

Widening divide

Peace in Manipur cannot be restored
by half-measures

Six months after a violent conflagration set in motion an ethnic conflict in Manipur, little has changed in bridging the divide between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities and in reducing the hostility. Every few days there is a violent occurrence or a provocative move from partisans on either side of the conflict, which heightens tensions and widens the divide even further with nothing being done to reverse the course and bring back normalcy to areas most prone to violence. The announcement, on Wednesday, by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), which represents Kuki-Zo groups, that it is pursuing "self-rule" with a separate "chief minister" in districts dominated by the tribal community, points to yet another hardening of stances that has prolonged the conflict. Such a move, which has no legal basis, is also bound to enrage Meiteis, especially those whose key grievances include the special land ownership rights to tribals in the State's hill districts. That the announcement came just a week after an Intelligence Bureau team and Ministry of Home Affairs officials held meetings in Churachandpur is an indication that the Union government is losing the plot in Manipur. The government has tried to keep a tenuous peace going by not enacting any change in the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led State government even after its failures in maintaining law and order. A leadership change has been a key demand by the Kuki-Zo community representatives besides others. The Union government has meanwhile relied upon paramilitary forces to quell the violence in areas adjoining the Imphal valley and the hill areas. It has taken a recourse to provisions of Article 355 to maintain peace, despite denying its imposition in the State.

This ploy has ostensibly been undertaken to retain the support of Meitei partisans who have refused to allow any change of leadership in the State government and also to address the Kuki-Zo people's distrust of the State police. Yet, the outcome has been a sharpening of the divide with partisans on either side raging against these half-measures. In the absence of a clear détente and the beginning of a dialogue process to rebuild an enduring peace and fraternal relations between the communities that would facilitate the return of people, even sporadic incidents have exacerbated the situation, making peace-building daunting. Unless the BJP's central leadership changes its stubborn strategy of maintaining a discreet silence while using administrative ploys to contain the conflict, the festering in Manipur is bound to continue.

War in Myanmar

The junta must hold talks with the
rebels and relinquish power

A coordinated offensive by Myanmar's ethnic rebels against the junta in several parts of the country late last month is the clearest sign yet that the coup regime's hands are overstretched. The Three Brotherhood Alliance, a coalition of ethnic minority armed groups, has claimed to have made territorial gains on Myanmar's border with China and dozens of junta forces surrendering. Clashes have erupted in the restive Rakhine State, and Chin State that borders India. Faced with battlefield setbacks, the junta's response has been to carry out air strikes, causing heavy civilian casualties. In a rare acknowledgement of the challenges, Myint Swe, the military-appointed President, said recently that "It is necessary to carefully control this issue (rebel offensive)". When the military toppled the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021, its first step was to use force to establish order. It jailed most of the pro-democracy politicians, including Ms. Suu Kyi, and unleashed a violent crackdown on protests. Since then, over 4,000 civilians and pro-democracy activists have been killed by the military and some 20,000 people jailed, according to advocacy groups. The UN estimates that 1.7 million people have been forced out of their homes. But the junta's violence has done little in stabilising the country.

Myanmar has faced violence by ethnic minorities for decades. But in the past, the main political contradiction in Burmese society was the peaceful struggle by the pro-democracy movement, led by Ms. Suu Kyi. This time, the pro-democracy movement gave up the Suu Kyian model of peaceful resistance, formed an underground government, established a militia wing and joined hands with the ethnic rebels – an outcome the coup regime did not anticipate. Over two years, new political realities have emerged. The rebels have made substantial territorial gains and kept multiple fronts open, maintaining operational pressure points on the junta. The generals are also facing regional isolation, especially in ASEAN. The new rebel offensive and territorial losses point to the mounting woes of Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's regime. The junta does not have any easy options. A military solution looks improbable. The junta has not come forward for talks; but the rebels, led by a diverse new generation of leaders, have asked the generals to retreat from politics and then hold talks to find peace. They demand a federal democratic system with greater autonomy for ethnic minority regions. If the violence continues, especially in areas bordering India and China, it will have regional repercussions. Major regional players, along with ASEAN, should play a more proactive role to achieve a ceasefire in Myanmar, setting the stage for meaningful dialogue that is aimed at restoring democracy and freedoms.

