Manipur: Faultlines of Ethnic Violence

A history of conflict since independence, the national security threat, why successive governments failed, and a ten-point strategy

Meitei, Kuki-Zo and Naga conflicts, 1949 to November 2026, with data, tables and figures.
Every figure is labelled by evidence quality; judgements are the author's.

DELTA DOCTRINES

9 November 2026 | Desk assessment from public sources. Casualty figures are contested and labelled by source.
Scores and statements of blame are the author's judgement. Not a statement of Government policy.

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SUMMARY

Executive summary

Manipur, a small state of fewer than three million people on India's border with Myanmar, has been in some form of armed or communal conflict for most of the seventy-nine years since independence. This paper traces that record from the merger of 1949 to November 2026, identifies the faultlines that keep reproducing violence, assesses the threat to national security, explains why successive governments failed to resolve it, and sets out a ten-point strategy for the present government. It is written as an adviser's white paper: it states the evidence, labels its quality, and gives a point of view.

The central finding is that Manipur does not have one conflict. It has three, layered over each other, and each has been handled as if the others did not exist. The first is an insurgency by Meitei and Naga armed groups that began in the 1960s and 1970s over

questions of sovereignty and territory. The second is the Kuki-Naga war of 1992-98, a contest over land and village boundaries in the hills that killed between roughly 677 and 1,000 people and which reopened in February 2026. The third is the conflict between the Meitei community of the Imphal valley and the Kuki-Zo tribes of the hills, which began on 3 May 2023 and, by the state Home Minister's account to the Assembly, had killed 306 people and left 49 missing by 31 August 2026. A Right-to-Information reply puts the number displaced at 58,821 between May 2023 and March 2026, with 174 relief camps still open in March 2026.

The violence follows five faultlines. These are the unequal division of land between valley and hills; three incompatible territorial claims (a Greater Nagalim, a separate Kuki-Zo administration, and Manipur's territorial integrity); the proliferation of weapons, including about 6,000 firearms looted from police armouries in 2023; an unfenced 398 km border with Myanmar and an illicit economy that runs along it; and a collapse of public trust in the police, the security forces and the information environment. Each faultline is old. None was created in 2023.

The threat to national security is internal fragmentation rather than external attack. A state in which three communities live behind buffer zones, highways are closed for weeks, and each side holds weapons is a state in which the Union government cannot guarantee safe passage on a national highway that connects Nagaland and Mizoram to the rest of India. The 2026 reopening of the Naga-Kuki front, with 34 deaths recorded by Human Rights Watch between February and early September, shows that the danger is moving rather than shrinking.

Governments of every party have failed in the same four ways. They answered political demands with security measures; they signed accords (the Suspension of Operations agreements, the 1997 ceasefire, the 2015 Framework Agreement) without verification, deadlines or an endgame; they allowed atrocities to go unpunished, which let each community keep its own list of victims; and they reacted to warnings late. The Centre and the state each carry part of the record, and both Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party governments appear in it. The paper scores nine eras on a one-to-five scale as the author's judgement; the average is two.

The recommended response is a ten-point strategy built on a single principle: one process, one rulebook and one standard of justice for all three communities. The points are a single peace architecture; verified disarmament; neutral buffer policing; guaranteed highways; an independent land settlement; a dual political track that keeps the state's boundary intact while giving the Naga and Kuki-Zo areas real autonomy; justice and accountability; relief and return; border and illicit-economy control; and a long programme of trust, information and economic integration. Points 1-4 can begin within three months. Points 5-6 need about two years. The strategy is deliberately measured by four numbers that anyone can check: weapons recovered, days of highway blockade, relief camps closed, and cases brought to trial.

EVIDENCE NOTE

Casualty figures in Manipur are contested. Government, police, SATP and civil-society counts differ, and each is shown here with its source and a label: **S** for official or court record, **R** for credible media, wire or NGO reporting, **E** for estimate, and **U** for unverified recall that should be re-checked. Assessments of blame and all scores are the author's judgement. Naming an armed group or an individual reports what sources say and is not a finding of guilt.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction, scope and method

Manipur matters to India out of proportion to its size. It occupies a salient between Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam, controls the road to Myanmar at Moreh, and sits astride the corridor on which India's Act East policy depends. It is also home to some of the most persistent armed groups in South Asia. When the state is quiet, the northeast is easier to govern. When it is not, the effect reaches Kohima, Aizawl and Guwahati within days, through blockades, refugees, rumours and the movement of weapons.

This paper has four objectives. The first is to establish what happened, using the best available evidence on deaths, displacement and damage. The second is to identify the structural conditions that make violence recur, which we call faultlines. The third is to assess how each period of government, at the Centre and in the state, handled those faultlines and where it failed. The fourth is to recommend a strategy that the present government could adopt, one that treats the Meitei, Kuki-Zo and Naga communities by a common standard rather than favouring any one of them.

Scope

The paper covers ethnic, communal and separatist violence in Manipur from the integration of the state in 1949 to 9 November 2026. It includes insurgent attacks and counter-insurgency operations where they shaped inter-community relations, killings by security forces that triggered mass protest, and the large-scale inter-community violence of the 1990s, 2023 and 2026. It does not cover routine crime, and it treats the wider Naga political question only where it touches Manipur.

Method and evidence

The assessment draws on official statements to the Assembly and the Right-to-Information record; reporting by Human Rights Watch; data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP); Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) figures reported in the press; national and regional news outlets; and encyclopaedic compilations that cite them. Searches ran between 4 and 9 November 2026. Where a figure could not be traced to a source retrieved in the course of the work, it is marked as unverified recall. The reader will find the list of such items in the closing chapter.

Three cautions apply throughout. First, **numbers differ by source**: the official death toll for May 2023 to August 2026 is 306, SATP counts 313 classified deaths in 140 incidents over a slightly

different period, and Human Rights Watch writes of more than 260 deaths in the Meitei-Kuki-Zo conflict alone. Differences of this kind are normal in conflicts where no body keeps a single audited register. Second, **attribution is by community and by armed group, not by court verdict**; in most cases of mass violence in Manipur no prosecution of consequence has taken place. Third, **scores and statements of blame are judgements**. They are offered as a point of view, with the evidence beside them, so that a reader can disagree on the facts.

Table 1. Evidence labels used in this paper

Label	Meaning	Trust level
S	Official statement, RTI reply, court or government record	High within its date
R	Credible media, wire service, NGO report or SATP data	Medium to high
E	Estimate or census approximation	Medium to low
U	Unverified recall; re-verify before use	Low

CHAPTER 3

Manipur: land, people and institutions

Understanding the conflict begins with the physical and demographic shape of the state. Manipur is a bowl: a flat central valley, the Imphal plain, ringed by hills that rise to the borders with Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram and Myanmar. The valley is roughly a tenth of the state's area and holds well over half of its people (E). The hills are about nine-tenths of the area and hold the remainder. The geography has long been political, because it coincides with ethnicity, religion, land tenure, administration and, increasingly, armed power.

Table 2. Demography and geography of Manipur

Group	Share of population	Where concentrated	Label
Meitei (including Meitei Pangal)	about 53%	Imphal valley districts	E
Naga tribes	about 24%	Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Chandel, Kamjong	R
Kuki-Zo tribes	about 16%	Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Tengnoupal	E
Valley share of area	about 10%	Imphal West and East, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching	E
Hills share of area	about 90%	Nine hill districts (as before 2016)	E
Border with Myanmar	398 km	Unfenced; Free Movement Regime to 16 km (suspended 2023)	R

Population shares are census-based approximations; the Naga share is as reported by ThePrint (May 2026).

Three peoples, two legal worlds

The Meitei are predominantly Hindu (with a Sanamahi revival movement and a Muslim minority, the Meitei Pangal) and speak Meiteilon, the state's lingua franca. Most are classed as Other Backward Classes or general category and do not hold Scheduled Tribe status. The Naga tribes of the northern and eastern hills, among them the Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Zeliangrong and others, are largely Christian and share ethnic and political ties with the Nagas of Nagaland. The Kuki-Zo, a family of tribes that includes the Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Zomi and Gangte, are also

overwhelmingly Christian, with kin across the border in Myanmar's Chin State and in Mizoram. Both Naga and Kuki-Zo communities hold Scheduled Tribe status.

The legal worlds of valley and hills differ in ways that matter greatly to land. In the valley, land is held under statute and can be bought and sold. In the hills, land is largely held under customary title by tribes and villages, and the state's land revenue law has not applied there. Article 371C of the Constitution, introduced in 1971, gave the hill districts a special position through a Hill Areas Committee of the Assembly. As a result, a Meitei cannot ordinarily buy land in the hills, while a tribal person may buy land in the valley. Each community reads this asymmetry differently: the hills see it as protection against dispossession, the valley as a barrier that traps a majority of the population on a minority of the land.

Institutions and their weakness

The institutions that might manage these differences have been weak. The hill districts are governed through autonomous district councils whose powers and funds have been contested for decades. The Hill Areas Committee has not been able to prevent legislation that hill communities regard as hostile, and the state Assembly is dominated numerically by the valley: of the 60 seats, 40 are in the valley and 20 in the hills (recall). Political power, administrative capital and economic opportunity therefore sit in the valley, while forests, farmland and the roads to the borders sit in the hills. That is the basic imbalance on which every later grievance has been built.

Policing completes the picture. State police and the Manipur Rifles are staffed overwhelmingly from the community that dominates the district they serve, while central forces, chiefly the Assam Rifles, the CRPF and the Army, are deployed under special powers. In a crisis, each community sees the state police as partisan and the central forces as either a protector or an occupier, depending on where it stands. This has been true since the 1990s and became acute in 2023.

> OUR VIEW
> The state's physical geography makes a zero-sum politics almost inevitable: one valley, three peoples, and a hill belt that each claims in a different way. A strategy that tries to settle the question for one community at the expense of another will reproduce the conflict. The workable alternative is to design institutions that give each community security of land, identity and representation without moving the state's boundary.

CHAPTER 4

Historical roots, 1947–1971

Integration without consent

Manipur was a princely state under Maharaja Bodhachandra when British rule ended in 1947. A state constitution of that year created a legislature, and elections were held in 1948 on adult franchise (recall). In September 1949 the Maharaja signed a merger agreement at Shillong, and on 15 October 1949 Manipur became a Part C state of the Indian Union, administered by a

Chief Commissioner. It became a Union Territory in 1956 and a full state only in January 1972 (recall for all dates in this paragraph). For many Meitei, the 1949 merger was a decision taken over the head of an elected assembly, and the grievance remains a founding claim of the valley-based separatist groups. The hill peoples, for their part, had been outside the princely state's day-to-day administration and had not been consulted on a settlement that placed them under a Meitei-dominated legislature.

The Naga question next door

Across the border in what became Nagaland, the Naga National Council declared independence on 14 August 1947 and, from the mid-1950s, fought the Indian Army. The conflict led to the passage of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in 1958, first for the Naga hills. Nagaland was created as a state in 1963, but the political demand for the unification of all Naga-inhabited areas, including the Naga-majority hills of Manipur, survived the creation of the state and became the doctrine now called Greater Nagalim. From the first, therefore, the Naga movement had a territorial claim that overlapped Manipur's boundary. The Meitei public, fearing the partition of the state, came to see any agreement with the Naga groups as a threat to Manipur itself.

