



Background Dossier on Ethno-Religious Violence and Human Rights Abuses in Manipur, India

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Introduction

Since May 3, 2023, there has been an ongoing armed conflict in Manipur, North-Eastern India, in which over 120 people have died. The incident demonstrates the vulnerability of minorities, in this case Christian minorities, in India. This development comes after a [longstanding ethnic conflict](#) between the Kuki (mostly Christian) and the Meitei (mostly Hindu, but also Christian). Ground reports have likened the situation to that in a civil war, as civilians are using rifles and guns. In response, the state government has imposed a curfew and blanket internet shutdown, deployed an estimated [10,000](#) troops and paramilitary forces, and issued "[shoot-on-sight](#)" orders on May 4 to enforce the curfew.

The London Story strongly condemns the breach of article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), [by the failure of the state and national government to intervene to quickly resolve the situation](#). In a region that is highly militarized and in which human rights abuses have occurred systematically for decades, the steps taken by the Indian government in response have only exacerbated the violence in violation of international human rights law.

The London Story is deeply concerned that the situation in Manipur will further escalate, leading to an exacerbation of the already ongoing humanitarian crisis in the North-East of India. The London Story is convinced that the situation requires an urgent response from the international community, which calls on the Indian government to act on its responsibility to protect human rights.



Methodology

To understand and confirm the ongoing human rights violations in Manipur, The London Story interviewed sources from different backgrounds: David Campanale, an international journalist who conducted a thorough fact-finding investigation, one renowned human rights defender in Manipur, and members of the Manipuri community. Given the ongoing hostilities and the Indian government's crackdown on civil society, the names of the Manipuri sources are kept anonymous. The London Story supplements their testimonies with media reports from Indian and international news, and fact-finding reports from credible Indian and international human rights organizations.

Findings

Background

The violence arises from ancient ethnic fault lines between the majority Meitei community, which is largely Hindu and lives in the valley in Imphal, and the predominantly Christian tribes mainly Nagas and Kukis, who live in the surrounding hills. Local activists [allege](#) that age-old ethnic tensions between communities have been exacerbated for diverse political gains.

The Meiteis dominate political power in the Manipur Legislative Assembly. Out of 60 seats in the Assembly, 19 seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes (ST), i.e. for Naga or Kukis, while 40 are unreserved general constituencies, of which [39 seats were won by Meitei candidates in the last election](#). Several of the Meitei candidates contested as BJP candidates.

Scheduled tribe tensions

The Meitei community has for years campaigned to be recognized as a scheduled tribe, which would give them access to wider benefits including health, education and government jobs across India, and the right to buy land in the hill areas of Manipur. Scheduled tribes are among the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups in India and have historically been denied access to education and job opportunities. If the Meitei community are given scheduled tribe status, other tribal groups say they fear they will not have a fair chance for jobs and other benefits.

In April 2023, the Manipur High Court directed the state government of Manipur to give recommendations to the Central government for the inclusion of the Meitei community in the 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) list by submitting such recommendation to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in the Government of India. Kukis feared that granting Meitei a ST status would enable them to purchase land in the prohibited hilly areas and the [All-Tribal Student's Union Manipur called for a peaceful rally](#) and solidarity march to take place on 3 May 2023 in all the seven hill districts of the state.



Religious tensions

India is witnessing a steep marginalization and curtailment of rights of its religious minorities through laws such as the CAA, anti-conversion laws, hijab bans, cow slaughter laws, and more, while political leaders actively incite further violence against minorities by engaging in hate speech. India is failing to uphold constitutional rights as well as its obligations under international law to prevent discrimination against religious minorities.

Manipur is known for its large Christian population and strong church groups. 41% of the Manipuri population is reportedly Christian, while almost all members of the Kuki community are Christian. Local Manipuris [told](#) a David Campanale that Hindu nationalism prevalent across India has also affected freedom of religion and belief in Manipur.

In the [fact-finding report](#) authored by David Campanale, witnesses from Manipur describe prejudices and fears between the communities, but also within communities. Among the Meitei, there are Hindus, Christians, and people who follow the indigenous religion i.e. Sanahamism. According to statements made in a [fact-finding webinar to](#) David Campanale, many non-Christian Meiteis want to get rid of Christianity from their community, and have threatened Meitei Christians to convert. Many Meitei Hindus reportedly fear that the Christian population is growing. Since the BJP assumed power in Manipur in 2017, there have been [concerns](#) about an increase in Meitei militant groups, who reportedly support ethnonationalist fears against other religious groups. The [fact-finding report](#) by David Campanale also notes a general prejudice against tribals, and notes that Meitei Christians are considered by other Meiteis as “tribals”.

