# **Chandel Mission 2015 Report**

Report of the Preliminary Fact Finding and Needs Assessment, 13 June 2015



June 15, 2015 Disaster Relief Committee Manipur and Indian Red Cross Society, Manipur State Branch





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# Prelude

At around 8:30 AM on 4th June 2015, a convoy of troops belonging to the 6th Dogra Regiment of the Indian Army under the 26 Sector IGAR (South), returning to Imphal, was ambushed in a well planned attack by cadres reportedly belonging to the NSCN/GPRN, KCP, KYKL, and ULFA (non-state armed opposition groups or organisations). The ambush took place about half a kilometre away from Paraolon Village on the Tengnoupal to New Somtal Road in Chandel Sub-Division under Tengnoupal Police station of Chandel District, Manipur very close to the Indo-Myanmar border. In the ambush, the attackers used sophisticated weapons including grenade launchers and IEDs. At least 18 army personnel were killed and 12 were seriously injured. The attackers managed to slip away under the cover of the thick forest when reinforcements arrived. It was reported that two dead bodies of attackers found post ambush.

Immediately after the ambush, the Indian Army launched a search operation in the area known as 'Sulam' to truce the fleeing attackers. Fearing retaliatory action by the army, many villagers in the area fled their homes in panic. Paraolon Village was completely abandoned; not a soul remained. In other villages, male members fled leaving behind women, the elderly and children and domestic animals to fend for themselves.

The Indian Army held a press briefing in New Delhi a few days later, and claimed that personnel belonging to "Special Forces" undertook a "surgical strike" operation at rebel camps along the Indo-Myanmar border using sophisticated weaponry and helicopter gunships, and succeeded in eliminating dozens of armed non-state organisations' cadres. It was also widely reported in the national media that the operation also extended to neighbouring areas of Myanmar, in the Sagaing Division, across the international border with Manipur and Nagaland.

During the operation, the Manipur district administration of Chandel and the State government, as well as the local news media, were excluded from any level of participation or briefing. More dead bodies were also discovered in the thick forest, which were identified as belonging to the attackers. Some villagers were also reported as missing. Villagers wishing to identify the bodies found were prevented from doing so.

Till a week after the incident, no information on the situation prevailing in the area had reached the district authorities including the police. As the local news media was prevented from entering the area, local media had no reports about the villages or their inhabitants. Local sources informed the Disaster Relief Committee Manipur (DRCM) that the villagers who had fled their homes were living in terror without any food or shelter in the locality. Many had also fled to nearby villages to shelter.

A small group of village and youth leaders from the ambush area in Chandel met with the Disaster Relief Committee on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2015. After taking extensive statements, it was proposed that a preliminary situation fact finding and needs assessment team, based on the principles of humanitarian response, should make an attempt to visit the area soonest. We are grateful to Ms K. Shangnaidar Tontang, Secretary, Weaker Section Development Council (WSDC), Khangshim Village,

Chandel and Ms Nonibala Narengbam of Women in Governance (WinG), Manipur for their efforts and cooperation in sharing information and arranging meetings with affected community members.

The <u>Indian Red Cross Society (Manipur State Branch)</u> readily agreed to join the mission and coordinate the permissions required. We are deeply indebted to Prof. Dr. Y. Mohen, General Secretary of IRCS (Manipur) for his active support and for joining the team. The IRCS (Manipur) then contacted the MHA representative in Manipur and IGAR (South) to get the necessary clearances. It was made very clear to us by the authorities that no local media was to accompany the team. Finally a five member team (3 from IRCS and 2 from DRCM) was constituted and the team left at 7:25 AM on Saturday, 13th June 2015.

# Methodology adopted

Fact Finding and Needs Assessment are an integral and critical part of humanitarian response; it is the starting point for any successful programme implementation to bring humanitarian assistance to population in dire and urgent need brought about by a disaster, natural and human-induced such as armed conflict. There is global agreement on the Minimum Standards across the humanitarian sector. The existing practice is to add value to these standards through the conscious and diligent application of a rights-based and participatory approach underlying the standards.

Usually, and ideally, such assessments are not only time consuming but also require a participatory approach of both the beneficiaries (and target population) and the programme provider. This is to ensure that quality and accountability are maintained throughout the assistance programme.