The 1960s: first armed groups

The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed on 24 November 1964 with the aim of an independent Manipur. It did not take sustained armed action until 1991 (R), but its existence marked the start of a valley-based separatism that rested on the memory of a sovereign kingdom. The decade also saw the Mizo uprising in neighbouring Mizoram, and the sense across the northeast that armed rebellion could win political concessions.

It is worth emphasising how little of this history was negotiated. The Centre dealt with Manipur as an administrative unit and a border area, rather than as a plural society whose communities needed a shared constitutional bargain. The special provisions for the hills came only in 1971, and the Hill Areas Committee they created has never had real authority. By 1972, when statehood was conferred, the structural gaps were already in place: a legislature in which the valley dominates; hills with land protections but no institutional voice; and a Naga territorial claim that no one in Delhi or Imphal had answered.

> KEY POINT
> The first failure was structural. Manipur was integrated by administrative decision rather than by agreement among its peoples, and the Naga question on its eastern flank was left open. Every later crisis grew out of these two gaps.

CHAPTER 5

The insurgent decades, 1972-1991

Statehood in 1972 did not bring stability. The next two decades saw the formation of almost every armed group that still operates in Manipur. The People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) was formed in 1977, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1978, and the

Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) in 1980. Their founders were Meitei and their language was of liberation from India. In 1980 Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S. S. Khaplang formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which split in 1988 into the Isak-Muivah and Khaplang factions. The NSCN (Isak-Muivah), the NSCN-IM, has since dominated the Naga armed movement in Manipur.

Kuki armed organisations arrived later and for different reasons. The Kuki National Front (KNF) was formed in 1987 and the Kuki National Army (KNA) in 1988 (R). They emerged as a response to Naga assertiveness in the hills and to the sense among Kuki leaders that the Kuki claim to land and a political homeland had been ignored, a theme that persists in the present Kuki-Zo demand for a separate administration.

Table 3. The principal armed groups and their founding

Group	Founded	Community	Principal aim	Label
UNLF	1964	Meitei	Independent Manipur; armed from 1991	R
PREPAK	1977	Meitei	Independent Manipur	R
PLA	1978	Meitei	Independent Manipur; socialist	R
KCP (and factions)	1980	Meitei	Separatism; extortion	R
NSCN / NSCN-IM	1980; split 1988	Naga	Greater Nagalim	R
KNF	1987	Kuki	Kuki homeland / autonomy	R
KNA	1988	Kuki	Kuki homeland / autonomy	R

The security response

The Centre's answer was force, enabled by law. On 8 September 1980 the Government declared Manipur a disturbed area and extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act to the state. Under AFSPA, soldiers may use force, arrest without warrant and search, and are protected from prosecution unless the Centre gives sanction. In the following two decades, security-force operations multiplied, as did allegations of killings and disappearances. The ambush at Namthilok on 19 January 1982, in which 21 soldiers of the Sikh Regiment were killed (R), and the firing at Heirangoithong on 15 March 1984, in which 12 civilians died after an attack on a Central Reserve Police Force camp (R), are illustrations of the cycle: insurgent attack, security-force reprisal, public anger, further recruitment.

The political pattern complemented the military one. Manipur's governments in these decades were typically short-lived coalitions, vulnerable to defection, and President's Rule was imposed several times (recall). A state that changes governments frequently cannot sustain a negotiation, and the Centre came to rely on its own officials and security forces rather than on a stable local partner. Meanwhile the hills and valley drifted apart. By the end of the 1980s the Meitei groups were underground in the valley, the Naga groups were organising in the northern hills, and the Kuki groups were forming in the south, each with a territorial narrative that the others could not accept.

OUR VIEW

Both the Meitei and Naga insurgencies began as political claims. The Centre answered mainly with the army and with AFSPA. That produced a permanent security presence and a permanent grievance, while leaving the hill-valley divide to harden. Force contained some of the violence; it did nothing to settle the claims that produced it.

CHAPTER 6

The Kuki-Naga war, 1992-1998

The most violent episode in Manipur before 2023 was not a fight between valley and hills but a war between two hill communities. It remains the least discussed in national debate, yet it is the closest precedent for the Naga-Kuki confrontation that reopened in February 2026.

Origins

The immediate triggers were local. In June 1992 a Kuki youth kidnapped at Moreh Bazar was later found dead. On 4 May 1992 the Kuki Students' Organisation gave Nagas twenty-four hours to leave Moreh town, causing a mass exodus. On 12 September 1992 a Kuki War Declaration Committee declared war on the Nagas (R). The deeper causes were contested ownership of villages and hill land in Chandel, Senapati, Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts; competition between the NSCN-IM, which claimed the hills as Naga homeland, and Kuki groups that saw the same hills as their own; and the tendency of both sides to treat the settlement history of each village as proof of exclusive right. Kuki villages had spread into areas that Nagas regarded as ancestral, partly through migration over a century and partly through resettlement after earlier conflicts, and Naga groups regarded this as encroachment.

The scale of the violence

The United Naga Council later reported that about 470 Kukis and 207 Nagas were killed in the period 1992-97, with about 205 Kukis and 197 Nagas injured, and some 2,870 Kuki and 2,582 Naga houses burnt (R). Other counts exceed 1,000 deaths and put the displaced at between 50,000 and 100,000. The figures differ because neither community nor the state kept a verified register, but all sources agree on the shape of the conflict: a sharp peak in 1993, a decline from 1995, and a fading out without a settlement.

Table 4. The Kuki-Naga conflict by year

Year	Kuki killed	Naga killed	Houses burnt
1993	260	60	3,434
1994	44	67	677
1995	65	45	1,057
1996	53 (total, no split)	-	188
1997	54	38	245
1998	16	25	27

Source: Wikipedia, Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur, drawing on United Naga Council data (R). 1996 total is 53 deaths without a split by community.

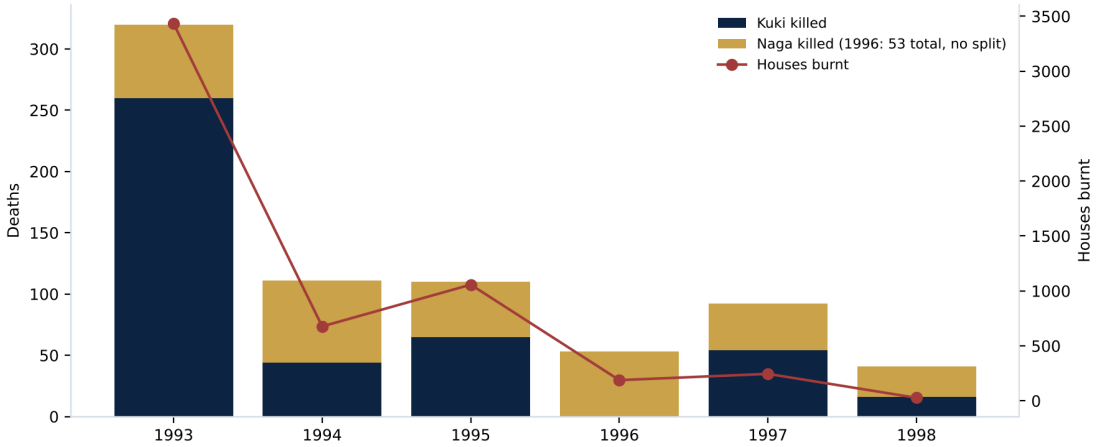


Figure 1. The Kuki-Naga conflict by year: deaths and houses burnt, 1993-1998

Massacres and their memory

Three episodes define the conflict in popular memory. The first is the killing on 15 April 1993 of four Naga militants by KNA cadres in Chandel district, accompanied by the burning of houses in two villages. The second is the Joupi massacre on 13 September 1993, in which around 115 Kuki civilians were killed, allegedly by NSCN-IM militants (R). Kukis observe 11 to 13 September each year as Sahnit-Ni, or Black Day. The third is the Sinam Khul bus massacre on 19 October 1994, in which Kuki National Front cadres allegedly pushed a bus into a gorge, killing 37 passengers, 30 of them Naga, and injuring 12 (R). Each community remembers its own dead and rarely those of the other: the United Naga Council has criticised Kukis for claiming to be the only victim, while Kuki bodies say the Joupi massacre has never been acknowledged.

The pattern of impunity matters more than any single event. We found no record of a conviction in the Joupi or Sinam Khul cases, and a peace process that might have addressed them never took place. Government and civil-society organisations attempted peace talks, dialogue and confidence-building, but the conflict ended without an agreement, and the issue at the centre of it, land ownership, was not resolved. The result is that in 2026 the same communities stand at the same villages, with weapons, and with the same unanswered grievances.

> KEY POINT
> The 1992-98 war is the best predictor of the 2026 Naga-Kuki front. The causes (land, village boundaries, armed competition, and a political dimension tied to Greater Nagalim) have not been addressed, and the memory of unpunished massacres has been passed to a new generation.

CHAPTER 7

Communal and state violence, 1993-2004

The Meitei-Pangal riot of May 1993

On 3-4 May 1993, rumours in the valley set off violence between Meiteis and the Meitei Pangals, the Muslim community of the plain. Press and later compilations put the number of

dead at between 96 and 130 on the Pangal side, with four Meitei dead, and a curfew was imposed (R). It is the deadliest single episode of communal violence in the dataset on which this paper rests, and it is almost forgotten in public debate. It shows that in Manipur the fault is not only between valley and hills: the valley contains its own minorities, and rumour can mobilise a crowd in hours.

AFSPA and the politics of impunity

From the late 1990s, the central grievance in the valley was not an ethnic enemy but the security state. On 2 November 2000, at Malom near Imphal, ten civilians were shot dead by Assam Rifles personnel after an insurgent attack (U). The same week, Irom Sharmila began a hunger strike demanding repeal of AFSPA, which she kept up, with forced feeding, until August 2016. On 11 July 2004 Thangjam Manorama was taken from her home by Assam Rifles and found dead the next day. Women of Imphal stripped before the Kangla Fort headquarters of the Assam Rifles with banners demanding that the army rape them, an act that remains the most potent protest image in the state's history, and AFSPA was subsequently lifted from the Imphal municipal area (U). In 2016 the Supreme Court, hearing the petition of the Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association, held that AFSPA does not give absolute immunity and called for investigation of alleged fake encounters, among them 1,528 cases recorded in petitions between 1979 and 2012 (recall, U).

These events matter to the analysis because they shaped how the valley population relates to the Centre. Where many hill communities see the Centre as a protector against valley dominance, many valley communities see it as an occupying power. Any strategy that relies on the central forces without addressing that legitimacy gap will fail in the valley, as it has in the past.

The 2001 uprising: the red line of territorial integrity

The clearest demonstration of what the valley will not accept came in June 2001. On 14 June the Government of India extended its ceasefire with the NSCN-IM to all Naga-inhabited areas, without limiting it to Nagaland. Meitei organisations, and many in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, read this as the first step towards ceding Naga-majority areas of Manipur. On 18 June crowds burnt the State Assembly building, and 13 protesters were killed in firing (R). The Centre reversed the decision on 27 July, restoring the original ceasefire ground rules (R). The episode has two lessons. The first is that the Meitei public treats the territorial integrity of Manipur as a red line and will mobilise in great numbers to defend it. The second is that the Centre negotiated a matter that affected Manipur's boundary without bringing Manipur to the table, a failure that has been repeated since.