Role of the government

Commentators fear that Kukis and Chin tribes, which are ethnic and religious minorities, are antagonized to appease the majority voter groups in Manipur. Historical migration across North-Eastern India has led to an ethnically diverse population. In other states in North-Eastern India, such as neighboring Assam state, state governments have set out to determine who is “Indian” and who is an “illegal immigrant”, and [1.9 million people](#) have been rendered stateless in Assam as a consequence of this National Registry of Citizens. Civil society fears that in Manipur, a similar ethnonationalist project is underway. For instance, Manipur’s Chief Minister Biren Singh has [openly called tribals “encroachers”, and “sympathisers of immigrants from Myanmar”](#). Manipur’s Chief Minister himself thereby antagonized one community by discursively linking it to illegal immigration from Myanmar. India has [not signed](#) the Refugee Convention, does not have a refugee law, and does not allow the UNHCR access to Manipur, and considers especially Rohingya refugees a [threat to national security](#). In 2021, as the Myanmar military overthrew the democratically elected government, a new wave of refugees, mostly Chins, [reportedly](#) entered India. With no official count, estimates of post-coup arrivals are as high as 70,000.

Local activists [accuse](#) the BJP government of targeting Kukis over the past years. For example, in April 2023, the Manipur government ordered that 3 churches be [demolished](#). In February 2023, the Manipur [state government began an eviction drive](#) in districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal, declaring the forest dwellers as “encroachers”. There are several possible explanations for the crackdown on

forest dwellers: Some note that Churachandpur sits on a vast reserve of oil and gas, and successive governments have reportedly been eyeing this resource. Churachandpur has become one of the ["targets" of the state government](#), as the district has been a hub of solidarity movements for tribal and land rights. Some [reports](#) allege that the forest dwellers, among them Kuki but also other tribes, have been engaging in poppy cultivation for illegal drug trade, and that the state government's crackdown is in response to these activities. The [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) also confirms increased poppy cultivation and opium trade along the border between India and Myanmar. The Manipur government has justified its crackdown on what it calls illegal immigrants as part of its war on drugs, alleging that Kuki Chin tribes have links to the Myanmar drug mafia. One witness who spoke with a [fact-finding team](#) led by David Campanale noted that Kuki are referred to as "[narco-terrorists](#)". In a [television interview](#) in March 2023, Manipur Chief Minister Biren Singh said: "The Chin-Kuki brothers [...] are encroaching everywhere and planting poppy and doing drug business [...] So the government has gone all-out against these elements."

Journalists note that the Manipur government has contributed to militarization of the general population by providing weapons. The ongoing conflict is conducted with [sophisticated firearms](#), as civilians have looted at least [4000 guns](#) and as there are [35,117 active gun licences](#) in Manipur. A recent investigation shows that since the current BJP Chief Minister Biren Singh came to power in 2017, [8000 gun licences](#) have been issued to civilians. Former Manipur police commissioner Raj Kumar Nimai [noted](#) that this figure is "staggering". He also questioned the role of the government, and noted that the Chief Minister is responsible for overseeing the licenses granted. Some Manipuris noted to The London Story that militant groups have existed in Manipur for decades, and that the Indian government has in the past provided Kuki militant groups with sophisticated weapons in order to counter the threats of other armed groups.

Extent of violence and targeting of Christians

Violence erupted during the solidarity march on 3 May 2023 organized in opposition to the Meitei demand for ST status. The [first incident](#) took place in Churachandpur district, which borders the Imphal Valley, and escalated quickly and severely to 10 other districts of the state: Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Kakching, Bishenpur, Jiribam, Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi, Churachandpur and Phezwal. The [fact-finding report](#) authored by David Campanale notes: "While local leadership in Manipur has not explicitly called the violence out for being religiously motivated, the focus of violence between the ethnicities soon shifted towards targeting religious identity and religious structures." Notably, Christians are predominantly targeted, with victims reported among [both](#) Kuki Christians and Meitei Christians.

At least [1700 homes](#) have been reportedly destroyed. Out of [50,000 people](#) who have fled their residences, as reported by the Press Trust of India, [35,000](#) are said to belong to Christian tribal communities. Christians from the Meitei, Kuki and Naga communities have lost their places of worship, their livelihoods, and their land. As of June 21, at least [250 Meitei churches](#) had been destroyed. According to most recent documentation as of July 12 2023 conveyed orally by David Campanale to The London Story, 564 churches, schools, seminaries and homes of church ministers from both Kuki and Meitei communities had been



destroyed. The Manipur High Court [reports](#) that the State Government has opened 318 relief camps, and that 47,914 people have been provided relief in these camps.

At least 120 people have reportedly been killed. On July 2 alone, four people were killed, and police reports that one of them was [beheaded](#). However, much of the violence is perpetrated using [firearms](#), and have looted at least [4000 guns](#) from army and police stations.

From the witness testimonies and wider reporting on the situation, it is evident that the large-scale violence is not sporadic and random. The Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, Meitei militant groups, have been observed to [target Christians deliberately](#), either forcing them out of the land or demanding they convert. Militant groups have also targeted moderate fractions of their own ethnic group: Kuki groups blocked the main national highway to Manipur, Dimapur-Imphal National Highway 2, preventing access to humanitarian aid. After 60 days, two Kuki groups decided to lift the blockade, and the houses of one of their leaders was [burnt down](#) in response to their decision.

