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History of UNLF, Meitei insurgent group that signed peace deal with Centre

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The UNLF is the oldest valley-based insurgent group in Manipur. (Image source: X/@AmitShah)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah Wednesday announced the **signing of a peace agreement with the Meitei separatist group** United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in Manipur, terming it a “**historic milestone.**”

The Home Minister also expressed the hope that this would encourage other valley-based insurgent groups (VBIGs) to participate in a peace process.

What is the UNLF?

The UNLF was formed on November 24, 1964, and is the oldest valley-based insurgent group — distinct from the insurgent groups active in the state’s Naga-dominated and Kuki-Zomi dominated hills. It was formed with the demand of secession from India under the leadership of Arembam Samarendra Singh, who was the general secretary of the group. Two of the top central committee leaders — Khalalung Kamei and Thangkhopao Singait — were a Naga and a Kuki.

The UNLF is believed to have received its initial training from the NSCN (IM), the largest Naga insurgent group. Its armed wing, the Manipur People’s Army, was formed in 1990 and over the years, it has carried out multiple attacks targeting Indian security personnel.

There are now two factions of the UNLF and jointly, government estimates place the number of cadres at 400-500. Its area of operation includes all the valley areas of Manipur, as well as some villages in the Kuki-Zomi hill districts.

A proscribed group, banned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, it largely been functioning from camps and training bases in Myanmar's Sagaing Region, Chin state, and Rakhine state with the patronage of the Myanmar military. However, it is now on the backfoot there, with mounting attacks against the military junta by various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs).

While the UNLF has weakened over the years, pushed across the border to Myanmar, there have been concerns about its increased activity, along with other VBIGs, during the course of the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur. The two UNLF factions are believed to have trained around 500 new recruits in the past months.

What is the precedent for the peace agreement?

The VBIGs have never entered into an agreement with the Centre or participated in any peace talks. Author and former fellow at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Malem Ningthouja, however, said it was not possible to definitively state that this was the first group to come to an understanding.

“In the past, there have been some groups like the UPPK, KCP and Maoist Communist Group — though their strength may have been insignificant — which have been either disbanded or rendered into insignificance. And we don't know under what terms they did so. Even in this case, we don't know the terms of the agreement but this has a spectacular impact since it's considered to be a major group. At a recent flag raising event in Manipur, more than 1000 people attended, and it has its mass organisations,” he said.

The UNLF underwent a formal split in the mid-1990s, when N Oken broke away, and his faction became the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL, another proscribed group).

After Samarendra was assassinated in 2000, the UNLF leadership was taken up by R K Meghen, who was arrested in 2010. While Meghen was imprisoned,

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Khundongbam Pambei became chairman.

There was another split in 2021, when Pambei broke away from the rest of the central committee. So now, there are two factions, one under the chairmanship of Pambei and the other under the chairmanship of NC Koireng. Pambei has been open to talks, and the process to begin ceasefire negotiations goes back to 20...

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What about the other groups?

While the UNLF is the oldest of such groups, several other Meitei insurgent groups have come into being in subsequent years. The UNLF is one of the seven “Meitei Extremist Organisations” banned by the Union government.

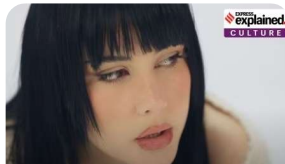
The UNLF faction under Koireng continues to be opposed to talks.

On the other hand, a tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement between the Centre, Manipur state and the Kuki-Zomi insurgent groups had been reached in 2008.

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