Table 5. Major episodes of communal and state violence, 1993-2004

Episode	Date	Deaths	Nature	Label
Meitei-Pangal riot	3-4 May 1993	100-130	Communal violence	R
Joupi massacre	13 Sep 1993	about 115	Massacre of Kuki civilians	R
Sinam Khul bus	19 Oct 1994	37	Massacre; mostly Naga	R
Malom firing	2 Nov 2000	10	Security-force firing	U
June uprising	18 Jun 2001	13	Firing on protesters	R

Episode	Date	Deaths	Nature	Label
Manorama killing	11 Jul 2004	1	Custodial death; mass protest	U

OUR VIEW

The state itself has been a source of mass casualties and mass protest. A security strategy that does not constrain and audit the security forces will lose legitimacy in the valley, just as one that fails to protect the hills will lose it in the hills. Legitimacy has to be earned in both places at once.

CHAPTER 8

Accords without endgames, 2005-2022

After 2004, the dominant instrument of policy was the ceasefire. The aim was to bring armed groups into a process, reduce killings and negotiate. The record shows that ceasefires reduced violence in the short term but were never connected to a settlement, and in some cases they left the armed groups stronger.

Suspension of Operations

The first Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki groups was signed in 2005. In August 2008 a tripartite SoO between the Government of India, the Government of Manipur and 25 Kuki groups created designated camps in which cadres were to live, with their arms deposited in a double-lock system and a monthly stipend, while political talks proceeded. The agreement worked as a ceasefire. It did not work as a path to disarmament or settlement. The camps were not systematically verified, cadres moved in and out, the monthly stipend became a livelihood, and the political talks ran for fifteen years without producing a deal. On 10 March 2023 the Manipur government withdrew from the SoO with two groups, the KNA and the Zomi Revolutionary Front, a decision that preceded the May violence by less than two months (R). Whatever its merits, it showed that the state had no stable policy on the camps and that the groups in them were now outside any agreed framework.

Surrenders and the incentive trap

Surrender policy followed a similar logic. On 30 April 2012, 103 rebels from several groups surrendered before Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh (R). Mass surrenders attract cash and training packages, and observers in the northeast have long suspected that some are staged and that surrendered cadres return to arms (U). The pattern created a market for rebellion: joining a group, then surrendering, became a way of securing state benefits. Meanwhile, attacks continued, among them the ambush at Riha in Ukhrul district on 15 April 2011 that killed eight, including six policemen (R), and the bomb in a migrant workers' tent in Imphal on 14 September 2013, which killed at least nine (R).

2015: the Framework Agreement and the ILP protests

On 3 August 2015 the Government of India signed a Framework Agreement with the NSCN-IM, after eighteen years of ceasefire. Its text has never been published in full, and a final settlement

has not followed in the eleven years since (R). The secrecy had effects in Manipur: Meiteis feared that the agreement conceded Naga territorial claims; Kuki-Zo groups feared that it would put them under Naga authority in areas where both live. In the same year, on 31 August and 1 September, police firing in Churachandpur during protests against three bills on the protection of Manipur's population, the Inner Line Permit measures, killed nine people, and the bodies stayed unburied for about two years as families demanded justice (U). The episode confirmed for the Kuki-Zo public that legislation passed by the valley-dominated Assembly could affect them without their consent.

2016–2022: districts, drugs and the border

In 2016 the state created new districts. The United Naga Council objected that the changes cut across Naga areas and blocked National Highways 2 and 37 for 136 days, causing shortages across the state (R). From 2017, under Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, the government began a campaign against poppy cultivation and drug trafficking, including the destruction of plantations and evictions from reserved forest. Supporters called it a long-overdue law-and-order measure; Kuki-Zo groups said it targeted their villages (U). After the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, refugees from Chin State, kin to the Kuki-Zo, entered Manipur and Mizoram. The Manipur government regarded them as illegal immigrants; Kuki-Zo groups sheltered them. On 13 November 2021 an ambush near Churachandpur killed five soldiers and two civilians (R).

By 2022, SATP counted only seven deaths in Manipur, the lowest in decades (R). The data suggest that a decade of surrenders, ceasefires and counter-insurgency had reduced the insurgency to a low level. They also conceal what the peace had been built on: SoO camps without verification, a Framework Agreement without a text, a drug policy without consent, and a border policy without consultation. The calm was real, but it rested on nothing that could survive a shock.

Table 6. Accords and ceasefires and why they did not settle the conflicts

Instrument	Year	What was promised	Why it failed
NSCN-IM ceasefire	1997	End of hostilities; talks	No territorial settlement; 2001 extension rejected in Manipur
Kuki SoO	2005, 2008	Camps, disarmament, talks	No verification; no endgame; state withdrew from two SoOs in 2023
Surrender policy	2012	Rehabilitation of cadres	Surrenders staged; no verification
Framework Agreement	2015	Settlement of the Naga issue	No final deal; text unpublished; Manipur absent from the table

Dates for the 1997 ceasefire are from recall (U); other entries are R.

CHAPTER 9

The 2023 crisis

The setting: three decisions in six weeks

The violence of May 2023 had a long background, but its timing and scale were shaped by a short sequence of decisions. On 10 March 2023 the state government withdrew from the Suspension of Operations agreement with two Kuki armed groups. Through the spring, the state

carried out eviction drives in reserved and protected forests, which Kuki-Zo communities regarded as a targeted attack on their villages. And in April 2023 the Manipur High Court issued a direction asking the state to consider the long-standing Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status (the date is variously reported as 14 or 20 April). Each decision was defensible on its own terms. Together they removed the buffers between the communities at the moment when mistrust was highest.

The Meitei demand for ST status is rooted in a sense of dispossession: Meiteis hold barely a tenth of the state's land, cannot buy hill land, and fear demographic change through migration from Myanmar. The tribal communities of the hills, Naga as well as Kuki-Zo, saw ST status for the Meitei as a threat to their reserved jobs, to the protection of hill land, and to the principle that the hills are tribal land. The High Court direction, whatever its legal merits, was treated as a decision that could take away what tribal people had held for fifty years.

Outbreak: 3 May 2023 and after

On 3 May 2023 the All Tribal Students' Union Manipur held a Tribal Solidarity March in the hill districts against the ST demand. Clashes broke out that evening near the Churachandpur-Bishnupur border, and within hours violence spread to Imphal and the hill-valley fringe. By 6 May at least 36 people were reported dead (R). A shoot-at-sight order was issued on 4 May and the Army and Assam Rifles were deployed. Thousands of people fled their homes, Meiteis from the hills and Kuki-Zo from the valley, and within weeks the two communities had been separated by a geography of buffer zones and checkpoints. Police armouries were looted on a large scale; by October 2023 an estimated 6,000 weapons and about 600,000 rounds had been taken (R), many of which have not been recovered.

Killing continued through the summer. On 29 May at least five people were killed, among them a policeman, and on 14 June at least eleven were shot. On 19 July a video emerged of two Kuki women being paraded naked and assaulted by a mob, an incident that had taken place on 4 May but which had gone unreported for eleven weeks (R). The video transformed the national debate. The Supreme Court described it as deeply disturbing, the CBI took over the investigation on 29 July, and on 7 August the Court formed a committee headed by Justice (retd) Gita Mittal, former Chief Justice of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court, to oversee relief and rehabilitation.

Table 7. Timeline of the 2023 crisis

Date	Event	Label
10 Mar 2023	State withdraws from SoO with KNA and ZRF	R
14/20 Apr 2023	High Court direction on ST status for Meiteis	R
3 May 2023	Tribal Solidarity March; violence begins	R
4 May 2023	Shoot-at-sight order; Army and Assam Rifles deployed	R
6 May 2023	At least 36 dead	R
12-18 May 2023	All ten Kuki-Zo MLAs demand separate administration	R
29 May 2023	At least five killed, including a policeman	R
14 Jun 2023	At least eleven shot	R
Jun 2023	MHA inquiry set up (report still not submitted, Sep 2026)	R

Date	Event	Label
19 Jul 2023	Video of two Kuki women paraded naked surfaces	R
29 Jul 2023	CBI takes over the case	R
7 Aug 2023	Supreme Court forms Mittal committee	R
10 Aug 2023	No-confidence motion against the Union government fails	R
23 Sep 2023	State suspends the Free Movement Regime	R

Sources: Wikipedia (2023-2025 Manipur violence), HRW, IANS, DT Next.

Scale: deaths, displacement and damage

The scale of the 2023 conflict can be seen in five measures. The first is deaths. Manipur police counted 175 dead by 14 September 2023, of whom 98 were Kuki-Zo, 67 Meitei, six unidentified and six security personnel (S). The official figure reached 258 by 22 November 2024 (S). On 2 September 2026 the Home Minister told the Assembly that 306 people had died and 49 were missing as of 31 August 2026 (S). Human Rights Watch gives more than 260 deaths for the Meitei-Kuki-Zo conflict and a separate 34 for the 2026 Naga-Kuki fighting (R), and SATP counts 313 classified deaths in 140 incidents between May 2023 and mid-April 2026 (R). The numbers are not contradictory; they cover different periods, definitions and categories. What matters is the order of magnitude: about 300 dead in three years in a state of under three million.

The second measure is displacement. An RTI reply released on 20 April 2026 states that 58,821 people were displaced between 3 May 2023 and 30 March 2026, and that 174 relief camps were open on 10 March 2026 (S). An RTI-based report published in 2026 records at least 731 deaths in relief camps over three years, from illness, age and other causes (R). The third measure is housing: 7,894 permanent houses destroyed and 2,646 partially destroyed, with the Manipur Police Housing Corporation having built 3,000 prefabricated houses (S). Police figures of 2023 put houses burnt at 4,786 (R). The fourth is religious property: about 400 churches damaged or destroyed and 132 temples vandalised (R). The fifth is weapons: about 6,000 looted, and about 6,000 first information reports registered (R).

Table 8. Casualties, displacement and damage, 2023-2026

Indicator	Value	Label
Killed, Home Minister (31 Aug 2026)	306	S
Missing (31 Aug 2026)	49	S
Injured (reported)	1,108	R
Displaced, RTI (3 May 2023-30 Mar 2026)	58,821	S
Relief camps (10 Mar 2026)	174	S
Prefab houses built	3,000	S
Permanent houses destroyed	7,894	S
Houses partly destroyed	2,646	S
Houses burnt (police, 2023)	4,786	R
Churches damaged/destroyed (approx.)	400	R
Temples vandalised	132	R
Arms looted (by Oct 2023)	6,000	R

Indicator	Value	Label
Ammunition looted (rounds)	600,000	R
FIRs linked to violence (approx.)	6,000	R
Deaths in relief camps over three years (RTI)	731	R

Sources are those cited in the text. Injury count (1,108) is from an older compilation and is likely to be an undercount.

