

## Rape Victims Speaks Out (Thailand)

**To thwart any attack from rival organizations and the advancing Indian army, valley-based militants started fortifying themselves by planting landmines in the villages and at all key entry and exit points. However, contrary to their design, it was the innocent villagers who have been stepping on the landmines to get maimed and killed.**

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Incidents of rape have risen sharply in Hmarbiel, Tipaimukh sub-division of Churachandpur district, Manipur, where the valley-based militants are reigning the place in terror in the face of ongoing counter-insurgency military operations conducted by the Indian Army.

"We are witnessing a quadruple increase in rape cases in the villages of Tipaimukh areas, where victims still have no medical facilities, though urgent," Lalhansang Pulamte, Asst Secretary of the Sinlung Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Organisation (SIPHRO) told the visiting North East Sun team. According to the Village Authorities (VA) and the victims, those blamed for the rapes are members of the valley-based militants, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), who have been occupying and unleashing terror in the areas since November 2005. Confirming the increase in the number of rape cases reported to the VA and SIPHRO, Lalhansang Pulamte said, "The number of rape victims has reached 25. The number is still expected to increase. However, the sense of fear, insecurity and shame has been prohibiting them to speak out."

To understand the problem there is a need to know about the ongoing counter-insurgency military operation in Manipur that has resulted in the spill over of unwanted sufferings and miseries for the innocent Hmar villagers of Tipaimukh. This can be traced back to have started at Sajik Tampak in the neighbouring Chandel district during March-April 2004 under "Operation All Clear", conducted by the Indian army. However, the operation failed to nip the bud of its target that was home to major valley based militant groups like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Liberation Army (PLA) or People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK). Instead, the operation has driven the valley-based militants to the hills of Tipaimukh areas where the militants took the advantage of the area that has been neglected and cut off by the Government of Manipur.

There is no proper road, no public distribution system, no medical facilities, and worst no law and order. These areas have been the ancestral home of the Sinlung originated Hmar tribe. In their flight and quest for shelter, the militants started occupying and annexing the villages in the areas. They started imposing and collecting tax from the poor villagers. Meanwhile, to thwart any attack from rival organizations and the advancing Indian army, the valley-based militants started fortifying themselves by planting landmines in the villages and at all key entry and exit points. However, contrary to their design, it was the innocent villagers who have been stepping on the landmines to get maimed and killed. The militants took the law into their hands and started exercising their brutal brand of justice. Different rules apply to their own. Vala Hmar said that, "The militants belong to UNLF and KCP. They demanded everything which we must deliver in five minutes time. If we failed, we faced the brunt consequences. They used to herd all the villagers together at any time of their choice. We used to be severely beaten and tortured. While doing so, they pick and choose our little teenage sisters and even young married women whom they rape forcefully."

Despite the operation, the Indian army were far from advancing any faster and farther. The militants took the liberty of lording over the poor villagers unleashing new chapters of terror everyday. Meanwhile, the villagers could find no time to grieve or mourn the loss of lives, property, dignity and values in the midst of the reign of terror. Unfortunately, in the absence of coherent and weak approach, the civil society has been bearing the brunt of terror unleashed by the militants. The Government has also to be blamed, as it is not adopting any farsighted approach on how the civil society could be affected in the process of the expensive military operations.

In the face of total breakdown of law and order and reign of terror, thousands of Hmar villagers have crossed over to the refugee camps in Mizoram as well as to different parts of Manipur and Assam. The fear ridden Hmar villagers from Tipaimukh sub-division have more stories that have been hidden out of fear and shame. The Village Authorities have unearthed the raping of more than twenty-five innocent women, most of whom were teenage girls. 17 years old Rachael told the visiting team of the North East Sun, "I was raped continuously by three militants. I bled for two days. I am afraid I may get pregnant. Three militants also raped my younger sister who is just fifteen years old too. She is not in her normal sense today. She has not been eating and sleeping since then. . ." Rachael suffers from incontinence and cannot sit down because of the pain, the result of a horrific rape incident on the night of 16th January.

