

The North East Catholic Research Forum

Brief Report of Meeting held on May 26, 2023, in Guwahati



Introduction

Deeply concerned by the violence and the targeting of Churches in Manipur, the Northeast Catholic Research Forum (NECARF) convened an emergency meeting in Guwahati at Inspiration building Kharguli on May 26, 2023, to assess the Manipur situation and gain a comprehensive understanding of the developing trend, and plan for justice and peace. Though the meeting was convened at short notice, NECARF members from most NE states attended, except from Tripura and Mizoram.

The meeting was moderated by James Pochury, Convenor, NECARF, and the proceeding began with Rev. Fr. Vargese Velikakam invoking God's blessings. After brief self-introductions by the participants, the moderator requested John Shilshi to set the tone of the meeting.

John updated the gathering with latest situation of the Manipur Mayhem and underscored a point that though a particular community was selectively targeted by the majority community Meitei; spontaneous attack on Churches, including those with valley Meiteis,

was disturbing, and could only be inferred as one instigated by radical Hindu organizations. Cautioning on the possibilities of similar incidents in other NE states, he invited practical suggestions from the participants on the following:

- Ways and means of strengthening Lay Catholic organizations' unity in the region,
- Possibilities of reaching out to Catholic Law makers to enable them speak in one voice when similar attacks on Christians take place in the region,
- How Catholics could play a catalyst role in uniting difference Churches in the region so that Christians could speak in one voice against all forms of injustice, and
- Explore ways to connect with national and international Catholic/Christian media for accurate dissemination of news, particularly in the light of the RSS and others continuing attempts to distort news against Christians.



The Discussion

As the floor was thrown open to discuss the above points by the Moderator, participants took part keenly and suggested several steps that could be taken under the initiative of NECARF. Besides, several other suggestions were also put forward for consideration; the need to rise above sectarianism, the importance of transcending selfish tribal feeling and understanding the larger geopolitical interests, understand the nuances of resource politics and land grabbing to facilitate big corporate houses, and the need to mobilize academic resources, conduct research, and engage with communities.

Proposed Actions

Relief Coordination: The meeting decided to coordinate with other organizations working for relief operations in Manipur through David Boyes who is presently engaged in a peace committee, as a step towards providing the healing balm. The meeting also stressed the need to explore long-term interventions for affected families.

Engaging Catholic/Christian Law makers: NECARF shall explore the possibilities of meeting Christian Law makers to apprise them of the emerging situation, preferably through individual state visits and request them to project a united Christian voice in similar situations as now witness in Manipur. The possibility of seeking support from international organizations was also discussed, acknowledging their potential role in advocating for justice and religious freedom.



Research, Media, and Legal Initiatives: To consider conducting an objective research on the Manipur crisis and the activities of RSS-backed organizations in the Northeast. Findings on such studies to be disseminated through academic channels, media platforms, and legal initiatives to raise awareness, counter false narratives, and advocate for justice.

Collaboration and Outreach: NECARF shall consider reaching out to other Christian brethren in the region through United Christian Forum of North East India (UCFNEI) and tribe

organizations, and forums to build a united front against the attack on Christianity in the region. Engaging with civil society organizations, student bodies, and youth forums was identified as a crucial step to amplify the collective voice and raise awareness about the challenges faced by the Christian community.

Team to respond to false narratives: As a long term strategy, NECARF shall consider having a media team which can respond to false narratives made public in media etc. by vested interest elements through presentation of credible and accurate facts.

Concluding Remarks

Besides giving valuable inputs and suggestions during the general discussion, Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menamparampil, in his concluding remarks appreciated the efforts of NECARF in keeping the Catholic discussion alive, and stressed strongly on the need to work in tandem with other like-minded people – Catholics or otherwise. He stressed on need to ensure objectivity and sincerity of purpose, while we remain mindful of increasing tendency to outsource violence by some governments and organizations. He requested NECARF to consider having dedicated team which could monitor and respond to false narratives by RSS and others so that people get correct information.

Conclusion

The meeting of NECARF provided a platform for members to assess the ongoing crisis in Manipur and devise strategies for justice and peace. Discussions focused on the need for Catholic unity, changing the narrative, engaging with government officials, conducting research, and building a collective voice. Proposed actions included the formation of Relief Coordination Committee, engagement with government and international organizations, research initiatives, and collaboration with tribe organizations. NECARF aims to emerge as a strong and influential institution to address the crisis effectively and advocate for the rights and well-being of affected communities in the Northeast. NECARF is committed to follow-up the proposed actions and to convene meetings periodically to assess progress and adopt strategies from time to time.

The meeting was sponsored **by the Archdiocese of Imphal**, and NECARF acknowledges the kind gesture with immense gratitude.