Unimpeded freedom of navigation vital: Rajnath

At ASEAN meeting, Minister calls for collaboration on peace and security; New Delhi's proposal to chair expert working group on counter-terrorism endorsed by participating Defence Ministers

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India is committed to the freedom of navigation, overflight, and unimpeded lawful commerce in international waters, and supports the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on Thursday.

Addressing the 10th meeting of Defence Ministers from countries belonging to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its dialogue partners in Indonesia, he reaffirmed ASEAN's centrality and appreciated its role in promoting dialogue and consensus in the region.

Later, Mr. Singh also held bilateral talks with his counterparts from Indonesia and Vietnam.

The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) is a platform to strengthen security and defence cooperation for the 10 ASEAN member States and their eight dialogue partners – India, Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the



Diplomatic efforts: Rajnath Singh speaks during the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus in Jakarta on Thursday. REUTERS

United States – which are collectively known as the Plus countries. India became an ASEAN dialogue partner in 1992, and the inaugural ADMM-Plus was convened in 2010.

Security collaboration

"The Defence Minister called for regional security initiatives that are consultative and development-oriented to reflect the larger consensus among various stakeholders. He expressed commitment to

wards nurturing practical, forward-looking and result-oriented cooperation with ADMM-Plus for enhancing maritime security in the region," the Defence Ministry said in a statement.

Mr. Singh called for active collaboration among ASEAN and Plus countries. Noting that conflicts extract a terrible toll in terms of human lives lost and livelihoods destroyed, apart from disturbing regional and global stability, and af-

fecting food and energy security, he reiterated India's commitment to work with ASEAN and Plus countries to ensure peace, prosperity, and security, which is an apt theme for this year's ADMM-Plus, the statement said.

Counter-terrorism group

The Defence Minister appreciated ASEAN members' enthusiastic participation in India-ASEAN activities, particularly initiatives for women in UN peacekeeping operations, and for a marine plastic pollution response. The maiden ASEAN-India maritime exercise was held in May. India and Indonesia are co-chairs of ASEAN's expert working group on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities in the 2020-2023 cycle. Recognising that terrorism is a serious threat to international peace and security, including in the ASEAN region, India proposed to co-chair the expert working group on counter-terrorism. This proposal was endorsed by ADMM-Plus, as terrorism remains a serious concern to countries in the region, the statement added.

Second anti-piracy patrol in Gulf of Guinea over: Navy



Ports of call: *INS Sumedha's* deployment was part of a plan to enhance Navy-to-Navy connect. PTI

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

The Indian Navy has completed its second anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG) in the Atlantic Ocean. The offshore patrol vessel *INS Sumedha*, which is on an extended range operational deployment and is currently operating in the Atlantic Ocean along the west coast of Africa, undertook a 31-day anti-piracy patrol, the Navy said on Thursday.

The maiden Gulf of Guinea anti-piracy patrol was undertaken by *INS Tarakash* in September-October 2022.

"The region is critical for India's national interests as it is an important source for India's energy requirements... *INS Sumedha's* operational deployment to a crucial geographical region of

immense relevance to India has ensured our national interests are further bolstered," the Navy said in a statement.

INS Sumedha's deployment also ensured enhancing Navy-to-Navy connect with regional Navies, including Senegal, Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, Angola and Namibia, the Navy said. Another highlight of the deployment was the ship's participation in the maiden India-EU Joint Exercise.

From November 10 to 13, *INS Sumedha* made a port call at Walvis Bay, Namibia as part of the Mission Based Deployment to West Africa and Atlantic. Professional interactions aimed at exchanging best practices, cross-deck visits and social engagements were conducted with Namibia's Navy in the harbour, the Navy stated.