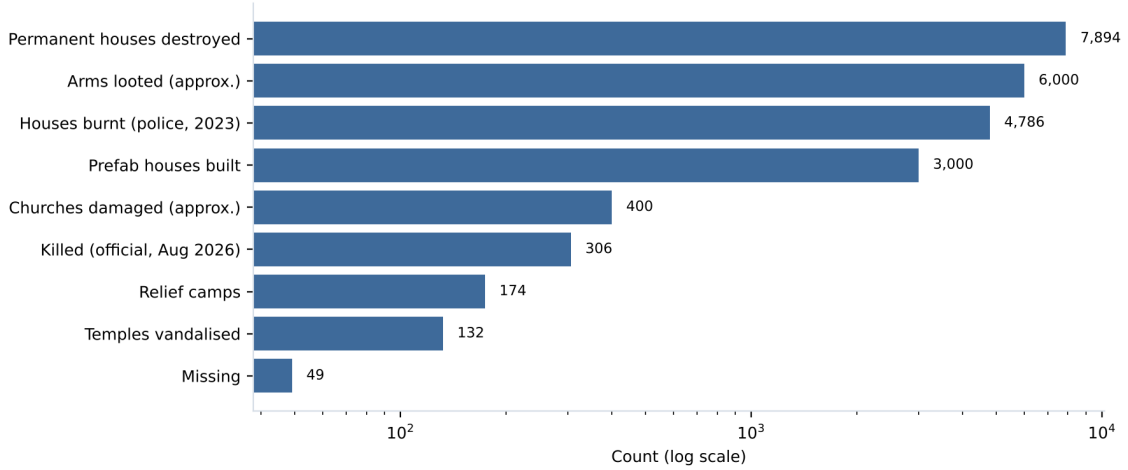


Figure 2. Damage and displacement indicators (logarithmic scale)

Why 2023 was different from earlier conflicts

Four features made the 2023 conflict different from the insurgency of earlier decades. First, it was a conflict between communities, not between armed groups and the state: ordinary villagers and mobs killed and burned alongside armed men. Second, it involved the looting of the state's own weapons, which put thousands of modern firearms into civilian hands. Third, it produced a physical separation of the population that has lasted three years and shows few signs of ending; a person of one community cannot safely travel through the territory of the other. Fourth, it involved sexual violence against women on a scale that, as the Supreme Court recognised, demanded investigation by a special team. These features make recovery far harder than in a conventional insurgency, because rebuilding trust requires more than agreement among leaders.

> **OUR VIEW**
> The 2023 violence was predictable, not inevitable. The ST direction, the eviction drives and the SoO withdrawal were three separate decisions that together removed the buffers, in a state where the underlying faultlines had been public for decades. The failure was one of anticipation, and of coordination between the Centre, the state and the courts.

CHAPTER 10

Governance, courts and the trajectory to 2026

The response of the state and the Centre

The state government's response in the first year was widely criticised, including by the Supreme Court, for slow investigations and for the perception that it favoured one community.

Chief Minister N. Biren Singh apologised publicly for the violence on 31 December 2024 (R). In November 2024 the National People's Party, a coalition partner, withdrew support (R). On 9 February 2025 Biren Singh resigned, after about 20 months of intermittent violence. President's Rule was imposed in February 2025.

The Centre's response consisted of the deployment of additional forces, the appointment of a security adviser, a Ministry of Home Affairs inquiry commission set up in June 2023, and the CBI investigations. The inquiry has not submitted its report; the retired judge who headed it resigned in February 2026, about three months before its deadline, according to Human Rights Watch (R). Prime-ministerial attention to Manipur has been limited in a way that has itself been a political issue, and the opposition's no-confidence motion of August 2023 was defeated on 10 August (R).

The role of the Supreme Court

The most consistent institutional actor has been the Supreme Court. It formed the Mittal committee on 7 August 2023 to oversee relief, rehabilitation and compensation, and asked a retired police chief to monitor criminal investigations. By the time its term was extended to 31 July 2026 the committee had filed 42 reports (R). In August 2026 the Court directed the committee to verify claims that some affected families had not received rehabilitation benefits, and on 14 August 2026 it told Kuki and Naga groups to plan the reopening of the highways (R). That a court should be managing relief and road access is itself an indictment: these are executive functions, and the executive has not performed them to the standard that a court was prepared to accept.

President's Rule and the return of a popular government

Violence declined during President's Rule, which lasted a year. The decline was real but conditional: it rested on heavy force deployment rather than on any political settlement. Kuki-Zo civil society organisations and legislators declared that they would suspend talks and not participate in government formation until substantive political dialogue with the SoO groups resumed, and a Kuki-Zo demand for a Union Territory with a legislature was renewed in 2025-26 (R). The Centre said a Union Territory was not possible under current policy (R). On 4 February 2026 President's Rule was revoked and Yumnam Khemchand Singh was sworn in as Chief Minister. Within days, the Naga-Kuki front opened.

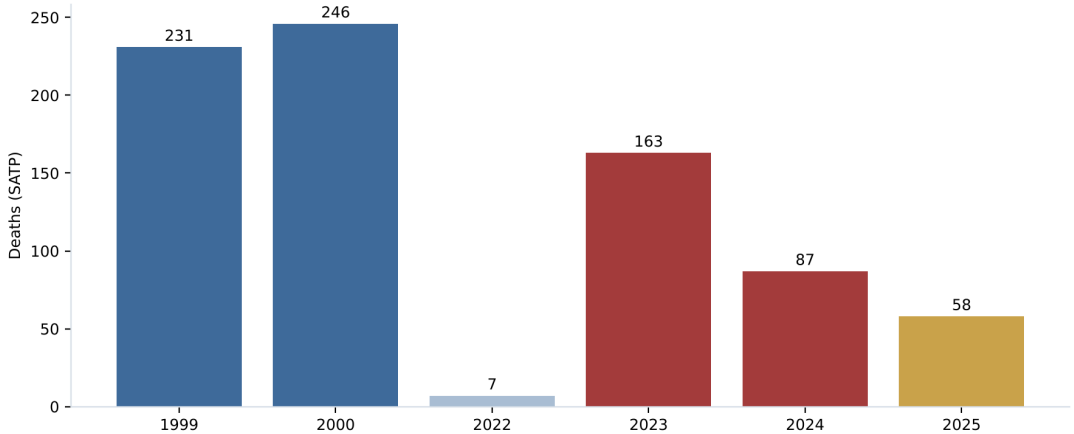


Figure 3. SATP annual deaths in Manipur for the years available in this study

Jiribam, November 2024

The events at Jiribam in November 2024 illustrate how quickly violence can spread beyond the main zone of conflict. On 11 November, after an attack on a police station and a Central Reserve Police Force post, security forces killed 10 suspected Kuki militants in a gunfight (R). Six Meitei civilians who had been reported missing, among them women and children, were later found dead (R). Empty-coffin processions followed in Imphal. The episode showed that violence could spread to a district with a mixed population that had been relatively calm, and that the pattern of hostage-taking and revenge killing was established. SATP counts 87 deaths for 2024 and 58 for 2025 (R).

The Naga-Kuki front reopens, 2026

The trigger was a minor altercation on 7 February 2026 in Litan village, Ukhrul district, between a Tangkhul Naga and a Kuki, though accounts differ on the details (R). Within weeks the confrontation had become a general one. By mid-May there had been at least 17 episodes of violence, and about 44 to 48 Naga and Kuki civilians had been taken hostage (R). On 28 March NSCN-IM cadres allegedly ambushed members of a rival Naga faction, the Eastern Flank, killing four. On 7 April a rocket strike in Tronglaobi, Bishnupur, killed two minor siblings, and CRPF firing on protesters killed three (R). In May, six Naga hostages abducted from Leilon village in Kangpokpi were found dead, and three Kuki church leaders were killed after meeting Naga pastors to seek a resolution (R). Human Rights Watch counted 34 deaths between February and early September, at least seven of them in late August.

The effects spread beyond the fighting. In May, Naga groups blocked the national highway to the Kuki-Zo-majority Kangpokpi district. In July, Kuki-Zo groups imposed a counter-blockade on Naga-majority Ukhrul and lifted it three days later after the Chief Minister called for free movement. The Naga blockade of Kangpokpi continued into September. Prices of food and cooking gas rose and fuel ran short during outbreaks of scrub typhus, dengue and typhoid. On 18 August a three-month-old baby died when her family could not reach the Kangpokpi district hospital, 32 km away (R). Officials, as reported by ThePrint, point to fears of land loss among Nagas, competition for resources after the displacement of Kukis into the hills, a dispute over a levy on resource use, control of the Wangli-Dimapur trade route, and the split of the NSCN-IM in April 2024 that created the Eastern Flank (R).

Table 9. The Naga-Kuki front, 2026

Date (2026)	Event	Deaths	Label
7 Feb	Litan, Ukhrul: altercation between a Tangkhul Naga and a Kuki	trigger	R
28 Mar	Hongbei, Kamjong: NSCN-IM v Eastern Flank	4	R
7 Apr	Tronglaobi, Bishnupur: rocket strike; CRPF firing on protesters	5	R
13 Apr	Kamjong: KNA-B v NSCN-IM	4	R
18 Apr	NH-202, Ukhrul: ambush on Naga civilians	2	R
24 Apr	Ukhrul: Naga-Kuki clash	3	R
13 May	Leilon, Kangpokpi: six Naga hostages (found dead)	6	R
Late May	Three Kuki church leaders killed after peace meeting	3	R

Date (2026)	Event	Deaths	Label
Late Aug	At least seven killed; blockade and counter-blockade	7+	R
Feb-early Sep	HRW total, Naga-Kuki-Zo fighting	34	R

Sources: HRW (3 Sep 2026), ThePrint (25 May 2026), SATP via Eurasia Review, Newslaundry. Rows overlap with the HRW total and should not be added to it.

OUR VIEW

The 2026 front shows the danger of a strategy that concerns itself only with Meitei and Kuki-Zo. The state and the Centre moved forces from the valley to Kangpokpi and Senapati, an admission that a second front exists. The next large episode of violence is more likely to begin in the hills than in the valley.

CHAPTER 11

Quantifying the violence

A long view of the data shows both the continuity and the changes in Manipur's violence. The most consistent public series is the one kept by SATP, which has recorded insurgency-related fatalities in the state since 1992. It divides deaths into civilians, security forces and militants. The following figures use SATP for periods and for the years where data were retrieved, supplemented by official counts for the 2023-26 conflict.

