei Christians is 1.7 lakhs.<sup>12</sup> The Meitei community, irrespective of religion, are predominantly settled in the valley regions. Other small communities like Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains also live in Manipur although their number is minimal.<sup>13</sup>

Besides Meiteis, there are the Tribal communities mainly consisting of two ethnic groups, the Nagas and the Kukis, who constitute 24% and 16% of the state's population respectively. They live in the hills primarily. With the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2011, that came into effect on 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2012, there are 37 Tribal communities specified as Scheduled Tribes in 34 Entries in Manipur.<sup>14</sup>

There is a high degree of urbanisation in the valley, with nearly 40% of the people living in urban areas. In contrast, the hill areas of the State are almost entirely rural. The valley region is thickly populated while the Hills are covered by forests interspersed with habitations.

The economy of the State relies mainly on three major sectors – the primary sector consisting of agriculture including livestock, forestry and logging, fishing and mining/quarrying, the secondary sector which includes manufacturing, construction, etc. and the tertiary sector which consists of transport and other service sectors.<sup>15</sup> At present, industries are largely traditional ones such as khadi, handlooms and handicrafts.<sup>16</sup>

Agriculture is most prominent<sup>17</sup> sector of the state's economy. However, it is entirely dependent on contingent factors like timely rainfall and weather conditions. Permanent cultivation is generally practised in the valley districts; in the Hills jhuming (shifting) cultivation is widely adopted alongside small pockets of terrace cultivation. While the Meiteis thrive on wet cultivation, the Tribal population subsist largely on the slash-and-burn technique of cultivation and depend heavily on the valley for their basic needs.<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, out of the state's total geographical area, the net cultivated area accounts for only 10.37%, of which 4.97% is in the valley and 5.55% in the hills. Cultivated areas in the hill and valley regions are 1,49,430 hectares and 1,94,190 hectares respectively.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Hindu. "Imphal civil society body COCOMI writes to European Parliament on Manipur", July 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/imphal-civil-society-body-cocomi-writes-to-european-parliament-on-manipur/article67112495.ece>

<sup>13</sup> *Supra* note 6: p. 16

<sup>14</sup> Planning Department, Government of Manipur. (Nov. 2019). "Executive Summary", *Manipur Vision 2030: Leaving No-one Behind – Achieving inclusive growth and the sustainable development goals*: p. 91

<sup>15</sup> *Supra* note 6: p. 25

<sup>16</sup> *Id*: p. 83

<sup>17</sup> *Supra* note 6: p. 43

<sup>18</sup> Arun, I, Ed. (2021). "Chainarol: Way of the warrior", Human Rights Alert.

<sup>19</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 23

Non-timber forest produce (NTFP), medicinal plants, timber and bamboo operations including manufacturing of wood and bamboo products, form an important source of income for the Tribals in the hills. The people involved in collection of NTFPs and medicinal plants form an important node in the supply chain of food and pharmaceutical industries in Manipur.

The number of persons below poverty line is 7.45 lakhs (38.8 %) and 2.78 lakhs (32.59%) in rural and urban Manipur respectively.<sup>20</sup> The poverty profile of Manipur is closely connected to the physical characteristics of the terrain and the economic development of the region. The hill districts have a higher proportion of people living in abject poverty in comparison to the valley districts. Poverty in the Valley is lower since the valley lands are fertile and irrigated. The valley being more urbanised also has better employment opportunities.

Official discourse pins poverty in Manipur on decades of economic backwardness, widespread unemployment, discrimination, rising population, poor infrastructure, and ineffectiveness of various development schemes.<sup>21</sup> However, the fact that Manipur continues to be a poor state, despite its rich natural resources, can only mean that successive governments, both at the state and Centre, have ignored the State and its people.

Manipur, for years, has been viewed mainly through the prism of national security due to its geographical location as a border state, and its history of assertion against the Indian state, The lives and livelihood of people in Manipur have consistently taken a backseat for the ruling powers of India. The aspirational struggles for autonomy and freedom by various armed groups are part of the history of the state, as are the ethnic conflicts<sup>22</sup> on issues ranging from "*exclusivity, dominance and integration*"<sup>23</sup> and "*questions of land, immigration and settlement, but also on the overweening fear of loss of identity itself*".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Supra* note 6: p. x

<sup>21</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 191

<sup>22</sup> Prior to the outbreak of violence in May 2023, Manipur has witnessed a series of ethnic conflicts over the past three decades alone: Naga-Kuki clash of 1992-1995, Meitei - Pangal conflict of 1993#, the Kuki-Paite clash of 1997-98 and the much more covert Meitei-Naga tension around the 2000s.

<sup>23</sup> Oinam, B. (2003). "Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in the North-East: A study of Manipur", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38 (21): pp. 2031-2037, available at <https://www.epw.in/journal/2003/21/perspectives/patterns-ethnic-conflict-north-east.html>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

### III. Genesis of the Conflict: A Range of Narratives

The framing of the discourse, particularly around the causes for the conflict, is bitterly contested by both communities.

The version heard by the Team in its visit to the hills was that Kukis have been discriminated against for decades, and have suffered due to the lack of development in the hill region. As per the Kukis, this long-standing lack of development, is compounded by the aggressive State's campaign of demonising the entire Kuki community through false propaganda by referring to them as infiltrators, drug peddlers and forest encroachers. This is underlined by their belief that they have a natural claim over the hills by virtue of being its original inhabitants, confirmed by their status as heroes who fought the British, in particular highlighting the Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919). There is anger that despite having such a rich legacy they have been short-changed since Independence, which is evident from the developmental disparity and budgetary allocation disparity between the valley and the hills. As far as the violence on 3rd May 2023 is concerned, most Kukis believe that the attacks on them were pre-planned, led by the Arambai Tenggol/Meitei Leepun who enjoy state patronage, and came at a time when the Union government was days away from declaring 6th Schedule status to the hill areas of Manipur.<sup>25</sup>

However, the dominant narrative pushed by the State, and one with which the Meitei representatives with whom the Team spoke with largely agree, is that this conflict was triggered by the March 2023 High Court order on Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to Meiteis. They also argue that the conflict arose due to Kuki backlash to the State government clamping down on illegal infiltration of Kukis from Myanmar, illegal forest encroachments by Kukis and the war on drugs by the State government targeting poppy cultivations by the Kukis. Underlying this narrative is the belief that the Meiteis are the original inhabitants of Manipur, and the Kukis are late-comers who are trying to alter the demography of the State, and win political power by facilitating illegal immigration.

Taking these competing narratives together, it is evident that the order of the High Court on granting ST status to Meiteis, was the straw that broke the camel's back, when in fact there are several legacy issues and political manoeuvres by the BJP that have together contributed to the inevitability of the present situation.

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<sup>25</sup> The Sixth Schedule provides for the creation of Autonomous District and Regional Councils and accords a host of legislative, executive and judicial powers to these autonomous bodies. It applies to certain Tribal areas of the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Manipur is governed by Article 371-C as well as the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, although this does not compare with the considerable autonomy conferred on Tribal areas by the Sixth Schedule.



### 3.1 Hill and valley regional developmental disparities

The developmental disparity between the Valley and Hill regions, and the socio-economic and political exclusion of the Kuki community, was repeatedly brought up in the interactions Team had with members of the Kuki community.

A representative of Kuki Student Organisation in Churachandpur told the Team that since the Meiteis control the government and bureaucracy, the hilly areas have been underdeveloped, especially with respect to public infrastructure. He highlighted the concentration of public institutions including Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS), Manipur University etc in Imphal as an example of this phenomenon. Even Tribal Institutions, such as the Indira Gandhi Tribal University are based in Imphal, he lamented. Manipur's sole airport is at Imphal. He highlighted that political power, which determines development priorities, has always been denied to Kukis. Given that the Meiteis have at least 40 MLAs, and all of the Tribal communities together have only 20 MLAs, it is no surprise that development has been so skewed in the State.

The Kukis blame not just the State, but also the Centre, for underdevelopment in the region. One aspect that was repeatedly highlighted was the conscious denial of the Constitutional 6th Schedule status to hilly areas of Manipur, despite repeated demands from the Kukis. The spokesperson of Indigenous Tribal Leader's Forum (ITLF) said that granting 6th schedule status could have been one possible way for protecting the aspirations and interests of the Kuki community in a Meitei dominated state. Other members of the Kuki Student Organisation also stated that, under the Chief Ministership of Biren Singh, the Hill Area Committee under Article 371C, and the autonomous district councils<sup>26</sup>, have been rendered practically dysfunctional.

A civil liberties activist from Imphal pointed out that while the regional disparity cannot be ignored, there is vast poverty and inequality even within the Meitei community, as a consequence of Manipur being a poor state. He alluded to the pathetic condition of Meitei displaced persons as evidence of poverty several members of the majority community in the State too are facing.

Notably, in contrast to the rest of the country, there is a perceptible developmental disparity in Manipur. The percentage of Manipuri population living below the national poverty line in the year 2011-12 was 36.89% as opposed to an all-India average of 21.92%.<sup>27</sup>

Having said that, there is a general consensus that beyond the overall underdevelopment in the State, there is marked disparity in development parameters between the hills and valley. The incidence of poverty is much higher in the hills than in the valley. There is severe inequality in

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<sup>26</sup> Constituted under the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971

<sup>27</sup> *Supra note 6*: p. 276

terms of population, area, sex ratio, literacy rate, infant mortality rate, expectancy of life at birth, poverty, per capita income, forest cover, electricity consumption and road length.<sup>28</sup> Agricultural development in the hills has been largely neglected and marginalised.<sup>29</sup>

There is also a sharp contrast between the valley and the hill in regard to urbanisation.<sup>30</sup> A recent study<sup>31</sup> revealed that the road density is 0.06 km per sq km in the hills, which is much lower than the 0.19 km road density in the valley. The valley also has better road conditions and greater access to cheaper transport facilities. The roads are unsurfaced and unmaintained in hill areas.

Raile Rocky Ziipao, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at IIT Bombay, argues that, embedded in this disparity, are layers of power and manipulation, manufactured by the dominant community and the state since the colonial period.<sup>32</sup> He writes that, unlike the "valley state" and the British, the Tribals did not have a written history, and as a result, became victims of *"colonizing by discourse."* Consequently tribals experience two forms of domination: physical and narrative control<sup>33</sup>. He also makes the point that the British consciously underdeveloped Tribal areas and engaged in the *"politics of othering the tribes"* by categorising them as *"savages"* and *"uncivilised"*, a perception that was perpetuated and replicated by the Meiteis. As such *"(T)ribes were ensnared on the one hand by racial inferiorisation and on the other by material/physical domination by the British, as well as the dominant communities in the region"*.<sup>34</sup>

Importantly, the Manipur government's Vision document identifies reduction and ultimate elimination of regional disparities as necessary for peace, justice and balanced socio-economic and political development in the state.<sup>35</sup> The fact however, remains that the BJP, the present political party in power in the state, rather than positively addressing development disparity and bringing peace to the state, has manipulated existing tensions and caused unprecedented conflict and segregation in the State

## 3.2 BJP coming to power

Several members of the Kuki and Meitei community alike trace the origins of the present conflict to the BJP ascending power. For the 15 years between 2002 and 2017, Congress-controlled alliances held power in Manipur, with a sudden shift occurring the 2017 elections. The BJP, which had not secured a single seat in the previous elections of 2007 and 2012, managed to secure the

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<sup>28</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 191

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>30</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 202

<sup>31</sup> Reimeingam, M and Haokip, TT. (2021). "Infrastructure Led Livelihood: A Comparative Analysis of Hill and Valley in Manipur", Working Paper 513, Institute for Social and Economic Change.

<sup>32</sup> Ziipao, RR. (2020) "Infrastructure of Injustice: State and Politics in Manipur and Northeast India", Routledge, New Delhi: p. 20

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*: p. 9

<sup>34</sup> *Supra* note 32: p. 13

<sup>35</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 93

highest vote, winning 21 of 60 seats, in the 2017 elections in the State. While the Congress retained its position as the single largest party, its seat share dropped from 42 seats in 2012 to 28 seats in 2017.<sup>36</sup> Even though Congress was the single largest Party, it was the BJP that formed a coalition government with N. Biren Singh, a former Congress MLA, taking oath as Chief Minister of Manipur.

Five years later, in 2022, the BJP won the status of the single largest party, by securing a majority of 32 out of 60 seats. This included 7 Kuki MLAs from the BJP. The Kuki People's Alliance, which has two members in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, and an independent Kuki MLA, also supported the BJP-led government in the state.

A media professional from Imphal told the Team that out of the present strength of 60 MLAs in Manipur Assembly, 35 MLAs are Meiteis, 10 MLAs are Kukis, 10 MLAs are Nagas and 5 are Meitei Pangals. She added that the 10 Kuki MLAs are currently supporting the demand for separate statehood for Kukis.

A women's rights activist from Kangpokpi informed the team that in Manipur, there has always been a tendency for politicians to not stick by a political party, and instead gravitate towards the political party holding power at the centre. This explains how a large number of MLAs who were previously affiliated with Congress have now changed their allegiance to the BJP (including Chief Minister Biren Singh). She said that since the BJP came to power, they have pushed a narrative of victimhood of the Meitei community built on false propaganda that the Meitei majority will become a minority.

Similarly, an ITLF Spokesperson commented that since coming to power in Manipur, Chief Minister Biren Singh has embraced majoritarian politics, similar to the playbook used by the BJP in mainland India. He stated that like other majoritarian leaders across India, Biren Singh, drawing on the support of the local media, has built himself up as the champion for the dominant community by demonising the minority communities in the State. He calls this a "*conscious radicalization of the communities over the past few years*".

A member of the Kuki Student Organisation, said that Biren Singh was not openly communal in his first term as Chief Minister, and only began to viciously target Kukis in his second term.

The team was told that the Chief Minister, buoyed with confidence after winning power for the second time, began to openly target those who spoke out against him, by getting them detained and arrested. The example of 21 year old Hanglalmuan Vaiphei, who was arrested and killed in custody after sharing a viral Facebook post blaming Biren Singh for the problems faced by the Kuki-Zo people was cited. The Team verified this narrative – a report in the Hindu reveals the

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<sup>36</sup> Chakravarty, I. "Manipur election 2017: BJP says it has the numbers to form government," *Scroll.in*, Mar 12, 2017. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/831624/manipur-election-2017-bjp-stakes-claim-to-forming-government>

following: “Churachandpur district was on edge after April 27, when Kuki-Zomi groups had, in a protest against CM Singh, burnt down a gym he was supposed to inaugurate. Amidst this, Vaiphei, a B.A. (Geography) student at Churachandpur College, had come across a viral post on social media by a user called “Bon Lee”, blaming Meitei politicians, including CM Singh, for the problems faced by Kuki-Zo people. He then reposted this on his Facebook and later deleted it in 24 hours, those who knew him said. However, police were quick to knock on his door on April 30, according to his family. It has now been revealed that the case Mr. Vaiphei was arrested in was in fact registered against “Bon Lee”. The post alleged that political leaders of the Meitei community, purportedly with the support of the CM, were fuelling poppy cultivation in the hills and blaming Tribals for it in order to “grab Tribal lands”. The post also painted the Meitei community as “racist” and “anti-India”, claiming they were the source of Manipur’s problems”<sup>37</sup> The report also notes that after grant of bail on May 3, Vaiphei was immediately arrested again in “an identical case registered for the same social media post”. While being escorted to jail on May 4<sup>th</sup>, he was killed – purportedly by a mob in the violence. The Hindu report had verified the FIR in the case, which revealed that “police were escorting 21-year-old Hanglalmuan Vaiphei from court to the Sajiwa Jail on May 4, when they were stopped by a mob in the Porompat area. The armed mob robbed the police of their weapons and beat Vaiphei to death as the police “escaped in different directions to save themselves”<sup>38</sup>

A retired Magistrate belonging to the Kuki community, who the Team met in a village in Kangpokpi, shared that another reason for the Kuki community’s dissatisfaction with the Biren Singh government, was his manoeuvre of rendering the Autonomous District Councils as defunct. She shared that no elections to the Council have taken place since he took power in 2017.

The Team was also told that the ethnic fire was stoked by the State government's unilateral decision to withdraw the Suspension of Operation (SoO) pact with two Kuki militant umbrella groups—the Kuki National Army (KNA) and the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA)—on 10th March, 2023, alleging that they were instigating people against the government’s anti-encroachment drive.<sup>39</sup> However, the Union government did not grant its approval to this withdrawal<sup>40</sup> and recently assured<sup>41</sup> the implementation of the SoO agreement with Kuki insurgent groups.

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<sup>37</sup> Lakshman, A. “FIR reveals horrific killing of Manipur youth,” *The Hindu*, Jul 24, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/when-a-kuki-college-student-in-police-custody-was-beaten-to-death-by-mob-in-manipur/article67112812.ece>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>39</sup> Deka, K. “The shameful blunders in Manipur”, *India Today*, Aug 7, 2023. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/india-today-insight/story/20230807-the-shameful-blunders-in-manipur-2416414-2023-08-06>

<sup>40</sup> Choudhury, R. “Manipur's Suspension Of Talks With Rebel Groups Awaits Centre's Approval”, *NDTV*, Mar 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/manipurs-suspension-of-talks-with-rebel-groups-awaits-centres-approval-3886344>

<sup>41</sup> Singh, V. “Centre will ensure execution of SoO pact with Kuki groups, says Amit Shah”, *The Hindu*, Jun 26, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/centre-will-ensure-execution-of-soo-pact-with-kuki-groups-says-amit-shah/article67012817.ece>

Most Meiteis the Team spoke to were of the opinion that Biren Singh is leading a legitimate fight against poppy cultivations, forest encroachments and illegal immigration from Myanmar, and believe that Kukis are behind these illegalities. Very few civil society representatives in Imphal were sympathetic to the idea that the relentless propaganda has led to the demonisation and othering of the entire Kuki community.

Brinda Thounaojam, former IPS officer whom the Team met at her house in Imphal, unequivocally blamed the Chief Minister for starting the slogan that all Kukis are Burmese and narco-terrorists, which has affected the mindset of the Manipuri people towards Kukis.



*Brinda Thounaojam with the Team*

Amom Malemnganba Singh, a research scholar at the Department of Political Science, Manipur University, Imphal, states as follows<sup>42</sup>: *“Since its resurgence, the BJP has worked to provide the Meitei community significant electoral positions while marginalising other religious and ethnic minorities. As a result, ethnic politics have become more intensified in Manipur. Since 2017, BJP karyakartas (party workers) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) pracharaks (full-time members) stationed in Manipur have been on an ambitious mission to incite the valley’s Vaishnavite Meitei (followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism) to assert their Hindutva politics against religious minorities and “illegal” immigrants while also providing the Meiteis with significant electoral positions. In Manipur, the RSS desires Meitei supremacy over other religious minorities... Manipur’s top BJP leaders have used anti-minority and anti-immigrant rhetoric to strengthen their political base by reimagining the state’s culture and traditions with a focus on majoritarian Meiteis to bring the state’s various ethnic communities under the influence of Hindutva politics... Through vigilante activities and cultural policing, various Meitei-based organisations have begun to resemble the Sangh Parivar in mounting majoritarian politics, are promoting anti-minority rhetoric, and stirring communal tensions to exploit religious minorities, which further undermines the state’s secular ethos. Such organisations have taken up massive recruitment programmes for*

<sup>42</sup> Amom Malemnganba Singh "Meitei Majoritarian Politics of the BJP in Manipur" 2023(58) EPW 1 available at <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/1/alternative-standpoint/meitei-majoritarian-politics-bjp-manipur.html>

*the Manipuri youth. They are gradually gaining political ground by instilling a feeling of resentment among the Meiteis to portray “illegal” immigrants as a threat and calling on them to defend their indigenous identity. The BJP has prioritised Meitei majoritarian politics in Manipur to peddle its mainstream Hindu nationalism. The party’s top priority is to subjugate the state to Hindutva politics by igniting an ethnonationalism movement led by the Meiteis that targets the state’s religious minorities and immigrants.”*

Ranjan Solomon, a writer, human rights activist and political commentator, writes<sup>43</sup> that: "*Tribal communities feel that the BJP-led state government is participating in perilous communal politics by backing the Meiteis as ‘Hindus’, against the Tribal people who are predominantly Christian. Hindu nationalism is the reason why there is growing religious fundamentalism in the valley. The religious extremism of the majority community feeds minority religious subjugation. Meitei youth have now organised themselves under the banner of an organisation called Arambai Tenggol. The BJP has appropriated the traditional religions in the North East under their banner.*"

The BJP managed to ‘triumph’ in Manipur for the first time in 2017. Within 6 years of gaining power, it has wreaked havoc on Manipur society. Not only has the BJP exacerbated pre-existing fault lines in Manipur’s society, it has forced people of Manipur to experience hatred, segregation and violence that are sure to leave unerasable imprints on Manipur society. It is not coincidental that Haryana, another BJP ruled state, suffered the blow from similar polarising politics in the month of July-August, while Manipur still lay under the shadow of violence.

### **3.3 Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to Meiteis**

At the outset, most media channels reported that the conflict arose out of a judgement of the High Court of Manipur, in a petition filed for grant of ST status to the Meitei community. A brief background to this order of the High Court is necessary.

As per the petition, the Meitei community enjoyed the status of "*tribe amongst tribes of Manipur*" until the merger of Manipur with India; however, ever since then, the Meitei community had been deprived of the Scheduled Tribe status. The Petitioner had approached the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for inclusion of the Meitei Community, and received a reply in the year 2013, which stated that "*The recommendation of the concerned State Government is prerequisite to process the case further.*" Hence, the Petitioners sought for a direction to the Manipur government to recommend inclusion of Meitei community in the Schedule Tribe list and to direct the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to restore the Scheduled Tribe status of Meitei community.

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<sup>43</sup> Ranjan Solomon "BJP’s Communal Politics Has Deepened Historical Conflicts in Manipur" *The Wire*, Jun 8, 2023, available at <https://thewire.in/communalism/bjps-communal-politics-has-deepened-historical-conflicts-in-manipur>

17. In the result,
- (i) *The writ petition is disposed of.*
  - (ii) *The first respondent is directed to submit the recommendation in reply to the letter dated 29.5.2013 of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.*

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- (iii) *The first respondent shall consider the case of the petitioners for inclusion of the Meetei/Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe list, expeditiously, preferably within a period four weeks from the date of receipt of a copy of this order in terms of the averments set out in the writ petition and in the line of the order passed in WP(C) No. 4281 of 2002 dated 26.05.2003 by the Gauhati High Court.*

In the judgement dated 27.03.2023, a Bench headed by the Acting Chief Justice of the Manipur High Court directed the State government to recommend the name of Meitei community for consideration of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India,<sup>44</sup> which triggered a massive reaction from the Tribals.

