

Assessing the Impact of the Myanmar Civil Conflict on India's Northeast Border Security and Mizoram and Manipur Demographics

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Abstract

The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, precipitated a civil conflict that has transformed into one of the most destabilizing crises in South and Southeast Asia. By 2026, the repercussions of this conflict have extended far beyond Myanmar's borders, profoundly affecting India's north-eastern states—particularly Mizoram and Manipur, which share a 1,643-kilometer porous border with Myanmar. This paper examines the multifaceted impact of the Myanmar civil conflict on India's Northeast border security and the demographic transformations occurring in Mizoram and Manipur. Drawing on policy documents, media reports, academic literature, and official statistics, the analysis reveals that the conflict has generated a complex humanitarian-security nexus characterized by large-scale refugee flows, ethnic tensions, cross-border criminal networks, and significant demographic shifts. The paper argues that the crisis has exposed fundamental weaknesses in India's border management framework, refugee policy, and federal coordination mechanisms. It further contends that the demographic changes unfolding in Mizoram and Manipur—driven by ethnic kinship ties and conflict-induced displacement—are reshaping the socio-political landscape of the region in ways that carry long-term implications for India's internal security, federal politics, and Act East Policy ambitions. The study concludes by recommending a differentiated, region-specific strategy that balances humanitarian obligations with security imperatives while addressing the underlying drivers of demographic anxiety and ethnic conflict.

Keywords: Myanmar Civil Conflict, Indo-Myanmar Border, Refugee Influx, Demographic Shift, Northeast India Security

1. Introduction

The outbreak of civil war in Myanmar following the February 2021 military coup has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of South and Southeast Asia. What began as a popular uprising against the military junta's seizure of power has evolved into an uneven but fierce conflict involving the military, ethnic armed groups, pro-democracy opposition forces,

Published: 13 July 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i4.301208>

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and domestic militias. Village burning, food shortages, administrative collapse, and repeated airstrikes have afflicted entire regions, including Chin State, Sagaing, and Kachin. Millions of civilians have been displaced within Myanmar, and tens of thousands have sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

For India, the crisis presents an immediate and pressing challenge. The north-eastern states of Mizoram and Manipur share a long, porous border with Myanmar's conflict-affected regions. The crisis is no longer viewed merely as a humanitarian problem but as a strategic, demographic, and security problem that impacts federal politics, border management, and regional peace. The situation has become a long-term humanitarian and security quandary with no easy resolution.

This paper addresses two interrelated questions: First, how has the Myanmar civil conflict affected border security in India's Northeast, particularly in terms of insurgent activity, cross-border crime, and the integrity of international borders? Second, what demographic changes are occurring in Mizoram and Manipur as a consequence of conflict-induced displacement, and what are the socio-political implications of these changes?

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the immediate humanitarian concerns. India's Northeast is strategically critical to the country's Act East Policy, serving as the land bridge to Southeast Asia. The stability of this region is essential for connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Moreover, the demographic and ethnic dynamics unfolding in Mizoram and Manipur have implications for India's internal security, federal structure, and social cohesion.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the Myanmar civil conflict and its cross-border dimensions. Section 3 examines the impact on border security, including refugee flows, insurgent activity, and criminal networks. Section 4 analyzes demographic changes in Mizoram and Manipur, exploring the ethnic dimensions of displacement and the political contestations surrounding migration. Section 5 discusses India's policy responses and their implications. Section 6 concludes with recommendations.

2. The Myanmar Civil Conflict: Dynamics and Cross-Border Dimensions

2.1 Origins and Escalation

The Myanmar civil conflict traces its origins to the military coup of February 1, 2021, when the Tatmadaw overthrew the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup triggered widespread protests, which were met with violent crackdowns, arbitrary arrests, and escalating clashes between the Military Council and resistance groups. The resistance movement, comprising the National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defence Forces (PDFs), and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), has since mounted a sustained challenge to junta control across large swathes of the country.

By 2026, the conflict had intensified significantly. The junta has launched massive counteroffensives involving thousands of troops, striking resistance strongholds with relentless airstrikes and seeking to recapture strategic territories. In Chin State alone, the military unleashed an estimated 6,000 troops in a state-wide reclamation effort. The Hakha-Thantlang

road—a vital trade artery linking the isolated mountainous region to the Myanmar-India border—was recaptured by regime forces in June 2026 after being held by Chin resistance since 2023. Similarly, the junta has intensified military operations to reopen the Tamu-Kale Road in Sagaing Region, a key trade route along the India-Myanmar border.