A few hours visit to a remote and acutely inaccessible area could not fulfil such an ideal performance as mentioned. However, the mission undertook the exercise as primarily a short probe to understand:

- The present situation of the area in terms of access and freedom of movement, human population security, health and safety requirements, mental health, education, agriculture and livestock status, etc.
- Counter-Insurgency or special operations related effects on the civilian population and nonstate opposition groups, such as, restrictions to fundamental freedoms of movement, association and speech; human rights abuses, sexual abuse, torture, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, enforced disappearances, illegal or arbitrary detention, mortality and casualties, etc.

The mission would attempt to make some preliminary observations and recommendations.

# **Team Members**

#### DRCM

- 1. Dr. Laifungbam Debabrata Roy, Public Health Physician/Senior Director, *Human to Humane* Transcultural Centre for Trauma and Torture Victims (H2H)
- 2. Ms. Sunitibala Takhelmayum, Senior Psychological Counsellor, H2H

#### IRCS Manipur

1. Dr. Y. Mohen, General Secretary IRCS (Manipur State Branch)

- 2. Dr. Bamkim Chandra Thokchom, Programme Officer IRCS (Manipur State Branch)
- 3. Sanjit, Driver IRCS (Manipur State Branch)

# Schedule of Journey

Time	Details	Remarks			
07:25 AM	Departure from Imphal				
08:30 AM	Halt in Pallel	Meal break			
10:00 AM	Tengnoupal	24 Assam Rifles check post			
11:00 AM	Larong Khunou	20 Assam Rifles check post on the New Somtal road			
11:30 AM	Duthang	Another check by Assam Rifles on the New Somtal road			
11:45 AM	Larong Khullen	Few inhabitants sighted			
12:10 PM	Darchol	No one sighted			
12:50 PM	Challong	No one sighted			
01:15 PM	Paraolon	Met with the Major Ravi of 6th Dogra Regiment; village			
		completely abandoned except for some livestock left			
		behind			
02:45 PM	Tamu (Myanmar)	Met with local people and sources			
03:15 PM	Namphalong (Myanmar)	Lunch			
07:00 PM	Reached Imphal				

# **Background of Chandel District**

Chandel district with a total geographical area of 3,313 square km lies in between 23.49 degree and 24.28 degree north latitude and 94.09 degree to 94.31 degree east longitude in the south- eastern part of the state of Manipur. This border district of the state neighbours Myanmar on the south, Ukhrul district on the east, Churachandpur district on the south and west, and Thoubal on the north. It is about 64 km from Imphal, the state capital.

As per the Census 2011, the population of the district counts to 144,028 and its density of population is 43 per square kilometre. The Census 2011 reveals that the sex ratio in the district stands at 932 per 1000 males, which is much lower than 981 in 2001. To a surprise, the Child Sex Ratio (0-6 age group) is much lower and is 919 (962 in 2001), which is a matter of concern. Chandel District has a literacy rate of 70.85 percent, which is lower than the state rate (79.8%). The male literacy and female literacy were 77.93 and 63.26 percent respectively.

From 1901 onwards there had been no change in the area of the State prior to November, 1969 Manipur was a single district territory having 10 (ten) subdivisions and Chandel was one of them. According to the district reorganisation of the State in 1969 the former sub-divisions had been further subdivided into 25 (twenty five) sub-divisions and the entire territory had been divided into 5(five) Districts and the present Chandel district was a sub-division under the name of Tengnoupal sub-division. Tengnoupal district had been carved out of Manipur Central district in 1974 under Manipur Gazette Extra Ordinary No.30 dated 11-05-74. The district contained 3 (three) subdivisions viz., Chandel, Chakpikarong, and Tengnoupal till 3.1.1994. On 4.1.1994 another sub-division called Machi sub-division came into existence. Another sub-division, Khenjoy, has also been recently formed.

Under the Extra Ordinary Manipur Gazette Notification No.174 August, 1983 the name of all the districts of Manipur had been changed and the nomenclatures took the name of all district

headquarters of each district while naming the respective district and thereby the Tengnoupal district became Chandel district by virtue of Chandel being the district Head-quarters. In each subdivision of the district there is one Tribal Development Block in short T. D. Block, and each subdivision is co-terminus with the respective T.D. Block; and the nomenclature of each sub-division is also the same with the respective T.D. Block.