Subsequently, the Supreme Court while dealing with a challenge to this order, orally observed the High Court judgement to be “factually wrong” but refrained from passing any orders in view of the pendency of the appeal before the Division Bench of the Manipur High Court.<sup>45</sup> The appeal before the Division Bench of Manipur High Court is still pending consideration.

Brinda Thounaojam told the Team that Home Minister Amit Shah had falsely stated that the

eruption of violence is linked with grant of ST status to Meiteis. She stated that large sections of the Meitei community are against their inclusion as Scheduled Tribes. Even an ITLF Spokesperson said that in 1949, when Manipur joined the Union Government, the Tribal communities were granted ST status and Meiteis were not, yet, they have traditionally never sought for such status, as they feel they are dominant and superior to the Tribals.

The members of the Kuki community who spoke to the Team unanimously stated that the demand for Scheduled Tribe status solely to enable purchase of hill lands by members of the Meitei community, which is not permissible now without the permission of the council. It is for this reason that all the Kukis and the Nagas are opposing ST status to Meiteis.<sup>46</sup> It was stated that this true reason is discernible from the fact that Meiteis already have job reservations under the SC (Scheduled Caste), OBC (Other Backward Classes), and EWS (Economically Weaker Sections) categories.

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<sup>44</sup> Judgement dt. 27.03.2023 of the Hon’ble High Court of Manipur at Imphal in Shri. Mutum Churamani Meetei v State of Manipur [WP(C) No. 229 of 2023]

<sup>45</sup> As early as 2000, the Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court in State of Maharashtra versus Milind had held in November 2000 held that “.. any tribe or Tribal community or part of or group within any tribe can be included or excluded from the list of Scheduled Tribes issued under clause (1) of Article 342 only by Parliament by law and by no other authority,”

<sup>46</sup> L. Lam Khan Piang, "Meiteis Have Not Been 'Denied' ST Status. Exclusion Was Their Own Choice" *The Wire*, May 26, 2023, available at <https://thewire.in/caste/meitei-st-status-exclusion-choice>

Amom Malemnganba Singh writes<sup>47</sup> that: *“Although the Meiteis’ demand for ST status may undermine the BJP’s Hindutva agenda in the state, there are factions within the Meiteis that are divided over these demands. It is important to note that the Meiteis’ demand for the ST status is closely linked to the BJP’s majoritarian politics of inciting the Meiteis to further solidify their dominance over minorities through the benefits provided for the ST category.”*

Through the course of the visit, the Team found that the issue of grant of Scheduled Caste status to the Meitei community was only one amongst a number of disputes between the communities, highly aggravated by the polarising actions and words of the Government.

### 3.4 Land and Economic Interests in the hills

Land occupies a prominent place in this conflict. Most of the Meiteis that the Team spoke to expressed their discontent at the perceived discrimination in land governance in hilly areas and valley areas. In the words of a senior opposition party politician, *“Kukis are purchasing land day-by-day in the valley. However, as non-STs we are unable to purchase land in the hills.”* Brinda Thounaojam told the Team that, due to the discriminatory land law regime operating in Manipur, Meiteis have been compartmentalised to just 10% of the area in the state whereas Tribal communities are able to reside and purchase land anywhere in Manipur.

On the other hand, a women’s rights activist from Kangpokpi stated that the Meitei slogan that *‘10% of land for 90% people’* is patently untrue, since 90% of the land in the hills is not habitable. She added that Tribals are so poor compared to the Valley people that allowing for land transfers would open the floodgates and Tribals would become landless in no time.

In the hill region, the landholding system is predominantly based on common property rights where the Chief of each village has control over user rights on jhum land, though terraced cultivation has private property characteristics. The Manipur government’s Vision Document notes that the hill region is yet to be cadastral surveyed, whereas in the valley region, private property rights have been fully established, and recommends that the land systems in the hills need to be “reformed” towards the notion of private property, however the choice and formulation of a new land system has to be left to the Tribals themselves.<sup>48</sup> This is perceived by the Tribals as an assault on their traditional method of governing land regimes in their community.

The potential plunder of resources is also acknowledged as a context for the conflict. A Meitei intellectual told the Team that Manipur is floating on a bed of oil, uranium, platinum and precious stones. He said that due to Tribal resistance, the government was unable to start mining in Churachandpur and Tamenglong districts, and hence, is using the bogey of narco-terrorism and

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<sup>47</sup>Supra note 43

<sup>48</sup>Supra note 14: p. 22



land discrimination to gain control of the resources. Brinda Thounaojam said that Manipur is being communally divided in order to plunder the oil and other mineral resources in the Hills. Catholic church officials are also of the opinion that the main reason for the present conflict is the attempt to take over the land and minerals embedded in the Hills. They noted that the government has entered into contracts with various multinational corporations (MNCs) for survey work and exploration processes, without even consulting the owners of the land or the Tribal chiefs.

Incidentally, a news report appearing in one of the local newspapers in March 2023, states as follows: *“Eastern margin of Manipur, also known as Ophiolite Belt in geology, extending from Jessami (Ukhrul District) in the north to Moreh (Tengnoupal District) in the south is rich in metallic and non-metallic minerals like limestone, chromite, PGE (Platinum Group of Elements like platinum, nickel, vanadium, etc.). Western margin of Manipur including portions of the districts of Tamenglong, Jiribam, Churachandpur and Pherzawl is reportedly rich in hydrocarbons (oil and gas) and falls under Assam-Arakan Basin ”.*<sup>49</sup> This confirms what an ITLF Spokesperson told the Team, that a company by the name, M/S. Jubilant Energy, has been given licence to explore for oil and gas in two blocks spread over the districts of Pherzawl, Churachandpur, Tamenglong and Jiribam,

Another sector that Tribals fear is ripe for corporate exploitation is the non-timber forest produce, which point to immense potential for commercialization of various medicinal plants that already have established markets, which could be further exploited.<sup>50</sup>

The signs are ominous. Clearly, natural resource plunder and Tribal land grab are perceived as the underpinning for the present conflict.

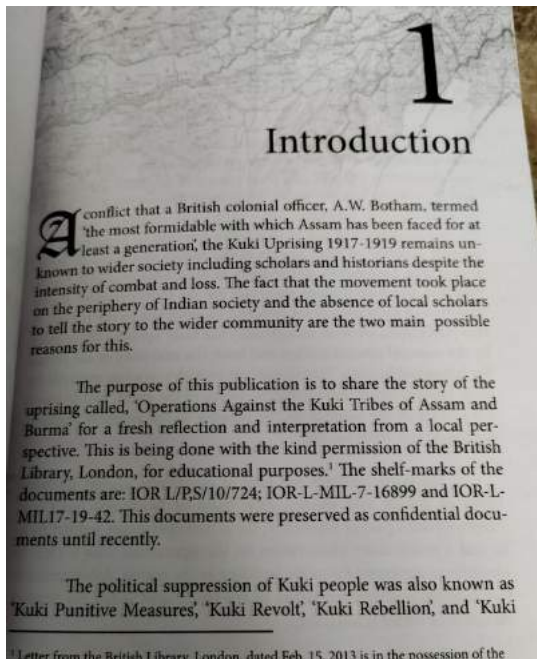
### **3.5 Competing historical claims to Manipur**

An underlying belief of many members of the Kuki community is that they are being made scapegoats in the name of “illegal infiltration” They refuse the tag of outsider and state that having lived in the Hills for centuries, the land belongs to them. An ITLF Spokesperson said that

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<sup>49</sup> “Singh, Dilip Kh. Oil and gas scenario in Manipur”, *The Sangai Express*, Mar 17, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2023/3/17/Kh-Dilip-SinghEastern-margin-of-Manipur-also-known-as-Ophiolite-Belt-in-geology-extending-from-J.html>

<sup>50</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 167



Letter from the British Library, London, dated Feb. 15, 2013 is in the possession of the



it is documented history that the Meiteis ruled over the Valley and had no control or rule over the Hills, where there was sovereignty of the Tribal communities including the Kukis.

Members of the Kuki Student Organisation, Churachandpur also informed the Team about the substantial contributions of the Kuki community to the Independence struggle. It was stated that the Anglo Kuki war (1917-1919) centenary gate is a legacy of Tribal resistance against the British. The Team was informed that during World War II, Subhash Chandra Bose hoisted the Indian flag in Churachandpur before proceeding to Moirang.

Several members of the Kuki community receive pension for being part of the Indian National Army (INA). In this view, one of the students said, though their forefathers have defended India, this contribution is undermined and the community itself is being branded as foreigners, immigrants and infiltrators.

In total contrast, the dominant Meitei narrative is that most of the Kuki population are illegal 'infiltrators', and only a few Kukis have been there for long periods. Most members of the Meitei community believe

themselves to be the original inhabitants of Manipur i.e., its true indigenous community, and find the other communities to be outsiders. Ima Ngambi, leader of the Meira Paibis told the Team that the Meitei communities are the indigenous people of Manipur. However, the Kukis are not indigenous, but are latecomers. The Meiteis believe that the Anglo - Kuki War itself is fictitious. Ima Ngambi denies the claim of the Kuki community having contributed to the freedom struggle. Incidentally, the United Naga Council has issued a statement<sup>51</sup> denying the Anglo-Kuki War, calling it a rebellion that ended in massacres of Naga people, and accused Kuki tribes of distorting history in a bid to "legitimise their imagined Kuki homeland within the Naga ancestral homeland".

<sup>51</sup> Lakshman, A. "Nagas say Kukis are laying claim to 'disputed' territory", *The Hindu*, Aug 21, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/nagas-say-kukis-are-laying-claim-to-disputed-territory/article67220174.ece#:~:text=The%20Apex%20body%20of%20Naga,of%20Manipur%20at%20the%20time>

The contestation around the narratives on the Anglo-Kuki war, which is said to be one of the biggest struggles of the Kuki community against British colonial rule, has been intensifying since the onset of the conflict in May 2023. Manipur Police has lodged cases against professors Jangkhomang Guite and Thongkholal Haokip, editors of the book *“The Anglo-Kuki War, 1917-1919”* and against Colonel (retd.) Vijay Chenchi, author of *“The Anglo-Kuki War 1917-19: Victory in Defeat”* on the complaint by 'Federation of Haomee', a Meitei organisation which has claimed that no Anglo-Kuki War had taken place in Manipur's history and described the event as an *“armed Kuki rebellion”*<sup>52</sup>

Historians from the Kuki community are reported<sup>53</sup> to have vociferously decried the lodging of cases stating that *“the police cases are attempts to delegitimise and omit Kuki history... By disputing that it was not a war, they want to discredit the fact that the Kukis are indigenous to the area. If they accept that the Anglo-Kuki War was true, they cannot say that Kukis have migrated from Myanmar in the recent past. Their theory of illegal migration would fall flat.”* Similarly, Thongkholal Haokip, an editor who is booked by the police, reportedly stated that *“A community that fought a colonial government twice during the two world wars cannot have their indigeneity questioned.”*

In sum, it is clear to the Team that the conflict is not simply over competing ethnic claims to Manipur, but also over the production of historical “truth” itself. The most recent spate of violence is a manifestation of struggles over claims to autochthony and belonging.

### 3.6 Illegal immigration

In the context of the larger claim to Manipur, the narrative of “rampant illegal immigration” from Myanmar is another issue which is hotly contested. Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, in Parliament, blamed illegal migrants for the conflict by stating that the violence was triggered by an influx of Kukis from Myanmar into Manipur, which *“created insecurities among Meiteis”*.<sup>54</sup>

The issue was inescapable in any conversation the Team had in Manipur. The Kuki representatives told the Team that the rhetoric of *“lakhs and lakhs of illegal immigrants”* was a devious fabrication of the State government and popularised by the Chief Minister Biren Singh himself. Reference was made to an interview<sup>55</sup>, in October 2019, where he declared that the National Register for Citizens (NRC) would be implemented in Manipur and added that though

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<sup>52</sup> Zaman, R. “Why a battle of narratives has broken out in Manipur over the 1917-1919 Anglo-Kuki War”, *Scroll.in*, Aug 20, 2023. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/1054519/why-a-battle-of-narratives-has-broken-out-in-manipur-over-the-1917-1919-anglo-kuki-war>

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Choudhury, A. “Centre blaming Myanmar migrants for Manipur violence is dangerous”, *Frontline*, Aug 24, 2023. Available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/centre-blaming-myanmar-migrants-for-manipur-violence-is-dangerous/article67212603.ece>

<sup>55</sup> Banerjee, R. “We face a huge migrant influx from Manipur”, *The Week*, Oct 5, 2019. Available at: <https://www.theweek.in/theweek/current/2019/10/04/we-face-a-huge-migrant-influx-from-myanmar.html>

there was no study, *"unofficial estimates point towards lakhs of foreigners"*. Apparently in February this year, Chief Minister Biren Singh had declared the formation of a Population Commission to conduct a door-to-door survey to detect illegal migrants in Manipur. While making this announcement, he is reported<sup>56</sup> to have said that 200 new villages in Churachandpur district, around 500 villages in Kangpokpi district and some villages in Tengnoupal, have been formed over the last few years and the State Government will verify whether these new villages are formed by indigenous people after displacing from their original village or were formed by illegal immigrants. The Team was also informed of Biren Singh's press conference on 2nd May, a day before the violence erupted, where he said that illegal immigration from Myanmar to Manipur was an issue, and that so far 410 people from Myanmar have been identified as staying in the state without proper documents, and then added that there were reasons to believe that there must be many more Myanmarese residing illegally in Manipur.

The members of the Kuki community claimed that the numbers of poor refugees from Myanmar were small. A representative of Kuki Student Organisation said that the border is highly controlled by the armed forces, which conducts door-to-door checking of records and regular patrolling. He referred to the incident of July this year, about 718 new infiltrations from Myanmar and said that the State had exact numbers and full details of persons entering Manipur. He said that getting documents including Aadhar card for Kukis has become difficult since they are so demonised by the State-sanctioned propaganda that every Kuki is suspected to be an illegal immigrant. He further stated that if illegal immigration is indeed an issue, then the administration ought to take necessary action instead of branding the entire community as infiltrators.

A women's rights activist from Kangpokpi stated that only some refugees from Myanmar are entering India to escape persecution. She said that this wild allegation arises from the basic premise of the Meitei community that Manipur belongs only to them.

A CSO representative in Churachandpur said that it is incorrect to presume any increasing immigrant population only because Kukis do not know the Meitei language, because Kuki is an umbrella term used to refer to a number of tribes, each of whom have their own languages. She said that only 20% of Kukis speak Meitei, and instead English is the common language.

On the other hand, at the Relief Camp in Moirang and Imphal, the Team was categorically told that there is illegal mass infiltration, which is having catastrophic impacts and there is every likelihood that, if not stopped, very soon Meiteis will become a minority. The Team was also told the Kukis are consciously increasing their population by bringing immigrants from Burma. Brinda Thounaojam, said that: *"Kukis are mostly Burmese. Infiltration is backed by Kuki militants who have been created by the Indian state. BJP is seeking to compartmentalise ethnic minorities and*

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<sup>56</sup> Devi, PK. "Manipur intensifies efforts to tackle illegal migration and protect forests, says CM N Biren Singh", *India Today NE*, Feb 26, 2023. Available at: <https://www.indiatodayne.in/manipur/story/manipur-intensifies-efforts-to-tackle-illegal-migration-and-protect-forests-says-cm-n-biren-singh-518979-2023-02-26>

*is encouraging, and will allow, the demand of separate administration. New Kukis didn't come till 1961. Some Old Kukis have been here for 200 years. These old Kukis should be identified and allowed to live here. In fact, even the Old Kukis want the Burmese Kukis to be removed. Foreigners have crept into all administrative departments and even been elected to the assembly. Lakhs and lakhs of illegal Kuki infiltrators are coming into Manipur. We should identify and deport these immigrants. We are not signatures to the refugee convention; we are not bound by any law."*

Ms. Anandi, adviser to the Meira Paibis, said that *"the Government of India is not responsive to the issues of the Manipuris, particularly in respect of illegal immigration. If, for example, Mujahideen infiltrate in Kashmir that would be a major issue. It is the central government and not the state government that is to blame, since Amit Shah said that he would control the hill side. Neither the military nor the security forces stop the entry of these Kukis from Myanmar. We love Kukis but only the ones who have been here for 100 years, and not the infiltrators, who after entering illegally, deforest the land, and plant poppy."*

A Forest Conservation Professional working with the Manipur Government provides another assessment in regard to the numbers. He says that *"there has been a slow trickle of refugees for some time now and despite the absolute numbers not being very large, this influx of immigrants has a decided impact on the electoral situation of the hilly districts. Kuki villages are usually 10-12 houses and under the village Chieftain, so ambitious Kuki men break away and form their own village. This is a possible explanation for the increase of Kuki villages, but there is every likelihood that illegal Kuki infiltrators from Myanmar are establishing new villages as well."*

A retired Bureaucrat living in Imphal said that after the coup in Myanmar in 2021, a number of people have fled to Manipur as refugees. He said, *"The government constituted a committee, led by a Kuki minister, that found about 2400+ illegal Myanmar immigrants. Another indication of the increasing immigrant population is that the number of people who don't know the Meitei language has increased drastically. Kukis learn it fairly quickly, but now if you visit the hill districts a large number of people don't know the Meitei language. After 2021, we assessed the number of illegal immigrants at around 10,000. The UN Refugee office in Delhi found around 4000-5000 such immigrants and NGOs who operate with undocumented immigrants recorded around 5-6000 further."*

It may be kept in mind at this juncture that the Manipur government issued a circular on 26.03.2023 to the Deputy Commissioners of districts bordering Myanmar not to open camps to provide food and shelter to refugees fleeing Myanmar, but later withdrew it. In another advisory, the Government asked the border district administrations to stop Aadhaar enrolment exercise.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> PTI. "Manipur govt asks DCs to 'politely turn away' Myanmar refugees, takes back order", *Times of India*, Mar 30, 2021. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/manipur-govt-asks-dcs-to-politely-turn-away-myanmar-refugees-takes-back-order/articleshow/81754739.cms>

On the other hand, neighbouring border states like Mizoram have accepted refugees from Myanmar and are granting relief to them.

The language of referring to the immigrants as "illegal infiltrators" as opposed to refugees is dehumanising and problematic. Furthermore, the country by now is well aware of the design and destiny of the narrative of "Illegal Infiltrator". This narrative has become an effective tool in the hands of today's ruling party, the BJP, to manufacture the otherisation of a targeted community. Before the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the same narrative was built up by the BJP; the Team was told that the biggest problem that the country is facing today is neither inequality, poverty, joblessness nor agrarian crisis, but "infiltration" from Bangladesh. There were targeted attacks against Bengali-speaking Muslim migrant workers in different parts of the country. To institutionalise the claim of "infiltration" the design of CAA-NRC-NPR was imposed on the country aimed at exclusion of the otherised population, the Muslims, from citizenship. Manipur, a border state of India, that has long been denied equal treatment, is now being made into the next testing ground of the narrative of "illegal infiltration".

### 3.7 Forest encroachments

Kukis are shocked that a false narrative of forest encroachments has been created and driven to demonise their community. They say *"We are the custodians of the forest and have been here before even the country was formed or before any law was passed. How can we be encroachers?"*. However, allegations of forest encroachments as a consequence of illegal infiltration are heard in official discourse and form part of the popular perception of the Meiteis the Team met.

A representative of Kuki Student Organisation, Churachandpur was of the opinion that Biren Singh has played a leading role in building false propaganda that Kukis are encroaching on forest lands, and throwing Kukis out of their traditional lands under this pretext. She took the example of the forcible evictions of Kukis from a number of forest regions including the Churachandpur-Khoupum protected forest. *"I am from a village K. Songjang which is within Churachandpur - Khoupum protected forest Area. This forest was notified in 1961. Thereafter, the village chieftains have objected to the notification of their respective villages. Hence, in 1971, the Government-appointed Forest Settlement Officers issued a notification excluding these genuine villages from the purview of protected forest notification. After this, villages peacefully continued living there. Shockingly, on 7/11/2022, the Biren Singh Government, nullified all FSO orders from 1971. How can the same government which excluded us do this? In late 2022, we received a show cause notice that our village falls in the protected forest area, but we did not reply. By January 2023, we got a second show cause notice and we were told by the district forest officer that we have to reply. Therefore, we replied, annexing documents dating back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century from the Magistrate reflecting our village name, the 1971 Settlement Officers orders excluding our village from the protected forest, as well as the gazette notification pertaining to our village. 11 days after our response, which was 29<sup>th</sup> February 2023, the Government officials came and razed our*

*village to the ground. Ours was on the highway, and first to be razed. Several other villages covered by the 1971 Settlement Officers orders have all suffered the same fate".*

A Forest Conservation Professional justified State action in the Churachandpur-Khoupum protected forest issue. He said that the Settlement Officer passed 38 orders setting aside forest lands without authority during the 1970s and 1980s. Noting this the Government constituted a committee that enquired into this and reported that the Orders were not sustainable. The Committee Report was apparently examined by the Law Department and upheld, based on which the Cabinet approved cancellation of the 38 Orders of the Settlement Officer. Based on the cabinet decision, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) and Head of Forest Force (HoFF) cancelled the orders and similar orders in other Protected Forests on 7.11.2022. It is on this basis that the residents in all these villages were issued show-cause notices and thereafter demolitions ensued. When asked whether it was fair for such old orders to be unilaterally cancelled, he said that some Kukis have challenged this in Court. He informed the Team that majority of the forest encroachers who have been evicted are from the Meitei community, however the Kuki community has perceived this as an attack on them.

In this regard the Team queried about the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006 which recognises and guarantees the rights<sup>58</sup> that Tribes and

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<sup>58</sup> Section 3 mandates that the following rights, which secure individual or community tenure or both, shall be the forest rights of forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers on all forest lands, namely: –

- (a) right to hold and live in the forest land under the individual or common occupation for habitation or for self-cultivation for livelihood by a member or members of a forest dwelling Scheduled Tribe or other traditional forest dwellers;
- (b) community rights such as nistar, by whatever name called, including those used in erstwhile Princely States, Zamindari or such intermediary regimes;
- (c) right of ownership, access to collect, use, and dispose of minor forest produce which has been traditionally collected within or outside village boundaries;
- (d) other community rights of uses or entitlements such as fish and other products of water bodies, grazing (both settled or transhumant) and traditional seasonal resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities;
- (e) rights including community tenures of habitat and habitation for primitive Tribal groups and pre-agricultural communities;
- (f) rights in or over disputed lands under any nomenclature in any State where claims are disputed;
- (g) rights for conversion of Pattas or leases or grants issued by any local authority or any State Government on forest lands to titles;
- (h) rights of settlement and conversion of all forest villages, old habitation, unsurveyed villages and other villages in forests, whether recorded, notified or not into revenue villages;
- (i) right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource which they have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use;
- (j) rights which are recognised under any State law or laws of any Autonomous District Council or Autonomous Regional Council or which are accepted as rights of Tribals under any traditional or customary law of the concerned tribes of any State;
- (k) right of access to biodiversity and community right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity and cultural diversity;
- (l) any other traditional right customarily enjoyed by the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes or other traditional forest dwellers, as the case may be, which are not mentioned in clauses (a) to (k) but excluding the traditional right of hunting or trapping or extracting a part of the body of any species of wild animal;

other traditional forest dwellers have over forest land including unclassified forests, undemarcated forests, existing or deemed forests, protected forests, reserved forests, Sanctuaries and National Parks. In fact the Ministry of Tribal Affairs itself recognises that in Manipur, the *"Tribal communities and Tribal chiefs are already holding ownership of forest land as their ancestral land in non-Reserved Forest Area. Therefore, implementation of the Forest Rights Act is perceived minimal in Manipur."*<sup>59</sup> To this, the reply normally was that, irrespective of traditional rights or laws, forests have to be protected.