2.2 Humanitarian Consequences

The humanitarian toll of the conflict has been devastating. According to a report by the Institute of Chin Affairs (ICA), nearly half of Chin State's population—approximately 200,000 out of a pre-conflict population of 500,000—has been displaced since the military coup. Of this number, approximately 130,000 people remain internally displaced within Chin State, while some 70,000 have sought refuge in India, particularly in Mizoram, Manipur, and New Delhi.

The displacement crisis has been exacerbated by recurring cycles of violence. In July 2025, intra-Chin clashes escalated dramatically when the Chin National Defense Force (CNDP) seized Rihkhawdar from the Chin Defense Force-Hualngoram (CDF-H), displacing more than 4,000 civilians into Mizoram. In June 2026, thousands of residents fled to Kale Town and India's Manipur State as junta troops advanced along the Tamu-Kale road. The fighting has forced residents of around 50 villages along the Kale-Tamu Road to temporarily evacuate.

2.3 The India-Myanmar Borderland as a Contested Space

The India-Myanmar border, stretching 1,643 kilometers and bordering four north-eastern states, has become a critical space where humanitarian, security, and geopolitical interests converge. The borderlands reveal ground realities that often diverge from official policy, driven by borderland communities and deeply inter-linked local economies.

For decades, the border has been characterized by the Free Movement Regime (FMR), established in 1950, which allowed visa-free movement up to 40 kilometers (later reduced to 16 kilometers in 2004). This regime enabled tribes with shared heritage to maintain familial, cultural, and religious ties across the border. The FMR was not merely an administrative convenience but a recognition of the lived reality of communities whose identities transcend modern political boundaries.

However, the Myanmar conflict has transformed these borderlands into sites of intense securitization. In February 2024, Home Minister Amit Shah announced that India would scrap the FMR on grounds of internal security, a move that came amid intense ethnic conflict in Manipur and a surge of refugees after Myanmar's 2021 coup. The government also decided to fence the entire 1,643-kilometer Indo-Myanmar border. These policy shifts represent a fundamental reimagining of the border—from a space of kinship and mobility to a line of territorial control and security.

3. Impact on Border Security

3.1 Refugee Flows and Humanitarian Pressure

The most immediate security implication of the Myanmar conflict has been the large-scale influx of refugees into India's northeastern states. Official estimates suggest that over 32,000 refugees are currently in Mizoram, though the actual number may be higher. According to

Mizoram state government figures, at least 33,036 Myanmar nationals are sheltering in the state. The overall number of displaced persons is even higher when refugees from Bangladesh and internally displaced persons from neighbouring Manipur are included, totaling more than 38,000 displaced people in Mizoram alone.

The distribution of refugees across Mizoram is significant. They are sheltering across all 11 districts, with Champhai district hosting the highest number at more than 13,500. Many displaced families fleeing junta atrocities have settled in border districts such as Lawngtlai and Zokhawthar. Refugees are not only staying in temporary camps but are also being hosted in schools, churches, rented houses, and informal settlements. The ICA has documented 127 refugee camps across seven districts in India.

The scale of the refugee influx has placed enormous pressure on local resources and administrative systems in border areas. As Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh observed, the ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar has "caused a large influx of persons into our border districts, placing enormous pressure on local resources, altering the demographic balance, and creating serious administrative and law enforcement challenges". Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma echoed these concerns, noting that the continuous influx has become "a burden for us".

3.2 Insurgent Activity and Safe Havens

The Myanmar conflict has created new security challenges by providing safe havens for insurgent groups. The India-Myanmar border is a critical space as it offers sanctuary for armed groups following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Northeast Indian insurgent outfits are known to have training camps, especially in the Sagaing region. The collapse of effective state control in large parts of Myanmar's border regions has allowed these groups to operate with relative impunity.

The border's porosity has been exploited not only by insurgents but also by transnational criminal networks. According to Manipur Chief Minister Singh, the border has been exploited by drug traffickers, arms smugglers supplying weapons to non-state actors, and groups involved in human trafficking and other illegal activities. The intensification of drug trafficking across the Indo-Myanmar border presents a significant challenge to both political and socio-economic stability in the region. Ethnic armed organizations of Myanmar operating along the border have increasingly engaged in drug trafficking as a means of financing their campaigns against the junta regime.

3.3 Cross-Border Criminal Networks

The security implications extend beyond insurgency to encompass a range of criminal activities. Law-enforcement agencies have repeatedly intercepted drugs, contraband, and trafficking networks operating across the Indo-Myanmar border. While the overwhelming majority of refugees are genuine victims of conflict, governments cannot ignore the possibility that criminal elements may exploit large-scale population movements and porous borders.