The district is inhabited by several communities with about 20 tribes, and is sparsely populated. The district is pre-dominantly inhabited by different scheduled tribes of ethnic communities. Prominent among them are Maring, Monsang, Moyon, Thadou and Zou. A sizeable number of Tarao, Aimol, Chothe, Kom, Lamkang, Any Mizo, and Tangkhul are also residing in the district. This district felt the impacts of the last two World Wars. During 1917 to 1919 the tribes belonging to Kuki group revolted against the British objecting recruitment for British labour corps, and in 2<sup>nd</sup> World War many fierce battles were fought in the district for checking the advance of the Japanese Imperial Army.

During the early part of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early part of this century, an ethnic conflict broke out between two tribal communities resulting in loss of human lives and property, and desertion of villages. Many native villages were uprooted from their ancestral homes and villagers are migrated to safer places within and outside the District. The feud began in 1992 but subsided in the second half of the first decade. Paraolon Village, near the ambush site was burnt and the entire village deserted during the conflict. The village had been newly rebuilt and re-settled.

Chandel district (formerly known as Tengnoupal district) came into existence on 13 May 1974. Chandel an administrative district of the state with its headquarters located at Chandel town is under the charge of Deputy Commissioner, supported by Sub-Divisional Officers. Deputy Commissioner also acts as the District Magistrate. Chandel district has presently five (5) sub-divisions namely, (a) Machi, (b) Tengnoupal, (c) Chandel, (d) Chakpikarong and e) Khenjoy.



# Report

The team left Imphal at exactly 07:25 AM on a 4WD Mahindra Scorpio of IRCS Manipur on the Asian Highway No.1 (National Highway 39). It had rained the previous night, the sky was overcast and the air was cool – the temperature hovering around the mid-20s degrees Celsius. At Pallel, we halted briefly for a rice and oily chicken curry meal at Emoinu Hotel, as we would encounter no more hotels on the road beyond. Until we reached Tengnoupal it was a rapid journey, and we were halted and checked thoroughly by personnel of the 24th Battalion Assam Rifles at Sita Lamkhai just a kilometre before Tengnoupal. New barricades and checking counters had been put up on both sides of the highway. We were all made to get down from the jeep and requested to produce our identity cards. We are asked several times where we were going and for what purpose. The road to the Indo-Myanmar border at Moreh Town, thus far, had very light traffic far below the normal volume of share taxis and small pick-up trucks. We did not encounter any heavy trucks. After a thorough check of the vehicle and our belongings, we were issued a pass and told to proceed.

As soon as we hit the New Somtal road, a single-lane recently metalled road that bifurcated from the Asian Highway a couple of kilometres from Tengnoupal, towards the interior villages it was a different sight. For more than 23 odd kilometres we could not see a single person or animal on the road; it was just the hills, the trees above and the dense forest beneath the road which were seen. The isolation of this road is remarkable. We passed through sections of heavy mist on the way to Tengnoupal and beyond, which slowed us down considerably. Only when we reached Larong Khunou,

the team met with Assam Rifles personnel of its 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion based there. We were halted at the closed gate. After providing them with the necessary information, which was cross-checked over the radio, we were allowed to go further. We did not see or meet any villagers at Larong Khunou; all along the long snaking metalled road in relatively good condition, we were met with silence and abandoned locked down houses.



THE 20 ASSAM RIFLES GATE AT LARONG KHUNOU

We moved ahead and crossed a small village, Duthang, which is just 1-2 KM away from Larong Khunou. We did not see anyone in the village. After Duthang, we were halted again by another Assam Rifles check group on the road, where two trucks loaded with a bull dozer and a road roller were also waiting to pass. We were only allowed to pass after careful communications were made over the radio. The Assam Rifles personnel checking us informed that no one was at Paraolon. We reached Larong Khullen, about 5 KM from Duthang. For the first time, we came across a few villagers.

While we were crossing Darchol Village, we met three persons - an elderly man in his late 50s along



with two elderly women and a dog - they were from Challong Village. When we asked them if they have any information about the villagers of Paraolon Village we were informed that the village is totally deserted and only three remained at the village as of now. When we probed further, he clarified that he meant three dogs! We thanked them for the information and started again. After we crossed Challong Village, we encountered with personnel of the Indian Army based there after the ambush on 4th of June 2015. The army personnel inquired about our visit and after

providing them with the necessary information we were allowed to move ahead.

