INDIA: Thousands displaced as ethnic clashes grip north-eastern state

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Dozens of people have been killed in ethnic clashes in the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur with mobs attacking homes, vehicles and churches, officials say.

Getty Images

Manipur (India): The violence began last week after indigenous communities held a rally to protest against demands by the main ethnic group in the state for tribal status.

Members of the Meitei community, who account for 53% of the state's population, have been demanding inclusion under the Scheduled Tribe category for years which will give them access to forest lands and guarantee them a proportion of government jobs and places in educational institutions.

The communities already recognised as Scheduled Tribes, especially Kukis who live in the hill districts, worry that they may lose control over their ancestral forest land if the Meitei's demand is accepted.

On Monday, India's Home Minister Amit Shah told a news channel that the situation in Manipur was under control and appealed to the people to maintain peace. The Manipur government would consult all stakeholders before taking a decision on the matter, he said.

Thousands of troops have been deployed in the state to maintain order and a curfew is in place in several districts and internet access has been suspended. Last week, the state's governor issued "shoot-on-sight" orders in "extreme cases" to bring the situation under control.

More than 23,000 civilians have been rescued and moved to temporary shelters, the army said in a statement on Sunday.

The evacuees include a large number of women and children.

Locals say they are worried about their future. "We don't feel safe right now," L Sanglun Simte, a resident of the state capital Imphal, told AFP news agency. The 29-year-old Kuki has been camping outside Imphal airport with 11 of his family members.

The army on Sunday said that there had been a lull in the fighting after soldiers worked "tirelessly for the past 96 hours to rescue civilians across all communities, curb violence and restore normalcy".

But the situation is still tense in several parts of the state.

While local residents remain in army shelters, other states have sent rescue teams to get their people out of Manipur.

Some states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh have arranged special flights for the evacuees.

Violence began last Wednesday. Mobs vandalised vehicles and burned homes and shops in Imphal, and several other districts.

Video and photos showed buildings set on fire, with thick black smoke engulfing the streets.

The army says it is bringing the situation under control.

On Monday, people came out to buy food and medicines after curfews were relaxed for a few hours in the affected areas, news agency PTI reported.

- BBC