The border is also vulnerable to the activities of arms traffickers and criminals. The widespread use of fraudulent documents by undocumented individuals—including fake Aadhaar cards,

voter IDs, and other official identification—has exacerbated the crisis, allowing illegal immigrants to access government services and establish residency. Activist V.L. Thlamuanpuia, in a letter to Home Minister Amit Shah, drew attention to these challenges, emphasizing the need for strict verification mechanisms to detect and prevent the issuance of fake Indian identification documents.

3.4 The Fencing Controversy

India's response to the border security challenges has centered on the decision to fence the entire Indo-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime. The policy shift has drawn fierce opposition from tribal communities, including the Tangkhul Naga people, who make up about 87% of Ukhrul's population in Manipur. Thousands of demonstrators marched through Ukhrul town in June 2026 to protest the decision, carrying placards reading "No fence between families".

The governments of Nagaland and Mizoram, along with Naga groups in Manipur and the Kuki-Zo community, have condemned the decision, arguing that it will fracture communities and escalate tensions. Mizoram's civil society organizations and student bodies, including the Young Mizo Association (YMA), have strongly opposed the Centre's plan to fence the 510-kilometer border. The opposition reflects a fundamental tension between the state's security logic and the lived realities of borderland communities whose familial, cultural, and religious ties span both sides.

4. Demographic Changes in Mizoram and Manipur

4.1 Mizoram: Ethnic Kinship and Humanitarian Response

Mizoram's response to the refugee crisis has been shaped by deep ethnic and cultural affinities between the Mizo people and the Chin communities of Myanmar, both of whom belong to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo ethnolinguistic family. The dominant Mizo community shares ethnic and familial ties with the Chins of Myanmar, the Bawms of Bangladesh, and the Kuki-Zos of Manipur. For Mizoram, extending asylum and aid is not seen merely as humanitarian assistance but as a responsibility toward an extended community bound by history and identity.

Local communities, churches, and civil society groups in Mizoram have continued to shelter, feed, and offer healthcare to their community since 2021, without adequate resources. In towns like Zokhawthar in Mizoram, just across from Myanmar's Rikhawdar, the movement of people has remained steady since violence intensified in Chin State. Unlike adjoining Manipur, Mizoram has welcomed waves of refugees from Myanmar after the military coup.

However, the humanitarian sentiment is increasingly colliding with administrative reality. No government, however sympathetic, can absorb large numbers of displaced people indefinitely without facing practical consequences. Schools, hospitals, housing, food supplies, and welfare systems come under pressure. What begins as a humanitarian response gradually evolves into a long-term governance challenge.

The biometric enrollment of refugees reflects this tension. The Mizoram government has completed the biometric enrollment of 58.15% of the 31,214 asylum seekers from Myanmar

sheltered across the state's 11 districts. The exercise is not merely humanitarian but administrative, reflecting a recognition that compassion must be accompanied by documentation, monitoring, and accountability. The biometric exercise may have revealed a reality that political rhetoric often obscures: numbers matter.

4.2 Manipur: Demographic Anxiety and Ethnic Conflict

Manipur presents a starkly different picture. The state has witnessed significant demographic changes in recent years, primarily due to the influx of immigrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh. The ongoing influx has raised serious concerns regarding Manipur's cultural identity, resource distribution, and security.

At the heart of Manipur's ethnic conflict is the Meitei community's fear of demographic shifts due to alleged illegal immigration of Kuki-Zo-Hmar people from Myanmar—a claim whose scale remains contested but was amplified into a rallying call by the Biren Singh government. Meitei groups have long maintained that Chin refugees from Myanmar—ethnically linked to the Kuki-Zo communities—have altered the state's demographic equilibrium. The Kuki-Zos counter that they are indigenous to the land and that the anti-immigration drive masks an attempt to seize their ancestral territories.

The ethnic clashes between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo tribes began over cataclysmic disagreements on sharing land, resources, affirmative action policies, and political representation. The violence has claimed over 200 lives and displaced 60,000 people. One of the triggers behind the violence was former Chief Minister Biren Singh's aggressive campaign against "illegal immigrants from Myanmar".

The demographic changes have been described as systematic and long-standing. Former Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh has asserted that Manipur's demographic transformation was shaped systematically in the 1960s and 1970s through the settlement of refugees from Burma, now Myanmar. In Kamjong district alone, the state government has identified at least 5,800 "illegal migrants" from Myanmar, with biometric data of over 5,100 already collected for possible deportation.

4.3 Comparative Analysis: Mizoram and Manipur

The contrasting responses of Mizoram and Manipur to the refugee crisis reflect different ethnic configurations, historical experiences, and political dynamics. Mizoram's humanitarian response is rooted in ethnic kinship and a shared identity with the Chin people, while Manipur's securitized response is shaped by its own ethnic tensions and insurgency issues.

