



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on May 15, 2023

35,000 Displaced in North India's Anti-Christian Riots

Violent clashes between the Meitei people and around 30 other tribes in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur over political, economic, and educational benefits given to some tribes have resulted in 62 casualties over the past week and have displaced around 35,000 residents from their homes.

To address the situation, police and military forces were deployed and have begun transporting displaced residents back to their homes or to the charred remains of their homes.

On May 8, Manipur's chief minister, N. Biren Singh, told reporters that around 230 people were injured and 1,700 houses burned in the violence. That same day, a report at India's scroll.in news website revealed that the [death toll hit 65](#), while three politicians in the state's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) told Reuters that the death toll was around 70.

Lorho S. Pfoze, a state member of parliament, remarked that the government was attempting to ensure that villagers could return to their homes as leaders from various sides held peace discussions.

Last week, more than 50,000 mostly Christian tribal residents protested in the state capital of Imphal against a Meitei demand for special legal status and benefits from the Indian government. The Meitei want India to allocate less land and fewer government jobs for tribal residents, ending affirmative action programs that have been in operation for decades.

In April, the high court in Manipur requested that the central government classify the Meitei as a "scheduled tribe." The other scheduled tribes strongly objected to this request, stating that the Meitei are the largest and richest group in the state.

The tribes suspected the Meitei demands would find a sympathetic ear among members of the Hindu nationalist BJP party that is in power in New Delhi. Notably, the BJP and a nationalist offshoot, the RSS, have proactively wooed the Meitei to boost their political clout in Manipur.

"The tribal and non-tribal groups have had a history of jealousy over the distribution of economic resources and opportunities, but this time their anger just could not be contained," stated Khuraijam Athouba, one of the Manipur politicians trying to broker peace between the feuding groups.

"We are urging both sides to really put an end to the violence, or they will have to live under strict curfew for months," he warned.

A state government scheme that started in February to force tribal communities out of forested hill



AP Images
Refugees from Manipur



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terrain that was earmarked for state use also incensed the tribes, who strongly oppose government attempts to remove them from their ancestral lands. For its part, the state government suspected that tribal groups were cultivating illegal drugs such as opium poppies in the forests, as well as the fact that huge groups of illegal migrants from Myanmar — who have some ethnic links with the neighboring tribes of Manipur — were allegedly living in the area.

It remains to be seen as to which side first provoked the other during the demonstrations in Imphal and Churachandpur, a district dominated by the Christian Kuki tribe. However, the demonstrations soon gave way to bloody fighting that rapidly spread.

Christians in Manipur accused the Meitei mob of razing dozens of churches and hundreds of homes to the ground. Manipur University, which is administered by the Christian Kuki tribe, was broken into.

“If this is not a pogrom, what is?” a Christian leader in Manipur told *Christianity Today*, asking to remain anonymous for safety reasons.

“They are burning churches when the protest rally was simply against the inclusion of Meiteis as Scheduled Tribe by All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM). There is definitely a religious angle here,” he said.

CT reports indicated that anger over arson and vandalism incited some of the violence. In turn, more revenge attacks rapidly intensified among tribal and non-tribal youth gangs. Eyewitnesses testified that the tribes were defeated as the Meitei Hindu groups were suspiciously well-armed and equipped for violence.

“Tribals were not prepared for a war. They were holding peace rallies against the demand for Scheduled Tribe status by Meiteis. The Meiteis on the other hand, were planning for this kind of confrontation for a long time, it seems. They collected gun licenses and guns and then lit the fire,” one eyewitness said.

In response to criticisms from feuding sides that the Indian Army had aided the other side, the army declared that it remained impartial in the conflict and claimed that they sheltered around equal numbers of Meiteis and tribals in relief camps.

The Syro Malabar Catholic Church in Manipur lambasted Prime Minister Narendra Modi for keeping mum while homes and churches were burned and stated that other Christian organizations in India hoped to sustain good ties with Modi’s government, thus these groups sought to address the crisis delicately. However, the church stated that the conflict in Manipur could be regarded as ethnic cleansing or even genocide, and urged Christians across India to speak out more forcefully against it.

The [Meitei Hindus](#) are the majority group in Manipur and can trace their origins back to the first century A.D. when the state was an independent kingdom. During the 15th century, Hinduism began to spread among the Meitei, ultimately becoming the official religion of the kingdom. The rest of the other ethnic groups in the area converted to Christianity.

The Burmese conquered Manipur for some time before India annexed it in 1949, formally including it as the 19th state of India in 1972. The area’s unsettled history has given rise to today’s turbulent dynamics, with the Meitei harboring some separatist insurgent groups that have lingering hostilities toward the many smaller tribes around the area, slamming them for not adequately protecting Manipur’s independence following India’s annexation. The tribes generally think the Meitei majority enjoys too much power and money in Manipur, while the Meitei detest the central government’s



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reservations of ancestral lands and jobs for tribal residents.



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