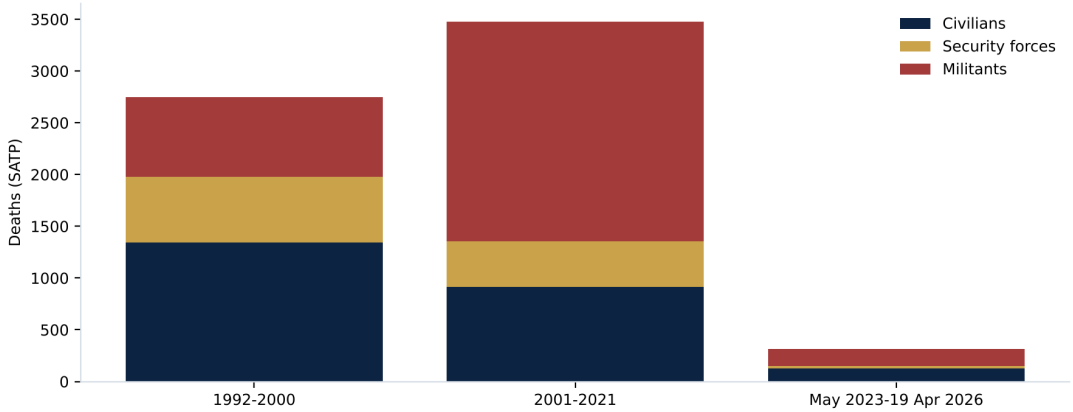


Figure 4. SATP deaths by period and category (civilians, security forces, militants)

In 1992-2000, SATP counts 2,750 deaths: 1,341 civilians, 636 security-force personnel and 773 militants. Civilians were the largest category, 49 per cent, which reflects the period of the Kuki-Naga war and the Meitei-Pangal riot. In 2001-2021 SATP counts 3,479 deaths, of which 2,122 were militants, 912 civilians and 445 security personnel. This is the signature of a counter-insurgency period, in which most fatalities were among armed groups and many deaths were of militants killed by security forces. In the period from May 2023 to mid-April 2026 SATP counts 314 deaths in 140 incidents, 313 of which it classifies: 127 civilians, 160 militants and 26 security-force personnel.

The annual figures for the years retrieved show the pattern. In 1999 SATP counts 231 deaths and in 2000 it counts 246. In 2022 it counts only seven. In 2023, the year of the outbreak, it counts 163: 72 civilians, 17 security-force personnel, 73 militants and one other. In 2024 it counts 87 and in 2025 it counts 58 (R). The data show that the 2023 conflict was much less

lethal on an annual basis than the insurgency of 1999-2000, but that it differed in character: it is the only year in the series in which communal violence, rather than counter-insurgency, accounts for most of the fatalities.

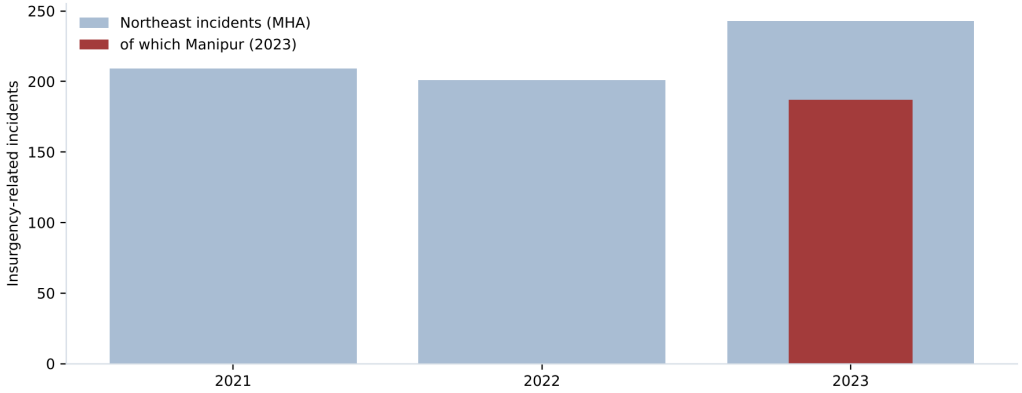


Figure 5. Insurgency-related incidents in the Northeast (MHA) and in Manipur in 2023

The Ministry of Home Affairs data, reported in the press, put northeastern insurgency-related incidents at 209 in 2021, 201 in 2022 and 243 in 2023, with 187 of the 2023 incidents in Manipur (R). A later MHA report says that Manipur accounted for 226 incidents, or 77 per cent of the Northeast total, since 2024. In the Northeast as a whole in 2024-25, the ministry records 294 incidents, with 30 civilian and three security-force deaths, and counter-insurgency results of 31 militants killed, 571 arrested, 220 weapons recovered and 975 cadres surrendered (R). Manipur, with under 1.5 per cent of India's population, has become the principal source of insurgency-related violence in the region.

The data also show where deaths concentrate. The ranking of discrete episodes by deaths shows that the largest events were massacres of civilians or communal riots in 1993-94, followed by episodes of ambush and security-force firing. Several of the larger events, among them Heirangoithong in 1984, Malom in 2000 and the June 2001 firing, involved the security forces killing civilians. The data, in other words, record a state that has at times been a source of mass casualties as well as the principal protector against them.

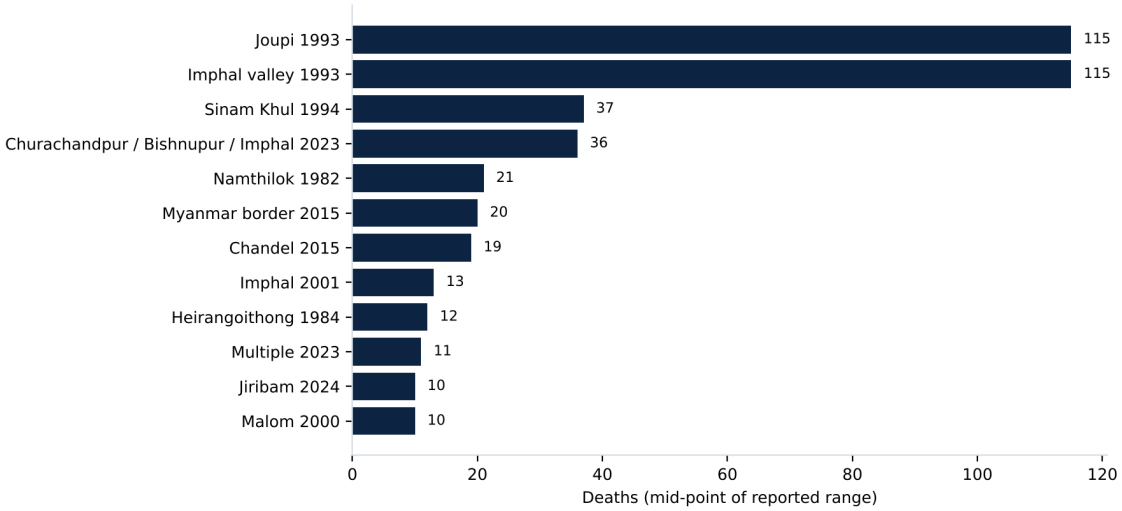


Figure 6. Largest discrete episodes by deaths (mid-point of reported range, 1982-2026)

KEY POINT

No single audited register of deaths, injuries and displacement exists for Manipur. Official, SATP, police, NGO and civil-society figures all differ. A public, independently audited casualty register for 2023-26 would end most arguments about numbers and is a precondition for justice and compensation.

CHAPTER 12

Five faultlines

The history above suggests that Manipur's violence is not random. It recurs along a small number of structural lines. Identifying them is useful because it shows what a strategy must address: a response that deals with the symptoms of one outbreak, without touching the lines themselves, will be followed by another. We identify five.

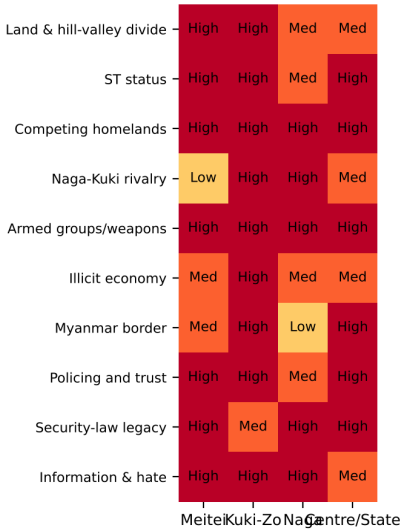


Figure 7. Faultline intensity by actor (author's judgement: High denotes an acute grievance or direct involvement)

Faultline 1: land and the hill-valley divide

The first faultline is land. The valley is dense and short of land; the hills are large and held under customary title. Hill communities fear that the demand for Scheduled Tribe status for Meiteis, and the eviction of villagers from reserved forests, will open hill land to outside buyers and settlers. Meiteis point out that they cannot buy hill land while tribal people can settle in the valley, and that the state's population has grown while its habitable plain has not. Hill land has rarely been surveyed, so every dispute, whether with the state, between villages or between communities, becomes a dispute over proof. The 2023 trigger was a court direction on ST status, but the underlying issue is the absence of a credible, trusted, impartial system of land records and rights. This is the one faultline that could be addressed largely by administration, with a land commission, surveys and clear rules. Delay is the main danger.

Faultline 2: competing homelands

The second faultline is the three incompatible territorial claims. The NSCN-IM seeks Greater Nagalim, which would place the Naga-majority areas of Manipur under a unified Naga polity.

Kuki-Zo organisations demand a separate administration, which they have described in turn as a Union Territory with legislature, a territorial council, or a separate state, and which would carve a Kuki-Zo area out of the hills. Meitei organisations insist on Manipur's territorial integrity and have shown, in 2001, that they will mobilise in great numbers to defend it. The Centre has said that a separate Union Territory is not possible under current policy (R), and the text of the 2015 Framework Agreement has not been published. No outcome can satisfy all three claims in full. The workable middle is autonomy inside Manipur for Naga and Kuki-Zo areas, with a constitutional guarantee that the state's boundary will not change.

Faultline 3: armed groups, looted weapons and the illicit economy

The third faultline is the supply of weapons and the finance that sustains the groups that hold them. About 6,000 firearms and 600,000 rounds were looted from police armouries in 2023, and many are still at large (R). Armed actors include Meitei groups (the PLA, the KCP and others), Kuki groups under the SoO, non-SoO Kuki groups (the UKNLA and KNA-B), the NSCN-IM and its rival the Eastern Flank, and vigilante organisations whose precise role is disputed (U). Officials cite extortion and control of highways, among them the Wangli-Dimapur route, as drivers of the 2026 fighting. Poppy cultivation, drug trafficking and the taxation of trade provide cash. Weapons are the multiplier of every other faultline: a political agreement can be undone by a few hundred armed men.

Faultline 4: the Myanmar border and refugees

The fourth faultline is the border. Manipur shares 398 km of unfenced boundary with Myanmar, and the four northeastern states together share 1,643 km (R). The Free Movement Regime allowed people living on either side to cross up to 16 km without a visa; Manipur suspended it on 23 September 2023 and asked the Centre to close it permanently, with fencing awarded to the Border Roads Organisation (R). The border links Kuki-Zo and Chin communities who share kinship, and it also links militant camps and drug routes. Fencing and ending the regime are popular in the valley and resented in the hills, because they cut communities that live on both sides. Myanmar's instability since the 2021 coup has increased the flow of refugees, weapons and drugs. A border policy that is made without the people who live on it will deepen the Kuki-Zo sense of siege.

Faultline 5: policing, security law and information

The fifth faultline is trust in institutions. Police and Assam Rifles are seen by each community as partisan. Buffer zones are policed by central forces and unofficial checkpoints, manned by volunteers, persist. AFSPA has applied across most of the state since 1980, and was withdrawn in parts in March 2023; its legacy of Malom and Manorama still feeds Meitei anger toward the Army. The information environment compounds the problem. The 19 July 2023 video showed how a single image can reignite a conflict, and rumours have repeatedly triggered violence, as in 1993 and 2023. Blanket internet shutdowns reduce rumour but also block the means to verify it. A neutral force and a credible information system are the cheapest peace measures available, and they are the ones least used.

