

An Account On The Violent Unrest In Manipur 2023

15 June 2023

I, the Archbishop of Imphal am deeply saddened by the present state of affairs in my Archdiocese. Since 03 May 2023, unprecedented violence and unrest has taken the State of Manipur like a storm. After 44 days since the unrest began the violence and arson continues unabated especially in the peripheries of the valley region. Precious lives have been lost, houses/villages burned or destroyed, belongings vandalized and looted, places of worship desecrated and set ablaze. Over 50000 people have been displaced and rendered homeless and are languishing in different Relief Camps and homes of individuals. Many have left the capital Imphal and the State to safer places; many have landed in neighboring State of Mizoram, other northeastern states, metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Kolkata, etc. There is complete collapse of the constitutional machinery in the State. Summarily, there is fear, uncertainty and a general sense of hopelessness and desperation.

I. Circumstances

Several issues have been waiting unresolved for a long time, gradually building up emotions and general angst.

1. The demand of the Meitei community to be listed as a Schedule Tribe (ST) and vehement opposition of the Tribals to this demand

- The endorsement and support expressed by many the Meitei political leaders, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and MLAs
- The opposition spearheaded by the tribal student organizations and CSOs.
- Manipur High Court acting Chief Justice Muralidharan, issued an order advising the government of Manipur to send recommendation to the government of India to include Meitei in the ST list within four weeks.
- subsequent dissent and condemnation by various tribal groups leading to the Solidarity Rally of 03 May 2023 organized by All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM).

2. The initiation of the State Government to survey the Reserved Forests, Protected Forests, Wildlife sanctuaries, etc.

- objection of the tribals to such a survey on the grounds that the designation of such categories of forests do not have the consent of the HAC (Hill Area Committee).
- Eviction and displacement of villages in the Forest lands (most of which are Kuki inhabited villages) which have angered the communities.

3. State Government's campaign against poppy cultivation in the name of WAR ON DRUGS.

- Most poppy cultivation happen in Kuki inhabited areas funded by rich others.
- Deforestation seen as cause for water scarcity in the valley region (though illegal and unscientific mining activities have depleted the ground water in riverbeds)

4. Open branding of Kuki community as illegal imigrants.

- In campaign against poppy cultivation, mix up of things have happened.
- Calling kuki Christians as poppy planters

- Calling them as imigrants from Myanmar coming and cultivating poppy, etc.
 - Considering militant cadres under Suspension of Operation (SoO) as behind all these, considering Kukis as Migrants, and Poppy and Ganja cultivators and Drug dealers.
5. **Recent alleged derogatory preaching of Pastor Ramananda could have fed the religious motif**
- Not long after the incident a section of Meitei community (**Arambai Tengol**) pledged to protect their indigenous culture and religion. Members of Arambai Tengol are said to be most active in the perpetration of the present violence.

All these issues in some ways are interconnected and have **conveniently mixed**, resulting in playing into the sentiments of the people.

The final point of eruption seems to be:

- The destruction of the Open Gym and the venue of the CM's proposed visit to Churachandpur on 27 April 2023, angered by the eviction of villages,
- The Tribal Solidarity Rally of May 03,2023 which turned violent mainly in Churachandpur area.

With the news and rumors of violent clashes in Churachandpur area spreading like wildfire, the Meiteis in Imphal began their hunt for persons of Kuki origin or lineage. The clashes are between the Meitei community and the Kuki-chin-mizo community of people.

II. **Situation of the people**

Two communities are warring but it has affected all the people of Manipur irrespective of which community one belongs. With the complexity of issues that has given rise to this situation, there seems to be no clear-cut reason for the present crisis.

