



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN INTERNATIONAL

This testimony by Dr. John Newton is submitted for the record of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's in-person hearing "Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S. - India Bilateral Relationship."

"Manipur: More than just 'ethnic clashes'"

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UK office. London, 18th September 2023

For the record:

The narrative that is most often trotted out to account for the violence in Manipur is that they are "ethnic clashes". This narrative is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because it is being used as a strategy to tip-toe out any religious dimension from the conflict.

The BBC's online analysis confidently said the problem was "Ethnic violence" before quoting a journalist – with a surname that strongly suggests he is Meitei and therefore might not necessarily be disinterested – who stated "the conflict is strictly rooted in ethnicity, *not religion*".¹

But why can't it be both? I would like to offer case studies from Aid to the Church in Need's project partners in the region that suggest the religious dimension does need to be examined.

Holy Redeemer Parish

If one looks at the flash point that began the Manipur violence on 3rd May, then, broadly speaking "ethnic clashes" might not be an entirely inaccurate assessment of that day's events.

I am not going to get into the disputed accounts of what occurred and who attacked who first in Churachandpur. Safe to say that tensions spiraled and by the end of the day events had escalated into skirmishes between members of the two communities. Church buildings were attacked as part of the unrest. That evening Holy Redeemer Church, in Canchipur was targeted, along with the Church school and convent on the same site.

At around 8.30pm on 3rd May, "a group of unidentified people, armed with iron bars and sticks came to the parish and forcefully crashed through the gates. There were three or four police agents, but they were unable to control the mob. After smashing the doors, windows and belongings of the church, the attackers set the church on fire".

"At 10pm a mob once again came and the presbytery of the parish was broken into and vandalized. All valuable assets such as computers and electronic devices, cash, gas cylinders, etc. were looted And the private rooms of the priests and the staff were ransacked and destroyed."

¹ Citing Dhiren A Sadokpam, editor of Frontier Manipur: "Manipur violence: What is happening and why", 20th July, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-66260730>





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The attackers returned twice before dawn, threatening school staff, breaking windows and ransacking the auditorium and classrooms, before setting an accommodation block for poor students on fire. Bethany Convent was looted with valuables, including computers and money, being taken.

St Paul's

However, in Imphal where 249 "Meitei churches" were destroyed within the first week of the violence the narrative of it just being "ethnic clashes" cannot be supported - and it is worth noting that despite some very sloppy reporting I've seen, the churches were not all destroyed by Kuki militants. Indeed Archbishop Dominic Lumon of Imphal has categorically stated that the Meitei churches were attacked by other Meitei. And let us be clear that by Meitei Churches we are talking churches in Meitei territory whose congregations are predominantly – but not necessarily exclusively – Meitei.

On the evening of 3rd May, Meitei militants entered the compound of St Paul's Church, Sangaiprou, in Imphal Diocese.² To quote the report ACN received from the Church:

"Around 8.30pm a mob came and began smashing and destroying the church and the properties therein. Window panes, doors, the interior of the church, statues, crucifixes, the sound system, musical instruments, and whatever else was in the church were smashed, and the altar set on fire."

Only after this rampage did the militants round up the 46 people who live in the compound, and demand that they produced proof of their identity to ensure that there were no Kukis there. There were not. So the militants set fire to a motorcycle and left.

The community was able to get the blazes in the church and courtyard under control. The militants returned twice more that evening, causing damage and rounding up residents to again demand proof of identity. It is nothing short of ridiculous that they carried out three identity checks – were they really expecting ethnic makeup of the residents to have changed since the first identity check.

The same ordeal occurred the following morning.

Then, at 2pm the militants entered the church again, took the cooking gas cylinders from the pastoral centre's kitchen, and after piling up all the pews and what the local Church called "valuable items" they set fire to them. According to the parish this caused the "almost total destruction of the property".

Livestock including more than 250 chickens and ducks were stolen.

² One might broadly call it a Meitei Church, although of its two priests, Fr. Immanuel, is himself Meitei.





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According to the report received by ACN, “all this time, no security cover was provided”, despite repeated attempts to reach the police through emergency numbers.

Religious Militancy

One factor behind the Meitei attacks is the resurgence of militant Sanamahi groups – those such as Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun are dedicated to the radical promotion of the Meitei tribe’s traditional Sanamahi religion. Depending on the estimate, between 8-16% of Meiteis adhere to the old ways. These groups appear to have driven the attacks on religious buildings.