Table 10. The five faultlines

Faultline	Principal parties	Nature	Intensity
Land and hill-valley divide	Meitei v Kuki-Zo and Naga	Chronic; trigger in 2023	High
Competing homelands	Naga, Kuki-Zo, Meitei	Structural	Very high
Armed groups and weapons	All	Active	Very high
Myanmar border and refugees	Kuki-Zo, Chin, Meitei, Centre	Chronic	High
Policing, AFSPA, information	State v communities	Active	High

CHAPTER 13

National security threat assessment

The threat to national security from Manipur is not primarily an external threat. It is the loss of effective governance in a border state that carries a national highway, a border crossing and a position in India's regional policy. Unlike a conventional external threat, it develops through accumulation: each blockade, each unavenged killing and each looted weapon reduces the state's capacity to enforce its writ, and that decline compounds. We assess eight threats, rated by likelihood and by impact on national security, as the author's judgement.

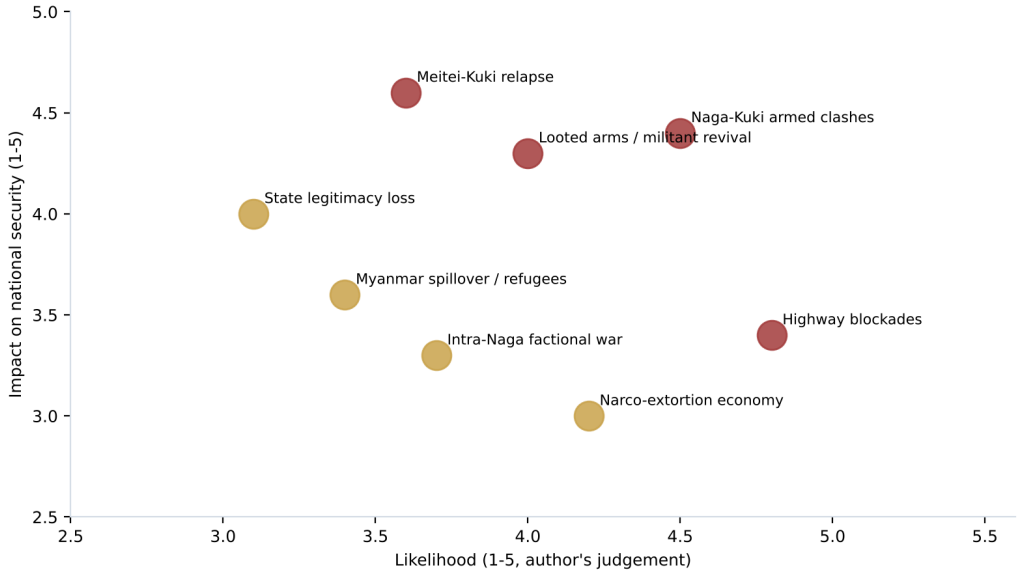


Figure 8. Threats to national security: likelihood and impact (author's judgement)

Table 11. Threats and indicators

Threat	Why it matters nationally	Early indicators
Naga-Kuki armed clashes	A second front; puts the NSCN-IM talks at risk	Hostage-taking; village burnings; ambushes on highways
Meitei-Kuki relapse	Reopens the 2023 conflict with weapons still at large	Buffer-zone shootings; rocket or drone use
Highway blockades	NH-2 is the artery for Nagaland and Mizoram; supply of Kangpokpi and Ukhrul	Days of blockade; price spikes; hospital access
Looted weapons	Feed militant revival and crime	Seizure data; ambushes
Myanmar spillover	Refugees, drugs, weapons; Myanmar instability	Border incidents; refugee flows

Threat	Why it matters nationally	Early indicators
Narco-extortion economy	Funds armed groups	Seizures; extortion complaints
Intra-Naga factional war	NSCN-IM and Eastern Flank	Ambush deaths (four on 28 March 2026)
Loss of state legitimacy	Citizens obey parallel authorities	Parallel checkpoints; boycotts; refusal of talks

The most dangerous combination lies in the upper right of the matrix: Naga-Kuki armed clashes, a relapse of the Meitei-Kuki conflict, and the presence of looted weapons. Blockades are near-certain but lower in impact on their own; they matter because they starve districts and reinforce the next round of violence. The strongest threat multiplier is the fragmentation of the Naga armed movement into rival factions, which has made the NSCN-IM a less reliable partner for the Centre and has created a new contest for control of territory and revenue.

Claims of foreign involvement are frequent in public debate about Manipur. We found no sourced evidence in the course of this study and make no such claim. The instability of Myanmar since 2021 is, however, a genuine cross-border factor, through the flow of refugees, weapons and drugs, and through the cross-border networks of armed groups, as the Indian Army's cross-border operation of 9 June 2015, which followed the ambush that killed 18 soldiers on 4 June, showed (R). The more reliable view is that outside powers do not need to act: the combination of weak governance, armed groups and communal hostility is a sufficient source of risk.

> OUR VIEW
> The national security question in Manipur is not whether a foreign power will exploit it, but whether the Indian state can maintain a monopoly of legitimate force on a border where three communities, several armed factions and a failed neighbour intersect. That test is currently being failed, and the cost is borne first by the people of Manipur and then by the northeast.

CHAPTER 14

How governments failed

The history set out in earlier chapters allows an assessment of how successive governments, at the Centre and in the state, dealt with the faultlines. Our approach is to assess each era against four questions: did the government anticipate the problem; did it respond proportionately and in time; did it address the cause rather than the symptom; and did it ensure accountability for those who committed violence, whether insurgent, mob or state. We then score each era from one (poor) to five (good). The scores are the author's judgement from the cited record. They are not a measured index, and they are offered so that a reader can contest them.

Table 12. Government performance by era (author's judgement)

Era	Government(s)	What the record shows	Failure	Score
1949-1971	Centre (Congress); Manipur UT administration	Merger in Oct 1949 without lasting consent from hills; Naga insurgency in neighbouring Nagaland; AFSPA enacted 1958	Integration by administration, not by consent; hills left out of decision-making	2
1972-1991	Centre; State (mixed, unstable coalitions)	Statehood 1972; PLA 1978, PREPAK 1977, KCP 1980; AFSPA 1980	Security answer to a political demand; frequent government changes; AFSPA became permanent	2
1992-2000	Centre; State	Kuki-Naga war (about 677-1,000 killed); Meitei-Pangal riot 1993; Joupi 1993	Slow response; no political settlement; land claims left open; no accountability for massacres	1
2001-2004	Centre (NDA); State	June 2001 uprising (13 killed) forced reversal of ceasefire extension; Malom 2000; Manorama 2004	Centre ignored Meitei territorial anxiety; AFSPA abuses fuelled mass protest	2
2005-2014	Centre (UPA); State (Congress, Ibobi Singh)	SoO 2005/2008; surrenders 2012; Naga talks	SoO camps without verification or political endgame; blockades; extrajudicial killings alleged	3
2015-2022	Centre and State (BJP from 2017)	Framework Agreement 2015; 2016 districts and blockade; war on drugs; 2021 coup and refugees	Framework Agreement not concluded; district creation without consultation; hills-valley trust fell	2
May 2023-Feb 2025	Centre and State (BJP, CM Biren Singh)	Violence from 3 May 2023; about 6,000 arms looted; SC steps in; Jiribam Nov 2024; CM resigns Feb 2025	Delayed response; allegations of partiality; looted arms not recovered; no accountability; MHA inquiry not reported	1
Feb 2025-Feb 2026	Centre (President's Rule)	Violence fell; no political process; Kuki-Zo bodies suspend talks	Calm without a political track; arms drive partial; no reconciliation	3
Feb 2026-now	Centre; State (CM Khemchand Singh)	Popular government restored; Naga-Kuki front opens; blockades; 34 deaths since Feb	Second front emerged within weeks; highway blockades; relief gaps flagged by SC and HRW	2

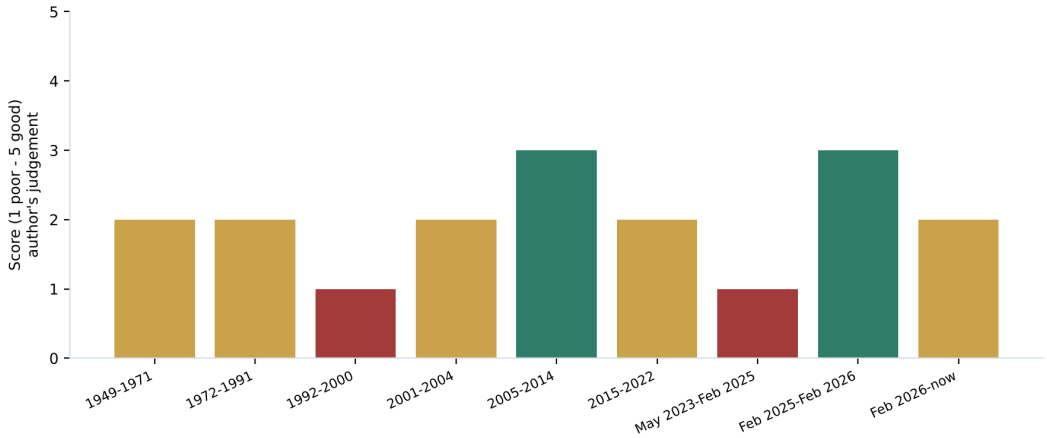


Figure 9. Government-failure score by era (1 poor, 5 good; author's judgement)

Four recurring failures

First, the security answer to a political demand. In every era, from the AFSPA of 1958 and 1980 to the deployments of 2023, the first instrument of policy was force. Security measures were necessary, as the scale of killing makes clear. But they were consistently offered in place of, rather than alongside, a political process that would address the territorial and identity questions at the heart of the conflict.

Second, accords without an endgame. The 1997 NSCN-IM ceasefire, the 2005 and 2008 SoO agreements, the 2012 surrenders and the 2015 Framework Agreement all reduced violence for a time. None had verification, deadlines, a published text or the participation of Manipur's own communities. The Centre treated Manipur as the site of an agreement rather than a party to it, and the consequence was the 2001 uprising, the Kuki-Zo suspicion of the Framework Agreement, and the weak state of the SoO camps in 2023.

Third, impunity. The state has failed to bring to justice those responsible for the great majority of the mass killings in this study: Joupi in 1993, Sinam Khul in 1994, the Meitei-Pangal riot, Malom, the 2015 Churachandpur firing and most of the 2023 violence, for which the number of prosecutions is small relative to about 6,000 first information reports. Impunity is not only a failure of justice. It sustains violence, because each community keeps its own list of victims and treats the other's grievances as propaganda.

Fourth, late reaction to warnings. Each major outbreak followed visible warnings: the Moreh ultimatum in 1992, the ceasefire extension in 2001, the ILP protests in 2015, and the combination of the SoO withdrawal, eviction drives and the ST direction in 2023. In each case, the system reacted after violence started rather than before.