- i. **The elected government of the State and the Centre** have not been able to restore the Rule of Law in the State and put a stop to the mad violence even after one and a half month. It is fit to state that there is collapse of the Constitutional Machinery in the State. One wonders why the President's Rule is still not an option.
- ii. **Many lives have been lost.** What the newspapers are giving are the confirmed cases (above 100) but there are much more lives lost then are officially published. The violent activities in the peripheries outside the capital city are very much underreported. Shutting of internet data connectivity has made it difficult to spread the actual information as all media platforms were disabled. There are however reports of many villages/hamlets in the foothills that have been vandalized, looted and torched. Thousands have fled their homes and have reached some shelter camps.
- iii. **The magnitude of loss** which has run to hundreds of crores is hard to comprehend. Many people especially the student community have been forced to move out of Imphal, the State capital. Even after 44 days, burning of houses even in the heart of the Imphal city continues to happen.

- iv. **The central armed forces** are assisting the State government in maintenance of law and order. However, there is a lot of protests going on against the armed forces. The people are protesting their presence and are demanding their removal. Special anti is raised against the Assam Rifles.
- v. It is hard to say if the **State forces were outnumbered or overwhelmed with SOSs or if they were complicit**. The absence of the security personnel in places where they were most needed raises questions that are unsettling. If there was sincerity, why was it that not even in one place of attack were the state force able to prevent things from running amuck for prolonged time. Why is it that vulnerable places even after attempted attacks were left unguarded?

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.

- vi. **Imphal and other districts** continue to be under the cloud of CrPC 144 with relaxation of the curfew for certain hours of the day.
- vii. **Reaching of ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES** continue to be a challenge. Two of the arterial Highways through which essential commodities are brought in to the State have to pass through Kuki dominated areas. Economic blockade has been imposed in these highways and so it has become impossible to reach essential goods vehicle into the capital Imphal without security escort. This has resulted in scarcity of things and escalation of prices of daily use.
- viii. **Churachandpur District and Chandel Districts** are particularly cut off from essential supplies. Relief intervention in these areas have become a big challenge.

III. Religious Dimension of the Unrest

At the face of it, it will be wrong to categorically say that it is a religious conflict. In the midst of ethnic conflict between the Meiteis and the Kukis, religious attack has been effectively carried out as briefly described hereunder:

1. In the present unrest religious places have come under attack. Hundreds of churches have been destroyed with few Meitei temples in Moreh, Churachandpur and Kangpokpi area also destroyed.
 - i. Each of the over 200 Kuki villages attacked had either one or multiple churches, depending on the number of Christian denominations.
 - ii. About 249 churches belonging to the Meitei Christians have been destroyed. All these destructions took place with precision within 36 hours of the start of violence. The wonder is in the midst of fight between the Kukis and the Meiteis, why did the Meitei mob burn down and destroy 249 churches located in the Meitei heartland? How is it that there was almost natural attack on the church in the Meitei localities itself and how did the mob know where the churches were located if not previously planned?

2. Revival of indigenous religion and the emergence of militia groups like **Arambai Tenggol** and **Meitei Leepun** and their oath taking ceremony to protect their traditional religion (**Sanamahism**) and prevent the onslaught of Christianity at all cost is a fact not known to many from outside of the State of Manipur.
3. Reports are that Meitei Christians are warned with dire consequences if not returned to their original religion. Some pastors have been indicated not to rebuild the churches. There is systematic silencing of the minorities. Is this not another “*Ghar Wapsi*”?
4. Therefore, the involvement of a Third element is visible and very much similar to the riot in Gujarat and Kandhmal (Odisha). Narratives like “war against drugs”, “operation against SoO militants”, “Fight against illegal migrants from Myanmar” have their own place in the violence but the undercurrent of religious intolerance stands out as the figures speak. In the midst of these orchestrated propaganda, subtle attack on Christianity seems to have found a clean and unsuspecting space.