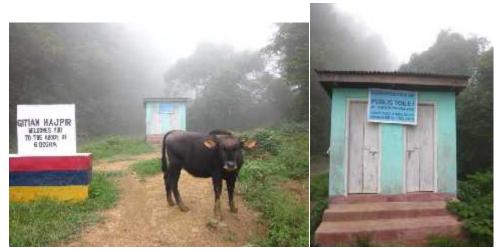
The road in this section was very rough, with large water-filled potholes and rocky, landslide debris. Huge stones had to be removed physically before we passed.



THE ROAD HAD BE CLEARED BY HAND; THICK MIST REDUCED VISIBILITY

After a few minutes' drive we found the road was casually blocked by placing branches of a tree across it. There was no one to be seen. The team cleared the block, and moving ahead we soon saw armed Indian army soldiers standing at the roadside in the mist. We were stopped and inquiries were made about our presence. The soldiers informed us that we were only a few meters away from the ambush site, and just further ahead was Paraolon Village. As we negotiated a bend on the now smoother road, we saw two damaged heavy vehicles ahead. The first was almost fully covered from front by tarpaulin. As we passed it slowly, it was clearly severely damaged and burnt. The back of the vehicle/truck contained the remains of the burnt materials which could not be identified as they were packed in sacks. The vehicle still emanated the smell of burnt fuel and other materials. We were again halted by personnel of the 6th Dogra Regiment posted there to guard over the vehicles. A small burnt out fire was at the roadside. The personnel were ill clad, with canvas raincoats and wore ordinary canvas shoes.

After another few minutes, we reached Paraolon Village. The village was covered with thick mist, giving it an eerie quality as no one was in sight. It is situated on a hill slope. A brightly coloured stone sign welcomed us to the area under the command of the 6 Dogra Regiment.



The stone sign erected by the 6 Dogra Regiment of the Indian Army at Paraolon

We were hailed through the mist by a man's voice. Dimly, we could make out some soldiers up a slope. We were told to come up, so one of our team members clambered up to talk to the soldier.



PARAOLON VILLAGE SHROUDED IN A THICK MIST

Our team member met with a Major Ravi of the army patrol stationed there. Expressing deep resentment at the villagers for "betraying" the Dogra Regiment who had looked after them for long, he loudly asked why the Red Cross and human rights organisations were putting pressure on them while it was the soldiers who had suffered much.

The rest of the team alighted and climbed up to the village. Two thin dogs came running towards us when they heard our footsteps. The village was totally abandoned and we could not find a single person in the village. Dogs, two cats and chickens hovered around us. Every door was padlocked and some household items and personal belongings were found scattered around in front of some of the thatched houses. The villagers had even left behind their shoes, soaps and toothbrushes. It was a gloomy doomsday like scene to behold in the mist.



ABANDONED HOUSES IN PARAOLON VILLAGE

Our purpose of the visit was to assess the situation and also to assess the villagers affected by the incident. Two empty community water tanks remained abandoned. The houses had planted passion fruit vines, lemons and other fruit trees around the houses. Ripening passion fruit lay rotting on the ground. The soldiers said they did not know where the villagers had gone.

An entire village of about 300 persons including the aged, women and children had simply vanished into the thin air, it seems. But we were glad that at least we got to visit the village and see for our self what the situation is like, and it was one of the chances for some of our team members to witness exactly what kind of life in isolation our people in the remote areas are leading, dependent on the army often for their supplies and daily needs.

We could not proceed further, and left Paraolon Village at around 01:00 PM heading for Moreh Town on the international border, and Tamu, the district administration town in Myanmar across the border from Moreh. It rained all the way up to Tengnoupal and heavy mist covered the entire area. We were stopped again at the ambush site. After identifying ourselves, a friendly Dogra Regiment soldier was only too pleased to recount what exactly had happened on that fateful day on 4<sup>th</sup> June.



The ambush site

We crossed two heavily armed army convoys on the way back; the second of the two convoys had high level officers seated in two military cars, and one vehicle had an Indian Union (Ashoka Pillar) insignia only as its number plate. We were not stopped; nor did they as they seemed to be in a hurry.

