News
Ministry



A man rides a scooter past a destroyed water tanker in Manipur, India, May 4, that was set on fire during a protest by tribal groups. The ongoing clash, which began May 3, is between the majority Meitei community (who are mostly Hindu) and Kukis, one of the tribes in the state (most of them Christian). (OSV News/Reuters)



by Thomas Scaria

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Sr. Sanrupe Kharsyiumiong and her companion were busy recruiting candidates for her congregation in some parishes of Manipur, when ethnic violence targeting Christians erupted May 3 in the northeastern Indian state.

After escaping, "our plan was to return in three days, but [we] got stranded in a village as mobs attacked houses and churches in several Christian villages," the 27-year-old member of the Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Most Blessed Sacrament told Global Sisters Report.

The ongoing clash is between the majority Meitei community (who are mostly Hindu) and Kukis, one of the tribes in the state (most of them Christian). A tribal solidarity rally triggered the May 3 violence, as the Meiteis attacked the rallyists when they returned from the event.

Archbishop Dominic Lumon of Imphal, the capital of Manipur, in a report submitted to visiting bishops in mid-June, stated that more than 100 civilians — mostly Christians — were killed, and 249 churches belonging to various denominations were destroyed in the violence, most of which were Baptist and Presbyterian (the two major denominations in the state).

But a July 10 report that the state government submitted to the Supreme Court indicated further destruction: 142 deaths, 5,053 registered cases of arson, and the displacement of nearly 54,500 people, most of whom are living in relief camps. (The report, however, did not mention the destruction of churches.)



Sr. Sanrupe Kharsyiumiong, a member of the Clarist Franciscan Missionaries of the Most Blessed Sacrament, along with her provincial Sr. Deena Pulickachundayil (Thomas Scaria)

Sitting in the visitors' room of her provincial house in Guwahati, a major city in the neighboring state of Assam, Kharsyiumiong told GSR that she and her companion hid in Kasom Khullen village for 10 days before the local parish priest drove them to safety to their convent at Andro, a town in Manipur's Imphal Valley.

"It was like traveling through a battlefield," she said of the journey. "We could see only the army and police. Several villages were torched and deserted, as their residents were either killed or fled to forests."

Another nun, who requested anonymity, shuddered recalling what she saw.

"On the night of May 3, rioters set fire to our parish church, ransacked our school and destroyed the boys' hostel," the Sister of the Little Flower of Bethany said.

The 56-year-old nun said the mobs spared their convent, but looted whatever they could find. The Indian army rescued her and three other nuns and sent them to a relief camp.



The Holy Redeemer Catholic Church and the boy's hostel in Canchipur in the Imphal Valley, torched by mobs (Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Imphal)

After two nights at the camp, the sisters were moved to the local archbishop's residence in Imphal, just six miles north of Canchipur.

Like the Franciscans and Bethanys, all 24 women religious congregations in Manipur have faced similar situations. Concern for safety has forced some superiors to send their people in Manipur to Assam and other states in India.

Some nuns have left Manipur after receiving threatening letters for helping those in the relief camps.

One of them, Sr. Regina Mareem of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, came to Guwahati July 3 after the Meitei militants served her a notice asking her either to stop aiding Kukis or face the consequences.

Several convents in Manipur have also received such notices. "We have come away and are waiting for the situation in Manipur to improve," Mareem, of the Naga tribe,

told GSR.

She said many convents in Manipur are now empty.

Information ban

Despite the scale of destruction, information about the violence hardly reached the outside world, as the Manipur government banned internet in the state May 3, reportedly to stop rumors and to contain the ethnic clashes. Even after three months, those outside Manipur still don't have the correct picture of the extent of violence in that state, with the Supreme Court coming down heavily on the federal and state governments for lack of information about the violence.



St. Paul's parish church and the pastoral center, after their destruction in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur (Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Imphal)

The first authentic information about the Manipur situation came from Lumon; however, the soonest he could share information outside the state was June 15 — six weeks after the attack began — to Archbishop John Moolachira of Guwahati and Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati, who visited Manipur.

Lumon said that, although the violence could not be "categorically termed" as a religious conflict, the "religious attack has been effectively carried out amid an

ethnic conflict between Meiteis and Kukis."

Then, on July 19, a video from May 4 surfaced on social media showing two women of the Kuki community being paraded naked and sexually assaulted allegedly by a Meitei mob. The outrage over the video forced Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to condemn the incident, breaking his silence on Manipur.

Police arrested seven young people from the Meitei community after the video became public. The video shocked the entire nation, with church groups and others organizing several peaceful protests all over the country in the past three months against the Manipur government's failure to maintain law and order and protect its people.

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Jesuit Fr. Walter Fernandes, director of the Guwahati-based North Eastern Social Research Centre, wrote how "one regularly sees headlines describing the clashes in Manipur as 'attacks on Christians' because more than 100 churches and some temples have been attacked.

"That gives a communal colour to what is a decades-old ethnic conflict resulting from complex ethnic relations and land management systems of Manipur," he explained.

As Fernandes explained, Manipur, comprising the Imphal Valley and hills surrounding it, has three main ethnic communities: the Naga and Kuki tribes, who are predominantly Christian, "and the mostly Hindu, non-tribal Meitei who form 53% of the 2.86 million population (2011 census) living on 10% of Manipur’s land in the valley." Meanwhile, Fernandes wrote, "The tribes comprise 40% of the population living on 90% of the land in the hills."

