

Appeal to stop violence in Manipur



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We are deeply concerned about the continuing ethnic violence in Manipur between the Meitei community and the tribal Kuki and Zo communities. We demand an immediate halt to this violence that is causing large scale disruption of lives, livelihoods and properties and unleashing even more terror among people.

The immediate trigger to this violence was an April 2023 Manipur High Court order advising the state government to grant the Meitei community (members of which now have either OBC or in some cases SC status) the status of Scheduled Tribe. Thereby, the Meitei community would have access to land that is currently reserved for tribal communities. Several spates of violence broke out throughout the month of May leading to a civil war situation given that both the groups were armed, leading to a complete breakdown of law and order. What we have witnessed since then has been unprecedented brutality and widespread atrocities against the civilians, by security forces, the police and the armed groups.

Manipur is burning today in very large part due to the divisive politics played by the BJP and its Governments at the Centre and State. And on them lies the onus to stop this ongoing civil war before more lives are lost. The violence is affecting men, women and children, over 50,000 people in more than 300 refugee camps and lakhs displaced.

Indeed, the situation has been grim since January this year when the BJP state government began efforts to remove ‘illegal immigrants’ from reserve forest areas who according to them have been settling in Manipur since the 1970s. The state government began an eviction drive in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal, declaring tribal forest dwellers as ‘encroachers’.

Characteristic of its modus operandi across the country, the BJP is once again exacerbating the age-old ethnic tensions between communities for its own political gain. Clearly, the role of BJP lies in using force and coercion to entrench its foothold in the state. Pretending to be an ally to both the communities, it is only widening the chasm of historical tensions between them without any effort till date to facilitate a dialogue towards resolution.

Both the central and the state government are weaponising the constitutional provisions to destroy concepts of democratic dialogue, federalism and safeguarding of human rights. In the present scenario, the worst of the violence against the Kukis has been perpetuated by armed Meitei majoritarian groups like Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, accompanied by genocidal hate-speech and supremacist displays of impunity. Of these, the first is a revivalist group drawing Meiteis to “return” to Sanamahi traditions; while the latter is clearly of a Hindu supremacist orientation. Chief Minister Biren Singh is closely associated with these groups.

Both groups vilify the Kuki community as “illegal outsiders” and “narco terrorists”. The Chief of Meitei Leepun, in a press interview, did not hesitate to state publicly that Kukis in areas disputed by Meiteis would be “wiped out”. He also termed the Kuki community to be “illegal”, “outsiders”; “not part of the family”; “not indigenous to Manipur” and “tenants” in Manipur. Earlier the Chief Minister himself had termed a Kuki human rights activist “Myanmarese”; a nod to the propaganda that the Meitei community faces a demographic threat from refugees fleeing unrest in Myanmar. Since these refugees are from tribal groups that live in Manipur as well, Meitei majoritarian groups whip up the bogey of swelling tribal numbers overtaking the Meitei majority.

This language that dehumanises a minority community as “illegal” was used by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah and the Assam Chief Minister during the Assam NRC exercise. Now the same language has spread to another state in the North East, with the BJP fanning the flames of hatred, violence and xenophobic frenzy.

It is noted that Kuki armed groups solicited votes for the BJP in the 2022 Assembly elections, and seven of the ten Kuki MLAs in the Manipur Assembly are from BJP. Propaganda by Kuki groups also takes a leaf from the BJP book and, invoking precedents where Kuki leaders have collaborated with Indian state interests, brand the Meiteis as anti-India. Reports suggest that the overwhelming majority of those killed in the ongoing violence are from the Kuki community. Reportedly over 200 Kuki churches have been burned, along with schools, granaries and homes.

It is tragic that the age-old strategic use of rumours, called fake news today, to instigate conflicts within communities, continues to make women most vulnerable. Reportedly, such fake news by the majoritarian Meitei groups of the rape of Meitei women by Kukis became the pretext for the alleged lynchings and rapes of Kuki-Zo women. There are news reports about frenzied mobs chanting 'rape her, torture her' while attacking women that urgently need to be verified.

As we demand an immediate halt to this continuing orgy of violence, there is a need, as soon as the violence ceases, for independent, non-partisan civil society members to visit the survivors and the bereaved; make attempts to verify reports of killings and rapes; and offer solidarity and all possible support to those traumatised by the loss of loved ones, homes and churches.

As concerned citizens from across the country, we demand that:

- *The Prime Minister must speak up and take accountability of the current situation in Manipur.*
- *A court-monitored tribunal must be formed to establish facts, and prepare the ground for justice and healing of the gaping wound that separates communities of Manipur to mitigate the divisiveness and hatred being engineered.*
- *A fast track court be set up for all cases of sexual violence by state and non-state actors, as recommended by the Verma commission that 'personnel guilty of sexual offences in conflict areas should be tried under ordinary criminal law.*

- *Provision of relief by the government to those forced to flee and guarantee their safe return to their villages; rebuild their homes and lives. Provision of ex-gratia compensation to those who lost loved ones, suffered injuries and loss of home, grain, livestock and so on. This process of return, rehabilitation and compensation should be overseen by a panel of retired judges who know the region closely, perhaps appointed by the High Court or Supreme Court.*

Endorsed by

Annie Raja, National Federation for Indian Women.

Kavita Srivastava, People's Union of Civil Liberties.

Anuradha Banerji and Vani Subramanian, Saheli Women's Resource Centre.

Kavita Krishnan, Feminist, Delhi.

Ranjana Padhi, Author and Feminist Activist, Odisha.

Nandini Rao, Feminist Activist, Delhi.

Manipur, India!

Not a forest fire, it is ethnic cleansing.

pic.twitter.com/Jav0n8RERN

— Ashok Swain (@ashoswai) [June 15, 2023](#)

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScb-LmpBpDnqWeCSaPob6jqP5mQ6WkiA6JMKmI0FQBQpAXPBQ/viewform>

Assam Times Staff. editor@assamtimes.org

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