

The Plight of the Kuki indigenous people settled in trio borders of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh

Respected -1. Madam Chair

2. Mr. Chairman

On behalf of the Kuki indigenous people of the trio borders of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh and on my own behalf, I thank the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for giving this opportunity to speak about the plight of my people and our aspirations in this 9th session of the the UNPFII.

Historical settlement of the Kukis

The Chittagong hill tracts located in Bangladesh, present day Tripura (now an autonomous state under the Indian Union), the Cachar hills, the Karbi-Anglong hills of Assam (also an autonomous state under the Indian Union), present day Mizoram (also an autonomous state under the Indian Union), present day Manipur (also an autonomous state under the Indian Union), the Naga Hills, Khasi and Garo hills, the Chin hills in Myanmar including also Sagaing Division (Kangmangphai) areas of Myanmar. The areas are contiguous but have come under three countries in post British colonial era. Kukis now number roughly 10 million spread across the vast territory in the three countries.

Socio-political organization – pre British colonial, and British colonial era.

Speaking the same Kuki-Chin language and sharing a common culture, the Kuki people were loosely organized into chiefdoms. The chiefs were the hereditary village heads assisted by a council of elected administrative heads with different responsibilities of administration. At some stage starting around the 17th century a central monarchy arose with the centre of power in present day Agartala – capital of Tripura. The impressive palace of the King still stands today. This monarchy loosely controlled the chiefs who were spread all across the settlement. The fragility of central control was largely because of the communication difficulties prevailing everywhere in the world in those times. Groups of chiefs located distantly from the centre acted largely in independent manner. There were frequent fights/battles between the chiefs which went largely unnoticed by the central authority. Writers of the era described this Kuki settlement area as ‘independent hill country’ or ‘Kuki country.’

The British aggression

The Kukis felt the full brunt of British colonial policy in the Kuki country. Records are still available of battles through the years between British and Kukis right from the 17th century till the 19th century for administrative control of the territory. The well-chronicled Anglo-Kuki war 1917-1919 starting from the present day Manipur was one of the final attempts by the Kukis to get rid of the British rule. The Kukis also joined the Indian National Army (INA) which fought alongside the Japanese during the 2nd World War to overthrow the colonial

British. Majority of INA pensioners in present day Manipur are Kukis. The continuous conflict with the British left the Kuki people isolated, fragmented and devastated, though remnants of the socio-political organization still remain till today in the form of 'Kuki Inpi.'

Conflicts in present day Kuki settlements

The speedy end to colonialism in the Indian sub-continent including Myanmar had its drawbacks. The aspirations of people deserving nationhood like the Kukis were brushed aside in the haste, leaving room for suppression/exploitation by the new governments. The Kuki area of North-East India and North-West Myanmar remains one of the most volatile and disturbed areas in the country and also the world, with nearly 100 armed militia groups operating in the area (and most of them in ceasefire/dialogue with the government).

For example, the Nagas, historically and now also, are a collection of many small tribes each with separate dialect and settlement area. They were not a political force in the past like the Kukis but paid tributes for their survival to the Kukis or other dominant/organised communities with whom they come into contact, in pre British colonial era. The Indian Govt after independence, has taken great pains to 'organize' them (the Nagas will deny this), even upgrading the erstwhile small Naga district into an autonomous State of the Indian Union (May 1, 1963). Purportedly, however, the Nagas have been waging a 50 year long war against the Indian Govt for an independent, sovereign Nagaland, and thus possess a large, well armed militia. Recently during 1993 to 1997, the immediately neighboring Nagas living alongside Kukis in Manipur were 'instigated' (on October 22, 1992) to drive the Kukis out of Manipur which resulted in the death of about 900 innocent Kukis, uprooted 360 villages and loss of homes/settlements and rendering over 100,000 people homeless refugees. The Indian security forces, which remained a spectator in this 'ethnic aggression' in the initial stages (lasting about 3 years) were in the end protecting the Naga villages as the Kukis had succeeded in organizing a 'defense force' even though initially unarmed (the Kukis had no militia then) and taken by surprise. The Kuki Inpi revised on June 29, 1993 at Kuki Inn, Imphal, Manipur has been fruitlessly pursuing with the Government of India countless times for proper rehabilitation/resettlement even taking the case to the country's Supreme Court but to no avail. Instead, the Indian Govt initiated 'ceasefire/dialogue' with the aggressing Naga militia in 1997 which continues till today with no end in sight! And it cannot be ruled out that many Kuki settlement areas would unjustly become part of autonomous Naga administered areas if the policy persists. Prior to this aggression by the Nagas, that is before 1993, the Naga militia was 'somehow' allowed to operate in Kuki areas such as Mizoram, Tripura, Cachar hills, Manipur etc creating conflict situations everywhere amongst Kukis in the Independent Hill Country.

In the present day Manipur there are three communities – Kuki, Naga and Meetei, but the disorder/disturbance/conflict is concentrated in the Kuki area, and fatalities/injuries due to landmines in this area are one of the highest in the world.

APPEAL TO UNPFII

It is fervently appealed to UNPFII to kindly consider the following points: -

1. To send a UNPFII team to the area for first hand observation.

2. To persuade the Governments to study the past and the wrong policies pursued by the colonial British Government against the Kukis and take measures to redress the wrongs so committed.
3. Stoppage of violation of human life, right and property of the Kuki indigenous people, including removal of all landmines in the area.
4. To prevent further violence/conflict/disturbance in the area, and to take immediate measures for rehabilitation/resettlement/development of the area.
5. To acknowledge and respect the contribution of the Kukis in ending British colonial rule.
6. To respect the extent to which the Kukis have fought for maintaining/restoring their rule over the land/settlement through centuries against colonial power.
7. To create an atmosphere where the Kuki indigenous people exercise their rights as per UN Charter, including a deserved political solution.

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Chairman

New York, USA

Kuki Movement for Human Rights

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