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## **INDIA: Two synagogues torched in northeastern state of Manipur**

### **INDIA: Two synagogues torched in northeastern state of Manipur**

*Foreign Ministry says Israel watching events closely after ethnic clashes erupt in northeast state of Manipur between religious, tribal communities; MK appeals for coalition's help*

By LAZAR BERMAN and TOI STAFF

The Times of Israel (05.05.2023) – Members of a small group tracing their heritage to the ancient Israelites and seeking to move to Israel found themselves caught up in violent ethnic clashes in northeastern India this week, when at least one member of the community was killed, 10 more went missing, and over 200 homes were torched in the state of Manipur.

A father of four from the 5,000-person-strong Bnei Menashe community is known to be dead and 10 others are unaccounted for, a Jewish organization with local volunteers told The Times of Israel on Thursday. Shavei Israel, headed by Michael Freund, is an Israel-based organization that encourages people of Jewish descent to strengthen their connection with Israel and immigrate.

In addition, two synagogues were burned down, and one Torah scroll was torched.

Freund said that at least 210 Bnei Menashe homes were also burnt to the ground. His organization, which is active in northeast India as part of its mission to return “lost” Jews to the fold, is raising money to provide emergency assistance to the community.

The Bnei Menashe are believed to be descended from the biblical tribe of Menashe, one of the Ten Lost Tribes exiled from the Land of Israel more than 2,700 years ago.

In 2005, then-Sephardic chief rabbi Shlomo Amar endorsed the Bnei Menashe’s claim to Jewish ancestry but required them to convert to Judaism. Some 5,000 Bnei Menashe have immigrated to Israel in recent years, with another 5,000 or so remaining in India.

The Bnei Menashe victim this week is believed to be one of at least five other people killed in violence that erupted after protests by more than 50,000 Kukis and members of other predominantly Christian tribal communities in Churachandpur and adjoining districts in Manipur state protested against

demands by the non-tribal Meitei ethnic community to be included under the government's "Scheduled Tribe" category. Under Indian law, members of such tribes are given reserved quotas for government jobs and college admissions as a form of affirmative action to address structural inequality and discrimination.

After a march on Wednesday by tribal students, unidentified individuals began setting houses on fire leading to spiraling violence.

The Bnei Menashe are part of the Kuki tribal umbrella.

According to Freund, the bulk of the violence is between the Kuki and Meitei, with Bnei Menashe not being specifically targeted.

"It's not traditional antisemitism in the sense that they're not being targeted because they're Jews," he said. At the same time, Freund said that he has received reports from staff on the ground that some Meitei rioters have yelled at them to "go back to Israel where you belong."

Shmuel Suantek, a member of the community living in Manipur, told Ynet he was appealing to Israel for help. "We are begging and asking the Israeli government to bring us now to our country, to Israel," he said.

The Foreign Ministry told the Times of Israel that they were looking into the matter.

National Unity lawmaker Pnina Tamano-Shata, a former minister of immigration and absorption who heads a Bnei Menashe organization in the Knesset, told Ynet that the situation for the Bnei Menashe in Manipur was "very worrying," based on conversations with people on the ground.

"I am in contact with the representatives of the community in Israel and I have appealed to Immigration and Absorption

Minister Ofir Sofer [of Religious Zionism], the Prime Minister's Office, and the Jewish Agency to do everything to help and immediately rescue the sons and daughters of the community," she said.

Senior government officials said they were "closely following the events in northeastern India," and that the Foreign Ministry was in contact with the necessary people.

"It is important to emphasize that there is no antisemitic incident there. We need a lot of sensitivity in handling this matter...because it could harm them later on," the unnamed officials said, adding that they were in contact with heads of larger Bnei Menashe communities in Israel including Acre, Nof HaGalil, and Kiryat Arba.

On Thursday, Indian authorities deployed hundreds of military personnel to northeastern Manipur state, bordering Myanmar, and cut off internet services.

"Curfew has been imposed... the situation is tense but is now under control," Awangbow Newmai, a Manipur government minister, told AFP. He confirmed the death toll of six people.

Internet services were also suspended for five days to stop rumors from spreading on social media, according to N. Biren Singh, the state's top elected official.

The army has moved nearly 9,000 people from violence-hit districts to other areas after protesters vandalized shops and businesses, including hotels, and set some homes on fire, said an army officer who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to reporters

The state governor on Thursday issued "shoot at sight orders in extreme cases" to local authorities, allowing district magistrates to shoot protesters.

*Photo: Homes and businesses set on fire in the state of*

*Manipur in northeast India, after clashes erupt between ethnic, religious communities, May 3, 2023. (Twitter video screenshot: used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)*

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