The Jesuit social scientist explained that the Meiteis are upset that a law bars them from buying land in the hills, whereas the tribals can own land also in the valley; the tribes, however, claim the Meiteis, who are the majority, monopolize jobs, economy and political power in the state.



A jeep and the Catholic pastoral center in Imphal, attacked by a mob during communal clashes in Manipur state, India (Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Imphal)

Earlier this year, some Meitei leaders demanded legal tribal status for their community, and on April 26, the Manipur High Court directed the state government to recommend to the federal government including Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribe list. The status as a tribal or dalit (formerly "untouchables" in the Hindu caste system) helps a community avail statutory benefits, such as reservation in government jobs, free education and other welfare projects.

The violence began in relation to a solidarity march the tribal groups organized May 3 to oppose the Meitei demand. Suspected Meitei militants attacked the rally.

Christian displacement

The violence that erupted has displaced the entire Christian community in Manipur, said Archbishop John Moolachira of Guwahati, head of the Catholic Church in northeastern India, who visited Manipur in June.

"Nearly 60,000 people have taken shelter in some 350 camps," Moolachira told GSR July 5 in Guwahati. The administration has deployed some 40,000 security forces — army, paramilitary and police — to quell the violence.

"The scenes in the state are so frightening and alarming," he said.

Even Catholic nuns and priests in Manipur have been scattered after the violence started, he added.

GSR experienced firsthand the challenges of reporting on the violence in Manipur, as the Kuki tribe's recent beheading of a Christian youth indicated the state was still too volatile to visit.

However, GSR met several nuns and priests in Guwahati with links to Manipur.

Kharsyiumiong's provincial in Guwahati, Sr. Deena Pulickachundayil, told GSR her sisters continue to serve in Manipur.

"We have asked the Manipur natives to come away, but others are still there," she said, explaining that their convent is in a Meitei area in Imphal. "But they did not harm the nuns. Some Meitei boys even guarded our home."

Kharsyiumiong, who came to Guwahati May 28, wants to return to Manipur "even if it costs my life."



Sr. Julie Mate, a Kuki member of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel, and her associate, Sr. Amjela Kim, who work in the violence-hit Manipur state in northeastern India; GSR met them in Guwahati, Assam. (Thomas Scaria)

Sr. Florence Yaonai, a Manipuri member of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel , said some Meitei fighters had tried to attack their school and a social service center at Yaripok in the Imphal Valley, but the local people, mostly youth from the same community, prevented them. "Generally, people in Manipur respect the nuns, who are involved in education and social work," explained the Naga nun.

Sr. Julie Mate, a Kuki member of the same congregation, said she was deeply pained to see her people's misery. "I managed to bring some relatives to Assam, but others are in dangerous situations," she added.

Sr. Sumam Kalathil of the Medical Sisters of St Joseph, based in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, visited Manipur to offer medical care to those in the camps, on invitation from Imphal vicar general Fr. Varghese Velikakam and Fransalian Fr. Roy Muthedathu.



Sr. Sumam Kalathil from the Medical Sisters of St. Joseph with two other Salesian nuns (Courtesy of Sr. Sumam Kalathil)

She came with another nun and visited three camps where they provided medical care and psychological counseling, especially to women and children.

"Their condition was really pathetic with very little facilities in the camps," said Kalathil, a trained nurse and psychologist. Many women and children suffered from fever and malnourishment, she noted, and many women in the camps were pregnant.

Kalathil also found many women in the camps to be mentally disturbed, unable to imagine a future; some told her that the violence snatched away their houses and lands. (Kalathil and her companion returned to Kerala after contracting typhoid.)



Members of the Medical Sisters of St. Joseph and Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate organize play therapy for the children in the relief camp at Kankopi district of Manipur. The state government reported July 10 that nearly 54,500 people

had been displaced by ongoing violence, most of whom were living in relief camps. (Courtesy of Sr. Sumam Kalathil)

Currently, a medical team from the Camillus Fathers and nuns from the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Holy Family and Missionaries of Charity provide help in the camps, Muthedathu told GSR over the phone from Imphal. He said the state government wants the camps closed so that schools could reopen.

"But violence and killings continue," the priest lamented.

Meanwhile Sr. Rose Paite, a Manipuri member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, sounded upset at the Indian church's "too slow and inconsistent" response to the violence.

"It took 23 days for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India to issue a call for prayer and solidarity," said Paite, a human rights activist and head of her congregation's social work.

She said the Manipur people want action from the bishops, not just "prayer and solidarity."



Sr. Rose Paite, a Manipuri member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians from the Paite tribal community in Manipur (Thomas Scaria)

Still, some prelates tried to help in their individual capacity: A high-level team from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India headed by president Archbishop Andrews Thazhath visited Manipur July 23 and assessed the situation. The team described the scenes of the deserted places in Christian villages as "heart-wrenching" and uninhabitable since they were fully destroyed by the violent mobs.

Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati, who visited Manipur twice in the past two months, said the situation in the state deteriorated after the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party came to power six years ago.

The current crises, he suspects, are part of "a premeditated and planned strategy."

"The state government had already set the stage for an ethnic cleansing with their propaganda that Kukis are illegal migrants from Myanmar," said the prelate.

In this dismal scenario, the 87-year-old archbishop is happy that the Catholic nuns continue to serve the people of Manipur, even risking their lives.

"The sisters are doing a tremendous job in Manipur at this hour of crises, especially standing with women and children who are most vulnerable and targeted," he told GSR.