Ms. Anandi, adviser to the Meira Paibis was emphatic in declaring that it was the infiltrators who had illegally entered Manipur from Myanmar and settled in the reserved forests, and are destroying the forests. She added that Meiteis follow Sanamahism – a religion where forests are revered, and hence destruction of forests hurts their sentiments.

Incidentally, the Manipur Vision document<sup>60</sup> quoting from the India State of Forest Report states that in 2017 Manipur had forests over 77.69% of its total area i.e. 17,346 sq.km, which was an increase of 1.18% from 2015, when forest cover was 76.51% of the total geographical area of the State. This increase of 263 sq.km. of forest cover has been attributed to the conservation and plantation activities as well as re-growth of shifting cultivation areas. The bi-annual change in forest cover of Manipur is stated to be as follows:

Year	Geographical area of Manipur (sq. km.)	Area under forest cover (sq. km.)	Increase (+) / Decrease (-) (sq. km.)	% of geographical area of the State
2005	22327	17086	-133	76.53
2007	22327	17280	194	77.40
2009	22327	17280	0	77.40
2011	22327	17090	-190	76.54
2013	22327	16990	-100	76.10
2015	22327	17083	93	76.51
2017	22327	17346	263	77.69

During 2019-20, Manipur<sup>61</sup> had forest covering 17,418 sq. kms.<sup>62</sup> which forms about 78% of the total geographical area of the state, and it is reported that the actual area under forest is reportedly about 15% higher than official records.

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(m) right to in situ rehabilitation including alternative land in cases where the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers have been illegally evicted or displaced from forest land of any description without receiving their legal entitlement to rehabilitation prior to the 13th day of December, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> "Status report on implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 [for the period ending 30.11.2017]", Available at: [https://Tribal.nic.in/downloads/FRA/MPR/2017/\(B\)%20-%20MPR%20Nov%202017.pdf](https://Tribal.nic.in/downloads/FRA/MPR/2017/(B)%20-%20MPR%20Nov%202017.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> *Supra* note 14: p. 160

<sup>61</sup> *Supra* Note 6: p. iv

<sup>62</sup> Of the total forest area, reserved forests and protected forests account for 1,467 sq.kms. and 4,171 sq.kms. The remaining 11,780 sq.kms. is treated as 'Unclassed forest'.



Numerous Meiteis informed the Team that thereafter the government has alleged that there has been loss of forest cover.

The Forest Conservation Professional working with the Manipur Government states that in 2019 the forest cover had reduced by 500 sq. km. to about 16847 sq. km., and it has further reduced by about 250 sq. km. He said that as of 2021, forest cover in Manipur was about 16598 sq. km. He added that the loss in forest cover was for a variety of reasons including illegal poppy cultivation, shifting cultivations, forest fires, mushrooming of new villages, encroachment and illegal felling.

Of course, in the midst of this crisis, the BJP has rammed through the amendment to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, which effectively frees vast tracts, estimated to be 20-25% of India's forests, to corporate plunder. Another aspect of the amendment is the exemption of no forest clearance required for security related infrastructure within 100 km of international borders. Both aspects of this amendment spells doom for the forests of Manipur besides severely compromising the rights of the Tribals vis-à-vis Article 371C and the Forest Rights Act. Incidentally village councils in Nagaland have taken a pledge to oppose the amendment act as it challenges the *“very essence of traditional customary and indigenous ownership-rights of the people over their land and forest”* as guaranteed by Article 371A of the Constitution of India.<sup>63</sup> The duplicity in the concern for the forests could not be more evident.

### 3.8 Poppy cultivations / Drugs

No discussion was complete without conversations about drug abuse and poppy cultivation that are fuelled by the drug mafia and power brokers. The Team was told that there is a chain of actors involved here, stretching from the wealthy and elite down to the poor cultivator.

An ITLF Spokesperson told the Team the following: *“Drugs have been a problem for a while. However, the war on drugs that was started by the Biren Singh Government in 2018 was only targeting Kukis, whereas all communities are involved and it is grown in various parts of the State. Poppy farmers are all poor, and they have no finance to afford seeds or fertilisers. The main drug lords in fact are rich Meiteis, including MLAs. This problem is actually serious since poor farmers discovered the potential financial boom. However, these farmers are very poor people without any state support, who are getting some economic benefits out of this and are finally able to buy full rations even. Local Church and community are against it, but the farmers are poor and it is a financial boon. The Kuki village Chieftains have made a number of proposals, which focus on provision of alternative sources of livelihoods, but to no avail. There is also definitely a problem of drug abuse and we have a number of rehabilitation centres that were running till today. Poppy*

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<sup>63</sup>Yashwant, S. “The ease of doing business.... in forests”, *Free Press Journal*, Aug 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/the-ease-of-doing-business-in-forests>

*cultivators are very poor and get money from drug lords like the person released though Brinda arrested him. Biren Singh will never talk about drug financiers or drug makers but only the poor farmers. He's made this a communal issue and is trying to paint himself as the champion against drugs. This has made villains out of the whole Kuki community and helped in radicalising the people in the valley."*

Members of the Kuki community expressed deep anger at the branding of the entire community, and pointed to the role of highly-placed Meitei politicians in funding the poppy cultivation and added that a few poor people being involved in cultivation cannot be used to brand an entire community as poppy cultivators.

However, most of the members of the Meitei community strongly believed that one of the causes of the present conflict was the backlash of the Kuki community to Biren's 'War on Drugs'. Ima Ngambi said *"Our Hills are covered by Kukis and we don't have the strength to go there. Kukis did this to get poppy and make crores and buy politicians, but Meitei people believe drugs destroy lives and society. Kukis want to do poppy cultivation and earn money by making brown sugar. This will destroy the lives of our young people. Society will be destroyed. They want to earn money through drugs which we want to stop. This is one of the main reasons why they started this conflict."*

On the other hand, a media professional from Imphal said that though narco-terrorism is a reality that cannot be ignored, the term is used to target Kukis, which has worsened since the violence. She said that the so-called war on drugs is only targeting poor farmers whereas the drug lords, who belong to all ethnic communities, are allowed to roam free.

This is confirmed by Brinda Thounaojam, who from her experience as a police officer in Manipur, spoke at length about the drug trade in Manipur. She said that her role in exposing the influential persons involved in drug trade has cost her job and now she is facing several cases. She said that drug cases in Manipur can be categorised into two categories: (1) accused involved with small drugs, an (2) high profile drug lords with political connections and politicians themselves. According to her, the second category people being high profile and with their nexus and connection are looting the state and destroying the youths of their future and the banner "WAR ON DRUGS" is only an eyewash coined by the present system to gain their political mileage. She detailed the incidents around the arrest of Lhukhosei Zou, a drug lord, in June 2018 and the manner in which members of the BJP government, including the Chief Minister did everything to get him released since he was the *"Chief Minister's second wife Olice's right-hand man in Chandel and that Olice was furious about the arrest"*.

A Forest Conservation Professional working with the Manipur Government said *"In respect of poppy cultivation, it may be true that members of all communities are involved in the drug trade and the attack is only on the poor farmers. It is a fact that it is difficult to get as much money from*

*any other alternative livelihood. However, any chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Break the chain anywhere and it collapses.”*

The Team has seen that the issue of poppy cultivations and drug use in Manipur are concerns of all communities. It is understood that there is a nexus between politicians with drug mafias involved in drug trafficking, which is behind this and people are unanimous that they must be exposed and action be taken against them. However, this is not happening, and there is known political patronage for those engaged in drug trade. It is evident that the "war on drugs" rhetoric has been consciously deployed to demonise the entire Kuki community in the eyes of the others.

It appears to be widely understood by all that the farmers engaged in poppy cultivation are compelled to do so for want of secure livelihoods and state support. The poppy cultivators are poor, whereas the investment comes from politically and economically influential persons. It is useful to highlight here that experience<sup>64</sup> around the world is that destroying poppies using a coercive method is not the right approach and that this approach has failed, and instead, adopting alternative methods such as introducing development livelihood programmes for the cultivators to cultivate new crops such as ginger, cardamom, and lemongrass as substitute crops to replace poppy, facilitating proper rehabilitation, and a fair amount of compensation without targeting them as ‘poppy victims’ will gradually reduce the production of opium in the state.

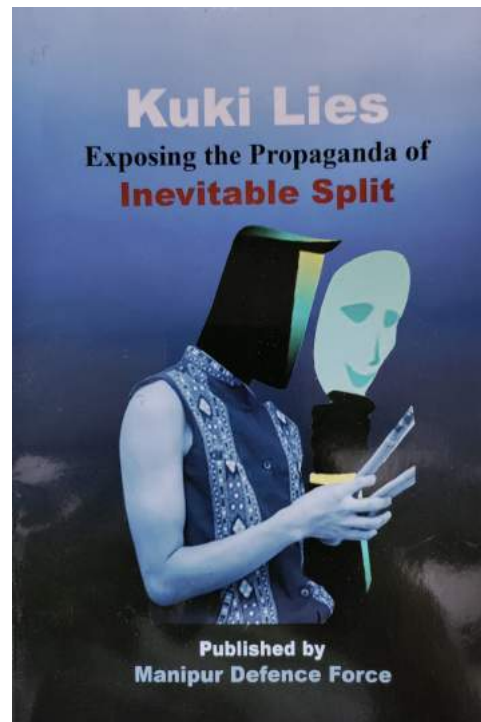
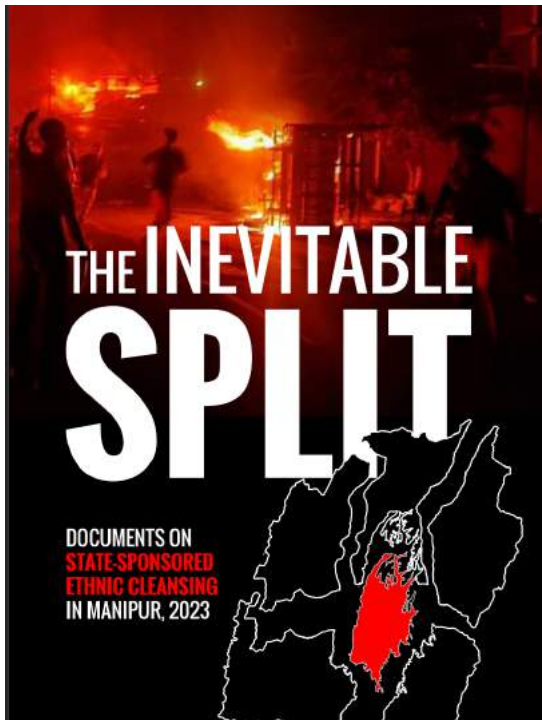
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<sup>64</sup> *Supra* note 23.

## IV. The violence and its aftermath:

### 4.1 Narratives of Violence and conflict-induced displacement

As with most aspects of this conflict, the narrative by both communities, on how the violence broke out, are in stark contrast to the other.



The version of events from the Kuki side, as per conversations and a report titled “*The Inevitable Split (Documents on State-Sponsored Ethnic Cleansing in Manipur, 2023)*”<sup>65</sup>, is as follows:

*Before the violence broke out, the Union of India was days away from granting 6<sup>th</sup> schedule status to Tribal areas. However, because of the High Court order ATSUM proposed a joint rally on 3<sup>rd</sup> May against granting of ST status to Meiteis. Valley-based Meitei organisations reacted to this call by organising counter- blockades in the valley areas the evening before the peaceful rally. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May, thousands of Tribals came for the rally. The peaceful rally proceeded as planned in all the hill districts of Manipur, and saw widespread participation by all Tribals including the Zomi, Kuki, Naga, Hmar, Mizo etc. The rally ended peacefully at 1:05 pm after a memorandum was submitted to the Hon’ble President and Hon’ble Prime Minister of India through the Deputy Commissioner, Churachandpur by the Tribal civil society and students’ organisations. By 1:30 PM on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, Meiteis insurgents came and burnt the Anglo-Kuki war gate which memorialises the Kuki rebellion of 1917-1919. The Meitei mob also assaulted returning rally-goers who resided in the border areas of Churachandpur district. The problem escalated when one of those rally-goers, Pastor*

<sup>65</sup> Media & IT Cell, Zomi Students’ Federation. “The Inevitable Split (Documents on State-Sponsored Ethnic Cleansing in Manipur, 2023)”, Gen. Hqtrs. Lamka.

*Sehkhohao Kipgen was beaten to death by the chauvinist Meitei groups. The mob carried out a systematic pre-organized arson and extermination in the capital city Imphal and other valley districts. Having identified Kuki homes, churches, hostels, educational institutions, and even paying-guests rented homes a month before the ethnic cleansing through official and unofficial means, the organised mobs were able to immediately identify all Kuki residences in a matter of hours. This ensured the targeted destruction of all Kuki homes, properties, and places of worship without any hindrance. The premeditated violence incited by the Manipur State and chauvinist Meitei organisations such as the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun that ignited on 3rd May 2023 following the peaceful protests organised by the Tribals is a blatant disregard for human life, human rights and most importantly, human dignity. This is nothing short of a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing.*

The dominant narrative according to the Meiteis as emerging from the various conversations with Meiteis, the report “*Kuki Lies*” prepared by the Manipur Defence Force and the report by Delhi Manipur Society titled “*Violence in Manipur: The Larger Story*”<sup>66</sup> is as follows

*For some months before 3rd May, Kuki organisations were protesting Manipur government's certain policies against forest encroachments, illegal poppy cultivation and Kuki infiltrators from Myanmar. They scuttled the proposed visit of Manipur's Chief Minister to Churachandpur, on April 27, 2023 to inaugurate an open gym at P.T. Sports Complex. The violence erupted on 3rd May, during the protest march organised by the All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM), against the High Court order and granting of ST status to Meiteis. Though the protest rally was proposed for all the Tribal areas of the State, it took place only in the Kuki dominated district headquarters of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal. The rally witnessed Kuki militants in combat clothes, brandishing sophisticated arms and marching in Churachandpur. Through the day from 10.30 a.m. onwards Kuki mobs attacked the Forest Beat Offices. They stage managed the burning of the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Gate at Leisang Village at around 2.40 p.m. and then went about vandalising, burning and attacking the homes of Meiteis in numerous villages in Bishnupur, Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Moreh, etc. News spread about 37 Meitei women having been raped in Churachandpur. Meiteis got enraged and thirsting for revenge they spontaneously retaliated in Meitei dominated areas. The retaliation by Meiteis against Kukis started at Moirang in Bishnupur district at around 6.45 p.m. This was followed by a series of attacks and retaliations and vice versa between Meitei mobs and Kuki militants till date. Illegal infiltrator Chin Kuki militants are at the forefront of the attack on the Meiteis, and they are heavily armed. Kukis are engaged in continued heinous killings of Meiteis, arson and destruction of Meitei homes and religious places compelling retaliatory violence from outraged Meitei mobs.*

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<sup>66</sup> Delhi Manipur Society. "Violence in Manipur: The Larger Story, *The NorthEast Affairs*, May 29, 2023. Available at: <https://thenortheastaffairs.com/violence-in-manipur-the-larger-story/>

The Team spoke to numerous victims of the violence. Snippets of a few conversations are below. These are necessary to reflect on the horror, anxiety, fear and loss that people have suffered due to the conflict.

The Team met the family of David Thiek, a 31-year-old man from Lamza village in Churachandpur district, who was beheaded by a Meitei mob on 2nd July while guarding his family's house. As per his family, David was previously working as a waiter in Mumbai. He lost his mother at a young age, and was taken care of by his father who is disabled. His family narrated to the Team the heinous manner in which he was killed. David's arms were first chopped off, followed by his head. His decapitated head was then displayed at various locations, as per his family. Pictures of this went viral. When the Team met the family they were still reeling from shock. His father and sister spoke of the mental trauma the family is facing not only from this incident but more broadly the state-wide violence. They lamented that they had never imagined that such a brutal incident was possible in India. They added that no action is being taken to ensure justice to the family. The Team was informed that Mairembam Romesh Mangang, a security guard of a BJP MLA, is accused of murdering David. They pointed to a viral photo of Mairembam Romesh Mangang holding David Thiek's head in one hand and a machete in another hand, which is available online.<sup>67</sup>

A displaced Meitei woman the Team met at a Relief Centre at Ideal Girls College, Akampat, Imphal East, hailing from Moreh, said trouble in Moreh began on the evening of 3rd May. Huge Kuki mobs began to gather in the evening and vandalise and burn homes. She said that despite the Assam Rifles being adjacent to their locality, there was no help forthcoming in stopping the arson. The Assam Rifles, however, shifted them to their camp where they stayed for more than 10 days. They were brought to the Akampat relief camp between 13th and 16th May. She said that around 5 villages with Meiteis in the region were destroyed, and a few thousand Meiteis are displaced who now live in several relief camps in the Valley. She added that while fortunately there was no loss of life in her village from the conflict, all properties were destroyed and valuables looted.

A displaced Kuki person at Kangpokpi, who hails from Aihang village in Sugnu District spoke of how he reached the relief camp. According to him, his village, which has about 100 Kuki families, was completely surrounded by Meiteis. He says that his village was attacked by a mob of around 6000-7000 people, led by about 150 members of the Arambai Tenggol. When the violence broke out, the Nagas provided his family refuge for one night. But fearing reprisals, the Naga family asked them to leave the next morning. His family then hid in the jungle for days after which they somehow reached an army camp. From the army camp they were brought to Kangpokpi. He said that his family, like all other displaced persons, had lost all their valuables, money, savings and

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<sup>67</sup> Hussain, A. "BJP MLA's security guard accused of beheading Kuki man David Thiek", *India Today NE*, Jul 20,2023, available at <https://www.indiatodayne.in/manipur/story/manipur-bjps-legislature-security-guard-accused-of-murdering-kuki-man-david-thiek-618075-2023-07-20>

basic documents. He wondered about the plight of the people who had taken bank loans to build houses, which were either just completed or being built, which now stand destroyed.



*Destruction of property in Sugnu*

A Meitei displaced person at the Moirang Relief Camp, said that she had come from Churachandpur with her husband and two-year-old child. She said that on the day of the Tribal March, Kuki people attacked their house and they had to flee. She said that she had named her daughter Koyelama after this camp.

The Team spoke with a group of Kukis at the ITI relief camp, Kangpokpi, who were from Themdoi, a village in the Naga dominated district of Senapati. They said that their houses were burnt on the 5<sup>th</sup> May after which the Assam Rifles helped them escape to temporary shelter in Motbung. Thereafter they were brought to Kangpokpi, Initially, families that fled mostly went to churches, which were the only places offering shelter. Since churches have community halls, they were able to be accommodated there before being moved to other places.



They have lost all their property and valuables. Entire villages were burnt and all their property lost. They were able to flee with just the clothes on their backs. Initially they thought that the violence would subside and that they would be able to return to their village after spending 1-2 nights in the jungle, but they were wrong. They lamented that they had fled only with the clothes on their backs and had lost all their possessions, and have nothing even for the save of memory

One of the Meitei displaced persons from Akampat relief camp in Imphal said that when the violence broke out on 3rd May, a Kuki mob attacked her village which is in the border region between the valley and hill districts. She said that she fell at the feet of persons

in the mob and begged them not to burn her house. However they poured petrol on her house and set it ablaze.

At the Youth Hostel in Churachandpur, a Kuki displaced person from Gotangkot, Kangpokpi spoke of the dangerous passage over the mountain side that he had to make to reach the relief camp. He said the journey lasted almost 12-13 hours. This road is often avoided by most because of landslides which poses a huge risk. He initially did not know about the May 3<sup>rd</sup> violence. Only when his neighbouring village got torched on 5<sup>th</sup> May, did he understand the scale of violence. On 6<sup>th</sup> May, he and his family, along with Kukis from the village fled by foot to the Assam Rifles camp. They stayed there for a brief while. They were then again shifted to Kangpokpi, but later came to Churachandpur. He says he feels much safer in Churachandpur than the other districts and would prefer to live here.

A Kuki student in Churachandpur said that this was a case of State sponsored ethnic cleansing. He said that from 3<sup>rd</sup> May there has been a concerted and planned attack on Kukis to drive them out of the valley and into the hills. Mobs organised by the Meitei Leepun and Arambai Tenggol went from house to house of Kukis, looting their homes and killing at will. This was carried out in Imphal and all villages in the valley where Kukis were residing. Even Kuki villages at the foothills were not spared.



*Wall of Remembrance at Churachandpur*

Whereas in Churachandpur where the business is largely controlled by the Meities, even two weeks after the outbreak of violence, Kuki organisations were handing over Meiteis to the Army and facilitating their safe travel to Imphal, yet, in Imphal every available Kukis was being targeted, beaten and even killed. Even Kukis who ran to the Deputy Collector's office for safety were handed over to the mobs by the police and they were killed.





*Some of the Meitei victims of the violence*

The destruction of house properties and displacement of thousands of people in the valley and hills, is one of the huge human costs paid in this conflict. A civil society organisation representative in Churachandpur informed the Team that around 10,000 Meiteis who lived in the Hills have been displaced to the relief camps in the Valley, and about 60,000 Kukis have been driven out of the Valley and foothills and are now living in the relief camps in the Hills.

As per the Press Brief dated 10<sup>th</sup> June 2023 issued by the Government of Manipur a total of 50,648 “temporarily displaced persons” were sheltered in 349 relief camps as on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2023.

Sl. No.	District	Number of camps	People in the camps
1	Imphal West	29	3769
2	Imphal East	40	7423
3	Churachandpur	100	14440
4	Kangpokpi	53	9008
5	Tengnoupal	6	723
6	Bishnupur	54	7095
7	Thoubal	12	1327
8	Kakching	32	4430
9	Senapati	1	30
10	Jiribam	4	131
11	Ukhul	13	1834
12	Kamjong	5	438
Total		349	50648

Incidentally this the Press Brief dated 10<sup>th</sup> June 2023 also stated that guidelines for management of camps had been issued for guidance of Deputy Commissioners and Departments on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2023. The Team has visited 7 relief camps, the conditions of which are discussed later in this Report.