When the North East Sun team visits Parbung, Hmarkhawpui and Sipuikawn, the poor villagers were all busy looking out for birth control pills for the rape victims. It was an appalling scene in the absence of any medical facilities. SIPHRO took seven of the rape victims to Aizawl for medical check up, as they were afraid of pregnancy. They were tested and one turns out to be positive. Parmawi, who was tested positive told the North East Sun, "How can I carry the baby of those rapist? She broke down and said, " I must abort. I cannot carry layers of scars. I am not strong. I am a human being." Thirteen years old, Hrietei d/o Zieka who was mercilessly raped by two militants is already on the verge losing her sense. Her parents wanted to migrate to far off place. Zieka told SIPHRO, "We are poor jhum farmers. And how can we just migrate without any money in our hands. Where is the government?"

In this remote areas where the armed militants are reigning strong, rape is the new weapon. The total absence of law and order has given the militants the unwanted liberty to act with impunity. The VA told the North East Sun that they have recorded more than 25 rape cases by the valley based militants. There are lots of married women too who were also raped. The number is expected to increase if the victims have the courage to speak out. Lalthruoikim, another rape victim said that, "We have many stories like this that actually ripped us. This happens all over this area, sometimes to our children. But what can be done in the absence of any security, law and order." Kimpui, one of the women village elder said, "In small villages we are very much concerned about our virtues and dignity. So all the rape victims have been silent. There is fear of rejection and shame too. To protect all those consequences, we tried to be silent about it. But as there is fear of pregnancy and threats of sexually transmitted diseases the attempt to be silent has no meaning. Besides, we cannot be silent about this inhumane act. This is too much to bear in silence."

Spending few days in conflict torn villages of Tipaimukh (Ruonglevaisuo), the North East Sun team found that many of the sleepy villages have been deserted. North East Sun met many other women with equally horrific stories to tell. These young girls have no desire to live in their villages. There was fear. There was shame. There was anger. And fear of rejection too. Dimnu, a forty-year-old woman, dressed in little more than rags with two of her kids, has already gone mad due to fear psychosis. The day and night dwell in the reign of terror left no one with the space for any hope. 16 years old Vuli told the North East Sun with overflowing tears and a whimper that she was raped by too many men to count. She was compelled to submit out of fear.

The Village Authorities (VA) told North East Sun that when the militants were reigning the place they were too busy pleasing them. "After they left, we are today busy looking for birth control pills for the rape victims." Bula, one of the VA said that, " There is no doctor here. But as the situation compels us, we have been looking for any medicines that can prevent their pregnancy." In a village that houses 400 to 500 families, the rape victims are more vulnerable than anyone. The families and the VA have been doing their best to wrap up the incident, but it has already become the talk of the small villages. It was indeed a futile attempt to silence the spreading of wildfire like gossips as the victims were deliberately pick and choose by the militants when the entire villagers were herded together. Thruompui told North East Sun, " I was pick out of the crowd on the night of 16th January when the militants gathered the villagers. I was taken a house where three militants took turn to rape me. They put a cloth in my mouth. There was no way I could retaliate as they threatened me to kill."

Zampui, m/o Thrakim told the North East Sun, "The militants came to our house to take our daughter away. We know what's going to happen. So I resisted. I was threatened. But I know my daughter will be spoilt and shattered. So the militants and I dragged and struggle for the hands of my daughter. It was like tug of war. Finally, they pointed their guns on my head. But still I would not let my daughter go. With no other option, I saluted them five times to please them. And they let go my daughter. It was too close, though."

Fifteen year old Grace, another rape victim, told the North East Sun, " I was drag out of our house. They were three of them. They all carry AK 47 with them. They took me to the school building where they all raped me continuously. I want to die." Zawma, one of the village elder said, " Our sufferings and miseries cannot be compared to anything. We don't have the courage to wake up and realised that our innocent daughters were raped. They are mourning and grieving every time. What can we do?" Meanwhile, SIPHRO Secretary, Lalremlen Neitham said, "Things have gone beyond the limit. We are moving the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Women. We plan to approach International human rights bodies. But the people in distress need immediate and urgent help."

Meanwhile the flight for refuge still continues. The fear-ridden villages are still far from the seeing the hands of law and order. North East Sun have discovers that systematic rape was used to destabilise the populations and destroy community and family bonds. Rape was also used to humiliate and demoralise families and communities. In the face of all these atrocities, the Government of Manipur continues to be silent.

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[<<< zurück zu: News](#)

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