The Centre and the state

Responsibility is shared, and it is not helpful to apportion it exclusively. The Centre has constitutional responsibility for the Naga accord, for AFSPA, for the central forces and for the border; it signed accords without bringing Manipur to the table and has not published the Framework Agreement. The state government controls the police, land, forests and district administration; its decisions on districts, evictions, the SoO and the border have repeatedly had effects it did not anticipate. Both Congress and BJP governments, in Delhi and Imphal, appear in the record. The Congress-led governments of Chief Minister Ibobi Singh (2002-2017) presided over the SoO camps, staged surrenders and alleged extrajudicial killings. The BJP governments from 2017, at the Centre and in the state, presided over the Framework Agreement's stagnation, the district and drug policies, the SoO withdrawal and the 2023 outbreak. It would be a mistake to treat either as exculpated.

The judiciary and the Executive

The judiciary has been both a source of the crisis and the principal source of institutional response. The High Court's April 2023 direction on ST status was a trigger; the Supreme Court's committees, monitoring of investigations and direction on highways have been the most consistent response since. That a court should be managing relief, road access and the verification of compensation is a sign that the executive has not done so. The Court cannot make peace, though; that needs a political process.

KEY POINT

Four failures repeat across every era: a security answer to a political demand; accords without verification or an endgame; impunity for mass violence; and a late reaction to warnings. A strategy that does not correct these four will fail for the same reasons as its predecessors, whatever its intentions.

CHAPTER 15

Lessons from elsewhere in the Northeast

Manipur's conflicts are distinctive, but India has resolved comparable ones. Three precedents in the region offer lessons, and each shows the same thing: settlements last when they are negotiated with all principal parties, when they give real autonomy rather than symbolic bodies, and when the Centre stays engaged long after the signing. The comparison is offered with caution, because conditions differ, and conclusions drawn from it are the author's judgement.

Mizoram, 1986

The Mizo National Front fought the Indian state from 1966 until the Mizoram Accord of 30 June 1986, signed by its leader Laldenga with the Government of India. Mizoram became a full state in February 1987 and the MNF gave up arms. The settlement has lasted four decades. Three features explain why. It dealt with one dominant community and one dominant armed group, which made it easier to negotiate. It gave the Mizo people a state with real power, protected by constitutional provisions on land and customary law. And the Centre kept its commitments and supported the new government with funds. Manipur cannot copy this model, because there is no single dominant group. It can learn from it that a settlement must be backed by constitutional guarantees and sustained funding, not merely by an agreement between leaders.

The Bodo accords, 1993, 2003 and 2020

In Assam, Bodo groups reached three successive agreements with the Government. The first, in 1993, created a Bodoland Autonomous Council that never worked, and violence continued. The second, in 2003, created the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule, with real legislative and financial powers, and ended the main insurgency by the Bodo Liberation Tigers. The third, in January 2020, brought in the remaining factions and led to the surrender of about 1,600 cadres (recall, U). The lesson is double. An autonomy arrangement without real powers fails, as in 1993. And a settlement with some factions leaves the field open to others, which is why the 2020 agreement was needed. Manipur's hill communities already have autonomous district councils that have no real powers, a position much like the Bodo council of 1993.

Nagaland: ceasefire without settlement

The case of Nagaland, by contrast, warns against the course Manipur has so far followed. The Indian Government and the NSCN-IM have had a ceasefire since 1997 and a Framework Agreement since 2015, yet no final settlement. The ceasefire reduced killings but also allowed the group to run a parallel administration, collect taxes and grow stronger, while the political question remained open. The long delay allowed rival factions to arise, among them the Eastern

Flank that split from the NSCN-IM in 2024. The lesson is that a ceasefire without a deadline and a verified endgame decays into a standing arrangement, with its own vested interests, and that it can generate new violence.

What the precedents suggest for Manipur

Four conclusions follow. First, successful settlements involved a clear, published text and constitutional protection, which the 2015 Framework Agreement has lacked. Second, autonomy must have real powers and funds. The district councils of Manipur's hills have long been starved of both. Third, settlements must include all the main armed factions, or the excluded ones will become spoilers, as the Eastern Flank and the non-SoO Kuki groups now are. Fourth, the Centre must remain engaged for years, which requires a dedicated institution rather than occasional attention. These conclusions have shaped the ten-point strategy in the next chapter.

KEY POINT

India has settled comparable conflicts. They were settled by published agreements, real autonomy, inclusion of all armed factions and sustained central engagement. Manipur has so far had the opposite on each count.

CHAPTER 16

A ten-point strategy: one process, one rulebook, one standard of justice

The strategy that follows is designed around a single principle: the Union and state governments must be seen to treat the Meitei, Kuki-Zo and Naga communities by the same rules. Every previous attempt failed in part because at least one community concluded that the process favoured another. The ten points are one package, not a menu. Points 1 to 4 create the conditions for order. Points 5 and 6 settle the political and land questions. Points 7 and 8 deliver justice and recovery. Points 9 and 10 secure the borders and rebuild trust. They are designed to be public, time-bound and measurable, so that a sceptical citizen of any community can see whether they are working.

Table 13. The ten-point strategy at a glance

#	Point	Timeline	Lead	KPI
1	One peace architecture	Month 0-3	MHA / PMO	Authority notified; single negotiating calendar
2	Disarm and verify	Month 0-12	MHA / State Police	Share of ~6,000 looted arms recovered; camp verification published
3	Neutral buffer and policing	Month 0-6	MHA / CAPF	Checkpoints removed; zero road blockades > 24 hrs
4	Safe highways, open markets	Month 0-3	State / MoRTH / SC	Days of blockade per quarter = 0
5	Land and identity settlement	Month 3-24	MoTA / State	Commission report; land disputes resolved
6	Dual political track	Month 3-24	PMO / MHA	Signed accords; no boundary change

#	Point	Timeline	Lead	KPI
7	Justice and accountability	Month 0-24	MHA / MoLJ / SC	Trial completion rate; report tabled
8	Relief, return and rebuild	Month 0-18	State / SC committee	Camps closed; houses built
9	Border and illicit economy	Month 0-36	MHA / BSF / NIA / NCB	Km fenced; seizure and conviction data
10	Trust, information and economy	Month 0-36	State / MIB / MoDoNER	Surveys of inter-community trust; trade volumes

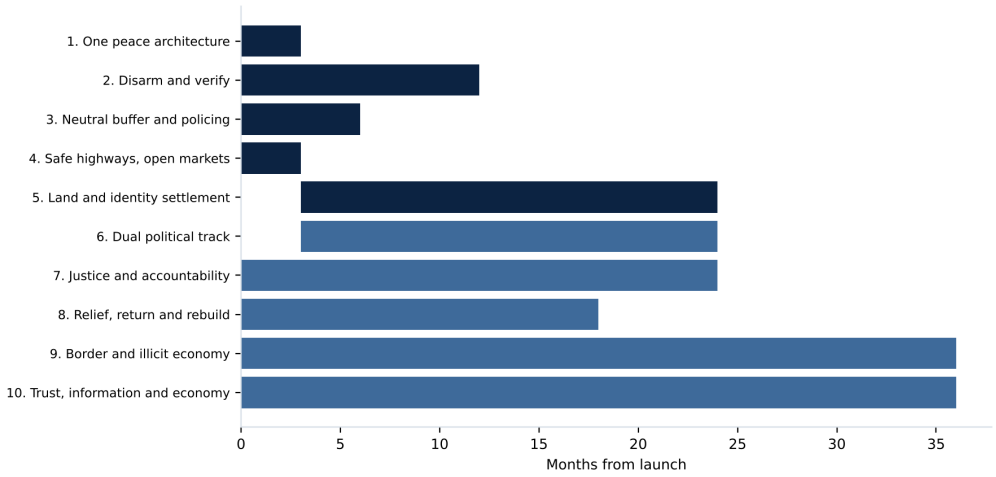


Figure 10. Indicative roadmap for the ten points, months from launch

Point 1: One peace architecture

Why. Past processes ran on separate tracks: the Centre with the Naga groups, the Centre and the state with the Kuki SoO groups, and little formal engagement with Meitei civil society. Each track generated suspicion in the others, and none was visible to the public.

What to do. Establish a single Manipur Peace Authority under the Ministry of Home Affairs, led by a Special Representative with Cabinet rank and a fixed term, and with a secretariat that includes the state government. Create one negotiating calendar covering Meitei, Kuki-Zo and Naga representatives, with published agendas and minutes. Do not run secret tracks. Create a Citizens' Reference Group of women's organisations, church and temple bodies, student unions and traders, with the right to be heard and to publish findings. Make the Authority answerable to Parliament through an annual report.

How to measure. The Authority is notified within a month; its negotiating calendar and minutes are public; all three communities attend.

Point 2: Disarm and verify

Why. About 6,000 weapons and 600,000 rounds were looted in 2023, and the SoO camps have never been systematically verified. As long as weapons circulate, no political settlement will hold.

What to do. Announce a time-bound amnesty for surrender of looted weapons, with a fixed end date, followed by prosecution of holders by the NIA and CBI. Create a digital arms register that

records each weapon recovered and matches it to the police armoury inventory. Verify the SoO camps by biometric roll, count the weapons in the double-lock stores, and publish the results. Link the stipend to verified presence. Offer a path out for cadres: skills, jobs, or integration into a state force with proper vetting. Deal with the Meitei groups and the Eastern Flank of the NSCN on the same terms as the Kuki groups: no group is exempt.

How to measure. Share of looted weapons recovered; SoO camps verified and results published; number of prosecutions of holders after the amnesty.

Point 3: Neutral buffer policing

Why. The buffer zones that now separate the communities are policed by a mixture of central forces and unofficial checkpoints, and every community suspects the state police.

What to do. Replace unofficial checkpoints with central forces and ethnically balanced joint patrols. Deploy the Central Reserve Police Force and the Army, under a clear mandate, to buffer zones, rotated frequently so that no unit becomes identified with one side. Reform the state police: recruit across communities, rotate officers across districts, and create an independent complaints authority. Establish community policing in the hills with traditional village authorities. Remove all roadblocks and checkpoints that are not run by the state.

How to measure. Unofficial checkpoints removed; complaints against police published and resolved; no road blockade lasting more than 24 hours.

Point 4: Safe highways, open markets

Why. The 2026 blockades show how quickly a highway becomes a weapon. A three-month-old baby died when her family could not reach a hospital 32 km away.

What to do. Declare National Highways 2, 37 and 202 protected corridors, with armed escorts for convoys and quick-reaction teams. Under the Supreme Court's 14 August 2026 direction, require Kuki and Naga bodies to agree and file a reopening plan. Create a prices and supplies monitoring cell that publishes the stock of fuel, gas, food and medicine in each district. Make blockades of essential supplies a punishable offence under a time-limited special law. Provide airlift for medical emergencies where the roads are closed.

How to measure. Days of blockade per quarter equal zero; hospital access in every district within one hour.

Point 5: A land and identity settlement

Why. Land is the most administrable of the five faultlines and the one that has been left longest untouched. The Scheduled Tribe question was decided in 2023 by a court direction rather than by a political process.

What to do. Create an independent Land Commission, led by a retired Supreme Court judge, with members from each community and experts in revenue law. Task it with surveying and recording hill land, with the participation of village authorities; resolving disputes over reserved and protected forest; and recommending on the ST question. Take the ST question out of the courts and give it to an expert commission that reports in 24 months, with a guarantee that existing tribal protections will not be diluted. Strengthen Article 371C and the Hill Areas

Committee, and give the autonomous district councils the funds and powers they have long been promised.