## 4.2 Dead bodies in the mortuaries

A Kuki student volunteer in Churachandpur told the Team that they are deeply hurt that scores of Kukis who were murdered in the Valley have still not been given a burial as per their customs. He lamented that there can be no thought of normalcy till they can bury, and mourn, their dead. They have no way of going to Imphal to identify and recover the bodies. He said that there are about 150 bodies in 3 hospitals, Regional Institute of Medical sciences and Jawaharlal Institute of Medical Science, both in Imphal and the Churachandpur medical College.

The Team was informed that there are 35 bodies in the morgue in Churachandpur, who belong to the Kuki-Zomi community, but the ITLF had directed families to not claim those bodies until the State government brings the bodies of Kuki persons in the Imphal mortuaries to Churachandpur. With the passage of time, ITLF decided that the 35 persons would be given a decent burial as a *“final tribute to the Tribal martyrs”* on 3rd August in S Boljang village near Turbong, an area at the border of the Kuki-Zomi dominated Churachandpur district and the Meitei dominated Bishnupur district. This was objected to by certain Meitei organisations who moved the Manipur High Court, which directed that status quo be maintained *“taking into consideration the potentiality of aggravating the already volatile law and order situation and the possibility of igniting a fresh wave of violence and bloodshed...”*.

Several members from the Meitei community informed the Team that the choice of the burial site was provocative, since the proposed burial site was in the “buffer zone” and accused the Kuki organisations of playing “politics over dead bodies”. The ITLF informed the Team that this interference was symptomatic of their situation where they cannot even give their dead a dignified burial. *“The government, the police, the courts - everyone is with the Meiteis”*, they commented.

A representative of Kuki Student Organisation said that they are deeply hurt by the comments about the dead lying in the mortuaries in Imphal. He highlighted the statement made by the counsel for Government in the Supreme Court, that most of the “unclaimed bodies” are infiltrators who came with a particular design and got killed. He questioned how such an inflammatory and false statement is permitted to be uttered in the highest court of the land when the Kukis are unable to step into Imphal to identify and recover the bodies.

One representative of a Meitei civil society organisation told the Team that it was a matter of utter shame that dead bodies of those killed in the conflict were still lying in the mortuaries in Imphal and Churachandpur. They said that it was in their culture to treat the dead with dignity,

but everything has been forgotten in this conflict. The Team chanced upon a monograph that details the Chainoral, one of the 4000 puyas i.e. manuscripts written in the ancient Meitei script, which explains the ethical considerations and sacred code of conduct in armed combats as follows: *“strong undercurrent of humanity, a clear distinction between the combatants and non-combatants, an exemplary respect for the body of the dead warrior, and a conscious attempt to avoid both direct and indirect harm to the surrounding areas”*.<sup>68</sup>

The Team believes that there is such abject failure on the part of the Union and State governments in addressing even this concern.

### 4.3 Destruction of religious places

The Team was informed that more than 350 Churches were burnt/destroyed in the conflict alongside several Meitei temples.

Several Catholic churches and institutions have been totally vandalised, looted, desecrated, burnt and destroyed. St. Paul’s Parish and Pastoral Training Centre (PTC): St. Paul’s Parish located in Sangaiprou, Imphal is a parish which has its members from all ethnic communities of Manipur such Meiteis, Kabui, Tangkhul, Paite, etc. In the same campus is the Pastoral Training Centre where lay catechists have been receiving training for many years. It is learnt that between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4th May, Meitei broke window-panes, doors, statues, crucifix, sound system, musical instruments, etc. and set afire the Church, altar, the PTC and vehicles. They entered the PTC, which housed 46 inmates (4 Priests, 37 trainees, one animator, one hostel warden, 3 domestic staff) and checked the identity of each of them to ascertain that there were no Kukis. They called for help and even the police Team that came for a while was nowhere to be seen when the mob arrived. All SOS calls to Emergency Nos. 100 and 112 without any response.




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<sup>68</sup> *Supra* note 18



The Holy Redeemer Parish, Canchipur was also destroyed on 3<sup>rd</sup> May by Meitei mobs armed with iron bars, woods, stones etc. The private rooms of the priests and the staff were also ransacked and destroyed. The mob also set ablaze the boys' hostel for needy students and destroyed the school auditorium and Primary Section of the School and the garage. The miscreants also entered the Bethany convent and vandalised it and looted all valuables including the community computer, some cash, and other common home items. There were 3 to 4 police security personnel but they could not control the mob.

A representative of Evangelical Fellowship of India, confirmed that scores of Meitei churches were burnt by Meitei mobs. He said that Meitei Christians are also being threatened to undertake "*Ghar wapsi*" and relinquish their Christian faith.<sup>69</sup>



Overall, the Christian leaders the Team met, expressed deep dismay at the targeted attack on the Churches and opined that some sections of the mobs, particularly the Arambai Tenggol had a deliberate communal motive. Claims were made that the churches were attacked as part of

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<sup>69</sup> Ghar Wapsi is a coercive project of right-wing Hindutva forces that forces Christians and Muslims to 'reconvert' to Hinduism.

revenge for the destruction of a Meitei place of worship in some parts of the State. However, the number of attacks on churches indicates the strong and active involvement of some fanatical groups with communal intent. They added that it is shocking that the State has yet to evolve a compensation package for the total destruction of Christian Churches and institutions

Even so, some Meitei organisations the Team spoke to, have rejected the view that there was any communal content to the attacks, which they believed is purely ethnic.

The report titled referred to above, "*Kuki Lies: Exposing the Propaganda of Inevitable Split*"<sup>70</sup>, published by Manipur Defence Force, states that: "*While this is an unfortunate turn of event, it was a retaliatory act driven by violent mob psyche. The anger against the Kuki aggression orchestrated by Kuki militants led to retaliatory consequences that affected Kuki churches. Nevertheless, in the violent act of arson, sanity prevailed and the Naga churches (also some Kuki churches) were left largely untouched.*". The Report goes on to state as follows: "*The antecedent to the church burning lies series of events where several Meitei places of worship in the hills (Koubru and Thangjing) were desecrated over a stretch of time. There have been cases where due to strong resistance by these migrant Kuki population, constructions of indigenous temples were stalled in the hill districts. Often these sacred places and associated indigenous practices are treated with contempt and ridicule (recent case of one Christian pastor Ramananda in various Church gathering can be cited). In addition, several armed Kuki militants have been carrying out a series of attack on the Meitei/Hindu religious shrines and symbols in the past as well as during the recent unrest. A 200-year-old Shiva temple was destroyed using bulldozer in Koubru Leikha under the Kangpokpi District administration, which is dominated by the Kuki tribes. The local administration turned a blind eye to the whole episode. Contrary to the Meitei unrest, this act shows a well-designed strategy to destroy the indigenous place of worship and the sacred sites. In addition, the seven-colour flag of the Meiteis have been desecrated by the Kuki militants.*"



The Report then lists the following Meitei temples as destroyed by the Kukis.

<sup>70</sup> Manipur Defence Force, "*Kuki Lies: Exposing the Propaganda of Inevitable Split*" *Poknapham*, Jun 28, 2023. Available at <https://story.poknapham.in/posts/649a975c04f76f006e2ded28>

Temples/Laishang	Place	Sub-Division	District
Mahadeva	Koubru Leikha	Saitu Gamphazol	Kangpokpi
Nungthong (Goddess)	Lairembi Serou	Waikhong	Kakching
Lainingthou Sanamahi	Thinungei	Bishnupur	Bishnupur
Kondong (Goddess)	Lairembi Moreh	Moreh	Tengnoupal
Langol Lairembi (Goddess)	Langol	Imphal West	Imphal West
Thongak (Goddess)	Lairembi Langol	Imphal West	Imphal West
Ima Panthoibi (Goddess)	Torbung	Moirang	Bishnupur
Ingourok Mahadeva	Leimakhong	Kangpokpi	Kangpokpi
Ireima (Goddess)	Moreh	Moreh	Tengnoupal
Maikeingakpa	Zoveng Meitei Leikai	Churachandpur	Churachandpur
Ibudhou Pakhangba	Meitei Leikai	Churachandpur	Churachandpur

The Team saw a demolished temple just before entering Kangpokpi town and learnt that this was a Meitei temple which was destroyed by Kuki mobs in the violence.

One of the Meira Paibis said that the Meiteis went "wild" because of the destruction of their temples and repeated denial of access to their religious places in the hills in the recent past. She added that the Kukis do not have respect for every God and that is a problem. The Meiteis at the Relief Camp Moirang expressed their disappointment at the narrative of Hindus attacking Christians and strongly stated that this was not a religious question, but one of ethnicity.

## 4.4 Sexual Violence

The Team had visited Manipur a month after the video of the horrific sexual assault of two Kuki women surfaced in the public domain. Though the two Kuki survivors currently reside in Churachandpur, the Team decided against meeting with them since they had already given an extensive interview to Scroll<sup>71</sup> detailing their horrific ordeal.

The older woman, who is 44 years of age, recounted how she and her 21-year-old neighbour and family were discovered while hiding in a forested path next to their homes. She explained the manner in which the mob first killed her young neighbour's father and younger brother, after which both of them were subject to intense sexual assault. She also explained how the men who surrounded her, told her that they were committing revenge for the rapes committed on Meitei women by Kuki men in Churachandpur. An FIR was later filed in her case on May 18th by her

<sup>71</sup> 'Everyone should know what happened to us': Four Kuki women recount brutal assaults they survived", July 2023. Available at <https://scroll.in/article/1053038/everyone-should-know-what-happened-to-us-four-kuki-women-recount-brutal-assaults-they-survived>

relative in Saikul police station in Kangpokpi district, which mentions the Accused persons as “unknown miscreants” of “800-1,000”.

Following the video going viral, the Prime Minister for the first time addressed the situation in Manipur on July 20th. Despite the fact that a civil war in Manipur had gone on for over 80 days at the time, Prime Minister Modi maintained a conscious silence on Manipur. While calling the incident shameful for any civilised society, Prime Minister Modi requested all Chief Ministers to strengthen law and order in their States, and alluded to rapes in Chattisgarh and Rajasthan, two Congress States. Even in the face of such brutality, Prime Minister Modi stuck to his ideological moorings and engaged in political whataboutery, which most Kukis the Team met found disrespectful and distasteful, and an attempt to deflect from the sexual violence the Kuki women had faced.

While referring to the video, Ima Ngambi, from the Meira Paibis, said that she strongly condemns the attack on the prestige of women on either side and the use of women’s bodies in the war. She added that there were many Meitei women who were raped too, but since there are no videos of these crimes, no concern is extended to their trauma. She also said that since Meitei society is conservative, the Meitei women did not go public about it till now. But the Meitei mobs knew and went wild. She said that it is not fair that the Prime Minister only spoke of the Kuki women who were raped, which was because of the video, but ignored the suffering of Meitei women.

This was a view that the Team heard from several Meitei people it met that *“only the rape of 2 Kuki women became an issue because of the video. Our rapes are not a problem because there are no videos”*.

In Kangpokpi, the Team was told of the rape and murder of two young Kuki women who worked at a car wash in Konung Mamang, Imphal. It is reported<sup>72</sup> that their grieving family members have alleged that it was local Meitei women who handed over the young women to the mob, and even urged the crowd to assault them “as a retaliation”.

Disturbingly when it came to rape, the Team often heard statements to the tune that *“they raped women from our community, so our men raped women of their community”* as justification, when the Team brought up the viral video of the sexual assault.

A Meitei displaced person from Moreh at the Relief Centre at Ideal Girls College, Akampat said that it was confirmed news she got on 3rd May, that 37 women were raped by Kukis in Churachandpur, however only the rape of 2 Kuki women became an issue because of the video.

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<sup>72</sup> Sitlhou, H. "REPLUG: How Fake News Created Pretexts to Lynch Kuki-Zo Women in Manipur", *News Click*, July 20, 2023. Available at <https://www.newsclick.in/replug-how-fake-news-created-pretexts-lynch-kuki-zo-women-manipur>

When the Team members informed her that this particular report of 37 Meitei women being raped was found to be fake news and the DGP has issued a statement in this regard, she did not agree and said that it is a fact that 37 Meitei women are raped.

During the time the Team was in Manipur, a Meitei survivor at a relief camp in Bishnupur, had just filed a complaint with the police about the sexual assault and rape she faced in Churachandpur on 3rd May. The Team tried to meet with the survivor but was told that she was not comfortable meeting anyone right now.

A media professional from Imphal said that the reports of sexual violence are unsurprising, given the history of sexual violence against women's bodies in armed conflict situations that Manipur has seen for decades.

The use of women's bodies as pawns and weapons in ethnic violence is something that must be condemned. Moreover, the wilful neglect of the government to this aspect until the video of the violence went viral must not go unnoticed.

## 4.5 Arms and Ammunition

Kukis, in unanimity, said that the Police and the security forces had distributed arms to the Arambai Tenggol cadre and even to the common Meiteis. They laughed off reports that the Meiteis raided the armouries and stole arms and ammunition. Can anyone take arms forcibly from the police and armed forces in Kashmir or Chhattisgarh, they asked.

According to news-reports,<sup>73</sup> about 1000 weapons and 10,000 ammunition were "looted" from armouries in Imphal by "some Meitei groups" in the initial days of the violence, and again more weapons and ammunition were "looted" by these groups on May 27-28. Other reports<sup>74</sup> confirm that in all, mobs have looted around 4,000 weapons and 50,000 rounds of ammunition from police stations and armouries since the conflict began and that in another incident, around 500 people in more than 40 vehicles looted arms and ammunition from the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB) camp at Naraseina in Bishnupur district. The Press Brief dated 10<sup>th</sup> June 2023 issued by the Government of Manipur confirms that more than 4500 arms and 611245 ammunition was "lost".

Earlier on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2023 the ITLF issued a press release<sup>75</sup> stating that the state's complicity in the selected targeting of Kuki- Zo Tribals becomes more evident from the "*handing over of 1500+*

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<sup>73</sup> Tiwary, D. "3,000 weapons looted in second wave of Manipur violence, 144 recovered so far" *The Indian Express*, Jun 3, 2023. Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/140-weapons-surrendered-manipur-amit-shah-8642463/>

<sup>74</sup> Gupta, A. " Manipur Police confirms reports of arms, ammunition loot. Details here", *Mint*, Aug 06, 2023. Available at: <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/manipur-police-confirms-reports-of-arms-ammunition-loot-details-here-11691287415315.html>

<sup>75</sup> Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum. Press Release dated May 31, 2023. Available at: <https://twitter.com/mtfdelhi/status/1663830078676176897/photo/1>



**Government of Manipur  
Press Brief – 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2023**

**1. Arms Recovered (Hills / Valley):**

Till 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2023

Sl.	Valley / Hills	Lost			Recovered		
		Arms	Ammn	Others	Arms	Ammn	Others
1	Valley	4014	548172	14807	888	13509	230
2	Hills	523	63073	2	102	17	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>4537</b>	<b>611245</b>	<b>14809</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>13526</b>	<b>230</b>

District wise recoveries:

Sl.	District/ Unit	Lost			Recovered		
		Arms	Ammn	Others	Arms	Ammn	Othe
1.	Imphal West		261		37	760	8
2.	Imphal East	162	5591	9	458	5841	215
3.	Kakching	129	1695		187	6130	5
4.	Thoubal	58	3051		14	120	
5.	Bishnupur	46	2044		22	360	2
6.	Churachandpur	389	55026		54		
7.	Kangpokpi	107	6047		8		
8.	Tengnoupal	No data	No data		40	16	
9.	1-MR	16	140				
10.	6-MR	5	260				
11.	1-IRB	22	1740	2			1
12.	2-IRB	31	3599	1	6		
13.	3-IRB	72	5500	9			
14.	4-IRB	27	1750				
15.	6-IRB	827	1217	6	4		34
16.	7-IRB	274	17294		50		
17.	8-IR(CDO) Bn	526	83977				
18.	9-IR(M) Bn	79	16860		21		250
19.	7 MR	1607	405193	14782			
20.	MPTC	160			89		14
<b>Total</b>		<b>4537</b>	<b>611245</b>	<b>14809</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>13526</b>	<b>230</b>

weapons supplied to these groups were used to attack and destroy over 30 Tribal villages along the Imphal Valley's foothills.

Both communities admitted to being armed and said this was necessary for self-defence. A volunteer at the Relief Camp in Moirang told the Team that the Meiteis had no choice but to arm themselves and the only place where weapons were available were the armouries. Faced with armed Kuki militants, they were compelled to arm themselves to safeguard their villages. Similarly, in Churachandpur, the Team was informed by a CSO representative that, given the manner in which the Meiteis have armed themselves, Kukis are now being forced to carry guns and guard their borders and villages, and they cannot be called militants. She said that the community has been forced to start buying guns and bullets to defend themselves.

Both in the Valley and the Hills, most villages in and around the buffer zone have constituted armed village defence forces tasked with protecting their village and people. It is a war out there, with the belief that lack of arms cannot guarantee safety.

## 4.6 Relief Camps for IDPs

Our Team visited 7 relief camps across 4 districts: two in Imphal City, one in Moirang, one in Kangpokpi and three in Churachandpur. The relief camps too lay divided on ethnic lines. In camps at Imphal City and Moirang, there are only people from the Meitei community, and in camps at Kangpokpi and Churachandpur there are only Kukis.

sophisticated weapons, covered by state media in the garb of looting weapons from the armoury of regular Battalion HQ of Manipur Rifles and Indian Reserved Battalions (IRB) in Imphal valley for the second time since May 3, 2023". It added that on 4<sup>th</sup> May too, arms looting happened at Manipur Police Training College, Pangei and at 9 Mahila IRB (Khuman Lampak), and that on 5<sup>th</sup> May, the 4 IRB and 5 IRB armoury at Korengei were looted, while on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> May, the 3 IRB Thoubal, 7 MR Khabeisoi, 8 IRB Khabeisoi, 6 IRB Khabeisoi, and DGP Pool bullets inventory were also looted. ITLF called this a "coordinated looting of government weaponry in the heart of the state capital by radicalised groups like the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun " made possible by the tacit support of the state police forces. ITLF also stated in their press statement that the

**Format for providing daily updates of Relief Camps & Inmates Data**

Name of District: KANGPOKPI					Date of Reporting: 8 <sup>th</sup> August, 2023			
Sub-Division	Sl. No.	Camp Code	Name of Relief Camp	Camp/Centre Type	Inmates on Previous Day	Inmates leaving today	New inmates joined today	Total Inmates for the day
KANGPOKPI	1	KPI-1-01	ITI Relief Centre	ITI Building	765	0	0	765
	2	KPI-1-02	Mandap Relief Centre	Sadbhavna Mandap	200	0	0	200
	3	KPI-1-03	Changoubung Relief Centre	Community Hall	178	0	0	178
	4	KPI-1-04	Hengbung Relief Centre	Govt. High School, CC Hall, etc.	864	0	0	864
	5	KPI-1-05	L. Songtun Relief Camp	Community Hall	357	0	0	357
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>2384</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2384</b>
CHAMPHAI	6	KPI-2-01	Kethelmanbi HS Relief Camp	Govt. High School	450	0	0	450
	7	KPI-2-02	Kethelmanbi Relief Camp	Community Hall	239	0	0	239
	8	KPI-2-03	Gannonghai Relief Camp	Community Hall	85	0	0	85
	9	KPI-2-04	Bongnoi Relief Centre	Community Hall	221	0	0	221
	10	KPI-2-05	Ngahmun Relief Camp	Community Hall	185	0	0	185
	11	KPI-2-06	Kholjang Relief Camp	Community Hall	81	0	0	81
	12	KPI-2-07	Washanghung Relief Camp	Community Hall	108	0	0	108
	13	KPI-2-08	DIET, Leikop Relief Centre	DIET Centre, Leikop	464	0	0	464
	14	KPI-2-09	HIM Relief Camp	School Hall	161	0	0	161
	15	KPI-2-10	Haipi Relief Camp	Community Hall	89	0	0	89
	16	KPI-2-11	Twineh Veng Relief Camp	Community Hall	155	0	0	155
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>2238</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2238</b>
WAICHONG	17	KPI-3-01	Chalwa Relief Camp	Police Station	232	0	0	232
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>232</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>232</b>
SAITU	18	KPI-4-01	Motbung Bethlehem Veng	Community Hall	158	0	0	158
	19	KPI-4-02	G Songlung Relief Camp	Community Hall	529	0	0	529
	20	KPI-4-03	RM Phajol Relief Camp	Community & School Hall	191	0	0	191
	21	KPI-4-04	Badminton Court Relief Camp	Badminton Hall	402	0	0	402
	22	KPI-4-05	Damdei Relief Camp	College hall	386	0	0	388
	23	KPI-4-06	Bethsaida Relief Camp	School Hall	223	0	0	223
	24	KPI-4-07	Khunkho Kuk Relief Camp	Community & School Hall	362	0	0	362
	25	KPI-4-08	Joujang Relief Camp	Community Hall	201	0	0	201
	26	KPI-4-09	Pangmol Relief Camp	Community Hall	235	0	0	235
	27	KPI-4-10	N Songlung Relief Camp	Community Hall	153	0	0	153
	28	KPI-4-11	Gannom Saporaina	Community & School Hall	342	0	0	342
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>3184</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3184</b>
KANGCHUP	29	KPI-5-01	Kollen Relief Camp	Community Hall	355	0	0	355
	30	KPI-5-02	Molhoi Relief Camp	Community Hall	199	0	0	199
	31	KPI-5-03	Leilon Khunou Relief Camp	Community & School Hall	363	0	41	404
	32	KPI-5-04	Leilon Phaikot Relief Camp	Community & School Hall	322	0	32	354
	33	KPI-5-05	Twibul Lhang Relief Camp	Community Hall	351	0	0	351
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>1590</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>1663</b>
BUNGTE	34	KPI-6-01	Khoripok Relief Camp	Community Hall	294	0	0	294
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>294</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>294</b>
SAIKUL	35	KPI-7-01	Ichaigojang Relief Camp	Community Hall	220	0	0	220
	36	KPI-7-02	Thangkamphai Relief Camp	Community Hall	338	0	0	338
	37	KPI-7-03	Saikho Relief Camp	Community Hall	174	0	0	174
	38	KPI-7-04	Pangjang Relief Camp	Community Hall	220	0	0	220
	39	KPI-7-05	Saikul HQ Relief Centre	Sadbhavna Mandap & CC Hall	250	0	0	250
	40	KPI-7-06	Y Langkhong Relief Camp	Community Hall	49	0	0	49
	41	KPI-7-07	H Tuimrang Relief Camp	Community Hall	30	0	0	30
	42	KPI-7-08	N Ziphai Relief Camp	Community Hall	135	0	0	135
	43	KPI-7-09	Nungka Relief Camp	Community Hall	161	0	0	161
	44	KPI-7-10	Saikul Village Relief Camp	Community Hall	181	0	0	181
	45	KPI-7-11	Sajang Relief Camp	Community & Temp. Hall	87	0	0	87
	46	KPI-7-12	Songpehjang Relief Camp	Community Hall	97	0	0	97
	47	KPI-7-13	Ekou Mullam Relief Camp	Community Hall	104	0	0	104
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>2046</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2046</b>
LHUNGTIN	48	KPI-8-01	Gangpikon Relief Camp	Community Hall	42	0	0	42
	49	KPI-8-02	Lhungtin Relief Camp	Community Hall	31	0	0	31
	50	KPI-8-03	T Gannom Relief Camp	Community Hall	84	0	0	84
	51	KPI-8-04	Maojang Relief Camp	Community & Youth Club Hall	83	0	0	83
	52	KPI-8-05	Denglen Relief Camp	Community Hall	50	0	0	50
	53	KPI-8-06	Mokon Relief Camp	Community Hall	185	0	0	185
	54	KPI-8-07	Dongsum Relief Camp	Community Hall	60	0	0	60
	55	KPI-8-08	Tingpinung Relief Camp	Community Hall	54	0	0	54
<b>Sub-Division Total:</b>					<b>590</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>590</b>
<b>DISTRICT TOTAL: 55 Relief Camps</b>					<b>12558</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>12631</b>

*List of Camps in Kangpokpi District*

### Shyamsakhi School Relief Camp, Imphal:

On the first day of the Team's visit to Manipur, it visited Shyamsakhi camp situated at the heart of Imphal city. Established and run by eight local community clubs, the camp houses 83 members of the Meitei community. It was set up 15 days after the first bout of violence broke out on May 3rd. Here, the Team met people who fled from several areas including Imphal East, Churachandpur, Moreh and Torbung. We also met a woman and her 1-month-old baby, which she gave birth to in the camp. The people told the Team that they wished to return home, however this was impossible due to violence. They were concerned that they could not even get information about the state of their homes, fields and properties.