We saw an old woman heading back with her dog towards Challong on the road, and she quickly turned away as she heard our vehicle approaching. We reached Tamu just before 03:00 PM after completing formalities with the police station and the immigration check at the border in Moreh. In Tamu, we met with local civilian and sources regarding any information on the whereabouts of the villagers and tried to gather some news about the reported cross border army's special operation strike after the ambush. Here too, we had to leave the place empty handed. We were told that no Indian army operation took place in Myanmar and that there were no casualties reported.



View of a Myanmar village from Kotal Khunthak in Chandel District near Paraolon (file picture by Maitreyee Handique)

The sources said that on a clear day all the nearby ranges were visible to each other from a high point, so if there had been an encounter or operation, they would have heard the sound of the gunshots and seen casualties.

After a quick light lunch at Namphalong market just across the border from Moreh Town, we headed back at 04:00 PM and reached Imphal at around 07:00 PM.

# Information sources

We accessed as many available information sources as possible. By seeking information from many different sources, the mission could cross-reference different responses to determine the best single estimate or conclusion and avoid bias, by application of the 'triangulation' of data.

# Key sources of information include:

Disaster-affected community members

Leaders of vulnerable groups, community based organisations, and youth leaders

Local government representatives and offices, including the state police based in Chandel District HQ

Local NGOs and coordinating bodies based in Chandel District

#### Local and national news media

# Afterword and observations

The journey, while it was relatively uneventful, was hampered by rain and thick mist in the area, especially from Tengnoupal onwards. Security related measures with special emphasis on vehicle and passenger checks by the central paramilitary armed policing force Assam Rifles has been heightened. New checking facilities, such as sheds, additional road blocks are seen all along the National Highway No. 2 (NH 39 before) from Pallel to Moreh. Everyone is checked. Regular cross checking by road checking or gate manning personnel with higher officers about our movement into the "no exit or entry zone" after the army convoy ambush delayed us considerably. With the inclement weather, lack of visibility and absence of human contact, our preliminary assessment was overwhelmingly based on passive observation.

# Villages reported as affected by the ambush related army operation

# VILLAGES OF RECENT AMBUSH AREA (SULAM) IN Chandel Sub-Division, CHANDEL DISTRICT, MANIPUR, INDIA

	VILLAGE	HOUSHOLDS Reported	HOUSEHOLDS Census 2011	POPULATION Census 2011						TRIBE
				Total	М	F	Total (0-6)	М	F	
1	LARONG KHUNOU	35	Not available							LAMKANG
2	DUTHANG	14	47	218	105	113	23	12	11	ANAL
3	LARONG KHULLEN	50	120	587	295	292	31	18	13	ANAL
4	DARCHOL	13	Not available							ANAL
5	VOUMKU (Darku)	15	32	126	58	68	16	7	9	ANAL
6	CHALLONG	40	59	259	134	125	36	19	17	LAMKANG
7	PARAOLON	30	64	310	144	166	49	26	23	LAMKANG
8	LIBUNG	15	24	113	53	60	22	11	11	ANAL
9	KOTAL KHUNTHAK	27	Not available							LAMKANG
10	THUNGAM	11	Not available							LAMKANG
	TOTAL	250	346	1613	789	824	177	93	84	

From this preliminary visit to the incident area, several conclusions may be drawn.

- 1. The area where the ambush took place near Paraolon village and about nine other villages of the Sulam area are now in extreme isolation.
- 2. Paraolon Village was totally abandoned, not a soul remained out of the reported 30 odd households (64 households according to the 2011 Census of India report with a total population of about 310 persons). The villagers' whereabouts are unknown.
- 3. No observations were made in Libung, Kotal Khunthak and Thungam villages.
- 4. There were no signs of forced entry and search in any of the houses we saw. All locks were intact.
- 5. All livestock including cats and dogs were abandoned.
- 6. No agricultural activity could be observed.

