CHAPTER IV: Journalists in the Armed Conflict Situation in Manipur

4.1 Armed conflict scene in Manipur:

Pradip Phanjoubam, editor of the *Imphal Free Press*, once observed:

"From the Manipur Government’s surrender policy experience, as well as that of the ongoing peace parleys between the NSCN (both factions) and Government of India, one or two other things are clear. The unsaid but universal thing about an insurgency situation is that there are always much more than meets the eye behind its dynamics. Its contributory causes are many, including inconsistencies in history, economic structures, development, identity alienation etc. It is also very much related to administrative weaknesses and incompetence, and above all, official corruption that continually trample upon all senses of fair play and justice."\(^{123}\)

The initial reaction of societies exposed to such conditions is one of awe and submission among the larger masses, and the general cynicism

\(^{123}\) Media’s Role in Conflict Resolution, Seminar Paper presented by Pradip Phanjoubam in the International Seminar-Cum-Workshop on Media in Conflict Situation in Manipur and International Humanitarian Law, jointly organized by the AMWJU and the ICRC at the State Guest House, Imphal on 9 and 10 December, 2006.
among the elites is that if they cannot beat the system, they better join the system. However, the social mechanism is not a dead phenomenon, in thought or in action. It is naturally conditioned to transform itself, however slow it may be, to respond to any stimulus fittingly. Under a condition of constant and consistent abuse, it mutates and its reaction can become extraordinary, in extremity and cruelty. To a good extent, insurgency in Manipur is also about such a transformation. *124* Within a matter of few years, moderate societies become blood thirsty. The difference in casualties before and after 1980s is a glaring example of the proposition. Insurgency, in this way, is a price the society pays for its neglect and insensitivities of the past.

Freelance writer Lt. Colonel A. K. Sharma remarked that one of the main causes of insurgency in the north east was physical isolation and psychological alienation over the years. The social, political and demographic imbalances have led to the revival and survival of insurgency in the north eastern states of India. The main problem here is about social, economic, ethnic and political deprivation. These people are not anti-Indian but essentially anti-establishment. *125*

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When the British rule in India was on the verge of ending, Manipur had agreed to hand over its defence, currency and foreign affairs to India on August 11, 1947. Then Manipur merged into the Dominion of India on 15 October, 1949 under the Manipur Merger Agreement. Later, she became a Part C State of India from 26 January, 1950. Instead of ratifying the Agreement by the State Legislative Assembly which was established under the provisions of the Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947; the legislative body had to be dissolved as an immediate consequence of the Agreement, to pave way for another set up of governance. Some section of the people were not happy with the way Manipur got merged with India and legitimacy of the Agreement under which the state came into the Union of India, is being questioned even now in regional as well as international fora.

The decades that followed Manipur's merger into India and her subsequent becoming of a Part C State was followed by the emergence of a number of underground organizations. Jananeta Hijam Irabat who was an elected member of the state legislature, had to go underground after a faux passé committed in connection with a public meeting proposed to be organized at Pungdongbam against the possible formation of a proposed Purvanchal Pradesh which will include Manipur. Later, he left the state for
Myanmar and there he established the first ever armed revolutionary organization of Manipur, Manipur Red Guard. However, he breathed his last on 26 September 1951 at Tangbo, Myanmar, before his Red Guard could attract popular attention. Another underground group called Manipur Revolutionary Nationalist Party (MRNP) also surfaced in 1953. It demanded the restoration of independent status of Manipur. The MRNP also went into oblivion soon following arrests of the Party leaders and tightening of security measures across the state.