In conversations with the relief camp convenor, the Team was told that a local MLA, also the speaker of the house, was helping the camp with relief efforts. He also mentioned that the Government provides Rs 80/- per inmate per day, apart from some rice and dal, but that this was insufficient to keep the camp running. He also said that due to the passage of 3 months, local volunteers are finding it difficult to give time to the relief camps since they have to work as well and have their own commitments. Also, it is difficult to keep raising money so now the displaced Meiteis themselves have begun to cook whereas initially there were hired cooks.

With respect to education, the Convenor said that with schools opening in Imphal, the Government has provided the children at the camps with textbooks and had facilitated admissions to local schools and colleges. The Team was told that the education department authorities had ensured that the transfer certificates of students were promptly processed. To ensure that displaced Meiteis in the relief camp are able to make a livelihood, he said local groups have come together to provide people at the camps vocational training. He also said efforts are being made to provide counselling services for displaced Meiteis.

### **ITI Relief Camp, Kangpokpi:**

On 11th August, the Team visited the ITI Relief Camp at Kangpokpi. The Kukis living in this camp have fled from the fringe and buffer zones, mostly from Saikul and Thenodi. They are from several villages including Khanenlok, Imphal, Salem Palok, Kangchup, Lchonzchin and Themdoi. The camp was started on May 16th, and houses over 186 people. The Team was informed that the camp is fully run on aid from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) based out of Nagaland and Mizoram, and received no help from the state except small consignments of dal and rice sent by the District Collector every fortnight. The extent of monetary aid that the State contributed to the displaced Kukis at the camp was a paltry one-time payment of Rs 500/- per person.

Meals are provided twice a day and people take turns in cooking meals. Both meals consist only of dal and rice. The people at the relief camp said that their staple diet includes vegetables, beef and other meat, and they don't eat dal usually, but that is all that is given here and due to lack of proper nutrition many people were falling sick.

Access to sanitation is a big issue here with there being only 2 toilets for the entire camp. Lack of access to health, education and livelihood also were concerns the Team heard from multiple people at the ITI camp. The Team was informed that no health Teams have visited the camp from the state, and that the few health check-ups conducted at the camps were all facilitated by NGOs.

Though there is a local district hospital, a couple of miles from the relief camp, the Team learnt that it is under tremendous strain, and is also under-equipped to handle complicated medical conditions and serious injury cases. In fact, when displaced Kukis first reached Kangpokpi, those with serious injuries were unable to receive help from the hospital and were transferred to

hospitals in Nagaland. Due to lack of adequate number of doctors at the hospital, the medical Team has not been able to pay attention to relief camps and visit them regularly. Three staff nurses from JIMS, Imphal, who fled to Kangpokpi, are working at the hospital and they try to visit the camps. As such for any diagnosis, the nurses consult with doctors on the phone. The Team was told that there are a high number of cases of typhoid, diarrhoea, fever, etc. in the camps. Moreover, since the hospital did not have medicine stocks, the people in the relief camps and others visiting the hospital for treatment had to buy their own medicines.



*Kangpokpi district hospital*

Since schools in surrounding areas are shut, the Team was told that children of all ages at the camp have nowhere to go. We met a young boy of 17, an aspiring lawyer, who fled from Imphal, who shared his fears of being unable to give his final exams, and prepare for entrance tests to attend law school. We also met several people who worried about not having livelihood options around the camps. A 39-year-old school teacher lamented the loss of her job back in her village, and how she had not carried a single piece of belonging from her house to be able to recollect her old life.

A representative of Kuki Student Organisation, Kangpokpi told the Team that there are about 55 relief camps in Kangpokpi district housing about 12,000 displaced Kukis.

### **Youth Hostel Relief Camp, Churachandpur:**

On 12th August, the Team visited 3 relief camps at Churachandpur starting with this camp run at the Youth Hostel. The camp was set up on May 25th, and in the initial days housed more than 800 displaced Kukis. Later several of them moved to other camps due to cramped space, bringing the number of people at the camp to around 400. The camp is run by YHA foundation which also runs 10 other camps in Churachandpur.

The living conditions were abysmal. More than 10-15 families lay cramped in a single room. Most people did not have mattresses, and they sleep on thin blue tarpaulin sheets. Partitions have been made by hanging a thin cloth and there is no privacy, especially for women. Women complained to us of being unable to change clothes and pads. Due to congested living conditions, various illnesses including measles, chicken pox, and viral fever have spread like wildfire among people in the camps.

Sanitation appeared to be a huge issue at the camp. With only 2 toilets, the Team saw long queues of people lining up to use the toilets on the morning of our visit. The camp was shrouded in a bad stench. Due to poor sanitation, the Team were told, several Kuki displaced persons have begun to fall sick.

The camp convenor told the Team that all relief being provided by the State is being routed to Valley, and that no resources come to the hills. *"We get 1-2 bags of rice. How is that enough for 100's of people"* he asked us. He said that there is a massive resource crunch and they are in need of bedspreads, mattresses, etc. He said almost all relief for the camp is coming only from philanthropic organisations, churches, and student organisations and there is almost no help from the State except for a one-time paltry sum of Rs 500/- per displaced Kuki person living there.

In the camp, they receive 2 meals a day, which is dal, rice, and aloo. People are in desperate need of nutritious food. Lactating mothers have particularly been impacted by the sudden change in diet. Many of them lost milk and are unable to feed their children. There is a need for Nestogen (baby formula), which is in short supply.

A volunteer said all relief camps were run by volunteers and that none of them have had a single day of rest since the conflict began. She said that many volunteers are struggling with mental and physical exhaustion.

A representative of Kuki Students Organisation informed the Team that there are 108 relief camps in Churachandpur housing more than 40,000 displaced Kukis.

### **Relief Camp run by Himar Youth Association, Churachandpur:**

The second camp, the Team visited in Churachandpur, was housed in a community hall run by Himar Youth Association. Here, we met displaced Kukis from various villages in Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts. Over 100 people were living at the camp. We were told that all resources for the camp including beds, mattresses were all provided by the community and that no relief is being provided by the State to the camp, not even dal and rice. Only a one-time payment of Rs 500 was given for each displaced Kuki.



*Community Hall at Churachandpur*

A problem raised repeatedly by displaced Kukis at the camp here was lack of waste disposal. The Team was told that garbage trucks come only once a week due to which huge piles of garbage end up getting stacked. This has led to several people falling sick at the camps due to the spread of viral diseases like measles, chicken pox and fever.

Women also complained to us of lack of privacy. Since there are no separate rooms in the camp, women say they struggle to change their clothes. The Team also noticed that the community hall had no proper windows. People at the camp had hung makeshift plastic covers for protection from rains.

### **Immanuel Church Relief Camp, Churachandpur:**

The last camp the Team visited in Churachandpur, was the relief camp at Immanuel Church, which has been running since 5th July. Over 156 people live in this camp. Similar to other relief camps, it is fully funded by CSO's and is run by the Kookie Kanglai Compi. The camp had people who had fled from Haokip, Imphal, Ai geng, Kangpokpi District. S Hengeliam, Churachandpur; Lailampat Churachandpur. In this camp too, a huge problem was lack of toilets for the displaced Kukis. Though temporary toilets were being constructed, this does little to solve the problem. The displaced Kukis are using a temporary bathroom, which is without a roof.

At this camp, the Team met a woman of 35 years of age whose husband was burnt to death by a mob. She narrated to us her difficulties of raising two children single-handedly, and how she sells food outside the camps every day to earn money to buy diapers and food for her children.



*Immanuel Church Relief Camp*

The camp is cramped and about 18 people share one room. It has become very difficult for people to survive and some of the displaced Kukis go out to earn by selling petrol, vegetables etc. on roadsides.

The Team met a Kuki displaced man, who was beaten by a mob in Imphal. The mob left him thinking that he was dead but he miraculously survived, and found his way to the camp.

### **Relief Camp, Khoyal Keithel, Moirang Lamkhai:**

On the way back from Churachandpur to Imphal, the Team visited a relief camp at Moirang which was housed in a marketplace. We were told that in the initial days the camp had over 400 Meitei displaced persons, but several people have now shifted to relief camps in Imphal West. At the time of our visit, there were a total of 269 people living in the camp.





## Relief Centre at Ideal Girls College, Akampat, Imphal East:

THONGJU KENDRA RELIEF CAMP							
At : Ideal Girls College, Akampat, Imphal East							
Organised by : Thongju Kendra Relief Committee							
SPONSORED BY : SHRI THONGAM BISWAJIT SINGH, Hon'ble Minister							
Opened On : 10 <sup>th</sup> May 2023							
TOTAL NO. OF CAMPER - 720							
PTION :	1. TH. TILANANDA	2. RK. BRAJAKUMAR	3. M. SANATOMBA	4. KSH. BHUPEN	5. KH. ROJIT		
ICE IN-CHARGE :	1. KSH. ARUNKUMAR (THOIBA)						
E :	1. SORAM BONO	2. A. BOINAO	3. KSH. RANICY (IBOTON)	4. KSH. ASHNIKUMAR (APAK)	5. KSH. KHELENDRO (NAOBA)		
ER & WORKS :	1. MAIBAM RATAN	2. KSH. JOHNSON	3. Y. NANAO				
REN :	1. H. SHIBU	2. MAIBAM IBOYAIMA					
CINE :	1. TH. TILANANDA	2. RK. BRAJAKUMAR	3. KSH. BHUPEN	4. N. DUEN			
TRJCTY :	1. TH. VIVUEN	2. P. JAPAN					
<b>WOMEN VOLUNTEERS:</b>							
No.	GROUP - A	Sl. No.	GROUP - B	Sl. No.	GROUP - C	Sl. No.	GROUP - D
	MAIBAM KAMALA	1.	H. NEENA	1.	KSH. MALASANA	1.	N. DINARANI
	KSH. ANANDI	2.	H. RENUKA	2.	SAPAM BABY	2.	N. BEMBEM
	SORAM ASHALATA	3.	KSH. THAIBEMMA	3.	ONAM URMILA	3.	S. SOMALINI
	MAIBAM GEETA	4.	KH. SUSHILA	4.	N. UMABATI	4.	O. PREMITA
	B. ASHAPREM	5.	G. BABY	5.	KSH. CHAOBA	5.	N. Ayingbi
	KSH. DEBIKA	6.	RK. BIJIYA	6.	KSH. THOIBI	6.	T. NIVEDITA
	KSH. NALINI	7.	L. KANMILA	7.	KSH. PREMILATA	7.	H. ROMILA
	KSH. BIBIKA	8.	TH. IBETOMBI	8.	KSH. PRIYA	8.	CH. RANJEETA
	KSH. BABLI	9.	P. SONIYA	9.	KSH. MEDONA	9.	K. RENU
	KSH. MEMA	10.	H. SHADHANA	10.	I. JAMUNA	10.	O. SHANTI
						11.	N. KALPANA
						12.	G. PREMILA

On 13th August, the Team visited Akampat Relief Camp at Imphal which is housed in an educational institution. This is the biggest relief camp in the Valley and houses about 900 displaced Meiteis. Here we met displaced Meiteis who fled from Moreh and Churachandpur. We were informed that besides government relief, local clubs, CSOs and the local MLA were contributing to

the running of the camp.

The Team was informed that Government doctors visit often and that counselling services were provided in the camps on a weekly basis for displaced Meiteis on the trauma they have struggled with. The government has released Rs 500/- per displaced person. The diet in the relief camp consisted of rice dal, vegetables and meat, including fish which is provided once a week. The residents themselves cook by taking turns. The Team was informed that there were two toilets on each floor and sanitation was more or less fine.

Many came to this relief camp from 9th May onwards. One of the displaced Meiteis said he was evacuated from his house on 3rd May and then stayed in the army camp before being brought to this relief camp on 9th May. He said that he is able to earn very less money by going out to the city and finding daily wage work because the work is infrequent and wages are poor.

Saleibam Thoibi, said that most of the people in this camp are from in and around Moreh. She said that the children were enrolled into nearby schools and were attending classes as also college students

## Harrowing experiences of fleeing haunt camp dwellers

NIRANJAN OINAM

IMPHAL: Over 100 days have passed since the outbreak of violence, yet a viable solution remains elusive. Displaced individuals, forced to abandon their homes with only the clothes on their backs, continue to seek shelter in relief camps set up across the state. Although these camps provide safety from the violence, finding solace within them is still a distant goal. The harrowing experiences of fleeing for safety continue to haunt the camp dwellers, as their daily lives vividly reflect the horrors they endured.

Nestled at Chingmeirong Mamang Leikai Upper Primary School, a relatively small relief camp accommodates 35 inhabitants. Managed by local clubs, Shinglups, and Meira Paibi Lups under the guidance of Wangkhei MLA Thangjam Arunkumar, the camp receives government support. Inmates participate in training on making incense sticks, candles, and dishwashing products,



which are marketed under the brand 'Punshi Mayol'. Several young women inmates have secured housekeeping jobs through Sangai Services, while young men engage in various menial tasks.

Of the 35 inmates, three hail from Torbung Bangla, three from Phougakchao Ikhai, and 29 from Churachandpur. Among them, 14 are children, including three under five years of age, who have received immunizations under Intensified Mission Indradhanush 5.0. Urban Primary Health Centre, Mantripukhri conducts regular health check-ups with a team

of two doctors and two nurses. Unlike many other relief camps grappling with inadequate amenities, the Chingmeirong camp faces a distinct challenge despite its modest size. Adult inmates struggle to have peaceful sleep at night due to vivid nightly recollections of their horrific experiences. Some resort to sleeping pills to get rest, yet even these pills serve as reminders of their traumatic past.

Meanwhile, children in the camp also suffer from post-traumatic stress, experiencing panic at the sight of a red sky during evenings and

are frightful of the sound of thunderstorms. Some younger children even cry, claiming their homes are ablaze. Recognising the psychological toll, camp volunteers hope for government assistance in providing counselling service to support both children and adults.

In contrast, the Akampat Girls' Ideal College relief camp, overseen by the Thongju Kendra Relief Committee and sponsored by Minister Th Biswajit, presents a different narrative. Aside from government relief aid, Minister Th Biswajit personally fulfils the camp's needs. Any deficiencies are promptly addressed by the Deputy Commissioner and the Chief Medical Officer of Imphal East district. At Eastern Ideal High School, 140 displaced students are enrolled, receiving free private tuition from renowned Biology tutor Irengbam Loyangamba. Samananda, an inmate, plays a pivotal role in ensuring education for these displaced students.

Women inmates receive

training in various crafts, such as Lei Nachom, dishwashing, silk thread production, paper bag making, floor phenyl preparation, snack production, and decorative flower crafts. These creations are marketed under the brand 'Minungshi'. Furthermore, camp organizers plan to install around 10 handlooms in the community hall adjacent to the camp, offering women inmates opportunities for income generation. Regular health check-ups and immunisations for children are also provided.

However, a significant challenge faced by the camp is waste management. With a substantial number of inmates and limited space for waste disposal, the camp grapples with decaying waste that poses health hazards to both inmates and neighbouring residents. Despite appeals, the Imphal Municipal Corporation (IMC) has yet to initiate waste collection efforts, raising concerns among the camp organisers and inhabitants alike.

### Some conclusions on the relief camps

The Team surmised that the broader ethnic segregation witnessed in the region between hill and valley region also plays out in relief camps. The camps visited by the Team in the Hills were either run by local civil society organisations, NGOs, churches or on support from local politicians with some or no support from the State. The relief camps are in abysmal condition and need immediate relief material and medical supplies in particular. Critical areas of concern include lack of adequate nutrition to displaced Kukis living in the camps, poor living conditions and sanitation resulting in illness, lack of access to medical aid, supplies and personnel, dilapidated and insufficient infrastructure. The education of the Kuki students both in the relief camps and in the hills is under serious crisis and immediate steps need to be taken to ensure that their education is resumed. Furthermore, the economic destitution caused by the violence and displacement has resulted in serious impoverishment and financial insecurity for the Kuki displaced persons. It is a matter of grave concern that the situation persists even three months after the outbreak of the violence.

The relief camps in the valley have their own share of problems including overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and livelihood insecurity. It has been helpful that the local clubs and various philanthropic donations have offset State oversight in the running of the relief camps, some of whom are also providing livelihood training to Meitei displaced persons in some of the relief camps. It is noteworthy that the Government has facilitated the admission of Meitei displaced students into schools and colleges in the vicinity of the relief camps thereby ensuring continuing of their education. Access to medical services is also in a much better situation given the proximity to the vast medical infrastructure in the valley. Attention has to be paid to the nutrition deficit in the diet in the relief camps and to the needs of children, senior citizens and the infirm.

Across Manipur, the conflict-displaced people residing at the camps were overcome by overwhelming grief of having lost their homes and livelihoods. People shared poignant stories of fleeing from violence, hiding in the forests and the arduous journeys they undertook to reach the relief camps. Some people the Team met travelled on foot for almost 3 days before reaching safety. Almost all conversations ended with people sharing their fear and uncertainty about what the future holds for them. Having lived at the camps for close to three months, the big question looming for the people there was: what comes next? Was their stay going to be indefinite? Could they return home? What is the government planning as rehabilitation?

### **Displaced persons who have fled to Guwahati**

On 14th August, the Team also visited conflict displaced persons who had sought refuge under Church authorities in Guwahati. The team was informed that initially, relief camps had been created to house over 125 families that had sought refuge. However, it was deemed better to settle the families across Assam. The displaced persons are a mix of class backgrounds - from working class to government job holders. The Team was informed that besides the children of these families, several other children had been sent from Manipur to be placed in schools in Guwahati. Further, more than 80 displaced persons had managed to secure jobs, but primary intervention, including financial support from the government, was lacking.

In a strong statement, the Church is attempting to keep the displaced persons from the Meitei and Kuki communities together. The attitude of both communities to living together was initially combative. One father told us *“Given that they have no alternative for food and shelter, they have adjusted to their situation. What they feel in their hearts is left to be seen.”*

## **4.7 Ethnic Segregation**

A result of the violence has been a complete ethnic divide between the Meitei and Kuki communities, with members of the Kuki community confined to the hills and members of the Meitei community confined to the valley.<sup>76</sup> No person of the other community is permitted to enter the other region, and stringent checks are carried out by community volunteers, extending to all levels including military forces. In one reported incident, even army jawans were made to produce identity Cards to pass by the Meira Paibis.<sup>77</sup>

It has been reported that after the initial bout of violence, the armed forces carried out a ‘repatriation’ exercise in Manipur. Effectively, all members of the Meitei community in the hills were brought to the valley, and members of the Kuki community in the valley were moved to the

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<sup>76</sup> In September 2023, the last members of the Kuki community in Imphal were forcibly removed by security forces and Manipur Police and relocated to a relief camp in Motbung in Kangpokpi district: Yaqut Ali, "Manipur: Imphal's Last Kuki Families Say They Were 'Forcibly Evacuated' From City" The Wire, Sept 2, 2023, available at <https://thewire.in/communalism/manipur-new-lambulances-last-kuki-families>)

<sup>77</sup> “Manipur Unrest: Meira Paibis ask Jawan from Assam to produce ID”, *Northeast Live*, Aug 06, 2023. Available at: <https://northeastlivetv.com/topnews/manipur-unrest-meira-paibis-ask-jawan-from-assam-to-produce-id/>

hilly areas. What was portrayed to be a peace initiative effectively resulted in total ethnic segregation and creation of a conflict border zone.<sup>78</sup> Even doctors were not spared and were moved to areas of their community.<sup>79</sup>

A fall-out of the conflict is the breakdown of the regular district administration across Manipur as the ethnic segregation extended to officials at the highest level. As a result of a “No work, No pay” order issued by the State government, a large number of officials have reported to duty, with Meitei officials reporting in the valley and Kuki officials reporting in the hills. However, with a number of main government offices being in the valley area, the Kuki-Zo employees are unable, and refuse, to comply, reportedly leading to exclusion of the Tribal community from decision-making in governance issues. In another case, a Meitei bureaucrat faced suspension after refusing to assume the post of Deputy Commissioner of a Kuki dominated district.<sup>80</sup> The result is that it has led to a “*so-called separate administration*” for the two communities.<sup>81</sup>

Members of the Kuki Student Association in Kangpokpi said that effectively, there is no government in the Hills. Hence, the community itself has set up an interim government with different departments, including the statistics department, legal department, and education department. One of main functions of this interim government is visiting the villages in the frontlines and enquiring with people there if they need relief – medicines, ammunition, arms, pads, medicines, groceries.

A consequence of this ethnic segregation has been militancy in the border region, with both communities and armed forces performing intense checks on anyone seeking to pass through.

In Churachandpur, the Team was informed by a civil society organisation representative that Kuki youngsters are now being forced to defend their villages. According to her, without these defence mechanisms, the Meitei community will immediately attack.

