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Manipur Ethnic Conflict — Three Years On: 217 Dead, 58,800 Displaced, and No End in Sight

24 April 2026

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Manipur Ethnic Conflict — Three Years On: 217 Dead, 58,800 Displaced, and No End in Sight

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WHY IN NEWS

The Manipur ethnic conflict, which began on **May 3, 2023**, has entered its **third year** with at least **217 killed** and **58,821 persons displaced** as of March 2026. Fresh violence in April 2026 included the killing of a **5-year-old boy and his 6-month-old sister** in a suspected rocket strike in **Bishnupur district**. The state government lifted restrictions across five valley districts on **April 18, 2026** after 11 days of clampdown, though tensions remain high.

BACKGROUND — THE CONFLICT

Origins: May 3, 2023

The conflict ignited on May 3, 2023, when a protest march by the **All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM)** in response to a **Manipur High Court order** — directing the state government to consider extending **Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei community** — turned violent. The Kuki-Zo communities feared that extending ST status to Meiteis would threaten their existing tribal land protections in hill areas.

The Two Communities

COMMUNITY	DESCRIPTION
Meitei	~53% of Manipur's population; valley-based; predominantly Hindu; not currently ST
Kuki-Zo	~16%; hill-based; Christian; have ST status under Schedule V areas
Naga	~24%; another hill community; largely uninvolved in Meitei-Kuki conflict

The Core Dispute

ISSUE	MEITEI POSITION	KUKI-ZO POSITION
ST status for Meitei	Supports — argues historical marginalisation	Opposes — fears loss of hill land protections
Forest land encroachment	Alleges Kuki-Zo encroach on reserve forests	Denies; says state is targeting tribals
Drug trade	Allege Kuki-Zo linked to Myanmar drug routes	Rejects; calls it demonisation

CONFLICT TOLL — SCALE OF CRISIS

INDICATOR	DATA
Deaths	217 (as of March 2026)
Displaced persons	58,821
Duration	Since May 3, 2023 (nearly 3 years)
Relief camps	350+ across valley and hills
Villages burned/abandoned	300+
Arms looted from police	5,000+ weapons (2023); many recovered

APRIL 2026 — FRESH VIOLENCE

- **Bishnupur rocket strike:** 5-year-old boy and 6-month-old sister killed; mother injured
- CRPF firing after protest mob vandalised a CRPF camp — 3 killed, ~24 injured
- Two Naga civilians shot dead on Imphal-Dimapur National Highway (NH-2)
- State banned internet across several districts; lifted partially on April 18

GOVERNANCE RESPONSE — WHAT HAS (NOT) WORKED

ACTION	DETAILS
AFSPA extension	Parts of Manipur remain under Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act
Central forces deployment	50,000+ central forces (CRPF, BSF, AR) deployed
Peace talks	Multiple attempts; stalled over Kuki-Zo demand for separate administration
SIT investigations	Special Investigation Teams formed; slow progress
Presidential Rule demand	Opposition demanded Article 356; not imposed
CM N. Biren Singh	Under intense criticism; questioned over impartiality

Kuki-Zo Demand — Separate Administration

Kuki-Zo groups demand a **separate administrative unit** (distinct from the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley) — either a separate state or a Union Territory with legislature. The Central Government has not acceded.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL DIMENSIONS

CONCEPT	RELEVANCE TO MANIPUR
Fifth Schedule	Applies to ST areas in non-tribal majority states — not Manipur (Sixth Schedule applies to NE)
Sixth Schedule	Provides Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) to tribal areas in NE India
Article 355	Centre's duty to protect states from internal disturbance
Article 356	President's Rule — not imposed
AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act — allows armed forces special powers in "disturbed areas"
Inner Line Permit (ILP)	Manipur enforces ILP since 2019 — restricts outsiders

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- Manipur conflict start: May 3, 2023
- Communities: Meitei (valley) vs Kuki-Zo (hills)
- Deaths: 217; Displaced: 58,821
- Trigger: HC order on Meitei ST status
- AFSPA: Armed Forces Special Powers Act — “disturbed area” tag

Mains

- “The Manipur crisis reflects the deep-seated contradictions in India’s ethnic federalism and forest policy. Examine.” (GS2/GS3)
- Role of ST status, land rights, and forest policies in fuelling NE conflicts

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Conflict started	May 3, 2023
Trigger	Meitei ST status HC order; ATSUM protest
Deaths	217 (March 2026)
Displaced	58,821 persons
Communities	Meitei (~53% population) vs Kuki-Zo (~16%)
Meitei ST status	Not yet granted; under litigation
Sixth Schedule	Applies to tribal areas in NE India (not Fifth Schedule)
AFSPA	Still in force in parts of Manipur
Kuki-Zo demand	Separate administration / UT with legislature

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