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Press release

CSI urges Indian prime minister to protect lives as violence in Manipur continues

Christian Solidarity International (CSI), a human rights organization, is profoundly concerned over the ongoing violent clashes in Manipur, a northeastern state of India. These hostilities have led to the tragic deaths of more than 100 individuals, destroyed over 6,000 homes and 400 churches, and resulted in the displacement and suffering of tens of thousands of people.

As Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits the United States on Thursday, CSI urges him to act promptly and decisively to ensure the safety and protection of all communities in Manipur, especially those bearing the brunt of this violence.

The unrest, which began on May 3, has been characterized by a disturbing escalation in ethnic conflict between the majority Hindu Meitei people and the largely Christian Kuki-Zomi tribal communities. We recognize that the conflict is largely ethnic, though with some religious overtones.

“Prime Minister Modi is optimally positioned to restore peace in Manipur, not only as the head of government but also due to the affiliation of Manipur Chief Minister Biren Singh with Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party,” commented CSI’s International President Dr. John Eibner. Reports suggest that Singh has adopted a partisan stance, exacerbating the conflict through his support for the Meitei community and perceived antagonism towards the Kuki-Zomi people.

The conflict was triggered by a peaceful protest by local tribal groups against the Meiteis’ demand for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe. This status would afford them certain privileges and protections, a prospect that the Kuki-Zomi community, less influential and affluent than the Meitei, contested. Their objection resulted in an outbreak of violence.

The Kuki-Zomi community harbors concerns that granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei people could lead to the latter buying land in their traditionally protected hill areas. As it stands, only tribal people can purchase land in Manipur’s hill districts.

“We urge Prime Minister Modi to ensure a fair, thorough investigation into these violent incidents. All those responsible must be held accountable, irrespective of their political affiliations or ethnic identities,” said Eibner.

It is imperative that Modi’s government curbs the dissemination of propaganda against the Kuki-Zomi people in Manipur, which, disturbingly, has been reportedly promoted even via the government-run AIR 103.5 radio station in Imphal. Such harmful narratives can exacerbate the victimization and marginalization of already vulnerable communities.

A significant demographic shift has ensued, with almost all tribal inhabitants leaving the Imphal Valley, and all Meiteis in the Churachandpur district, including government and police officials, abandoning their homes.

“CSI further urges the prime minister to pay close attention to the safety and rights of religious minorities in India. In 2022 alone, faith-based groups reported nearly 600 cases of violence against Christians, and 2023 has already witnessed at least 300 cases,” Eibner noted.

CSI also appeals to U.S. President Joe Biden to raise with Prime Minister Modi the safety and wellbeing of all Indian communities. While acknowledging the strategic importance of the U.S.-India relationship, especially considering the geopolitical competition with China, we insist that democratic values, civil rights, and the preservation of human lives must not be sidelined.

We are confident that Prime Minister Modi can prioritize the safety and wellbeing of all communities in Manipur and throughout India. India’s strength lies in its rich diversity, which should serve as a unifying factor rather than a source of division.

About CSI

Christian Solidarity International is an international human rights group campaigning for religious liberty and human dignity.

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