A Meitei civil society representative informed the Team that the Meiteis had no choice but to arm themselves since the Kukis had weapons. That is the reason that the armouries were looted, she added. She also said that there is a 'LOC' between the Hills and the Valley with a buffer zone which is patrolled by the armed forces. She said that there are bunkers on either side with armed squads taking turns to guard their villages. She was relieved that the firing from both sides had

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<sup>78</sup> Bhat, P. “Manipur ground report: In hospitals, doctors witness the tragedy of the violence”, *The News Minute*, Aug 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/manipur-ground-report-hospitals-doctors-witness-tragedy-violence-180986>

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> “Manipur IAS officer suspended for refusing to take charge as DC Jiribam amid ethnic violence”, *India Today NE*, Aug 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.indiatodayne.in/manipur/story/manipur-ias-officer-suspended-for-refusing-to-take-charge-as-dc-jiribam-amid-ethnic-violence-638883-2023-08-23>

<sup>81</sup> Singh, V. “After Manipur government order, Kukis and Meiteis stick to their regions while rejoining work”, *The Hindu*, Jul 15, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/after-manipur-government-order-kukis-and-meiteis-stick-to-their-regions-while-rejoining-work/article67084034.ece>

seen a lull for the past few days but this can change anytime and they have to be prepared to face Kuki attacks.

Representatives of COTU said that Kukis were on the defensive and not offensive and the Kuki Zo community will defend their ancestral land till the last drop of blood in their veins.

The unprecedented ethnic segregation in Manipur is a blow to democracy and represents the decimation of the social fabric of the state. It is hard to escape that this has been manufactured by the state government in a state where despite previous conflicts, communities were able to reconcile and live together.

## 4.8 Undeclared Blockade

Apart from ethnic segregation, there has been an undeclared but complete blockade of movement of essential supplies as well.

An ITLF Spokesperson said that in Churachandpur, the nodal highway from Imphal has been blocked resulting in a total inability to access essential items from Imphal. Previously, all supplies used to come from Imphal. He said that *“now, there is no public transport. Everything is coming from mountainous roads over 400 km away from Mizoram. This is very expensive. Even convoys are not coming through and the State is unable to send supplies past the blockade. The state previously used to try supplies across the blockade, but now they have stopped trying because they don't want to get into conflict with the people. The FCI Godown is in Imphal, but even PDS relief is being routed from Gauhati through Mizoram. All essential supplies coming from Dimapur to Imphal and then to Lamka<sup>82</sup>. The only airport is also in Imphal - even people who wish to leave must somehow go through Mizoram. This is despite the fact that Lamka is the largest district in Manipur. Our relief camps are run on the goodwill of people, Civil Society Organisations and Mizoram government but we are running short on funds*

A representative of Kuki Student Organisation, Churachandpur said that the situation in Churachandpur is worse than in Kangpokpi, in the sense that Kangpokpi has a direct route for supplies through Dimapur. He said that *“All our supplies came from Imphal, and have now been cut off. We are supported by the NGOs and community only. All supplies are now routed through Mizoram and we ourselves must exit via Mizoram, which is over 11 hours away.”*

A senior Catholic church official said while the blockade of essential supplies has hit the Kuki community in the Hills very hard, the blocking of the highways by the Kukis from time to time, has boxed the Meiteis into the valley, with the only possible way of leaving it being a flight to Imphal.

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<sup>82</sup> The Kuki community calls Churachandpur as Lamka, which is the traditional name.

When Ima Ngambi, of the Meira Paibis was asked about blockade of essential supplies and relief material to the Hills, she said that the Meitei people stop this because *“the Kuki people have looted our lands”*.

The Imphal valley and the Hills today stand divided by a "border". There are bunkers on either side of the "border" manned by armed squads from the respective communities, while the armed forces are stationed in between to man the border. The Meiteis have blocked the movement of essential supplies, even by the armed forces, from the valley to the hills. The frontier between the valley and hills, and the undeclared blockade, has severely compromised the transport of essential commodities including basic relief food items, medicine affecting thousands of conflict-displaced Kukis in the relief camps in hill districts. The blockade is having a devastating effect on the Kukis in the relief camps in particular, and on Kukis in general. The Kukis, on the other side, ensure that no Meiteis enter their district and have periodically blockaded the National Highway, which hits supplies to the valley and impacts the mobility of Meiteis out of the Valley.

#### **4.9 Education, Living Situation and Health:**

Following the outbreak of violence on May 3rd, everyday life - health, education and livelihood - came to be drastically impacted across the state, most particularly in the Hills.

Due to the violence, schools and colleges in the State shut overnight, and several school going children came to be displaced. Not only were several schools burnt but a sizable number began to be used as relief camps due to which classes were unable to resume quickly.

In Imphal valley, the Team were told that classes resumed in July. At the relief camps the Team visited in Imphal and Moirang, children had begun to attend school. College-going students have resumed their classes too. The Team was that the education department has extended help in distributing textbooks to students and facilitated admissions in schools and colleges, sometimes even without transfer certificates. However, Church authorities said that even with the opening of schools in the valley, a large number of students are absent for various reasons including fear.

In total contrast, in the hills (Churachandpur and Kangpokpi), the displaced Kuki school and college students have not been able to resume classes.

At Kangpokpi, the Team were told that schools have been shut since the violence broke out, and it's likely that the present situation will continue as such for a long time. At the ITI camp, the Team visited, none of the children at the camp were attending school. The Team was informed that schools in the surrounding district are shut, and that students have nowhere to go. There is only one functional school in Char Hazare, a Nepali village in Kangpokpi.

An independent journalist at Kangpokpi informed the Team that since local schools are not open, children from wealthier families have been sent to Guwahati and other areas to pursue their education. She also added that several students from Kangpokpi would travel to Imphal for school due to their close proximity, which is no longer possible now.

Even college students have been adversely affected, she said. Students from RIMS and JMIMS from Imphal had to flee without any of their essentials like laptop, documents and textbooks. Over 18 students from Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal and 8 from Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal have been displaced, according to her.

Despite various efforts by students to approach the army, chief secretary of the state and even current Naga students to extract these documents, they have had no luck. She also spoke of professionals who fled from Manipur University who left behind their laptops which contained their original thesis and life's work.

In Churachandpur the situation was similar. A representative of Kuki Student Organisation told us that schools remain shut due to regular firing in the area. The Team was also told that since the camps are housed in several educational institutions, it has been difficult to resume classes, though morning classes have begun for students between 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>. An ITLF spokesperson said that for Kukis, protecting their lives has become a priority. *"We may lose education and health, but we need to protect our lives and land. Health, education are concerns for peace time. During war, the first goal is defending land and lives."* he said. However, he said that there is deep concern for the future of the students and added that talks are on-going with the Central Government regarding provision of prefabricated homes, and once that is supplied, the displaced Kukis would be shifted there, so schools can resume.

Livelihood has also taken a drastic hit for the people in the State especially the displaced persons. A camp convenor from Churachandpur told us that most displaced Kukis at the camp used to be agricultural labourers and small farmers who owned small plots of land where they would cultivate crops, or depended on agricultural land to earn their living. In fact, several people had grains stocked up, and were setting up to sow rice and seeds so they could harvest the yield later between December and January. Now with no access to their lands, they have lost all money they invested on their paddy field.

At the relief camps, finding alternative work has been tremendously difficult, leaving people with no means to earn their living. This is increasing the economic precarity of the displaced families, and threatens to engulf them in deep poverty.

At Kangpokpi, the Team were told by displaced Kukis housed there that none of the people in the camp have found work and have any source of livelihood. A school teacher at the camp told

us: “Only those people in government services continue to receive salary, rest of the Kuki people have no money”

In camps in Imphal, displaced Meiteis are struggling to find alternative sources of livelihood. A displaced Meitei the Team met in Akampat, a 36 year old mother of two, told us that she used to previously own a shop in Moreh where she sold goods that she bought from the Burma border and earned enough to feed her children. Now at the camps with nothing to earn, she says she’s not able to buy her children anything, not even a biscuit or a chocolate.

At Moirang Camp too, a similar sentiment was awash. A young displaced Meitei woman shared her fears of not being able to work and earn money. She said that the camp convenor has promised her that they will be arranging sewing machine training for her in a couple of weeks, and that she will be able to earn. She told us that her husband who lives with her at the camp has found work operating a tractor nearby.

Even outside the relief camps, in the Hills, Kukis are struggling for sustainable livelihoods. At Churachandpur, a CSO activist told us that several establishments have shut down and constructions stopped halfway, leaving thousands of people without jobs. She also remarked that several teachers in schools have lost employment.

Daily life has come to a standstill as per persons the Team met in Churachandpur. Inflation has skyrocketed. We were told that a 25 kg bag of rice which cost Rs 1100/- pre-conflict, is now selling for Rs 1800/-. Even prices of biscuits have shot up from Rs. 5/- to Rs 8/-. She said that in Churachandpur, the market is open only on alternative days because of shortage of supplies due to the blockade, and banks are open only twice a week. In May and June, banks were fully shut. The Team saw that the petrol bunks were closed in both Kangpokpi and Churachandpur.

One of the major impacts of the crisis has been on the medical and health requirements of people living in the hill areas. Through conversations with doctors and nurses at the district hospital at Kangpokpi, and with activists and civil society organisations, the Team found several issues plaguing the medical and health needs of people in the hills. *Firstly*, there is a crippling shortage of medical supplies including life-saving drugs, medical equipment and even basic medical necessities like gauze at hospitals. *Secondly*, the exodus of medical professionals including doctors, medical specialists, lab technicians and analysts from the hospitals in the hills has profoundly impacted the provision of medical services to the people in the hills. An employee at a Churachandpur-based Civil Society Organisation relayed to us a tragic story where her mother, who was in need of dialysis, passed away in Kangpokpi, after the sole lab-technician who administered dialysis in the area fled due to conflict. *Thirdly*, for people living in the hill areas, the present strain on existing hospitals and difficulties in accessing basic health needs is understood against the larger backdrop of underdevelopment in the area. In both Kangpokpi and Churachandpur district, there is only one district hospital each. While there are private hospitals



in the area, we were told that even these hospitals were under incredible strain, and are strapped for resources. *Lastly*, on account of the blockade and lack of state support, even district hospitals are being forced to rely on resources from NGOs and CSOs to stay afloat

## **4.10 Access to justice and accountability**

Our overall assessment is that as the present political situation evolves, there is an alarming lack of access to justice and accountability for communities, particularly conflict victims.

### **Concerns regarding access to justice**

The conflict has had a serious impact on access to justice insofar as functioning of courts is concerned. The Team informed that three months into the conflict, the only district court in Kangpokpi is functional to some extent in respect of criminal matters, but no civil or family matters are taken up.

The Kuki community who fled from Imphal flagged the difficulty in access to justice in respect of destruction/vandalisation of houses and property. Several of them have gotten 'zero FIRs'<sup>83</sup> lodged in the hilly areas, which have been transferred to the jurisdictional police stations. However, since then, they have not received any update. Moreover, it would not be possible to participate in the investigation process, or be present before the police for mahazar. Hence, there are grave apprehensions about whether the FIRs will reach their logical conclusions. A retired Magistrate belonging to the Kuki community told the team of her apprehensions regarding investigation of cases lodged by her in Imphal pertaining to the vandalisation and destruction of her property. Even as a judicial officer, she is unable to get updates on the same.

She spoke about the need for neutral people to look after immovable property. She also expressed her hesitance about the transfer of cases to SIT stating that the cases are extremely scattered, and SIT may not be able to monitor the investigation, and the only central zone is Imphal, where Kukis are not able to go. However, in respect of the zero FIRs lodged on either side, the Superintendent of Police, Kangpokpi, Mr. Manoj Prabhakaran said an independent force is being formed to go to meet the complaints and the police stations on either side will coordinate.

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<sup>83</sup>Zero FIR is one that is lodged in a station without territorial jurisdiction, which is later transferred to the police station with jurisdiction.



The lawyer representing COTU noted that the process of investigation in the valley areas is highly suspect at the moment due to intervention of Meitei militant groups. He pointed to the lack of progress in investigations into the heinous crimes against Kukis and various other apprehensions that makes justice seem like a distant dream.

A practising lawyer in Kangpokpi also noted that more than 230 original property documents have been shown to him by Kuki conflict-displaced persons, but he is unable to take any action to help them in respect of protection/sale of property. He referenced an order of the Chief Minister that prohibits sale of property, and said the same may have to be legally challenged. He also noted that Meitei tenants are no longer paying rent to Kuki owners of properties in the valley. He also pointed to situations where some Kukis in the process of purchasing land in the valley had paid considerable amounts which are all lost now.

A similar concern was raised by Meitei conflict-displaced persons, whose properties in the hills have been ransacked and destroyed. They are not able to get any information on what has happened to their homes or their possessions. Due to the total ethnic divide, most of them have no hope of accessing justice, and have lost their entire lives' work, including savings, possessions, documents, houses and lands. In respect of the issue of property and lands of the Meitei community of Kangpokpi, the Team questioned the Superintendent of Police, Kangpokpi, Mr. Manoj Prabhakaran, who said that 20 Meitei villages have been affected, with around 2000 Meiteis displaced. He said that the houses have been mostly destroyed in the conflict, but he is ensuring regular patrolling in the area.

The Team was informed by the retired Magistrate that there is no clarity on how many people have been arrested for various crimes, and this information is not available.

The Team was informed that Manipur has only two central jails both of which are located at Imphal (separate women's and men's jail). However, after the conflict, even when Kuki inmates are granted bail, they are unable to be taken out, even under army escorts. Only one Kuki inmate who got bail was somehow brought out, and that was under protection, by flying him out to Churachandpur on a helicopter. The Team was informed that there are around 200 Kuki prisoners, and the ITLF has written to the Supreme Court seeking for temporary jails to be established in each district. She mentioned that one Kuki was arrested two days ago, and the SP offered options of army camp or police which are both safer than jail. The Superintendent of Police, Kangpokpi, Mr. Manoj Prabhakaran said that a notification has been released by the Home Department directing for temporary prisons to be created in hilly areas. He noted that under him, the police are not pressing for judicial custody of any accused. He said that the Kuki inmates in the Imphal jail are being taken care of, but the situation does not permit them to be brought out. An independent journalist reporting from Kangpokpi said that previously, jails had been constructed in Chandel, Kangpokpi and Churachandpur, but they were never used, and were converted for other purposes.

The Team was informed by an ITLF Spokesperson that the Kuki community also lacks legal resources to pursue legal remedies in respect of the multiple false FIRs being lodged by members of the Meitei community and called for the support of non-BJP political parties.

The Supreme Court's interventions have played a significant role in seeking to increase access to justice, and a summary of the interventions are attached as **Annexure - II**.

### **Situations of Judges and Lawyers**

Needles to add lawyers and judges have not escaped the wrath of the mobs. An application of the Manipur Tribal Forum before the Hon'ble Supreme Court lists as many as 5 Kuki judges who were forced to flee their homes, and whose properties were vandalised. Reportedly, two of the judges even contacted the High Court of Manipur seeking assistance in the form of evacuation and protection, but no help came.

The ethnic segregation has extended to even the legal community - and has had massive repercussions in view of the fact that the only High Court of Manipur is based in Imphal.

Prior to the conflict, lawyers of all communities were able to practise in the High Court of Manipur and the trial courts in Imphal, where several special courts, such as the consumer forum are located. However, the Team was informed of a significant lack of representation of the Kuki community in the High Court. A practising lawyer in Kangpokpi told us that the High Court consists of one Judge from outside Manipur, and the rest are from the Meitei community. Of the almost 30 designated senior counsels, only one belongs to the Naga community, one is from Odisha state, and the rest belong to the Meitei community. Similarly, there are no Kuki Government pleaders in the High Court.

In Kangpokpi, which is a primarily Tribal district around one hour's journey from Imphal, only two advocates regularly practised in the single magistrate court, with a large majority travelling to Imphal to practise. However, since the conflict, all the Kuki advocates have fled back to Tribal areas, increasing the number of advocates practicing in the single court to over 20 advocates. These advocates have sought to register a District Bar Association in Kangpokpi, but the same has not been possible since the Registrar of Societies is located only at Imphal. Given that regular functioning of the court has not yet resumed, these advocates are facing a serious livelihood crisis.

Our Team also met a practising lawyer in Kangpokpi who noted that all the advocates who previously practised in Imphal have had to give up their entire practice and briefs - most of which have been handed over to advocates from the Naga community. In view of the volatile situation, though he is able to appear through video conferencing online, now, even property matters and other civil matters are required to be filed through neutral advocates from the Naga community.

The legal practice has also been severely hit by the internet blockade, which has resulted in advocates being unable to access online resources for over 100 days, resulting in Kuki advocates being unable to access online resources and appear online through videoconferencing before the Court. Now, though the internet can be availed after lengthy compliance procedures, there is often an electricity cut.

It has also been reported that even lawyers of the Meitei community who represent Kuki persons before courts of law are unsafe. Recently, lawyers who were representing Professor Kham Khan Suan Hausing (Kuki professor accused of making alleged remarks against the Meitei community) were constrained to withdraw from the case in the High Court after facing threats and after the home of one of them was vandalised by a mob.<sup>84</sup>

On the other hand, compelling stories of a Meitei Advocate who saved 16 Kukis from a mob and ensured that they reached safety have emerged. Unfortunately, due to this act, his farmhouse was burnt down and he received threats for helping the Kukis.<sup>85</sup>

## 4.11 Internet ban

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023, the Manipur State Government enforced a state wide blanket prohibition on internet services, bringing to halt overnight, all information flow across the state. The ban, which

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<sup>84</sup>"Manipur Lawyers Withdraw From Prof Kham Khan Suan Hausing's Case After Mob Attack", LiveLaw, Sept 3, 2023, available at <https://www.livelaw.in/news-updates/manipur-lawyers-withdraw-from-prof-kham-khan-suan-hausings-case-after-mob-attack-236874?infinitemscroll=1>

<sup>85</sup> Rokibuz Zaman, "'Forever bond': As Manipur burnt, ordinary people stood between attacking mobs and their neighbours" *Scroll.in*, May 10, 2023, available at <https://scroll.in/article/1048838/forever-bond-as-manipur-burnt-ordinary-people-stood-between-the-mob-and-neighbours-under-attack>

lasted 100 days, was partially revoked on 25th July by the Government following directions passed by the Manipur High Court. However, the government order in force, which allows only broadband services to resume, provides little respite to the people of Manipur. Mobile internet, which is the most available mode through which people access the internet, continues to be suspended. In India, about 96% of the population rely exclusively on mobile data for internet access.<sup>86</sup>

Internet bans immobilise every facet of human life. In Manipur, people dependent on the internet for their livelihood have been particularly hard-hit. For people working from home internet shutdown means fear of job loss, and in several cases actual job losses.<sup>87</sup> Several people are being pushed to resettle in other states just to hold on to their jobs.<sup>88</sup> Speaking to *Scroll*, a court transcriber, Tonsing explained how the internet ban in Manipur left him with little choice but to resettle outside the city to be able to continue his job, and support his family financially. Several thousand people with similar transcribing jobs from the state – a popular occupation with Manipur youth – have been facing a similar predicament.

Business in Manipur has also been dealt a crushing blow from the internet embargo, and it has been reported that moving offline has completely immobilised many businesses. The internet ban has struck the legal community hard as discussed above.

The internet shutdown has also adversely impacted students, and the education sector. With schools and colleges coming to a grinding halt since May, the option of continuing education online could not be considered an option due to internet shutdown. College students staying outside the city faced difficulties contacting their loved ones in the state and receiving support from parents. Due to internet suspension, parents have been unable to transfer money to their children outside the city through internet banking, leaving students scrambling to pay rent and afford basic necessities. For students living in Manipur looking to study outside the city, internet suspension is just as difficult. Inability to access online admission forms of universities and attending online coaching has dampened dreams of better education.<sup>89</sup>

Internet bans are levied with the justification that they curb the spread of violence by stopping the spread of disinformation and false rumours. However, many argue that the opposite is at

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<sup>86</sup> Jayshree Bajoria, 'No Internet Means No Work, No Pay, No Food' (*Human Rights Watch & Internet Freedom Foundation*, 14 June, 2023) Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic>>.

<sup>87</sup> Goswami, M. "I Fear Losing My Job!: The Impact Of Internet Ban in Violence-Torn Manipur", *The Quint*, Jun 10, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/manipur-net-ban-effect-livelihood-education#read-more>

<sup>88</sup> Zaman, R. "How two months of internet shutdown paralysed Manipur's economy", *Scroll.in*, Jul 11, 2023. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/1052313/how-two-months-of-internet-shutdown-paralysed-manipurs-economy>

<sup>89</sup> *Supra* note 88.

play.<sup>90</sup> Without the internet, people have no tool to fact-check misinformation or fake news. As a result, rather than de-escalate, internet bans in effect can escalate violence. In fact, as per human rights activists in Manipur, internet shutdowns have aided in obscuring and hiding details of rights violations across the State.<sup>91</sup> Many say that the video of two Kuki women being paraded naked, which cast global spotlight on the conflict in Manipur, would have surfaced much earlier if not for the internet ban.<sup>92</sup>

Manipur is no stranger to internet shutdowns. The State has witnessed about 6 internet shutdowns bans between 2016 till date as per data collected by international digital rights group Access Now.<sup>93</sup> A statement released by Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a digital research and advocacy organisation notes that the internet shutdown in Manipur – one of longest outside of Jammu and Kashmir – may in fact be illegal. Commenting on the July 25th notification granting only partial restoration, IFF argues that it makes internet suspension indefinite, which violates Rule 2(2A) of the Telecom Suspension, 2017 and the Supreme Court order in *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* which notes that internet suspension cannot extend beyond 15 days, and that as such internet bans must be temporally and geographically limited.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Gupta, A. "An Internet ban will not restore peace in Manipur", *The Hindu*, Jul 22, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/an-internet-ban-will-not-restore-peace-in-manipur/article67106942.ece>

<sup>91</sup> Chandran, R. "India's Internet Shutdowns Hurt Women More, Manipur Assaults Show", *The Wire*, Jul 28, 2023. Available at: <https://thewire.in/security/indias-internet-shutdowns-hurt-women-more-manipur-assaults-show>

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> "The government of Manipur must put an end to the ongoing internet shutdown impacting millions", *AccessNow*, Aug 22, 2023, available at <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/manipur-must-end-internet-shutdown/>

<sup>94</sup> Tanmay Singh & Prateek Waghre, "Statement: 100 Days of Manipur's Ongoing Illegal Internet Shutdown & Violation of Fundamental Rights", *Internet Freedom Foundation*, Aug 10, 2023, available at <https://internetfreedom.in/manipur-100-days-internet-shutdown/>.

