

MHA's Twin Decisions: SoO Renewal and NH-02 Reopening in Manipur

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Manipur SoO Agreement Latest News

- Ahead of PM Modi's upcoming visit to Manipur, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced two important steps.
- First, it **renewed the Suspension of Operations (SoO)** agreement with Kuki militant groups under the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People's Front (UPF), with renegotiated terms.
- Second, it secured an agreement with the Kuki-Zo Council to **reopen National Highway-02**, a vital route for the movement of commuters and essential supplies.
- These measures are seen as crucial for easing tensions and restoring some normalcy in the state, which has been grappling with **ethnic conflict** since May 2023.

The SoO Agreement and Its Breakdown in Manipur

- The Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement, signed in 2008 as a **tripartite ceasefire** between the Centre, Manipur government, and Kuki insurgent groups under KNO and UPF, aimed to facilitate political

dialogue.

- It was periodically renewed until March 2023, when the Biren Singh government withdrew from the pact with the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) and Kuki National Army (KNA), accusing them of fuelling unrest in Churachandpur after eviction drives.
- Following the ethnic violence between Kukis and Meiteis in May 2023, insurgent groups on both sides became active in the conflict, leading to the complete lapse of the SoO agreement in 2024.

Renegotiated Terms of the SoO Agreement

- The renewed SoO agreement, according to the MHA, requires Kuki militant groups under KNO and UPF to uphold Manipur's territorial integrity and pursue a negotiated political solution.
- Key provisions include **relocating camps from sensitive fringe areas**.
 - There are 14 Kuki militant camps in hills of Manipur; seven are at the periphery of the Kuki-dominated hills, near the Meitei-dominated valley.
 - Meiteis have long called for these camps' relocation, alleging that they are used to launch attacks on nearby Meitei villages.
- It also includes consolidation of smaller camps into larger ones, and depositing weapons with CRPF or BSF to prevent misuse.
- Cadres will undergo strict physical verification, with identity cards issued and movements regulated through local police stations, while foreign nationals will be removed from lists.
- Remuneration will now be transferred directly to cadres' bank accounts to ensure transparency.
- A Joint Monitoring Group will oversee enforcement, with violations potentially leading to a review of the pact.

Government Response to Kuki Demands

- The Centre has addressed several key Kuki demands, including the **removal of Biren Singh as Manipur's Chief Minister**, whom hill tribes accused of partisanship during the ethnic conflict.
- Following the imposition of President's Rule in February, Kuki militant groups began engaging in talks with the government.
- Another major concern was the **unchecked activity of Valley-based Meitei insurgent groups in Imphal**.
- To address this, the government signed a peace pact with the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in November 2023.
- Camps for UNLF cadres are now being set up, with ID cards being prepared, and the process is close to completion.

Mixed Reactions to the Renewed SoO Agreement

- The renewal of the SoO agreement has drawn sharp responses from both Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups.
- A Meitei civil society organisation, condemned the deal, calling it **undue legitimacy for "armed narco-terrorist groups"** and objected to **Manipur's state government being a party while under President's Rule**.

- On the Kuki-Zo side, the inclusion of a clause affirming Manipur's "territorial integrity" raised concerns, as their central demand has been for a separate administration.
- However, other Kuki groups argued that the agreement's reference to a "negotiated political solution" leaves room to pursue their demand.

Controversy Over 'Free Movement' on NH-02

- The conflict in Manipur has hardened inter-district boundaries, restricting safe movement between Kuki-Zo and Meitei-majority areas.
- While restoring free movement of people and goods has been a key government goal under President's Rule, Kuki-Zo groups have resisted until their political demands are addressed.
- Recently, alongside the renewed SoO deal, the MHA announced that the Kuki-Zo Council (KZC) had agreed to open National Highway-02.
- However, Kuki-Zo groups quickly contested the claim, stating that essential goods were already moving and that the term "free movement" was vague.
- They stressed cooperation with security forces did not imply consent for unrestricted Meitei movement in Kuki areas.
- Moreover, no reciprocal commitment had been made by Meitei groups. Within hours, the KZC clarified its statement, saying it should not be read as endorsing unrestricted movement across buffer zones.

Source: IE | HT | TP

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