IV. Observation (General):

1. The pretext for attack on the places were that there were shielding the Kukis. Even after verifying the identity of the inmates with ID cards, (in some cases multiple times), and intruding into every room in the house and ascertaining that those they were looking for were not to be found, the mob still attacked.
2. Churches which had no relation to the present conflict became casualties of the present unrest. The fact that some sections of the people have attacked the churches with deliberate motive cannot be ruled out. Many churches belonging to Meitei Christians were also burnt in several places. Claims were made that the churches were attacked as part of revenge for the destruction of a Meitei place of worship in some parts of the State. However, the number of attacks on churches that had nothing to do with the conflict indicates the strong and active involvement of some fanatical groups in the pretext of preservation of Meitei customs, cultures, tradition and indigenous religion.
3. The multiple attack on the churches and hostels with relentless intent is disturbing.
4. The *modus operandi* in most of these attacks were that the attackers first tried to loot the house and then set it on fire. In places where the houses were not set on fire, the people were vandalizing and looting at will for days.
5. Organized attack as this cannot just happen unless it was premeditated and planned. While the violence engulfed the State like a storm, the attacks seemed well planned. The targets of attack also smacked of fanatic elements out to disrupt the existence of Christianity, in the pretext of preservation of culture.

V. Destruction to Catholic Church and Institutions.

Extensive destruction to private homes and property have been inflicted on both sides. Vandalism and looting of properties in broad daylight is the uneasy order of the day in many pockets. Along with private properties many churches have been the target of attack in many parts of the valley region.

The Catholic Church and its institutions have suffered the fury of the mob in at least 10 places:

1. St. Paul's Parish Church

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. The Parish Church has been burnt to ashes in the intervening period of 3rd and 4th May. On **3rd May, 2023**, around 8.30 pm a mob came by and began smashing and destroying the church and the properties therein. Windowpanes, doors, Interior of the church, statues, crucifix, sound system, musical instruments, etc. and whatever was in the church were smashed and the altar set on fire. The fire was put off by the catechist trainees who live in the same campus.

Second and deliberate final torching happened on 4th May. At around 2.00 pm in the afternoon, they walked into the church, collected the cooking gas cylinders from the kitchen of the PTC, and after piling up all the pews and valuables they smashed, looted, and burnt both the Church and the PTC building.

The Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Isaac and Assistant Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Immanuel Kanta (a Meitei himself) along with all present were left with no choice but to look on in panic and run for safety.

- 2. Pastoral Training Centre (PTC):** In the same campus is the Pastoral Training Centre where lay catechists have been receiving training for many years. This is a Regional training center which has been conducting two years Diploma course for lay Catechists.

PTC was occupied by altogether 46 inmates (4 Priests, 37 trainees, one animator, one hostel warden, 3 domestic staff). On 3rd night and on 4th morning, the mob entered and sought the identity of the inmates. The inmates had to identify themselves for multiple times. The Director and Assistant Director reasoned with the crowd that there were no Kuki persons. They satisfied themselves by going in to each room in search of any person who could be hiding. They did not find anyone they were looking for. Finally the mob set the PTC building on fire. The house was looted of all remains after the fire.

In the incident of arson, Parish Church, PTC building with all infrastructure, St. Paul boys hostel, two vehicles and four bikes were burnt. Huge number of livestock including chicken and ducks (numbering over 250), pigs and fish in the pond all were confiscated/stolen by the people.

All this time no security cover was provided. Even the police team who were in the vicinity before the mob arrived were nowhere to be seen. All SOS calls to Emergency Nos. 100 and 112 without any response. Even after the first instance of attack, there was no security deployment leaving it vulnerable for further attacks and eventual destruction. Today when all is destroyed there is 24 hours deployment of police personnel.

3. Holy Redeemer Parish, Canchipur

On 3rd May, 2023 at around 8:30 pm. A group of unidentified miscreants armed with iron bars, woods, stones etc. came to the parish campus and forcefully crashed through the gates of Holy Redeemer Parish, Canchipur, Imphal and ransacked the parish church and the presbytery. There were 3 to 4 police security personnel but they could not

control the mob. After smashing the doors, windows and the belongings of the church, the mob set the church on fire.

4. Holy Cross Church, Kakching Khunou

The church of the Holy Cross Mission Centre, Kakching Khunou was attacked and vandalized on 04 May 2023. The mob fell short of torching the building structure but did not spare the doors, windows, the religious articles and facilities in the church. They dragged the altar, the ambo, statues and the sound system of the church out in the open and set them on fire.

