

A State Divided: Ethnic Violence and Civilian Struggles in Manipur

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House in flames in Imphal. (May 3, 2023)

Two years into the Meitei-Kuki ethnic conflict in Manipur, violence continues to ravage the region, with civilians often caught in a relentless cycle of killings and targeted attacks. Over 60,000 people have been displaced, and nearly 260 lives have been lost . The situation has led to a stark geographical and social divide, with Meiteis living in Kuki-Zo-dominated areas being relocated to Meitei majority districts and regions, while Kuki-Zos residing in Imphal have been moved to Kuki-Zo majority districts and regions. This forced segregation has entrenched deep mistrust and hostility, making reconciliation increasingly difficult. On May 3, violence broke out in Manipur, between two ethnic communities: the Meiteis and Kuki-Zo communities. Manipur shares a [nearly 400-km border with Myanmar](#), and less than 10 percent of this border is fenced, serving as a transit route for illegal drugs into northeast India from the Golden Triangle.

Following the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, there has been an influx of refugees from Myanmar belonging to the Kuki-Chin community into India. The majority Meitei community has accused illegal immigrants of creating a narco-terror network, but the Kuki-Zo feels that the Meitei community is creating a narrative to effectuate what they describe as ethnic cleansing of the Kukis. Violence was first reported in the Torbung area in Churachandpur during the Tribal Solidarity March, organized on May 3 to protest the Meiteis' demand to be included in the Scheduled Tribe status. Areas in the hill districts are allegedly being used for poppy cultivation by Kuki immigrants from Myanmar.



Haokip Veng, a locality in Imphal burnt and vandalised. (May 8, 2023)

However, the Kukis say they are unfairly blamed for poppy cultivation and claim that the primary reason behind the protests was opposition to the reservation for the Meiteis. The Kuki-Zo community has intensified its demand for a separate state, citing the failure of both the Indian government and the Manipur state administration to protect their people and control the escalating violence. The inability of the authorities to curb the conflict has created a vacuum where civilians, feeling abandoned and unsafe, have resorted to taking up arms for self-defense. This alarming trend of civilian militarization perpetuates the cycle of killings and targeted

violence exacerbating the region's instability. The persistent unrest underscores the urgent need for a decisive, inclusive solution to foster long term peace and stability of the state.



A mother grieving for the deceased who lost his life during the conflict. The deceased has been identified as Toijam Chandramani Meitei from Churachandpur district. He succumbed to bullet injuries on May 24 while he was being taken to a hospital. (June 6, 2023).

At the onset of the Manipur conflict, targeted killings based on specific community identity shook the state, intensifying fear and mistrust. Individuals were brutally murdered solely because they belonged to either the Meitei or Kuki-Zo community, further polarizing the already fragile social fabric. Villages and neighborhoods became unsafe, forcing people to flee their homes and seek refuge in areas dominated by their own ethnic group; meiteis closer to Imphal and the Kuki-Zo's upwards to the hills. These initial acts of violence not only deepened the divide between the two communities but also set the tone for the prolonged cycle of retaliatory attacks and escalating tensions that followed.



Womenfolk protest against the planned mass burial at Torbung on August 3. The burial of 35 people belonging to Kuki-Zo people sparked tensions along the border of the two communities. (August 3, 2023)



Police Woman Personal consoling children who have been displaced by the conflict. (May 8, 2023).



Meira Paibis gathered in the streets to protest for safeguarding Manipur territorial integrity.

(May 28, 2023).



With homes destroyed and no security, many like Naba now bear arms not by choice, but to protect shattered remnants of their lives. (14 September, 2023).

Naba, from Khuga Tampak, Churachandpur, fled with his family amid escalating violence. Guarding a frontline in Bishnupur, he recounts the trauma:

“On May 3, a peace rally day, an Anglo-Kuki war centenary gate was burned in Torbung Bangla. Armed men soon attacked shops and homes. Despite state forces nearby, violence surged. By evening, gunfire erupted; homes were vandalized. Villagers, unprepared, hurled stones while evacuating children, women, and the elderly. Five youths were shot; 35 houses burned.

Central forces arrived at 5 AM, but during evacuation to the DC complex (2 km away), mobs pelted stones. Sheltered for six days, they heard gunfire persist. An elderly woman’s body, unclaimed due to denied burial rites, remains with us.”

Naba tearfully recalled helplessness at being unable to afford ₹10 food for his daughter. Escaping barely, with no basic amenities, almost 2,700 meiteis displaced from Churachandpur were forced to cut chip packets as plates.



Ngangbam Surbala, a 31 year old woman, tragically lost her life after succumbing to fatal bullet wounds inflicted during the attack, while her 8 years old daughter sustained bullet injuries in her right arm. (7 September, 2024

Koutruk village, situated in a conflict-prone region, reflects the tension that has plagued the area. The village is caught in the middle of ethnic and territorial disputes.