- 7. No public transport was observed during the entire journey.
- 8. No movement of civilian population observed either moving out and into the area.
- 9. No district administration presence in the area.
- 10. No local news media representatives had visited the area since 5 June 2015.
- 11. District administration and police sources in Chandel HQ and Tengnoupal had no information about the missing villagers or the prevailing situation in the area. No attempts were made for state government officials to visit the area since the operation commenced.
- 12. As far as we could observe, the district administration or any competent non-government organisation have not conducted any inquiry or assessment of needs of the local population and livestock those few remaining and for the many families who have fled the villages, abandoning everything.
- 13. The soldiers of the 6 Dogra Regiment we met were not hostile to the mission; in fact, they were quite friendly and readily shared information. Most of the regiment's personnel hail from the northern Indian states of Uttaranchal, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu (J&K). A few are from Uttar Pradesh.
- 14. Local sources in Tamu could give no confirmatory information on the Special Forces operation having taken place along the Indo-Myanmar border area including in areas within Sagaing Division of Myanmar. Some gunshots were heard but no news regarding killings or casualties. No information was also available if any local civilian populations were affected or displaced as a consequence of any operation having taken place.

# Recommendations

# District Administration and government of Manipur

- Urgently initiate steps to locate the missing villagers from the area of the ambush that are still missing and conduct their needs assessment including livelihood issues, food security, shelter, clothing, needs of vulnerable sections such as children, women and elderly, and health needs including mental and psychosocial health support requirements.
- Initiate steps for a comprehensive needs assessment of the villages in the area, including the needs of the abandoned livestock.
- Ensure that local schools are re-opened for the education needs of the children.
- Ensure that state public distribution systems (PDS), health, sanitation and welfare measures and programmes are secured and in place.
- Cooperate closely with district based NGOs and community based organisations including the All Tribal Women's Organisation (ATWO) and other district level tribal organisations to take up the above steps.

# Village Leaders and other village level bodies of the ambush area

- Report to the district administration and its agencies and officials responsible for the area (sub-division) giving detailed information of the situation prevailing among the displaced population and the abandoned or semi-abandoned villages.
- Seek cooperation and close collaboration district administration to take up steps for the safe return of the villagers, *holistic* or *comprehensive* rehabilitation measures, resumption of traditional agricultural and related activities.
- Seek cooperation of local NGOs and community based organisations, including tribal women's organisations for the follow up steps.

# NGOs and community based organisations

- Urgently take steps for a full planned appraisal and needs assessment, based on humanitarian principles and minimum standards of humanitarian response in conflict disasters, of the situation in the ambush and army operation area located villages and the local population, especially those who have abandoned their hearths and homes giving special attention to the needs of women, children and the elderly, including local livestock.
- Cooperate with the district administration and its concerned agencies at the sub-divisional level to ensure maximum effectiveness and accountability.
- Develop plans and programmes for the affected villages giving special attention to livelihood, health including mental health, education, nutritional and safety needs with the cooperation of state government.

#### State and national news media

• Immediately initiate full investigative media coverage of the situation in the affected areas of the Chandel after the 4<sup>th</sup> June 2015 incident and army special operation in order to highlight and give public awareness of the ground reality.

# Government of India and the international community including the United Nations

- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to initiate urgent steps to ensure that the post-conflict situation prevailing in Chandel district of Manipur is "people friendly" in its fullest terms and meaning. In coordination with the Ministry of Defence and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), and with the full cooperation and participation of the government of Manipur, the MHA should undertake measures to ensure that the local population in the district continue to enjoy the full security and rights enshrined in the Constitution of India, including security under the law, fundamental freedoms, civil, economic and social rights, have access to full and comprehensive rehabilitation measures in an effective and accountable manner.
- The MHA should also ensure that the process of bringing about a lasting resolution to the long-standing armed conflict in Manipur and North East region of India is sustained in a way that is sensitive to the interests and politically unstable situation of the people of this region. In particular, confidence building measures should be urgently put into place, such as the long standing demand and need for the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 and other related legislation that have jeopardised not only the conflict resolution objectives of the government of India, but have placed the Union's armed forces in an extremely vulnerable and demoralising policing role within the country and also led to innumerable human and constitutional rights abuses through the sustained existence of a climate of impunity in India.
- Office of UN High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) to provide due and diligent attention to the prevailing conflict and post-conflict situation in Manipur, with special attention to Chandel District of Manipur on the Indo-Myanmar border with the objectives of securing lasting peace, security and development of the indigenous tribal peoples.
- Invite the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz to visit India on an official mission.

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