5. Mary Immaculate Church, Games Village

The community church of Mary Immaculate at Games Village, Imphal was burnt to ashes on 4 May 2023, mob attack. It was one among the several churches that were torched in the locality. The church belonged to everyone, although the majority of the attendees of the church belonged to the Kuki tribe.

6. St. Mary's Church, Salungpham, Thoubal District

The Catholic Church at Silungpham in Thoubal District was among the many churches that was burnt in the area. The small village chapel is supported by 6-7 families, leaving them with no place for gathering for worship.

7. Sacred Heart Parish Church, Yairipok

Very strong and multiple attempts were made to attack the Sacred Heart Parish Church at Yairipok. Initially they came with a JCB machine to force through the gate and bring down the church. After intervention and negotiation led by the local Pradhan and Zila Parishad members, the mob was turned away. Till the date of this report, the local *Meira Paibis* (women folk) are keeping keen watch.

8. St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, Sangaiprou

On 5th May, 2023 owing to strong pressure to attack St. Joseph's School premises, all the inmates, including those displaced persons from PTC had to be evacuated to safety by the security personnel in the presence of the SP with the help of the DC, Imphal West. However, after the evacuation at around 3:00 pm a mob entered the campus of St. Joseph's Higher Secondary School, Sangaiprou. The local women folk pleaded with the people not to destroy the school as it was the pride of the locality. The mob destroyed some windowpanes, and entered the hostel cum residence of the principal and robbed some belongings. At the time of the mob attack none of the inmates were around.

After days of some quiet, on 13 June, the mob wanted to inspect the same school on the suspicion that persons belonging to Kuki community are there. At that time the Rapid Action Force (RAF) of the government was camping there. A grenade was found within the campus. The people were allowed to search the campus and having satisfied that there are no persons being shielded, they left. Police officers and district administration

gave good support. The RAF has been vacated from the premises and a company of BSF is camping in the school as the school is located in sensitive zone.

This is one of the most prestigious schools in the whole State. It is disturbing that in the name of suspicion the mob has attempted multiple times to harm the institution.

9. St. George High School, Wangkhei

4th May, 2023: Around 8:30 pm about 5/6 people came to see whether the school is sheltering some particular tribal communities (Kuki tribe). Police were called and the group was dispersed.

On 5th May, 2023, around 3:30 pm a mob of 50/60 came and crashed through the gate, smashed the CCTV camera and entered the campus. After verifying the identity of the inmates, the group left satisfied that they did not find the people they were looking for. The mob was stopped by the intervention of the local people and intervention of the Police team. For the fear of the mob the sisters left their convent for few days and returned after a week.

10. St. Joseph's Parish, Sugnu

On 28th May, the Parish Priest and FCC sisters working in St. Joseph's Parish, Sugnu vacated the parish to move to safety. On 4 June 2023, the mob/miscreants belonging to the Meitei community has destroyed the Church, Presbytery, School, Community Hall, students hostel and other belongings. The Convent which is situated some distance away is being occupied by the State police but not before it being robbed of all valuables. It is one of the oldest parishes in the diocese.

11. Village Churches

Many village churches in our Catholic Kuki villages have all been burnt. The number is exactly not known as it is difficult to get in touch with the people who are displaced from their villages.

VI. Present Status

- ✓ Emotions and tensions are high both in the valley and in the hill areas of the State.
- ✓ Many of the stranded/displaced persons who were secured in the military barracks have been shifted out of the camps.
- ✓ Relief and shelter camps have been opened in different localities within Imphal for affected Meitei communities coming from affected hill areas.
- ✓ Community members are engaged in relief work activities.
- ✓ Healing process will take time. But who will initiate the healing/peace process? Peacemakers are finding it hard to engage the parties in meaningful dialogue.
- ✓ The government of the day has failed in reining in the violence. Silence from the Prime Minister, the cluelessness of the Home Minister even after his visit to the State, the indecisiveness of the State government to put a stop to the violence is worrying. It cannot shun responsibility and shed off culpability.

