

Kuki-Zo Groups Renew Demand for Union Territory Status

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Demand for Union Territory Status Latest News

- The long-standing Kuki-Zo **insurgency issue in Manipur** has resurfaced.
- Recently, the Kuki National Organisation (**KNO**) and the United People's Front (**UPF**) — umbrella groups of Kuki-Zo insurgents under the **Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact** — held talks with the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).
- The **core demand remains the creation of a Union Territory (UT)** with a **legislative assembly** for Kuki-Zo inhabited areas, citing the impossibility of coexistence within Manipur's administrative structure after the 2023 ethnic violence.

Background

- **Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact:**
 - **Initial signing:** 2008 between the MHA, Manipur Government, and Kuki insurgent groups.

- **Objective:** To maintain peace and allow dialogue for a political settlement.
- **Status:** Periodically renewed, and renegotiated and reinstated (on September 4, 2025) with new terms ensuring –
 - Verification of cadres and deportation of foreign nationals.
 - Relocation of insurgent camps.
 - Inclusion of a new clause — “**negotiated political settlement within the Constitution of India.**”
 - Reaffirmation of Manipur’s territorial integrity.
- **Ethnic violence (May 2023):**
 - Triggered between **Kuki-Zo tribals and Meiteis** over land and identity issues.
 - Resulted in approximately **250 deaths and over 60,000 displaced** persons.
 - This led to the Manipur Government **refusing to extend the SoO pact** (in February 2024), accusing Kuki groups of violating ground rules and instigating violence.

Key Developments

- **Demands by Kuki-Zo groups:**
 - **Creation of a UT** with Legislature for Kuki-Zo areas.
 - **Protection of traditional tribal land rights** and authority of village chiefs.
 - **Simplification of land registration** and succession procedures, currently centred in Imphal.
 - **Recognition of historical autonomy** of Kuki-Zo hills.
- **Centre’s response:**
 - A.K. Mishra, North East Advisor to MHA, represented the Government, reiterating Centre’s sensitivity to Kuki-Zo grievances.
- **But creation of new Union Territories is not current policy.**
 - Emphasised consultations with all communities in Manipur for a negotiated political solution.
- **Other issues discussed:**
 - Land, forests, customs, and development in tribal areas.
 - Confidence-building measures and governance reforms.

Historical Context and Constitutional Argument

- **Pre-Independence autonomy:**
 - Kuki-Zo hills were not under the Manipur State Durbar **before 1947**.
 - **Under British rule**, these were “Excluded Areas” (Government of India Act, 1935), administered by the British Political Agent, not the Meitei King.
 - **Traditional chiefs managed land**, justice, and administration independently.
- **Post-merger integration (1949):**
 - Manipur’s merger with India led to **centralised governance**, ignoring tribal land tenure systems.
 - **Compensation** was paid to the Meitei King but not to Kuki-Zo chiefs.
 - The SoO groups argue that creating a **UT** within India **would restore pre-independence autonomy, not promote secessionism**.

- **Constitutional arguments:**

- The Constitution allows Parliament to create UTs under **Article 3**, which gives the central government the power to directly administer these regions.
- Arguments include –
 - **Providing direct central government control** for strategic importance (e.g., Andaman and Nicobar Islands).
 - **Preserving cultural distinctiveness** (e.g., Puducherry, Daman and Diu).
 - **Ensuring better political and administrative management** in areas with unique challenges (e.g., Delhi, Chandigarh), and
 - **Providing special care** for backward or tribal areas that are not yet ready for full statehood.

Way Forward

- **Inclusive dialogue:** Continued engagement with both hill and valley communities to ensure lasting peace.
- **Administrative reforms:** Decentralised governance models like Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) could balance tribal autonomy and state integrity.
- **Developmental focus:** Prioritise infrastructure, education, and livelihood in tribal areas to reduce alienation.
- **Land tenure reforms:** Legal protection of customary land ownership while integrating it within constitutional frameworks.
- **Confidence building:** Ensure security, rehabilitation, and justice for victims of ethnic violence to rebuild trust.

Conclusion

- The renewed Kuki-Zo demand for a **UT with legislature underscores the deep-rooted ethnic and governance fault lines** in Manipur.
- While the Centre remains firm on **preserving territorial integrity**, sustainable peace in Manipur will depend on **balancing tribal aspirations with the unity and federal structure of India**.

Source: **TH**

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