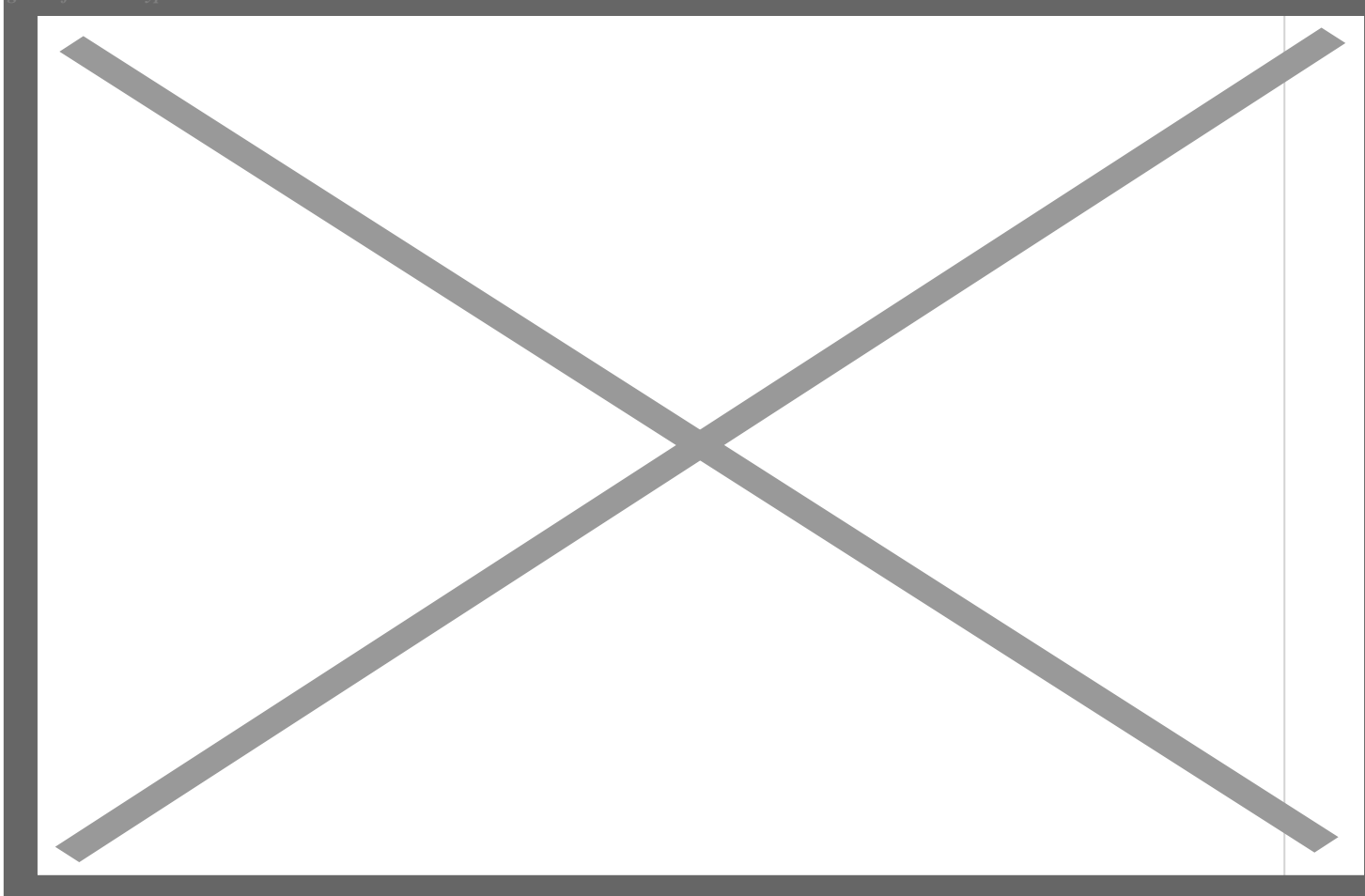


Tribal groups in India protest against Manipur mob sexual assaults

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People participate in a protest against ethnic violence and mob assaults on two women who were paraded naked in Manipur in Kolkata on Saturday. [Bikas Das/AP Photo]

New Delhi, July 24 (RHC)-- Thousands of tribals, mostly women, have staged a massive sit-in protest in India's Manipur, demanding the arrest of those involved in the harrowing mob assaults on two women, as

the opposition parties slammed the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for failing to stop violence in the northeastern state bordering Myanmar.

Saturday's protest, organised by the women's wing of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF), was believed to be attended by about 15,000 people in Churachandpur, a tribal majority city 65km (40 miles) south of the capital Imphal.

Religious and women's organization leaders leading the protest called for the sacking of Biren Singh, the top elected official in the state where more than 130 people have been killed since violence between Meiti and Kuki ethnic groups erupted in early May.

A 26-second video showing the assaults on women belonging to the ethnic Kuki-Zo tribe triggered massive outrage and was widely shared on social media late on Wednesday despite the internet being largely blocked and journalists locked out of the remote state.

The footage shows the two naked women surrounded by scores of young men who grope their genitals and drag them to a field.

The state government on Saturday announced the arrest of a fifth suspect in connection with the incident, which the police said occurred on May 4 – a day after the ethnic violence erupted. Rajiv Singh, the state's director-general of police, said police were carrying out raids to arrest other suspects.

According to a police complaint filed on May 18, the two women were part of a family attacked by a mob that killed its two male members. The complaint alleges rape and murder by "unknown miscreants".

The protesters assembled at a "Wall of Remembrance" site in an open ground in Churachandpur, a stronghold of the Kuki tribe, where they kept dummy coffins of people of their minority community killed in the violence.

Ngaineikim, the chairperson of the Kuki Women's Organization for Human Rights, accused Singh, who belongs to the majority Meiti community, of orchestrating atrocities and then expressing sympathy with the victims. Singh, who belongs to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP, did not comment immediately but on Thursday said that an investigation was under way to ensure "strict action is taken against all the perpetrators, including considering the possibility of capital punishment. Let it be known, there is absolutely no place for such heinous acts in our society".

Nearly 400 men and women also held a protest in the Indian capital New Delhi with similar demands. They carried placards reading "We demand action against the perpetrators" and "Resign, Biren Singh".

Meanwhile, the deadly ethnic clashes have rocked the country's parliament, with the opposition blocking proceedings and demanding the sacking of Singh, the chief minister of Manipur. The opposition shouted slogans demanding that all other parliamentary business be postponed and that a debate be launched on the violence, starting with a statement by Modi.

On Thursday, Modi broke more than two months of public silence over the ethnic clashes, telling reporters that mob assaults on two women as they were paraded naked were unforgivable, but he did not refer directly to the larger violence. The government refused the opposition's demand that Modi participate in a debate.

The near-civil war in Manipur was sparked when largely Christian Kukis protested a demand by the mostly Hindu Meiteis for a special status that would let them buy land in the hills populated by Kukis and other tribal groups and get a guaranteed share of government jobs.

Clashes have persisted despite the army's presence in Manipur, a state of 3.2 million people tucked in the mountains. More than 60,000 people have fled to relief camps.

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