## V. Understanding Roles of Various players

### 5.1 Views on the State

The broad consensus across different communities is that the government, both at the Centre and the State, have played a principal role in the lead up to the violence and the continuance of the violence for so long. However, one trend that seemed to emerge was that the Meitei community broadly aligned themselves with the State government and allocated a broader portion of the responsibility to the Union Government. On the other hand, the Kuki community strongly blamed the State government and Chief Minister Biren who they identified as a Meitei Chief Minister who stood only for the Meitei community, whereas they feel that the Union government has at least entered into dialogue with them.

Brinda Thounaojam squarely blamed the BJP, at both the Central and State level. She said the conflict was not an ethnic conflict but violence promoted by the State. She was of the opinion that the BJP is allowing the violence to continue and said that this scale of violence is only possible with state backing. She told the Team: *“Chief Minister Biren has sponsored two fanatic groups, Arrambai Tenggol and the Meitei Leepun, who have torched the valley. The Central Government has refused to impose President's rule or even change the Chief Minister though violence has raged for more than 3 months”*. According to her, this reflects the arrogance of the BJP. She said, *“Prior to 3<sup>rd</sup> May, the Chief Minister was going to be changed due to internal problems, and suddenly the violence erupted. Chief minister could have sent troops to control. BJP is talking about Hindu Rashtra and playing with fire in Manipur. They want to break-up Manipur, but what they will actually achieve is the balkanisation of India. Manipur burns and the Prime Minister went to France and where-not! In fact, no one spoke of Manipur except until the video came out.”*

A women's rights activist from Kangpokpi noted that the plan clearly is to keep the pot boiling - the narrative has become one of state government-controlled police forces vs the union government controlled armed forces. According to her, *“These are subplots in a larger design of the double engine government to displace the accountability that they ought to be subjected to, and to deepen the hatred between the Kukis and Meiteis to such an extent that the BJP governments at the centre and state escape blame and instead the other community is identified as the enemy.”*

An ITLF Spokesperson also blamed the BJP at Centre and State, and added that the State



Government has done nothing to control the crisis and is in fact fuelling further violence. He further said *“Since the Biren Singh government is from the BJP, the Central Government and the State Government are working as per their plan. Why else was President's rule not imposed? The question really is about their willingness and not their inability to control the violence. Since the conflict, Prime Minister Modi spoke about the crisis only once, and that was only after the video went viral. Now he's back to being silent. Amit Shah is accusing so-*

*called Kuki infiltrators, and claiming that they have a role in the violence and in saying so he has hurt the sentiment of the Kuki people. He should refrain from using such language.”*

A displaced Kuki from Imphal who has fled to Guwahati said that *“The Chief Minister has been playing politics of division. The Government of India has been enjoying this fight between communities. On one hand, they have entered into SoO agreements with Kuki militant groups and on the other hand they have not removed Biren or imposed President's Rule. The media is also controlled by Meiteis. Since the second term of the Biren government, there was a constant narrative of terms such as Kuki militants, infiltrators etc. There has been a constant targeting of the Kuki community by the Chief Minister through use of words that are unbecoming of his post. Since the violence, Kukis have had no access to internet or social media, but constant flow of Meitei narrative on media has been permitted by the government.”*

Ima Ngambi, a Meira Paibi, said that Meiteis and Kukis are fighting each other because of negligence of Indian administration when in fact both communities struggle due to negligence of the Government. She said, *“Modi only spoke after the viral video but until then he was fully silent. The State Government is suppressed by the Indian Government. This war happened when the State Government took action on drugs. Stopping the violence is in the hands of the Union government, and is not the responsibility of the State Government. Biren Singh is just a puppet of the Government of India. Any solution must come from the Government of India.”*

Despite such scathing critique of the role played by the BJP and by its Governments at Manipur and centre, the extent of ethnic polarisation that has made enemies out of the two communities, means that the accountability that ought to be demanded from the State has taken a back seat and instead, hatred for each other predominates.



## 5.2 Views on the Arambai Tenggol / Meitei Leepun

By all accounts of the Kukis, and in the opinion of certain sections of Meitei CSOs, at the forefront of much violence and propaganda in Manipur, are two Meitei chauvinist organisations – Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun. Not much is known of the origins of these two organisations, which rose in sharp prominence in May when the violence began.

Started with the stated aim to promote and bring back the past glory of “Sanamahi”, a Meitei religion, members of the Arambai Tenggol (roughly translated as dart-wielding cavalry) have been spotted leading the brutalisation of Kukis at Imphal valley and frontier villages.

Several Kuki survivors have identified their assailants as ‘boys in blackshirts’ alluding to the Arambai Tenggol uniform: a black shirt with three pony-riding warriors.<sup>95</sup> A lawyer representing COTU explained to the Team that the Arambai Tenggol distribute thousand of these black t-shirts alongside alcohol and drugs to their cadres that make them like zombies. He added that the organisation focuses on young boys aged between 16 and 20 years, who feel that being identified as a member of the Arambai Tenggol is a matter of pride. According to him, the leadership of the Arambai Tenggol is completely hidden. He shared that his village was attacked by mobs led by Arambai Tenggol.



The Arambai Tenggol’s involvement in the violence has rich video and photographic evidence. A flood of videos and pictures of persons wearing the Arambai Tenggol uniform and attacking villages are available in free stock online. The Arambai Tenggol is also said to have police patronage. A human rights activist the Team met said that most arms and ammunition that the Arambai Tenggol wield are from the police and IRB

armoury. Though not trained, they are fully armed, as per this activist.

In a viral video, the police are seen accompanying persons wearing the Arambai Tenggol uniform to the valley. Pictures submitted by Manipur Tribal Forum Delhi before the Supreme Court also

<sup>95</sup> Saikia, A. “Armed gangs and a partisan state: How Manipur slipped into civil war”, *Scroll.in*, Jun 06, 2023. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/1050361/armed-gangs-and-a-partisan-state-how-manipur-slipped-into-civil-war>

show pictures of an Arambai Tenggol's leader Kourounganba Khuman surrounded with firearms including AKM, Benelli M2 shotgun and 1911.<sup>96</sup>

A representative of Kuki Student Organisation said that the Arambai Tenggol began to function from 2015-16 with a goal to instigate fear and terror among Tribals in the hills. He says hundreds of Arambai Tenggol members would come to the hill areas on motorbikes under the guise of conducting health and wellness campaigns and plant trees, when in actuality their intention was nothing less to create a spectacle of terror, and humiliate the Tribal community. This was echoed by an ITLF Spokesperson who explained to the Team how the Arambai Tenggol has taken out multiple motorbike rallies from Imphal to the Mizoram border with the sole intention of intimidating the Tribal community.

Several people, both Kuki and Meitei, that the Team met, strongly suspect that several prominent politicians, including Chief Minister Biren Singh are sympathetic towards the cause of these organisations.



*File picture of Chief*

*Minister Biren Singh posing with a cadre of the Arambai Tenggol.*

As companions to Arambai Tenggol, are members of the Meitei Leepun, a movement claiming to unite Meiteis settled in different parts of the world.<sup>97</sup> Led by Pramot Singh, self-proclaimed former ABVP member, who many claim is close to the Chief Minister, the Meitei Leepun has amassed a substantial following. Pramot Singh, the founder claims that the Meitei Leepun has about fourteen thousand members in Imphal alone, and over 1000 members trained in handling arms.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup>Interim application of Manipur Tribal Forum is available at <https://www.scobserver.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IA-Directions-19326-2023-Kaoliangpou-Kamei.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Supreme Court Affidavit

<sup>98</sup> Parvesh, J. "'Kukis have no right to demand anything': Meitei Leepun chief", *The Week*, Aug 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.theweek.in/theweek/current/2023/08/04/chief-of-meitei-leepun-m-pramot-singh-interview.html>

Meitei Leepun has been active in the recent past. In fact, as per Scroll,<sup>99</sup> they were taking significant strides even prior to the violence breaking out. In response to the call for protest against the High Court judgement, the Meitei Leepun called for a counter-blockade proclaiming that no goods and people can leave Imphal valley.

ITLF believes that the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun are the main initiators of the violence.

Several other Kuki and Meiteis persons told the Team that these two groups are either patronised or are fronts for Meitei valley-based insurgent groups (VBIGs<sup>100</sup>) like the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF). Many people believe it is very likely that the demand for a “separate Manipur” will resurface again. An independent journalist reporting from Kangpokpi said that she believed that the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun are smokescreens for Meitei separatist organisations which have been dormant for a decade. These organisations show themselves as cultural revivalists but are in fact re-agitating the issue of a separate Meitei nation, though they could very well get subsumed within the larger Hindutva narrative.

Communalism appears to be one of the key ideological planks of the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun. *‘Why else would 350 churches in the State be burnt immediately on the violence breaking out’*, asked an ITLF Spokesperson. A representative of Evangelical Fellowship of India said that the war being waged by Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun is communal. He said that there is a serious issue of pressure being exerted by these groups on Meitei Christians to convert to Sanamahism in what he called Manipur’s version of the Ghar Wapsi movement. He claims that in fear of these two organisations, many Meitei Christians have fled the valley. There are over 1,25,000 Meiteis who are Christian who live in fear since the violence broke out.

In an interview, one of the leaders of the Arambai Tenggol is also noted saying that rising conversion of Meiteis to Christianity is an issue of concern for the Arambai Tenggol and bringing them back to Sanamahism faith is a key goal. Scroll also claims that the Arambai Tenggol first rose in prominence in April this year, when they attacked a Meitei Christian pastor by the name of Takhellambam Ramananda for allegedly insulting Sanamahism faith.

A Pangal Muslim told the team that both these organisations are like the RSS, they want Manipur reserved for the Hindu Meitis. In fact, they falsely accuse the Pangals of being Bangladeshi.

According to the Manipur Tribals’ Forum, the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun outfits have been around for only about four to five years ago; Meitei Leepun owe their allegiance to Mr. Sanajaoba, who is not just a Member of Parliament but also the titular king of Manipur, while

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<sup>99</sup> *Supra* note 96.

<sup>100</sup> VBIGs is a term for armed groups comprising people from Manipur’s Imphal Valley and includes the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the United National Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLF), People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) and the Kanleipak Communist Party (KCP) and the United People’s Party of Kangleipak (UPPK). These groups are based in Myanmar.

Arambai Tenggol has been known to be pro-State government and has consistently countered protests against the State government.<sup>101</sup>

From all accounts that the team heard, the role of these two organisations in the build up to the violence and the violence itself appears to be significant and needs to be thoroughly investigated

### 5.3 Views on SoO Groups

Members of the Meitei organisations and community have consistently claimed that the militant Kuki groups under the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement are behind the violence. One senior politician demanded that the Government instead of making efforts to rein in these Kuki militants under the SOO groups, has let them loose for electoral gains.

“SoO groups” refers to the Kuki nationalist organisations who are agitating for a Kuki homeland, and who have entered into “Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements with the Indian state since 2008 onwards. According to the document *“Agreed Ground Rules for Implementation of the Suspension of Operations (SOO) with Kuki National Organization (KNO) in Manipur”*, the SoO agreement have been in force since 1<sup>st</sup> August 2005 onwards and that it was agreed between the Government of India, Government of Manipur and Kuki National Organisation (as an umbrella for 11 Kuki organisations) to *“formalise the Suspension of Operations and cease hostilities with effect from 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2008”*. A similar agreement was entered into on the same day between the Government of India, Government of Manipur and United People's Front (as an umbrella for 8 Kuki organisations). These agreements, it appears, have been extended from time to time, and as per the information provided to the Team, the same are still in operation. It is reported that earlier this year in March the Manipur cabinet decided to withdraw the SoO agreements with the Kuki insurgent groups.<sup>102</sup> However, the Union government did not give its approval for this withdrawal.<sup>103</sup> A more recent report<sup>104</sup> is that the Union and State government would ensure the implementation of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki insurgent groups in the hill areas.

The Ground Rules mandates that these organisations would *“abide by the Constitution of India, the laws of the land and the territorial integrity of Manipur”* and would *“completely abjure the path of violence”* and in return the security forces (the Army, Paramilitary Forces and the State Police) would not launch operations against them. The Ground Rules contemplate the cadres of these groups to stay in designated camps, and are required that all weapons would be held within

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<sup>101</sup> Lakshman, A. “Probe role of CM, Rajya Sabha MP in fuelling violence: Manipur Tribal body”, *The Hindu*, May 31, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/probe-role-of-cm-raiya-sabha-mp-in-fuelling-violence-manipur-Tribal-body/article66915888.ece/amp/>

<sup>102</sup> “Manipur govt ends its peace pact with 2 insurgent groups”, *Hindustan Times*, Mar 12, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/manipur-govt-ends-its-peace-pact-with-2-insurgent-groups-101678560295793.html>

<sup>103</sup> *Supra* note 41

<sup>104</sup> *Supra* note 42

the Camp's Central Armoury in a double locking system, with one key being with the Group and other with the concerned Security Force. The Ground Rules require a reasonable amount as per Government norms to be paid by the Government for maintenance of the cadre of the group who stay in the designated camps.

According to the news-report referred to above, SoO camps have been regularly checked, and all weapons, except two, were found to be intact during inspection in the past two months.<sup>105</sup>

A learning from the conversations in the Valley and Hills has been the support that the SoO groups have given to the BJP in the 2015 District Council elections, 2017 and 2022 Assembly elections and the 2019 Parliamentary elections. While the Kuki representatives the Team met believe that this was a major mistake and one of the causes for the present situation. On the Meitei side, this is seen as adding credence to their allegation that the Union government and the armed forces, particularly the Assam Rifles, are soft on the Kuki militants.

## 5.4 Views on Meira Paibis

One of the images that the Team came away with were the groups of women, on either side of the “border” taking charge of, and deciding who can travel the roads. In the nights, the women sit together or patrol their localities keeping vigil. However, the Kuki women are only present at the border, monitoring those entering the Hills, whereas the role of the Meira Paibis in the valley has been seen as disrupting peace-making efforts, shielding armed insurgents, preventing passage of essential supplies and there are allegations of their participation in violence against women. Tora Agarwala<sup>106</sup> offers a sober appraisal of the contentious role of the Meira Paibis in the ongoing violence reporting how the Meira Paibis – the women torch-bearers of Manipur.



<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Agarwala, T. “Feminist icons or violent vigilantes? The contentious role of Meira Paibis in Manipur’s conflict”, *Scroll.in*, Aug 04, 2023. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/1053761/feminist-icons-or-violent-vigilantes-the-contentious-role-of-meira-paibis-in-manipurs-conflict>

Kuki leaders are extremely critical of the Meira Paibis as being active participants in the violence, as also protectors of the perpetrators of violence, against Kukis, and their role in enforcing the blockade to the Hills.



The lawyer representing COTU related the incident where Meira Paibis handed over a mentally challenged Naga woman to the mob, assuming her to be a Kuki, and the mob then killed her. On further enquiry the Team learnt that the victim was Lucy Marem from the Maring Naga community who was shot dead near the foothills of Keibi Heikak Mapal village in Imphal

East district and in regard to which the police had arrested 9 persons from the Meitei community, including five women. This heinous killing has been widely reported in the news.<sup>107</sup>

One of the Kuki student leaders related a more recent incident where Meira Paibis blocked the security forces and compelled them to release 12 cadre of Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), which is one of the Meitei valley-based insurgency groups (VBIGs). Further details about this incident as learnt by the Team are as follows: On June 25, the Indian Army's Spear Corps, during a search operation, apprehended 12 cadre of Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), but were compelled to hand them over when a huge mob led by the Meira Paibis staged a blockade demanding their release. A news report<sup>108</sup> states that the BJP MLA from Andro constituency, Thounaojam Shyamkumar Singh, was the one who negotiated the release of the KYKL cadres—a charge that the lawmaker denies. Incidentally the same news report states that among those apprehended is the mastermind of the deadly ambush of an Indian Army convoy in Chandel district in June 2015, which resulted in the deaths of 18 troopers.

As detailed earlier in the report, the Meira Paibis have enforced a complete blockade of any essential supplies, including relief material and medicines from being taken into the Hill districts.

This is a matter for grave introspection given the rich legacy of the women's movement in Manipur, whose roots lie in the Nupi-lan (Women's War) in the early 1900s and 1930s against repressive colonial policies and then in the post-Independence struggles into the 2000s where it protested the human rights violations by the Indian state and the armed forces epitomised by their well-known protest on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2004 when a group of Meira Paibis shed their cloths before the headquarters of Assam Rifles in the heart of Imphal holding a banner which proclaimed:

<sup>107</sup> Baruah, S and Leivon, J. "‘Disturbing’: Naga woman's killing puts tense Manipur on the edge", *The Indian Express*, Jul 19, 2023. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/disturbing-naga-womans-killing-puts-tense-manipur-on-the-edge-8847286/>

<sup>108</sup> *Supra note 55*

'Indian Army Rape us, Indian Army Take Our Flesh'. The Meira Paibis also played an important role in the creation of women led economies in Manipur.



*File Photo of Meira Paibis*

Thokchom Binarani Devi writes of the role of the Meira Paibis: *“By the late 1970s and with the beginning of 1980s the entire state of Manipur was under heavy combing operation by the army in order to flush out the extremists. During the operation a number of innocent people suffered a lot, including women. During that time women, who were directly affected by actions of the Police and Paramilitary forces, along with other local women started to guard their family members. This movement of women came to be known as the Meira Paibi movement. If there are any serious problems which are likely to affect peaceful social atmosphere of the locality, it is made compulsory for every house to join this movement, ever since the women in different parts of the state have been organizing themselves against the activities of armed personals, and other related issues.”*<sup>[3]109</sup>

## 5.5 Views on Naga Community

The Team had limited interaction with members of the Naga community. However, one point that was repeatedly raised by the Kuki community was that the initial rally on 3rd May 2023 against the judgement directing the government to recommend Meiteis for inclusion in the Scheduled tribe list had been organised by *All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM)*. However, the Meitei violence emerged against the Kuki community only, was the narrative. An ITLF Spokesperson said that the Nagas control highways inside Manipur, and if they are involved, they can block all supplies. He said that Nagas have their own political demands, and have been trying to remain neutral.

<sup>109</sup> Devi, TB. (2011). *Women’s Movement in Manipur*, Concept Publishing Company.

At the time of the visit, the Team were told that the Naga community had not responded to the Kuki demand for separate administration. Later, after the Kuki community made a clear demand for separate administration in 5 districts, the Naga community replied strongly through United Naga Council (UNC) stating *"With regard to land, the Nagas' opposition to the creation of new districts in 2016 remains alive as an unfinished issue. Of the districts, ones carved out from Senapati and Chandel districts are the handiwork of the Congress government's appeasement policy carried out in the name of administrative convenience. Hence the demand of separate administration which incorporates the so-called new two districts is necessarily opposed"*.<sup>110</sup> It was reported that the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) has stated that *"The Naga community is not opposed to the Kuki-Zomi demand for 'separate administration' but it should not encroach "even an inch" of Naga territory:"* the statement by James Hau, Information and Publicity Secretary of the United Naga Council read.<sup>111</sup>

The Team was informed that the United Naga Council is vehemently opposing the inclusion of "disputed" territory in the proposed Kuki-Zo administration. A Forest Conservation Professional working with the Manipur Government in Imphal told the Team that the current conflict will have a definite impact on Naga-Kuki relations, and his apprehension was that the Nagas agreed to the NRC because of perceived infiltration. He added that of every likelihood of Naga-Kuki conflicts re-emerging in the background of this demographic shift and claim for separate administration.

At the time of writing this report, the Kukis displayed an exceptional conciliatory gesture to the Nagas by refraining from observing 'Black Day' on 13th September, for the first time in the past three decades. As is known, 13th September marks the day on which 115 Kuki civilians were killed in 1993 by Naga militants.<sup>112</sup>

## 5.6 Views on Pangal Community

As per the 2011 census, there are 2.39 lakh Meitei Pangals in Manipur, which is more than 8% of the total population of Manipur. The Meitei Pangal community is classified as Minorities and Other Backward Classes (MOBC).

A member of the Meitei Pangal community told the Team that though his community is seen in this conflict as a neutral body, in fact, the Pangals are being trapped in the middle, especially in Kwakta village which is on the boundary between Imphal and Churachandpur. He said that both the Meitei and Kuki communities believe that the Pangals support the other community.

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<sup>110</sup> Bhat, P. "Separate administration for Kukis cannot include disputed territory: Naga group", *The News Minute*, Aug 23, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/separate-administration-kukis-cannot-include-disputed-territory-naga-group-181395>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Rokibuz Zaman, 'A message for Nagas': Why the Kukis did not mark 'black day' this year, 15.09.2023 available at <https://scroll.in/article/1055968/a-message-for-nagas-why-the-kukis-did-not-mark-black-day-this-year>



## 5.7 Views on the role of the Armed Forces and State Police

Another aspect that repeatedly came up in discussions with the Team was the relationship between the various armed forces and the communities. It may be kept in mind that the state police force has faced equal ethnic segregation as the general populace and have been permitted to report to the districts dominated by their communities.<sup>113</sup>

In respect of armed forces, each community had a different opinion. A media professional from Imphal noted that there is concrete evidence of a good relationship between Assam Rifles and Kukis, and Kukis don't want their withdrawal. On the other hand, a relief camp volunteer in Churachandpur said that the Assam rifles are the only neutral force, since the state police have fled to the valley or hills depending on their ethnicity.

Another representative of Kuki Student Organisation, Churachandpur said that the State Police and Commandos regularly come from the valley and shoot in the buffer zone area. He said that when the same was sought to be stopped by the Assam Rifles, an FIR was lodged against them.<sup>114</sup> A member of the Meitei Pangal community told the Team that the Assam Rifles are stuck in an awkward situation between the communities, just like the Pangal community. He noted that the Assam Rifles are bound by the SoO agreements and are unable to comply with demands for action from the Meitei community.

A retired Magistrate belonging to the Kuki community informed the Team that the Kuki community is unable to trust the Indian Reserve Battalion or the Assam Police which are broadly seen as supporting the Meitei community in this conflict.

This brings out another layer in this vastly complex conflict and the roles played by or attributed to the police and the various armed forces operating in Manipur.

## 5.8 Meeting with the Governor of Manipur

The Team met with the Manipur Governor, Smt. Anusiya Uikey on 13th August at the Governor's house, during which the team apprised her of the key issues around the conflict, including the ethnic segregation, plight of conflict-displaced persons in the relief camps, the undeclared blockade and the suffering it was causing to the Kukis and the overall failure of the Biren Singh-led State Government.

The Governor was conscious that the ethnic segregation and hatred was to such an extent that communities are not able to travel to the other area. The Governor was also aware of the

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<sup>113</sup> *Supra* note 82

<sup>114</sup> The registration of FIR is a matter of record as cited here: Tiwary, D. "Story of the Assam Rifles, against whom Manipur Police have filed an FIR", *The Hindu*, Aug 10, 2023. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-history/assam-rifles-manipur-police-filed-fir-8884517/>

blockades of two major highways being NH2 and NH37 and the impact that it was having. She informed the team that this was also resulting in government supplies not being able to be transported from the valley to the hills. She explained about the efforts she had been making to end the blockade and ensure that medical supplies were taken to Churachandpur, where she had herself gone on two occasions. She said that medicines were being transported by helicopter, and that necessary items are provided through the district administration including hygiene kits, medicines and grains. She added that due to the blockade from Imphal to Churachandpur, all the supplies are required to be routed through Mizoram.