State response violates international human rights law

The current situation in Manipur clearly demonstrates the breach of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which India ratified on 9 July 1993 and the [failure of the state and national government to intervene to quickly resolve the situation](#). In fact, more than [550](#) civil society groups and individuals from across India have come together to condemn the ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur and urge Prime Minister Narendra Modi to break his “[deafening silence](#)” on the matter. The Indian government has a responsibility to protect, and it must take this seriously under its human rights obligations.

Police complicity

Ground reports note incidents of police [standing idle](#) as violent incidents take place in front of them, and of police being complicit in violence. On 15 June 2023, Archbishop Lumon [described](#) the violence as a “complete collapse of the constitutional machinery in the State,” adding that “in the peripheries where sporadic violence keeps happening unabated, the mob is said to be marching alongside the State Police who do nothing when the mob goes about torching houses and looting at will.”

Excessive use of force by armed forces

The “Armed Forces Special Powers Act” (AFSPA) has been in force in Manipur since 1958. The AFSPA empowers armed forces to arrest and enter property without a warrant, and gives them the power to shoot to kill, even if the armed forces are not at imminent risk. The AFSPA also prevents victims from seeking



justice and prevents criminal action against a member of the armed forces without permission of the Central Government. AFSPA has permitted and cemented systematic human rights violations in Manipur, and Human Rights Alert, a human rights organization in Manipur, has documented over 1500 cases of extrajudicial killings by armed forces in Manipur.

The AFSPA stands in clear violation of the right to life, the right to remedy and the rights to be free from arbitrary deprivation of liberty and from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, as enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which India has ratified and to which India is bound. This clear breach of international law has been repeatedly questioned by the [UN Commissioner for Human Rights](#), [UN member states](#) during the Universal Periodic Review, and the [UN Special Rapporteurs on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#), who have demanded India repeal the law. AFSPA was initiated as a temporary ordinance measure for 6 months, but has continued to be in operation to date. In 2021, the central government gave the indication it would allow AFSPA to lapse, which it did in [November 2021](#), but it was ultimately re-promulgated in January 2022.

In addition to the AFSPA in force in Manipur, the Manipur state government in response to the violence issued [“shoot-at-sight” orders for “extreme” cases](#), in violation of the right to life and responsibility to protect civilians. The current shoot at sight order in place in the state derives its legitimacy from the application of AFSPA along with other emergency powers that Manipur state can assume.

Internet shutdown

The state government’s Home Department ordered a shutdown of internet services in response to the violence, alleging that this would prevent the spread of rumors. However, blanket internet shutdowns go against the 2015 Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Responses to Conflict Situations, which states that even in times of conflict, “using communications ‘kill switches’ (i.e. shutting down entire parts of communications systems) can never be justified under human rights law.”. Additionally, access to internet is recognised as a [fundamental right](#) under Indian constitutional law, as per the *Bhasin v Union of India* judgment. The internet shutdown also prevents people from contacting their loved ones, from whom they may have been separated. It also prevents people from imparting and receiving factual information about the violence, thereby facilitating the spread of disinformation and further spiraling of violence.

Criminalisation of fact-finding

There are reports that fact-finding missions have been prevented by the police. For instance, on July 8, the National Federation of Indian Women received a [criminal charge](#) for conducting a fact-finding mission into the ongoing violence. They were charged with [sedition](#) and conspiring to commit offences of waging war against India.

Recommendations

To the Indian government

- Employ all necessary measures and exert utmost efforts to promptly halt the ongoing ethnic and religious violence, to protect all religious minorities such as the Christian community of Manipur, and to pre-empt any further escalation;
- In these efforts, strictly abide by the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials;
- Call on political leaders to exercise restraint and to cease inflammatory statements, re-establish trust and play an impartial role to mediate the tensions, and take urgent steps to restore calm and ensure an inclusive dialogue with the participation of civil society and affected communities;
- Refrain from criminalizing those who are critical of government's conduct;
- Allow independent investigations to probe the violence, and allow (international) observers and journalists;
- Unconditionally and without delay lift the internet shutdown;
- Allow unhindered access to humanitarian aid;
- Repeal with immediate effect the unlawful Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), in line with Universal Periodic Review recommendations and appeals by the UN;
- Publicly condemn hate speech that encourages inter-ethnic violence in Manipur, to investigate and address root causes of the violence and hold those responsible accountable
- Refrain from direct or indirect involvement in violence through implicit or explicit support for the majority community;
- provide redress for survivors and families of victims;

To the International Community

- Condemn in strongest terms the ongoing violations of human rights in Manipur and across India; deplore the repeated use of internet shutdowns throughout the country to silence dissent and criticism;
- Systematically and publicly raise human rights concerns, notably on freedom of expression, religion and the shrinking space for civil society with India at the highest level;
- Call on India to repeal with immediate effect the unlawful Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), in line with Universal Periodic Review recommendations and appeals by the UN;
- Initiate independent monitoring of the situation in Manipur, and seek access for the UN and the ICRC to conduct independent monitoring and provide aid to internally displaced persons;
- Assist with humanitarian efforts as needed and if requested;
- Engage on human rights issues with India through an at least annual Human Rights Dialogue at the highest level;
- Organize regular dialogues with the Parliament of India, with discussions on human rights and democracy at their core.