How to measure. Commission report published; land disputes resolved; funds released to the councils.

Point 6: A dual political track

Why. The three territorial claims cannot all be met in full, and past attempts to trade one for another have produced violence.

What to do. Pursue two tracks within a single framework. For the Naga question, conclude the Framework Agreement with a published text and an explicit clause that no territory of Manipur will be transferred without the consent of the Manipur Assembly. For the Kuki-Zo, negotiate a territorial council with real legislative, financial and administrative autonomy inside Manipur, which falls short of a Union Territory but gives the community security. For the Meitei, give a constitutional assurance of territorial integrity. Publish the draft of each agreement before it is signed. Hold the three sets of talks in parallel and share the results, so that no community suspects a secret deal.

How to measure. Signed agreements with published texts; no change to the state's boundary; Assembly endorsement.

Point 7: Justice and accountability

Why. Impunity is the thread that links 1993 to 2026. About 6,000 first information reports have been registered since 2023, and most have not reached trial.

What to do. Create special courts for the 2023 and 2026 cases, outside Manipur if necessary, with a single prosecution cell that ensures consistent charging. Publish the report of the MHA inquiry commission. Pass a law to protect witnesses. Review AFSPA in the districts where it still applies and require sanction decisions within a fixed time. Establish a Truth and Acknowledgement Commission, along the lines of those used elsewhere, to record the testimony of victims of all communities, including the victims of 1993-94, without offering amnesty for the gravest crimes. Support the investigations into the sexual violence cases with a dedicated unit.

How to measure. Percentage of cases tried; time from charge to verdict; report tabled; number of witnesses protected.

Point 8: Relief, return and rebuild

Why. About 58,821 people have been displaced and 174 relief camps were open in March 2026. Rehabilitation has been slow and some families have not received benefits, a gap that the Supreme Court has directed its committee to verify.

What to do. Complete a verified list of the displaced, to be published and open to challenge. Build permanent housing with a common design and common standards for all communities. Pay compensation at parity for deaths, injuries and property loss, regardless of community. Give each family a choice between return to the original village, where safe, and resettlement elsewhere. Provide jobs, livelihoods and school places in camps. Use the Mittal committee as

an independent monitor, with a direct line to the Supreme Court.

How to measure. Relief camps closed; houses built; share of eligible families paid; school enrolment among the displaced.

Point 9: Border and the illicit economy

Why. The 398 km border with Myanmar and the drug and extortion economy that runs along it feed the armed groups. Border policy has so far been made without consultation with those who live on it.

What to do. Complete fencing in Manipur through a participatory process that protects family ties and customary crossing, with designated crossing points. Replace the Free Movement Regime with a biometric local permit regime. Create a joint NIA, NCB and state task force to trace the finances of armed groups and the drug trade. Target extortion at highway checkpoints with a complaints line and prosecutions. Offer farmers a credible alternative to poppy, with crop substitution, marketing support and credit. Coordinate with the Myanmar authorities and ethnic organisations on the border where possible, and prepare a refugee policy that provides humanitarian protection without creating new settlements.

How to measure. Kilometres fenced; drug seizures and convictions; extortion cases registered and tried; alternative-crop income.

Point 10: Trust, information and the economy

Why. Trust cannot be created by security measures alone. It requires everyday contact between communities and a better information environment.

What to do. Create a fact-checking and rumour-response cell staffed by independent journalists, with a rapid-response hotline, and replace blanket internet shutdowns with targeted ones of limited duration. Establish a reconciliation council of civil society, women's groups, churches, temples and mosques. Fund school and sports exchanges across the buffer zones and joint markets under escort. Invest in hill roads and valley-hill trade, in border markets at Moreh, and in the horticulture and handloom sectors where all communities have a stake. Appoint a monitor of hate speech with powers to refer cases for prosecution.

How to measure. Surveys of inter-community trust; trade volumes through joint markets; number of shutdown days.

CHAPTER 17

Implementation, indicators and risks

A strategy of this kind will not succeed unless it is sequenced. Points 1 to 4, which establish the single process, disarmament, neutral policing and safe highways, can start within three months, because they depend on executive decisions and not on negotiation. Points 5 and 6, land and the political settlement, need about 24 months, because they require commissions, drafting and Assembly endorsement. Points 7 to 10 run in parallel over 18 to 36 months, because justice, relief, border management and trust-building are long-term. A delay in the first four will make the rest impossible, because no community will negotiate while it is afraid.

Table 14. Key performance indicators

Indicator	Baseline (latest)	Target	Source
Looted weapons recovered	about 6,000 looted (2023)	80% within 12 months	Arms register
Days of highway blockade per quarter	Weeks (2026)	0	State / MoRTH
Relief camps open	174 (Mar 2026)	0 within 18 months	State, RTI
Displaced persons	58,821 (to Mar 2026)	All offered return or resettlement	State, RTI
Cases brought to trial	about 6,000 FIRs	Majority charged and listed	Special courts
Deaths per year (SATP)	58 (2025)	Under 10	SATP
Naga-Kuki-Zo deaths	34 (Feb-Sep 2026)	0	HRW, police

Baselines are drawn from the sources cited in earlier chapters; targets are the author's proposals.

Table 15. Principal risks and mitigations

Risk	Likelihood	Mitigation
A community boycotts the process	High	Single-track talks; each community holds a veto only over its own red line
Arms drive fails	Medium	Amnesty, then NIA and CBI action; verified camps; incentive to hand in
Political cost to the state government	High	Centre co-owns the package; cross-party council
Spoilers among hardline groups	Medium	Target finances; protect moderates; publicise progress
Overlap between courts and executive	Medium	Supreme Court committee monitors; the executive implements
Myanmar instability spills over	High	Border management; refugee policy; contacts across the border

What would change this assessment

The assessment is conditional, and four developments would alter it. A verified and substantial recovery of looted weapons, together with a published roll of the SoO camps, would lower the probability of a relapse and raise the score of the present government. A published Framework Agreement with a clause protecting Manipur's boundary would remove the main Meitei objection to the Naga settlement. An independent casualty register and the start of trials in the 2023 cases would begin to answer the grievance of impunity. And an end to the highway blockades, enforced evenly against Naga and Kuki-Zo groups alike, would show that the state can protect movement for all. Conversely, a fresh mass-casualty event in the hills, a collapse of the Naga talks or a large inflow of weapons across the Myanmar border would raise the risk sharply. The indicators in Table 14 are chosen so that either direction can be seen early.

The author's confidence is highest in the descriptions of the faultlines and the record of past failures, which rest on repeated and consistent evidence, and lowest in the numerical targets and the scores, which are judgements. Readers who disagree with a score should read the evidence in the relevant chapter and form their own view; the argument of the paper does not depend on any single number.

CHAPTER 18

Conclusion

Manipur's violence is neither mysterious nor inevitable. It arises from a small set of old faultlines: unequal land, incompatible territorial claims, the supply of weapons, an open border and a collapse of trust in institutions. Every government since 1949 has seen them, and none has settled them. The result is that the 2023 conflict, the Kuki-Naga war of the 1990s, and the insurgencies of the 1960s are best understood as outbreaks of the same disease, not as separate illnesses.

The evidence also shows that the situation can still be recovered. Violence fell during the year of President's Rule, SATP counted only seven deaths in 2022, and, despite everything, there are communities in every part of Manipur that want to live together. What has been missing is a process that all three communities believe is fair. The strategy proposed here does not claim to solve every problem. It aims to do four things: to stop the killing and the blockades; to disarm and verify; to deliver justice and relief by a common standard; and to start a political and land settlement that keeps Manipur whole while giving each community security. These are modest aims in a conflict of this length. They are, however, measurable, and they are the minimum that the people of Manipur, and the country, are entitled to expect.

The final judgement of this paper is that the national security risk from Manipur is higher in November 2026 than it appears. The calm of 2022 was real but shallow. The calm of President's Rule was real but conditional. The reopening of the Naga-Kuki front, with its hostage-taking, blockades and rival armed factions, shows that conflict is moving to new places and new actors. A government that waits for the next outbreak to define the response will have chosen the same path as its predecessors. A government that adopts a single, public, measurable process, and holds itself to it, will have a chance to break the pattern.

CHAPTER 19

Sources and items to re-verify

The principal sources are listed below. Figures not traced to a retrieved source are labelled U in the text and are listed after them for re-checking before any external use.

Table 16. Principal sources

Source	Used for
Manipur Home Minister's statement to the Assembly, reported by ETV Bharat (Sep 2026)	306 dead, 49 missing (31 Aug 2026)
RTI reply released 20 Apr 2026, reported by ETV Bharat and ThePrint	58,821 displaced; 174 camps; houses
Human Rights Watch, 3 Sep 2026	34 deaths since Feb 2026; blockades; MHA inquiry status
ThePrint, 25 May 2026	Naga-Kuki fault line; Eastern Flank; NSCN-IM
Eurasia Review analysis of SATP data (Apr 2026); SATP pages	Annual and period fatalities

Source	Used for
Wikipedia compilations: 2023-2025 Manipur violence; Insurgency in Manipur; Timeline of insurgency in NE India; Kuki-Naga conflict	Episodes; 1990s data; groups
Assam Tribune and ETV Bharat on MHA reports	Incident counts, 2021-2025
DT Next (Mittal committee); Morung Express / IANS (FMR); Scroll; Newslaundry	Judicial committee; border; Jiribam; Ukhrul

Table 17. Items to re-verify before external use

Item to re-verify	Why
Malom (2000), Manorama (2004), the 2015 Churachandpur deaths, the 1,528 EEVFAM cases	Recalled, not re-fetched
Meitei, Kuki-Zo and valley-hill shares; 40/20 seat split; 1997 ceasefire date; merger dates	Census and historical recall
Official death toll after 31 Aug 2026; Naga-Kuki toll after 3 Sep 2026	Later events
All scores and statements about blame	Author's judgement
Names of armed groups and their alleged actions	Reported, not adjudicated

APPENDIX

Glossary of terms and abbreviations

Table 18. Terms used in this paper

Term	Meaning
AFSPA	Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958; applied to Manipur from 8 September 1980
ATSUM	All Tribal Students' Union Manipur, organiser of the 3 May 2023 Tribal Solidarity March
CAPF	Central Armed Police Forces (CRPF, BSF and others)
FMR	Free Movement Regime on the India-Myanmar border, suspended by Manipur in September 2023
Greater Nagalim	Proposed unification of Naga-inhabited areas across states and Myanmar
KNA, KNF, KNO, UPF	Kuki National Army, Kuki National Front, Kuki National Organisation, United People's Front
Meitei Pangal	Meitei Muslims of the Imphal valley
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
NSCN-IM	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah)
PLA, PREPAK, KCP, UNLF	Meitei armed groups founded between 1964 and 1980
SATP	South Asia Terrorism Portal
SoO	Suspension of Operations agreements with Kuki groups, 2005 and 2008
ST	Scheduled Tribe status under the Constitution
Zo / Kuki-Zo	Collective name for the Kuki-Chin-Zomi family of tribes