On September 1, a young woman who visited her parental home was tragically killed, and many others, including her minor daughter, were injured in the attack. The attack, carried out by armed men [using weaponized drones, bombs, sophisticated weapons](#) targeted Koutruk and several nearby foothill villages.



*A residence in Kanchup stands silent as an unexploded bomb shell from a recent drone bombing on Nov 11 rests partially embedded in the ground, mere steps away from the entrance.
(November 12, 2024)*

One of the most intense phases of the ongoing Meitei-kuki ethnic conflict in Manipur which has been ongoing since may 2023 erupted on Nov 7 in Jiribam where a [31 year old woman](#) was burnt to death and several houses were set ablaze in Jarolpokpi village in Jiribam. The November killings have reignited the violent clashes between the two communities which are also intensifying acts of terrorism aimed at innocent civilians. In under two weeks at least 20 people have lost their lives.



Keithelakpam Deveshori stands in her burned home in Kangchup, devastated by a recent attack allegedly carried out by armed Kuki men on November 11. (November 13, 2024)



Burial site of the Six civilians killed in the Jiribam. Six of them were taken hostages which include 3 women and 3 children including a 10 month old infant. (12 December, 2024)



Telam Uttam sleeps with his remaining children. (17 December, 2024)

Uttam and his family had been displaced by the conflict. He has been working as a laborer outside the state while his family stayed back in Borobekra relief camp. On November 11 armed men abducted them and their bodies were later discovered at various spots near the Assam-Cachar border. The victims included three women and three children – a 10 month old infant, a 2 and half year old boy and an eight year old girl. Uttam, with tears in his eyes, said that he had lost his family whom he believed had been taken away by the will of God. He reflected on the life they had shared, living under one roof, united in both happiness and sorrow, sharing meals and cherishing their moments of togetherness. He demands justice for his family's tragic end and be held accountable for their actions. The massacre of his family left a void in his heart, but his 2 sons survived the harrowing incident. His eldest son, Telam Roshan, recounts the harrowing incident:

“I was getting ready to bathe and had just taken off my clothes when my mother warned that they were coming. She instructed me to close the door. Suddenly they opened fire, kicked the door down and hit my face with the butt of a gun before kicking me. The attackers pointed their guns at our heads and ordered us to come outside. My mother signalled for me to run away. I ran as fast as I could through the paddy fields while they fired shots at me. Thankfully, the CRPF managed to save me.”



A grieving mother holds onto her son's photograph as her elder son tries to console her. Kh. Athouba, a 22 year old college student tragically succumbed to bullet injuries during a confrontation between



security forces and large crowd in Jiribam on November 18. (11 December, 2024)

Sapam Dayanda meitei, husband of Sapam Sophia (34) along with his three children. Sapam Sophia was gunned down while she was working in a paddy field on November 5 at Saiton, Bishnupur district (November 14 2024).



A picture of Sapam Sophia Leima with her children. (14 November, 20



Locals protest demanding justice to the sudden disappearance of Kamal Babu Singh from Leimakhong Army Camp at Lamshang(3 December,2024).



Akoijam Belarani, wife of Kamal Babu, with fellow protesters demands answers about the disappearance of her husband at Lamshang (3 December, 2024).

Kamal Babu Singh, 56, a works supervisor at the Leimakhong Army Camp in Manipur, has been missing since November 25, leaving his family in anguish and desperate for answers. A resident of Gossaipur in Cachar district, Assam, Kamal was last seen leaving for work on the morning of his disappearance, following his usual routine. Kamal had been staying in his brother's house and was last seen leaving his residence for work at the Leimakhong Army Camp, where he has been employed for several years. According to his family, he did not return home that evening, and all attempts to contact him have since failed.

Temporary homes, permanent uncertainty in Manipur's prefabricated house, the search for jobs is a daily struggle. The conflict has taken their homes, their livelihoods and the sense of security (August 10, 2024).

Wangkhem Meme working in a paddy field. (10 August, 2024)



Displaced by the conflict, Wangkhem Meme temporarily shelters in prefabricated houses with her 4 children. With no steady income, she takes on odd jobs to make ends meet. From working in paddy fields to washing dishes, her employment is uncertain until someone offers her a chance.





Displaced children in prefabricated houses playing an indigenous game, Khulokpi.(July 24, 2024).



Stephen Luwang is a self-taught social documentary photographer and photojournalist from Manipur, India, dedicated to uncovering the human stories behind the region's conflict. Through intimate, empathetic storytelling, he amplifies the voices of resilience and suffering often ignored by mainstream media. His work—like his searing documentation of the May 3 ethnic violence—captures raw emotion, transforming overlooked struggles into a powerful call for dialogue and change. Despite risks and emotional tolls, Luwang remains committed to truth, using his camera to bridge silence and awareness.

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