

By **Juhi Sharma**  
5 July 2024

## COMMENT 271 – Ethnic conflict in India's Manipur: External security predicament



**Juhi Sharma** holds a B.A (Hons) Political Science degree and an M.A in Political Science from the University of Delhi. Juhi studied European politics and German language at the University of Tübingen, Germany. She is currently working at Centre for Legislative Research and Advocacy, New Delhi.

The violent ethnic conflict between Kuki and Meitei communities in the Indian north-eastern state of Manipur, which started on May 3 2023 is dubbed as ‘[civil war](#)’ by many. The ethnic conflict in Manipur has been [ongoing](#) for over a year now with no clear sign of a conclusion. Notably, the Manipur crisis is as much a matter of external security concern for India as it is an internal security threat. Several instances have revealed external involvement igniting violence in Manipur.

### **Chin’s refugee influx into Manipur and the end of Free Movement Regime**

Myanmar shares a [390 km](#) long porous border with Manipur, of which only 10 km is fenced. Chin State in Myanmar, that borders Mizoram and Manipur in India is one of the most severely impacted states in Myanmar under the military junta rule. The rebel forces and junta are engaged in confrontations in the Chin State. The military rulers have made a series of attacks on the rebel forces since 2021, forcing many Myanmar citizens to flee. India and Myanmar enjoyed a [Free Movement Regime](#) (FMR) that permitted residents living within 16 km on either side of the borders to travel up to 16 km with a border pass and stay for up to two weeks at a time. Chins have been taking advantage of this 16 km stretch to flee from the crisis in Chin state and take refuge in India. A [UNHCR report](#) from May 2023 states that since February 2021, about 54,100 people have left Myanmar and entered India. There are now roughly [8,000 in Manipur](#) and over 40,000 in Mizoram. The Mizos and Kukis regard the Chins as ethnic kin, and Chins make up the majority of refugees. CNN-News 18 has reported that [China](#) is using Nepal and Myanmar to

infiltrate terrorists, weapons and funding radicals into Manipur. There have been speculations regarding terrorists infiltrating the Myanmar border because of the kind of arms and combat skills used by the ethnic radicals in Manipur. Chin refugees, who are similar in appearance with the Mizos and kukis, can easily cover themselves under civilian garb and spread conflict. The Manipur and Central governments attributed ethnic unrest in the northeastern State, which resulted in over 200 fatalities since May 3 of last year, to illegal immigration. In tandem with these concerns, the Indian government decided to [end the FMR](#) in February 2024 and fence the India-Myanmar border.

### **The Chinese threat: Connections between the Manipur PLA and the Chinese PLA**

A confession CD by a [PLA member](#), Sergeant Ronny, was accessed by some sections of the mainstream Indian media in 2019. In August 2019, the Indian army and the Manipur State Police took Sgt. Ronny into custody. He revealed that the People's Liberation Army of China and the PLA of Manipur maintain connections. Following training in China, sixteen terrorist platoons have returned to India. He added that the Manipur PLA's youthful recruits are being trained by the Chinese army. Terrorists who returned to India were trained in the use of heavy weaponry. PLA militants are also continually trained in Burma. Manipur also has a lot of makeshift camps such as Singhat and Soibolkuki.

The Manipur PLA has been fighting guerrilla warfare against the Indian Armed Forces since its founding in 1978, as part of the Manipur Insurgency. The [Chinese](#) are known to fuel insurgency in the North-east, provide arms & ammunitions to insurgents, as well as safe haven to north eastern insurgent leaders, particularly the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM). In March 2024, NIA filed a chargesheet against the group alleging its collaboration with Meitei Valley- Based Insurgent Groups (VBIGs) to [‘wage war’](#) against the Indian government – and destabilize Manipur as part of a specific "China-Myanmar" module. The current conflict offered China the opportunity to sponsor armed intrusions via Myanmar. Importantly, the sophisticated weapons used by the conflicting tribes in Manipur point towards the involvement of foreign support.

## **Transnational conspiracy by terror groups based in Bangladesh and Myanmar**

According to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) of India, militant groups with bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar have joined forces with some militant leaders in India's Manipur to commit acts of violence with the goal of causing division among ethnic groups and waging war against the Indian government. A 51-year-old man from Churachandpur's hill district was taken into custody by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on September 30, 2023. The arrest was made in connection with a [transnational conspiracy](#) by terror groups with bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar to "wage war" against the Indian government by taking advantage of the ongoing ethnic unrest in Manipur. Three citizens of Myanmar were arrested in the border town of [Moreh](#) on October 22, 2023. According to the police, in ethnic violence-plagued Churachandpur, Manipur, two members of the [Myanmar-based Chin Kuki Liberation Army \(CKLA\)](#), who were in possession of weapons, ammunition, drugs, and cash near the India-Myanmar border, were arrested in October 2023.