Archbishop Dominic has spoken of in a very nuanced way about religious attacks being carried out in the context of an ethnic conflict. A statement on behalf of Cardinal Oswald Gracias spoke of the “persecution” of Christians. However it is framed, we are looking at a complex situation in which religion has played a part, and moreover there have been individual attacks where religion seems to have been a driver, but it is quite hard to argue that attacks, like the one on St Paul’s Church, are primarily ethnic.

END of John Newton’s testimony

PRESS RELEASE – Aid to the Church in Need International

19th July 2023, by Filipe D’Avillez

India: Anti-Christian violence continues to rage in Manipur

Even leaders of the Hindu nationalist party are beginning to accuse the BJP of complicity in what has become a generalised attack on Christians. ACN continues to monitor the situation closely.

The situation in the State of Manipur, in India, continues to cause grave concern, as [violence against Christians rages](#) and the number of Churches and Christian buildings destroyed, already in the hundreds, continues to climb.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay, [published a short note](#) on 9 July explaining that the situation is causing “anxiety to all and suffering to the people of the area”, and ensuring that the episcopate of India is in communion with the local Diocese of Imphal and trying to find ways to help.

Local sources have blamed the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has a Hindu nationalist platform, of stoking the violence, and this theory was given more weight by [the resignation, on 13 July](#), of the vice-president of the party in Mizoram, the state which neighbours Manipur, in protest at the violence.

In his resignation letter, R Vanramchhuanga claimed that even though 357 Christian churches and buildings belonging to different churches have already been burned by militants, leaders from the BJP-held local and central governments have yet to condemn the actions.





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“Therefore, I do believe that massive demolition of Christian Churches in Manipur was supported by the state and Central authorities”, the politician said.

Pontifical agency Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) has been monitoring developments in Manipur and has received information from local sources. What started out as the attempt of the Meitei group to be registered on the Scheduled Tribal list quickly turned into attacks against the Christian Kuki and Naga Tribals from the hills. The violent attacks of the militant Meitei groups resulted in burning of entire villages, the death of more than 100 innocent Kuki civilians and the destruction of Catholic and Protestant churches, including those belonging to Christian Meiteis, and can now be described as open persecution against Christians.

Two detailed examples of destruction of Church property that reached ACN clearly show the methodology and intentions of the attackers.

St. Paul’s Parish

On 3 May, according to a report from the diocese of Imphal received by ACN, several Meitei activists entered the St. Paul’s Parish and Pastoral Training Centre, located in Sangaiprou, which serves people from a variety of ethnic communities.

“Around 20h30 a mob came and began smashing and destroying the church and the properties therein. Window panes, doors, the interior of the church, statues, crucifixes, the sound system, musical instruments, and whatever else was in the church were smashed, and the altar set on fire.”

The 46 people who live in the premises were rounded up and made to provide proof of identity to ensure there were no Kukis amongst them. “After verifying their identity, they set fire to a motorcycle and left. The fire in the church was brought under control”, according to the report.

The local Christians believed they had escaped the worst, but instead the group returned twice that same day, again going through the motions and asking for proof of identity to make sure there were no Kukis.

On 4 May the mob arrived again. “The residents were asked to identify themselves. After checking verification a number of times, they left, finding none of the people they were apparently looking for. However, at around 14h, they walked into the church, collected the cooking gas cylinders from the kitchen of the PTC, and after piling up all the pews and valuables they smashed, looted, and burned both the Church and the Pastoral Training Centre building”, causing almost total destruction of the property, and not even sparing the livestock.

According to the report received by ACN, “all this time, no security cover was provided”, despite repeated attempts to reach the police through emergency numbers.

Holy Redeemer Parish





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The destruction of Church property in Holy Redeemer parish, in Canchipur, is another example of how security forces failed in their duty to protect the innocent during the protests in Manipur.

At around 20h30 on 3 May, “a group of unidentified people, armed with iron bars and sticks came to the parish and forcefully crashed through the gates. There were three or four police agents, but they were unable to control the mob. After smashing the doors, windows and belongings of the church, the attackers set the church on fire”, says the report sent to ACN.

As with St. Paul’s Parish, though the worst seemed to be over, the nightmare soon returned. “At 22h a mob once again came and the presbytery of the Parish was broken into and vandalized. All valuable assets such as computers and electronic devices, cash, gas cylinders, etc. were looted and the private rooms of the priests and the staff were ransacked and destroyed.”

The attackers would still return twice before the sun came up the next morning, threatening staff, breaking windows and ransacking the auditorium and classrooms before setting the residence for needy students on fire. They also entered the Bethany convent and looted all the valuables, including computers and cash.

ACN continues to monitor the situation closely and is in touch with local Church authorities to find the best and fastest way to provide emergency aid to help address basic needs and help alleviate people’s suffering.

****END of ACN Press Release 19th July 2023****