Commenting on the situation, she said that each community is seeing a high level of unity and



hence the armed forces are unable to efficaciously take steps and that it was difficult to get peace in view of the repeated incidents on both sides especially in the border regions. She said that due to seizure of arms from the armouries more than 5000 weapons and 5 lakh bullets have been taken and both sides are now armed. As such unless the communities themselves agree to sit and give up their arms, it is very difficult to do anything. She said that the need of the hour was mediation and for civil society organisations from both sides to initiate

peace and reconciliation talks. She acknowledged that this wasn't a conflict that suddenly occurred but had been stirring for a long time. She said that she had publicly requested that the violence must be stopped and both the communities must speak to the Government of India in a peaceful manner.

## VI. Summarising:

A CSO representative in Churachandpur, like all other Kukis, confirms that the Kukis have suffered more, whether in number of deaths, number of displaced persons, properties lost, places of worship destroyed and most importantly, have been made scapegoats at the hands of the government. *“Everyone has suffered, but the Kukis have suffered more than those in the valley because they are fighting on two fronts - against the state government and the dominant majority community”* is her conclusion. Another Kuki student representative summarised the impact on the communities rather succinctly when she said that *“among Meiteis, it is mostly the poor who have suffered, whereas among Kukis, all have suffered in this state-sponsored ethnic cleansing”*.

*“We are all victims here, though the Kukis have suffered more... Everyone is suffering... People are wounded... How are they going to stay together? The accommodating space that was Manipur is now destroyed... We are a state that has had Tribal Chief Ministers (Yangmaso Shaiza and Rishang Keishang) and a Muslim Chief Minister (Mohammed Alimuddin) in the past. I fear for the future of my state, Manipur, and its people. Is Manipur the next Kashmir? Will it be divided into three ethnic states? There are no sensible voices on either side courageous enough to speak the language of peace, justice and reconciliation?”* This was the lament by a Meitei intellectual, who is deeply troubled by the brutal violence unleashed on each other. They added that there are numerous stories of people saving persons from the other community but no one is now willing to speak about this. Such is the ethnic divide and hatred.

The scale and design of the violence has resulted in the unprecedented complete ethnic segregation of the Meitei and Kuki communities into the valley and hills of Manipur, respectively. The BJP with Modi at the Centre and Biren Singh in Manipur have the ignominious credit of overseeing the complete decimation of Manipur's social fabric resulting in entire communities being totally ethnically segregated. The BJP government has manufactured this segregation in a state, which despite previous conflicts, was able to reconcile and live together.

Communities have been able to find ways to reconcile despite horrific ethnic conflicts, be it the Naga - Kuki conflict from mid-1992 till 1995, the Meitei Hindu – Pangal conflict of 1993 or the Paite - Kuki conflict during 1997-98. But this time around, it is not an inter-community conflict, but one where a politically dominant majority community backed by the state, is up against the minority. This is one where the State has propped up chauvinist organisations to play out its communal agenda. Here the Team recalls the sentiment of Brinda Thounaojam: *“The present plan to construct prefabricated houses exposes their sinister design to force the two communities to live in total segregation and isolation. This is the gift of BJP on the 75th anniversary of India's independence.”*

The Kukis have taken a clear stand that separate administration is the only way out. Their demand is UT status with an elected legislature. *“Political solution first then peace”*, reads the huge

hoarding in Churachandpur, and the walls of Kangpokpi and Churachandpur. A spokesperson of ITLF argues: *“How is dialogue possible? It has to come from the aggressor which controls the narrative. Also, everyday inflammatory content is put out against the Kukis, so why will we think of any dialogue? You can't perpetuate a view that we are encroachers, infiltrators and poppy cultivators and expect a dialogue. It has to come from a space of acknowledgement and acceptance.”*



On the other hand, the Meitei community demands that the withdrawal of SoO agreement, protection of territorial integrity of Manipur and strict action against forest encroachments, Kuki militancy and poppy cultivation and the demand for separate state to be dropped, all preconditions for any dialogue.

A Meitei displaced person from Moreh at Akampat echoes another precondition for peace, which is the removal of the Assam Rifles. She says, *“Our houses are adjacent to the Assam Rifles camp and they did not do anything. When we asked, they said they didn't have orders from above. We want to live in love and peace even with the Kukis. We will live with them if they want peace. But the Kukis are not stopping. Why did innocent people get roped into this fight? Poppy and SoO have to be removed then things will settle. Though everything is in Modi's hands, we do not have any hope from him”.*



*Posters on Walls of Imphal*

It is an almost unanimous opinion that the State was the biggest actor in this entire situation and it consciously allowed the situation to worsen, though the violence could have been stopped, if only the state had acted immediately. It has allowed Manipur to burn, and to segregate ethnically.

Even so, fixing the accountability on the BJP governments at the State and Centre, takes a backseat, while the deep animosity and hatred towards each other dominates.

The BJP, which has been in power in Manipur since 2017 onwards, and at the Centre since 2014 onwards, is to blame for the current volatile situation in Manipur and is trying to escape its role by fanning the hatred between the two communities. Divide and rule is the clear policy; it has orchestrated an ethnic divide which it is communally exploiting. The government is squarely to blame for the violence and loss of lives and property suffered by the affected persons. It is a matter of shame that the Supreme Court has had to intervene to ensure that basic steps are taken in investigating these gross and inhuman crimes.

Any necessary decisions and steps ought to be considered within the broader context of restoration of peace in the state and fixing of accountability on the BJP governments, both at the Centre and the State. Peace is possible on the basis of justice and reconciliation. For any political solution to emerge, restoration of peace and normalcy is a must.

It is the resignation of Mr. Biren Singh as Chief Minister that will mark the first step towards any feasible political solution to this humanitarian crisis. Indeed, the present BJP government has no legitimacy whatsoever to continue. The Team appeals to all concerned to cease hostilities and initiate dialogue and peace-building measures. This could be through the ending of the undeclared blockade to allow safe passage into and out of the Valley and, secondly, by expediting the return of bodies to the Kukis to perform a dignified burial. The Team hopes and wishes that these steps could help in securing some respite from the violence towards a peaceful political resolution to this crisis.

## **VII. Recommendations**

The Team has met with the Governor, Smt. Anusiya Uikey, and made several suggestions including communicating the need for a change at the head of the Manipur government failing which any step forward in the tough path to a political solution seems unlikely. In conclusion, the Team would like to reiterate those suggestions, which are necessary to address the immediate humanitarian crisis particularly in the relief camps, and the survival crisis in the Hills.

1. Immediate steps are required to address the shortage in meeting the basic needs including food, water, infrastructure, sanitation, health care, education and other services, of the conflict-displaced persons living in the relief camps. The abysmal condition of the relief camps in the Hills requires immediate attention.

2. The undeclared blockade is wreaking havoc in the daily lives of not just the conflict-displaced Kukis but others as well. Free and safe movement of essential supplies, fuel, food, medical supplies and other supplies must be ensured.
3. Given the scale of violence, more than 6000 criminal cases are registered for various offences including murder, rape, assault, arson, theft, etc. Some clarity has emerged through the intervention of the Supreme Court, yet the manner of investigation is yet to be resolved. Ensuring justice to the conflict-victims ought to be an essential part of any path ahead.
4. The question of compensation for the loss of life, injuries suffered and properties destroyed is also of importance. For this purpose, expeditious access to justice for those has to be ensured.
5. Some livelihood activities have been initiated by civil society organisations in the relief camps in the Valley, which is totally absent in the relief camps in the Hills. This needs to be addressed as the conflict-displaced persons are suffering a crippling financial crisis.
6. While educational institutions have resumed in the Valley and conflict-displaced children and youth have been helped to resume their education in educational institutions near the relief camps, this is yet to be done in the Hills. All steps must be taken to ensure that education of children and youth in the Hills does not suffer.
7. Students who have fled from various educational institutions in Imphal require immediate attention and all steps are required to be taken to ensure that their educational records and belongings are returned to them and steps taken for them to resume their education. In this regard it would be ideal for State governments to welcome conflict-displaced students to continue their education in these States.

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# Annexures

## Annexure - I - Press Release dated 16th August 2023

- Eight Member Team of CPIML, AIPWA, AILAJ and an Independent Activist Visits Manipur
- Team Holds Nexus of Biren Singh Led Manipur Government and the Union Government as fully responsible for the complete breakdown of constitutional machinery resulting in an unending saga of violence and untold human suffering in Manipur

An 8-member team led by the CPI(ML)Liberation including Pratima Engheepi (CPIML Central Committee member and Vice-President, All India Progressive Womens' Association), Bibek Das (CPIML Central Committee member), Sucheta De (CPIML Central Committee member), Clifton D' Rozario (CPIML Central Committee member), Avani Chokshi (CPIML Karnataka State Committee Member), Krishnaveni (All India Progressive Women's Association), Madhulika T (All India Lawyers Association for Justice) and Du. Saraswati (Dalit and women's rights activist, Karnataka) has visited affected villages and relief camps across Manipur, between 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> August, and are shocked at the political turmoil created by the double-engine BJP governments in Manipur and at the Centre. The Team visited villages and relief camps in Imphal valley, Kangpokpi and Churachandpur districts. The Team also met with concerned authorities and the leaders and organisations of the affected communities including the Meira Paibis and Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum.

1. This unprecedented ethnic segregation of the Meitei and Kuki communities into the valley and hills of Manipur, is the gift of BJP on the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence. Never before in the history of India has a government overseen such a complete decimation of society's social fabric that has resulted in entire communities within a state being ethnically segregated into different parts of a State. The double-engine BJP government has manufactured this segregation in a state, which despite previous conflicts, was able to reconcile and live together.
2. It goes without saying that this ethnic segregation and violence that has been raging for more than 3 months now, is the consequence of the actions of the BJP government. Even as the Chief Minister Biren Singh proved thoroughly incompetent and reluctant to put an end to the violence, Prime Minister Narendra Modi prioritised his visits to France and the US over Manipur. In fact the miserable response of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister in the Parliament exposes their bankruptcy in offering any comprehensive political solution to this crisis.
3. The situation in the relief camps is grim. Across the valley and hills thousands of internally displaced persons live in desperate conditions. Basic services are lacking, insufficient arrangements are being made as the government has wiped its hands off the suffering people.

- The relief camps in the valley for the displaced Meiteis are in shocking condition. It is learnt that only Rs. 80/- per person in addition to some rice and dal is given by the state government at the relief camp at Shyamasakhi High School at the heart of Imphal, which is grossly insufficient. The Team also observed that no proper facilities are being provided at the relief camp at Moirang, which is currently being housed at a marketplace. Only Rs 500/-per person has been distributed to the people at the camp to date. The relief camp at Akompat run in the school campus is also congested with insufficient basic amenities.
  - The situation in the relief camps for Kukis in the hills is extremely serious. At the youth hostel in Churachandpur, run by volunteers, the rooms are highly congested, and infectious diseases have begun to fast spread. Measles, chicken pox, viral fever are an everyday reality at the camp. Sanitation is poor, and the camps the Team visited, which each have internally displaced persons upto 500 in number do not have sufficient toilet facilities. Most relief camps are unable to provide nutritious food to the residents and are only given rice and dal twice a day. At Kangpokpi, the relief camps are in a similar situation with no proper nutrition and sanitation. The district has only one upgraded PHC which has been designated a district hospital and which does not have sufficient doctors, staff or medicines.
4. The frontier between the valley and hills, and the undeclared blockade, has severely compromised the transport of essential commodities including basic relief food items, medicine affecting thousands of internally displaced Kukis in the relief camps in hill districts. This also impacts the mobility of Meiteis out of the Valley.
  5. The government is squarely to blame for the violence and loss of lives and property suffered by the affected persons. It is a matter of shame that the Supreme Court has had to intervene to ensure that basic steps are taken in investigating these gross and inhuman crimes.

It is the resignation of Mr. Biren Singh as Chief Minister that will mark the first step in the journey towards any feasible political solution to this humanitarian crisis. We appeal to the affected communities to cease all hostilities to ensure that the suffering masses in the relief camps can be properly taken care of as a gesture of moving forward from the conflict and towards a resolution to the present impasse.

The Team met with Smt. Anusuiya Uikey, Governor of Manipur and informed of the alarming situation in Manipur and emphasised the immediate steps to be taken in regard to the relief camps as also the need for Biren Singh to step down for any political resolution to materialise.



## Annexure II - Intervention of the Supreme Court<sup>115</sup>

Soon after the eruption of violence in Manipur on 03.05.2023, two petitions were filed before the Supreme Court. First was a petition filed by the Manipur Tribal Forum Delhi seeking SIT probe into the violence and relief for the victims; and second was a petition filed by Chairman of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) of the Manipur Legislative Assembly challenging Manipur HC on grant of ST status to the Meitei community.

When the matter was taken up by the Supreme Court on 08.05.2023, the Union govt stated that there had been no violence for the last two days and further stated that normalcy was returning to the state. The Solicitor General (SG) stated that the property of all people, regardless of religion, would be protected. However, Senior advocate Colin Gonzalves shared the apprehensions of the Kuki community that there would be more attacks in the coming days, and sought urgent orders for evacuation of people from certain areas. At this stage, the SG intervened and said that such statements may have an adverse impact.

On 17.05.2023, when the matter was taken up, the SG placed a status report on record showing deployment of 62 companies of CRPF and 126 columns of army/Assam rifles in the state, opening of 318 relief camps giving aid to almost 48,000 IDPs etc. The report also noted that regular patrolling was being done and there was free passage of people from relief/safe locations to airport/native places was taking place. It was also placed on record that the Manipur Home department had given directions to police for registration of FIRs regardless of jurisdiction. The Court noted that *"Certain apprehensions have been expressed on behalf of petitioners. They have sought appropriate directions so that steps can be taken in sensitive areas. The apprehensions be taken into account by authorities who are monitoring the situation."*

On 15.06.2023, the Manipur Tribal Forum filed an interim application stating on record that the Union of India and the Chief Minister of the State of Manipur *"have embarked jointly on a communal agenda for the ethnic cleansing of the Kukis"* by armed communal organisation being Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun. Directions were sought for protection of the Kuki community by the army. The IA notes that despite the assurances of the SG, no relief had been given, and states *"After the giving of these assurances over 81 Kukis were killed, 237 churches and 73 administration building/quarter were burnt and 141 villages destroyed and 31410 Kukis displaced from their homes. The assurances of the authorities are not useful anymore and made in a non-serious fashion and are not even intended to be implemented."* The Interim Application noted the need for cold storage and autopsy of corpses and commented on the inadequacy of relief camps. The forum provided testimonies of victims of violence to show that the law and order situation in the hands of the State government was still abysmal. Hence, directions were sought, inter alia, for the Indian Army to take control of law and order in the main affected

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<sup>115</sup> An outline of the intervention of the Supreme Court into the issue of violence in Manipur, derived from legal reporting in Livelaw (livelaw.in)

districts, constitution of SIT and, reparation from the Union and State government for the Tribals killed.

On 20.06.2023, despite urgent mentioning of the situation, the Supreme Court refused to list the Interim Application of the Manipur Tribal forum, and directed listing on 03.07.2023.

On 03.07.2023, the Supreme Court sought an updated status report. On behalf of the Manipur Tribal forum, it was submitted that the situation has worsened and the number of killings has increased from 20 killings on last date to 110 now. It was submitted that the violence was state sponsored, and Militant leaders had been calling for annihilation for the Kuki community. The beheading of Kuki Tribal David Thiek was also brought to the notice of the Court. On the other hand, the Solicitor General said that the situation was slowly improving with the deployment of forces, increased relief camps and reduced curfew. The Solicitor General is reported to have said *"My learned friend may not give this a communal angle- like Christians or something. Real human beings are being dealt with"*.

On 10.07.2023, when Senior Advocate Colin Gonsalves on behalf of Meitei Tribal Forum said that everyone was against the Kuki tribe in the state, Chief Justice of India is reported to have said that the court proceedings should not be utilised as a platform for escalating violence or exacerbating existing problems in the state. He clarified that the Supreme Court's role was limited to the interpretation of the law and stressed the need to focus on the specific modalities of the case. He said– *"We don't want this proceeding to be used as a platform for further escalation of violence & other problems which exist in the State. We do not run the security apparatus or law and order. If you have suggestions we can take. Let's not see this as a partisan matter, it's a humanitarian issue."* However, when Adv. Colin continued that armed groups are being used by the State, the CJI said– *"This is not the platform where we do this...we should be conscious of the remit of the Supreme Court. We cannot run the law and order on the ground, elected government does. We understand your feelings but there should be certain modalities of arguing before this Court."* At this juncture, SG is reported to have urged Adv. Colin Gonsalves to refrain from giving interviews and expressed concern about his behaviour in discussing the case publicly

On 11.07.2023, the Supreme Court granted protection from arrest to Adv. Deeksha Dwivedi, a member of a fact finding Team of National Federation of Indian Women against whom an FIR was lodged. The Court accepted a number of recommendations of the Petitioners in respect of dead bodies, shortage of doctors and essential medicines in the hill districts, situation of students, situation of relief camps, looting of arms etc. and directed for positive action to be taken in this regard. The Court also directed that *"The Union of India and the State of Manipur should make sufficient arrangements to ensure the protection of the lives and properties of all citizens and residents of the State of Manipur."*

On 19.07.2023, a video of naked women being groped and paraded went viral, which dated back to the 4th of May. On 20th, the matter was taken up by the Supreme Court, which ordered that *"The Court is deeply disturbed by the visuals which have appeared in the media since yesterday depicting the perpetration of sexual assault and violence on women in Manipur. What is portrayed in the media would indicate gross constitutional violations and infractions of human rights. Using women as instruments for perpetrating violence is simply unacceptable in a constitutional democracy. This Court must be apprised of the steps which have been and shall be taken by the government to (i) hold the perpetrators accountable; and (ii) ensure that such incidents are not repeated. The Union Government and the State Government are directed to take immediate steps - remedial, rehabilitative and preventive and to apprise the Court of the action which has been taken before the next date of listing on affidavit."*

On 31.07.2023, the SC asked the Supreme Court why the police took 14 days to register the FIR in respect of the viral video. However, the SG said that seven arrests had been made within 24 hours of the video surfacing. On being questioned, the SG said that over 6000 FIRs had been registered in Manipur. The Supreme Court ordered for disaggregation of data around nature and stage of investigation of the FIRs. The representative of the women victims of sexual offences opposed the proposal for the Union of India to hand investigation of the rape case to CBI and to transfer trial of the case out of Manipur. In another petition where the Kuki population was effectively blamed for the violence, with issues of narco terrorism, poppy cultivation and deforestation raised, the Supreme Court suggested withdrawal of the case.

On 01.08.2023, the SC found an *"absolute breakdown of law and order and machinery of the State"* and directed for personal presence of the DGP of Manipur. The court found that in 6000 FIRs only 250 arrests had been made. The CJI also questioned if the policemen who handed over the women to the mob were questioned, and questioned whether enquiry had been conducted, noting that. *"It's clear that for the two months, the state police was not in charge. They may have made performative arrests but they were not in charge. Either they were incapable of doing it or uninterested"*. The court directed for disaggregation of the FIRs and noted that an independent body needs to be constituted to look into the issue. In respect of unclaimed dead bodies who were unable to be retrieved in communal tension, the SG made a submission that *"Most of the unclaimed bodies are those of the infiltrators who came with certain agenda..."*, The Supreme Court directed for identification of the bodies.

On 07.08.2023, the Court permitted transfer of 11 FIRs pertaining to sexual violence to the FIR, while identifying a high level overseeing officer over the CBI investigation. The Court also permitted the state to constitute 42 SITs to look after cases which are not transferred to the CBI, while directing for inclusion of inspectors from other state police forces in the Teams and directing for supervision by 6 high level officers from outside the State of Manipur. The Court also constituted a committee of three former female High Court judges namely Justice Gita Mittal (former Chief Justice of J&K High Court), Justice Shalini Phansalkar Joshi (former Bombay HC

judge) and Justice Asha Menon(former Delhi HC judge) to *"look at diverse aspects on humanitarian nature"*. The mandate of the committee included to enquire into the nature of violence against women in Manipur, submit a report on steps required to meet the needs of the survivors, ensure that free and comprehensive medical aid and psychological care to victims of survivors is provided; ensure conditions of dignity in relief camps set up for displaced persons including suggestions for additional camps,ensuring the payment of compensation and restitution to victims of violence; and Issuing directions for the appointment of nodal officers at relief camps to ensure that they maintain a database of all persons who are housed in their respective relief camps to ensure reunification of families, and the provision of toll-free helplines to provide updates on any investigation, missing persons, and the recovery of dead bodies.

On 21.08.2023, the Supreme Court noted that three reports have been filed by the Mittal committee including

- A report highlighting the loss of documents of Manipur citizens in the riots which would enable relief and rehabilitation measures. This report calls for assistance in reconstruction of important documents such as Aadhaar cards, bank details and disability certificates for such citizens;
- A report on necessary steps for compensation under the NALSA victim compensation scheme and the Manipur Victim Compensation scheme including compensation for new offences, directions for time bound implementation, involvement of Para Legal Volunteers/ Law students/ students be involved to go through FIRs and identify victims for compensation, grant of authority to Secretary of MALSA to take suo motu action, compensation for orphaned children, immediate payment of relief to victims who have lost all belongings etc. The report also seeks for directions of the Supreme Court to ensure appointment of secretaries in all 16 District Legal Services Authorities
- A Report that classifies directions of the Supreme Court in respect of compensation, violence against women, Comprehensive psychological assistance, and mental health care and identifying experts to assist in evaluating and considering the same.

On 25.08.2023, the Supreme Court issued a number of directions in respect of the cases transferred to investigation of CBI and jurisdiction of Assam. The Court requested that a special court be assigned in Guwahati to handle the pre-trial steps of CBI cases including applications for remand, warrant, extension of custody. The Court granted liberty to victims and witnesses to give evidence virtually or physically. The court also issued a number of directions in respect of implementation of directions of court and for effective functioning of the committee.

On 01.09.2023, the Supreme Court directed as follows *"We direct the Government of India and the Government of Manipur to distribute basic supply of food, medicine, and other essentials so that there is no denial of basic human facilities. The manner in which the blockade is dealt with is under law enforcement. However, considering the humanitarian aspect of the matter,*

*Government should explore all options including air dropping if necessary. The court shall be apprised of the steps taken to ameliorate the situation in the next hearing."*