## **Vicinity to the Opium triangle: The Narco-insurgency nexus in Manipur**

Manipur also borders the opium triangle of Myanmar-Thailand-Laos. There is a perception that [insurgent groups](#) in Manipur and drug syndicates in Myanmar have an agreement, and that the latter may also act as drug couriers and facilitators as they can finance the conflicting ethnic groups in Manipur. [Investigations](#) into narcotics seizure cases in Manipur have revealed the involvement of insurgent members from organisations such as the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), Kuki National Organisation (KNO), United Tribal Liberation Army (UTLA), and Chin Kuki Liberation Army (CKLA). Manipur shares the same fertile land as Myanmar for opium cultivation and the tribals in the state engage in poppy cultivation. Myanmar is now the world's greatest opium supplier, with a potential supply of 1,080 metric tonnes in 2023—the highest since 2001. According to a Manipur police report, during the period of 20 March 2022 to 13 May 2023, over 764 people were arrested under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, and drugs

valued at Rs 142 crore were seized. Notably, the seizure of narcotic substances in Manipur is proportionately correlated with rising drug production in Myanmar. Peculiarly, [arms and drugs](#) were found together with these arrested individuals, further reinforcing the narrative of narco-insurgency nexus.

## Reference List

- Baker, Graeme. (2023, July 20). Manipur violence: What is happening and why. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66260730>
- Dalidia Fanai, E. (2023, June 2). Mizoram faces refugee influx as conflict rages on. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mizoram-faces-refugee-influx-as-conflict-rages-101685645758854.html>
- Mahapatra, D. (2023, May 31). Cross-border narco-terror root of Manipur violence: PIL. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/cross-border-narco-terror-root-of-manipur-violence-pil/articleshow/100631644.cms>
- Paliwal, A. (2020, September 1). Is China behind a recent insurgent attack in India's Northeast? The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/is-china-behind-a-recent-insurgent-attack-in-indias-northeast/>
- Rodrigues, S. (2023, September 13). How Manipur conflict fits into broader game plan of China. Firstpost. <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-manipur-conflict-fits-into-broader-game-plan-of-china-13119162.html>
- ACAPS. (2023, 28 July). INDIA Myanmar refugees. ACAPS. [https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data\\_Product/Main\\_media/20230728\\_ACAPS\\_briefing\\_note\\_Myanmar\\_refugees\\_in\\_India.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20230728_ACAPS_briefing_note_Myanmar_refugees_in_India.pdf)
- Choudhury, A. (2024, May 17). Northeastern View | NIA blaming NSCN-IM for destabilising Manipur could create new friction points at multiple places. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/northeastern-view-nia-blaming-nscn-im-for-destabilising-manipur-could-create-new-friction->

points-at-multiple-places-101715968286224.html

Editorial Team . (2024, May 4). Manipur violence will not end soon; Meitei UGs are not defeated yet. Imphal Times.

<https://www.imphaltimes.com/editorial/manipur-violence-will-not-end-soon-meitei-ugs-are-not-defeated-yet/>

Hazarika, P. (2024, April 26). Nexus between insurgency and narco-trafficking: A case study of Manipur. Vivekananda International Foundation. <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2024/april/26/Nexus-between-Insurgency-and-Narco-Trafficking>

HT Correspondent. (2023, October 24). 2 members of Myanmar-based Chin Kuki liberation army arrested in Manipur. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/2-members-of-myanmar-based-chin-kuki-liberation-army-arrested-in-manipur-101698119442710.html>

IFP Bureau. (2023, October 27). Major players in drug trade. Imphal Free Press. <https://www.ifp.co.in/editorial/major-players-in-drug-trade>

Manipur news | Are China & Pakistan using Nepal to escalate the situation in Manipur? | news18. (2023, July 31). News18. <https://www.news18.com/videos/manipur-news-are-china-pakistan-using-nepal-to-escalate-the-situation-in-manipur-news18-8470333.html>

Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. (2024, February 8). MHA decides to scrap Free Movement Regime (Fmr) between India and Myanmar to ensure the internal security of the country and maintain the demographic structure of India's North Eastern States bordering Myanmar. PIB Delhi. <https://pib.gov.in/pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2003884>

Service, E. N. (2024, February 6). Entire 1,643-km India-Myanmar border to be fenced: Home Minister Amit Shah. The New Indian Express.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Feb/06/entire-1643-km-india-myanmar-border-to-be-fenced-home-minister-amit-shah>

Singh, B. (2023, October 23). Manipur police arrests three Myanmar nationals from border town Moreh. The Economic Times.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/manipur-police-arrests-three-myanmar-nationals-from-border-town-moreh/articleshow/104639638.cms>

Singh, V. (2023, September 30). NIA arrests one from Manipur's

Churachandpur for 'waging war against India.' The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nia-arrests-one-from-manipurs-churachandpur-for-waging-war-against-india/article67366932.ece>

Tiwary, Deeptiman . (2023, July 28). The 'free movement regime' along the India-Myanmar border, and why it has complicated the volatile situation in Manipur. The Indian Express.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/free-movement-regime-india-myanmar-border-manipur-migration-explained-8865348/>

---

19 Avenue des Arts 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium  
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles  
Email: [info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu) Web: [www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)