- ✓ The situation is volatile. There is unspoken mistrust amongst all the communities of the State.
- ✓ The Church must go slow and assess the situation and refrain from too hasty decisions which can give room for being considered as biased. The church must maintain neutrality and foster peace and unity. Any unguarded or unverified comments are extremely dangerous to make.
- ✓ Relief for the people who have been displaced/affected is an urgent need.

VII. Challenges for the Archdiocese

1. Administrative Challenges

- i.* The present violence has given rise to a situation where priests and religious belonging to a particular community (Kuki) can be assigned only in Kuki inhabited areas. We hope that the situation reverts back to normalcy.
- ii.* There is doubt as to whether we will be able to revive St. Joseph's Parish, Sugnu with practically all Catholic faithful displaced from the parish. If the people do not return to their native place, revival of the Parish and reconstruction of the parish is doubtful.
- iii.* Within Imphal city itself the parishes such as St. Joseph's Cathedral Parish, Mantripukhri, St. Paul's Parish Sangaiprou, Mary Immaculate Parish, Chingmeirong, Holy Trinity Parish, Lamphel will have a drastic drop in the number of parishioners who have left the places, their homes burnt and properties destroyed. Their return to the parish is doubtful in the present state of affairs.

2. Loss of Property, livelihood option, Rebuilding and Rehabilitation

- i.* The loss of Archdiocesan property in the present violence is estimated to be over 25 crores, without counting the village chapels.
- ii.* The number of Catholic families displaced is yet to be ascertained.
- iii.* Displacement has resulted in the loss of livelihood option for many families who live on daily wages, teachers, self-employed, etc.
- iv.* Humanitarian intervention at various levels is the need of the hour. Analytical study of the social dimensions of the crisis will be able to shed more light into the future engagement as a church.

3. Educational institutions and generally speaking education of children have been disrupted in a big way. After the pandemic when things were crawling back to normalcy, this violence which has resulted in the closure of schools and educational institutions have unleashed another chaos for the student community. Parents of tribal children are unsure if their wards can pursue peaceful student life in Imphal city. There is fear psychosis in all. Addressing traumatic needs through counselling will be another challenge.

VIII. SOLIDARITY ACTIONS SUGGESTED

The present crisis that the people and the Church in Manipur faces is not an isolated one. There seem to be similar patterns across the country which will find its

relevance. This patterns and the *modus operandi* is to be viewed on the broader perspective of the concern of Minorities in India.

The Archdiocese of Imphal wish to put forth few suggestions in the wake of the present crisis.

1. That Regional Bishops' Council forward the contents of this report to the the Nuntiature, CBCI, CCBI, CRI, and other relevant national level Catholic organizations, for information and action.
2. Representation by CBCI to the President of India, the Prime Minister of India and others raising the concerns of the Minorities in the country.
3. A Press Conference by the CBCI at national level if considered appropriate.
4. Solicit the attention of credible and reputed national and international media.
5. Advocacy for raising the issues of minorities in the country in the floor of the Parliament of India.
6. Approach the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) for intervention and justice wherever minorities are subjected to similar harassment and atrocities.
7. Every Diocese announce a special day of Fast, Prayer, Peaceful Rallies/Processions, etc. to be carried out at appropriate places.
8. Closure of all educational/related institutions across the country as a mark to highlight the concern of the minorities.

The Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Imphal, Manipur is pained, saddened and most of all concerned at the situation that has unfolded. I pray that sanity returns, peace, forgiveness and brotherhood is reclaimed and that peaceful coexistence once again becomes a reality. I thank all for your solidarity, wishes and prayers in this time of crisis. Please continue to uphold us in your prayers.

Sd/-

+Dominic Lumon DD

Archbishop of Imphal

Pastoral Training Centre and St. Paul's Parish after destruction.



Holy Redeemer Church, Canchipur, Presbytery, Boys Hostel, School after destruction

