

7. Peace Step in Manipur – Governance

Centre and Manipur government ink peace pact with Kuki-Zo groups. To de-escalate the ethnic conflict, the Centre and Manipur government have signed a revised Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups. The agreement reaffirms Manipur's territorial integrity and ensures the opening of a key national highway while introducing a clause for a political settlement within the Indian Constitution.

Introduction – A New Step Towards Peace in Manipur

In a significant development aimed at restoring peace, the Centre and the Manipur government have signed a revised Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups. This move comes just ahead of the Prime Minister's scheduled visit to the state on September 13, his first since the outbreak of ethnic violence in 2023.

Key Provisions of the Revised SoO Agreement (2025)

The re-negotiated agreement introduces several new and reinforced clauses to address the complexities of the ongoing conflict –

Verification and Deportation of Cadres – Security forces are mandated to conduct a thorough verification of all insurgent cadres. Any individuals identified as foreign nationals will be de-listed from the groups' rosters and subsequently deported.

Reiteration of Territorial Integrity – The pact explicitly reaffirms the territorial integrity of Manipur, thereby formally ruling out any possibility of territorial bifurcation or the creation of a separate administrative unit carved out of the state's existing boundaries.

Evolved Political Settlement Clause – A new phrase has been introduced, committing the parties to work towards a “negotiated political settlement within the Constitution of India.” This is a significant evolution from the 2008 pact, which only mentioned the possibility of creating territorial councils.

Relocation of Insurgent Camps – The two main umbrella groups, the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and the United People's Front (UPF), have agreed to relocate seven of their designated camps. These camps will be moved away from conflict-prone areas to de-escalate tensions.

Securing of Weapons – As part of the relocation, all weapons from these camps will be stored under lock and key in nearby CRPF or BSF camps to prevent their misuse during clashes.

Strengthened Monitoring Mechanism – A Joint Monitoring Group will be tasked with enforcing strict compliance with the agreement's ground rules. The pact includes provisions for decisive action against any violations, which could include a complete review or revocation of the SoO agreement.

Opening of National Highway-2 – In a major confidence-building measure, the Kuki-Zo Council (KZC) has agreed to ensure the opening of National Highway-2 (Imphal–Dimapur). This highway is a critical lifeline for the Meitei-dominated Imphal valley, and its blockade had caused severe shortages of essential goods.

Timeline and Background of the SoO Pact

1990s – The decade witnessed brutal Kuki–Naga clashes that resulted in hundreds of deaths. This conflict spurred the formation of Kuki insurgent groups demanding a separate homeland or statehood.

2008 – The first Suspension of Operations (SoO) Agreement was signed as a tripartite pact between the Centre, the Manipur government, and 25 Kuki insurgent groups operating under the KNO and UPF umbrellas.

2008–2023 – The pact was renewed on an annual basis, though this period was marked by periodic allegations of ground rule violations by the signatory groups.

May 3, 2023 – Widespread ethnic violence erupted between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, leading to over 200 deaths and the displacement of tens of thousands of people. February 29, 2024 – Citing the alleged involvement of SoO groups in the ethnic violence, the Manipur government officially withdrew from the agreement and refused to extend it further.

September 3, 2025 – After months of negotiations, a revised SoO Agreement was signed with new, stricter terms, including the affirmation of Manipur's territorial integrity and the opening of National Highway-2.

Tribal Demographics of Manipur

Manipur is a multi-ethnic state with a complex demographic landscape, which is central to understanding its conflicts.

Overview – The state is home to 33 recognized tribes, who collectively form approximately 41% of the state's population (Census 2011). These tribes are broadly divided into Naga and Kuki-Zo groups and predominantly inhabit the hill districts, while the non-tribal Meitei community is concentrated in the Imphal Valley.

The Hill-Valley Divide – This is a critical geographical and demographic feature. The tribes dominate the hill areas, which constitute 90% of Manipur's landmass. The Meitei community dominates the fertile Imphal Valley, which makes up only 10% of the area but holds 60% of the state's population.

Major Tribal Groups

Naga Tribes –

Prominent Groups – Includes the Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Poumai, Rongmei, and Zeme, among others.

Location – Predominantly found in the northern and eastern hills (Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong districts).

Characteristics – They are ethnically linked to the Nagas of Nagaland, are mostly Christian, and have distinct customs and festivals like the Luira seed-sowing festival.

Kuki-Zo Tribes –

Prominent Groups – Includes the Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Simte, Gangte, and Zou.

Location – Dominant in the southern and western hills (Churachandpur, Kangpokpi districts).

Characteristics – They share close ethnic ties with tribes in Mizoram and Myanmar, are a Christian majority, and celebrate festivals like the Chavang Kut harvest festival.

Significance of the 2025 Agreement

Revival of the Peace Process – It re-establishes a formal framework for dialogue and de-escalation after a year-long deadlock.

Restoration of Economic Lifeline – The reopening of NH-2 is crucial for ensuring an uninterrupted flow of essential goods to the Imphal valley, which will help control prices and reduce shortages.

Balanced Political Approach – The pact attempts to strike a delicate balance by affirming territorial integrity (a key Meitei concern) while keeping the door open for a constitutional settlement (a Kuki-Zo aspiration).

Improved Security Stability – The relocation of insurgent camps and stricter monitoring mechanisms are designed to prevent the misuse of camps and weapons during ethnic clashes.

Confidence-Building Measure – The agreement signals a renewed willingness from both the government and Kuki-Zo groups to pursue peace within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

Challenges Ahead

Despite the positive step, the path to lasting peace remains fraught with challenges –

Deep-Rooted Trust Deficit – The profound mistrust between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities remains the biggest obstacle.

Strict Implementation – The success of the pact hinges on the effective and impartial monitoring of camps and cadre movements by the Joint Monitoring Group.

Unresolved Political Aspirations – Kuki-Zo groups are likely to continue pressing for their demand for autonomy or a separate administration, which could reignite tensions.

Ongoing Ethnic Tensions – Sporadic violence and deep polarization along ethnic lines could easily disrupt the fragile peace process.

The Way Forward and Constitutional Pathways

1. **Inclusive Dialogue** – Future peace talks must be broadened to include representatives from all major communities—Meitei, Kuki-Zo, and Naga—to find a holistic solution.
2. **Confidence-Building Measures** – Prioritize the rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced persons from all communities to address their grievances.
3. **Developmental Approach** – Focus on improving infrastructure, creating jobs, and enhancing educational opportunities in conflict-affected areas to provide alternatives to insurgency.
4. **Explore Constitutional Solutions** – Examine viable models for administrative devolution within Manipur, such as the creation of Sixth Schedule councils or utilizing the special provisions under Article 371C.

Article 371C – Special Provisions for Manipur

This article, inserted by the 27th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1971, grants the President a special responsibility for the administration of Manipur's hill areas. It mandates the creation of a Committee of the Legislative Assembly consisting of MLAs from the hill areas to safeguard their interests.

Conclusion

The 2025 revised SoO agreement is a crucial and constructive step toward de-escalating the conflict in Manipur. However, its ultimate success will depend on sustained trust-building, inclusive dialogue involving all communities, strict enforcement of ground rules, and the pursuit of a political solution that upholds constitutional values while addressing the legitimate aspirations of all of Manipur's diverse peoples.

Source – <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/centre-manipur-govt-kuki-zo-groups-sign-agreement-nh-2-to-be-opened/article70011438.ece>

