

## FREE MOVEMENT REGIME - POLITY

NEWS: The **United Naga Council (UNC)** has demanded the **reinstatement of the Free Movement Regime (FMR)** along the India-Myanmar border, following its **scrapping by the Indian government in February 2023**, which disrupted the cultural and economic ties of the Naga communities living across the border. The UNC also seeks the **rollback of districts** created in 2016, which it argues disregarded the rights of the Naga people.

### WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

#### What Was the Free Movement Regime (FMR)?

- **Historical Context:**
  - Much of India's northeast region was under Burmese occupation until the **Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826** established the current India-Myanmar boundary.
    - The Treaty of Yandabo was signed by **General Sir Archibald Campbell on behalf of the British** and Governor of Legaing Maha Min Hla Kyaw Htin on behalf of the Burmese.
      - It ended the **First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826)**.
  - However, the border separated communities with shared ethnicity and culture, including the **Nagas** in Nagaland and Manipur, as well as the **Kuki-Chin-Mizo communities** in Manipur and Mizoram, without their agreement.
  - Currently, India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km border across **Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh**, of which only 10 km is fenced, in Manipur.
- The **Free Movement Regime (FMR)** was a bilateral arrangement between **India and Myanmar** that allowed free cross-border movement of people belonging to certain **hill tribes** living along the international border.
- Under the FMR, individuals **residing within 16 km on either side** of the India-Myanmar border were permitted to cross the border **without a visa**.
- Eligible individuals could **stay up to two weeks per visit**, facilitating regular and informal interaction across the border.
- This system particularly benefited **indigenous Naga communities** whose ancestral lands straddle both sides of the border and who share deep-rooted **historical, cultural, social, and economic ties**.

## Communities Benefited by the FMR

- The FMR supported traditional mobility for **Naga tribes** like the **Tangkul, Anal, Moyon, Lamkang, and Maring**, among others.
- These communities are concentrated in **Manipur (India)** and the adjoining **Sagaing Division (Myanmar)**, regions with long-standing kinship and trade links.

## Removal of FMR in 2023: Official Reasons

- In 2023, the **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** announced the **scrapping of the FMR**, citing **national security concerns**.
- The government emphasized the need to curb **illegal arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and unauthorized immigration**, which it claimed were facilitated by the open-border regime.
- The decision was part of a broader strategy to **secure India's borders**, particularly in light of increasing instability and violence in Myanmar.



## Impact on Naga Communities

- The removal of the FMR has **disrupted traditional patterns of cross-border interaction**, impacting:
  - **Livelihoods** that depended on informal trade across the border.

- **Social and familial bonds**, especially intermarriages and seasonal visits between communities.
- **Cultural exchanges**, including participation in tribal festivals and community gatherings.
- The Naga people feel that the decision **ignores their unique socio-cultural realities**, as many tribes exist across artificial boundaries created by colonial powers.

### **Violation of Indigenous Rights: UNC's Stand**

- The **United Naga Council (UNC)** has strongly opposed the move, arguing that it **violates the rights of indigenous peoples**.
- Citing **Article 36 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007)**, the UNC notes:
  - Indigenous peoples **divided by international borders** have the right to maintain **cultural, social, and economic ties**.
- Though **India is not a signatory**, it **voted in favour** of the declaration, lending moral weight to the UNC's position.
- The UNC believes the move reflects a **lack of sensitivity to indigenous autonomy and identity**, especially for border-dwelling communities.

### **Background: Creation of New Districts in Manipur (2016)**

- In **2016**, the **Manipur state government** created **seven new districts**:
  - Jiribam, Kamjong, Kakching, Tengnoupal, Noney, Pherzawl, and Kangpokpi.
- These were carved out of districts like **Ukhrul, Senapati, Chandel, and Tamenglong**, which have a significant **Naga population**.

### **Naga Opposition to District Creation**

- The **Naga groups, including the UNC**, opposed the new districts, stating:
  - The move was done **without proper consultation** with stakeholders.
  - It **violated previous agreements**, including **MoUs** with Naga organizations and a **2011 central assurance** to maintain the **status quo** on administrative boundaries.

- The UNC views these developments as attempts to **dilute Naga territorial claims** and **undermine tribal autonomy**.

### **India-Myanmar Border Characteristics**

- The **India-Myanmar border** stretches over **1,643 km**, passing through four northeastern states:
  - **Manipur (390 km)** – Only about **10 km fenced**.
  - **Mizoram (510 km)** – Highly porous, with difficult terrain.
  - **Nagaland (215 km)** – Shares tribal kinship across border.
  - **Arunachal Pradesh (520 km)** – Remote and sparsely populated.
- The **entire border region** had been under the **FMR**, recognizing the historical presence of indigenous groups and the need for **soft-border policies**.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/manipur/reinstate-free-movement-regime-roll-back-districts-created-in-2016-manipur-naga-body-to-governor/article69537371.ece>