Dr. Srini Sitaraman of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies argues that New Delhi must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and adopt a region-specific strategy: a security-focused response in Manipur, diplomatic engagement in Nagaland, and humanitarian support in Mizoram. This differentiated approach recognizes that the impact of the Myanmar conflict varies significantly across India's northeastern states.

The demographic implications also differ. In Mizoram, the refugee influx has strained resources and raised governance challenges but has not fundamentally challenged the state's

ethnic equilibrium, given the kinship ties between Mizos and Chins. In Manipur, however, the influx has exacerbated existing ethnic tensions and contributed to a violent conflict with profound demographic and political implications.

5. Policy Responses and Implications

5.1 India's Legal and Policy Framework

India's response to the refugee crisis has been constrained by the absence of a comprehensive refugee law. India is not a party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, meaning that Myanmar refugees face legal limbo. Some are tolerated by state officials on humanitarian grounds; others are at risk of detention or deportation under immigration laws. This ambiguity has led to varying reactions across the Northeast.

The lack of a uniform refugee regime has made the crisis a challenge to the federal structure and administrative coordination of India. While Mizoram has opposed instructions from New Delhi calling for tougher border enforcement, citing kin ties and humanitarian concerns, Manipur has adopted a more securitized response. Refugees often find themselves caught between local sympathy and national security concerns, facing confusion regarding documentation, access to education, eligibility for health care, and the right to work.

5.2 The Fencing Decision and Its Consequences

The decision to fence the Indo-Myanmar border and scrap the FMR represents a major shift in India's border policy. The move has been framed as a necessary security measure, but it has significant humanitarian and social consequences. By ending the Free Movement Regime and closing off the frontier, India is not only shutting the door on refugees fleeing violence but also tearing through the fabric of indigenous life that has always crossed this border.

The policy shift has also created tensions between the central government and state governments. While the Centre has directed states to restrict cross-border influx, the Mizoram state government has instead sheltered thousands fleeing from Myanmar's Chin State. This divergence reflects the tension between New Delhi's security logic and the ground realities of borderland communities.

5.3 Geopolitical and Strategic Implications

The Myanmar conflict poses a direct threat to India's strategic interests in the region. Myanmar is India's gateway to Southeast Asia and a cornerstone of its Act East and Neighbourhood First policies. The instability in Myanmar has delayed major connectivity projects, including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Armed groups control large stretches of territory along the two corridors, making construction difficult and unpredictable.

There is also the China factor. Beijing has aggressively cultivated Naypyidaw since the coup, filling the vacuum left by western withdrawal with infrastructure financing, arms supplies, and diplomatic cover. For India to cede Myanmar's strategic space entirely to China would be a self-inflicted wound in its own backyard. India's engagement with the Myanmar junta—

including President Min Aung Hlaing's visit to India in May-June 2026—reflects a pragmatic calculation that engagement, not isolation, best serves India's interests.

5.4 Federal Tensions and Governance Challenges

The refugee crisis has exposed significant tensions in India's federal structure. The lack of a uniform refugee regime has created coordination challenges between the central and state governments. Mizoram's humanitarian stance has at times placed it at odds with New Delhi's securitization agenda. Meanwhile, Manipur's ethnic conflict has been exacerbated by allegations of illegal immigration, with the state government calling for deportation while the central government pursues a more cautious approach.

The crisis has also become entangled with electoral politics. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tour of eastern states in September 2025 emphasized the theme of illegal immigration, crystallizing it as the BJP's defining electoral narrative for impending assembly elections. In Manipur, Modi's remarks on cross-border infiltration validated Meitei grievances while alienating Kuki-Zo communities. The politicization of the refugee issue risks further entrenching ethnic divisions and complicating efforts at reconciliation.

6. Conclusion

The Myanmar civil conflict represents one of the most significant challenges to India's Northeast security and stability in recent decades. The crisis is not merely a humanitarian problem but a strategic, demographic, and security problem that impacts federal politics, border management, and regional peace. As the conflict enters its sixth year with no end in sight, India must develop sustainable, long-term strategies that balance humanitarian obligations with security imperatives while addressing the underlying drivers of ethnic conflict and demographic anxiety.

The borderlands between India and Myanmar provide key insights into how regional ties endure through periods of uncertainty. For India, this underscores the need to complement its broader strategic approach with sustained sensitivity to local realities. Recognizing the role of border communities and the changing dynamics on the ground can help ensure that its engagement remains responsive and forward-looking. The extent to which these connections are recognized and integrated into future policy frameworks will be critical in shaping bilateral relations and regional stability.

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