After the debacle of the MRNP, several educated youths with a firm conviction of continuing a long struggle launched a historic mission for liberating Manipur and formed the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) on 24 November, 1964. Arambam Samarendra was the first Secretary General of the Front. Another underground organization called the Meitei State Committee (MSC) was formed in 1966 in Sadar Hills area of Manipur at the initiative of some ex-members of the Communist Party under the

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128 Ibid
patronage of the Federal Government of Nagaland. N. Tomba Singh and Yaima Singh were respectively President and Secretary of the Committee.¹²⁹

In 1968, a faction of the UNLF formed the Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM). Its leaders were O Sudhir, N. Bisheswor Singh and Y Pramod.¹³⁰ After Manipur attained statehood in 1972, a general amnesty was declared for the undergrounds. All cases registered against the youths involved in political offences were withdrawn and all political offenders in jail were released as a result of the general amnesty granted to political offenders in 1972. It brought about a crucial change in the RGM. Many of the prominent members of the outfit left the RGM and came overground. Sudhir was the leader of this group.¹³¹ But still a faction of the RGM who believed that statehood could not solve the problems of Manipur refused to accept the amnesty. Bisheswor was one of the important leaders of this group and he came out from Sudhir’s group sometime in 1975 and later formed the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) on 25 September, 1978.¹³²

¹²⁹ Mangi S., A Study of Some Selected Socio-Political Problems of Manipur (1947-80), Ph. D thesis, Department of Political Science, Manipur University, P-274.
The PLA then became an armed wing of the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) which was established on 25 February, 1979.

The Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) was founded on 19 October, 1977 at Koubru hill in the north-western side of Imphal under the leadership of R K Tulachandra.\textsuperscript{133} The outfit was a well integrated group as long as Tullachandra was at its helm. Differences of opinion erupted after he was arrested again on 16 February, 1980. The state government thereafter initiated a peace move to have a dialogue with the Party. Tulachandra, in a tape recorded speech broadcasted from AIR, Imphal, appealed to the members of the Party to observe cease-fire for a period of one month with effect from 14 March, 1980.\textsuperscript{134} This appeal was strongly objected by a section of the organization. Then two distinct groups came up within the PREPAK, one led by Tulachandra in jail and the other led by Maipak Sharma. Afterwards, Sharma in collaboration with some old members of the Meitei State Committee formed a new organization called


\textsuperscript{134} Mangi S., A Study of Some Selected Socio-Political Problems of Manipur (1947-80), Op. cit, p- 304.
the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) in a convention held at Heirok, Thoubal District on 15 May, 1980.\textsuperscript{135}

The Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) was formed in Bangladesh in 1994 by a combination of breakaway groups of UNLF, PREPAK and KCP with the aim to unite the revolutionary organizations operating in Manipur and fight together in the struggle for independence. Achou Toijamba and Namoijam Oken are respectively Chairman and General Secretary of the Lup.\textsuperscript{136}

Later, the UNLF, RPF and PREPAK which have been separately fighting for an independent Manipur for over three decades, formed a common front called the Manipur People’s Liberation Front (MPLF) in 1999 with an aim to accelerate the progress of liberation struggle. R. K. Sanayaima, the Chairman of the UNLF is the convener of the joint Front.\textsuperscript{137}

In spite of all endeavors to jointly work in a harmonious environment among the armed outfits of the state for the common goal of independence from the Indian yoke, many internecine killings among the underground organizations had come up time and again. The factional fights have affected the UNLF,
KYKL, PREPAK and KCP in the past and for the latter two outfits, their factions are still not seeing eye to eye.

The Naga Hills District Tribal Council, which was established under the chairmanship of Charles Pawsy in 1945 with the objective of educating the Nagas to rule over themselves in a democratic manner, was changed into the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946. At the beginning, the NNC, which pioneered in the Naga Movement for self determination, was not all that against remaining within India. The Naga Movement for self determination gained greater momentum after A. Z. Phizo was elected the President of the NNC on 11 December, 1950. A plebiscite was held on 16 May, 1951 in a congregation at Kohima on the issue of Naga self determination where the Nagas voted for complete independence and secession. The Government of India refused to accept the verdict and later on, the NNC resorted to armed struggle.

It was in the later part of 1956 that the spreading of secessionist movement of Nagaland was felt in Manipur conspicuously. It was felt first in the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur in the East, North and West districts.

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The Nagas of these areas secretly organized themselves into Naga Home Guards and started indulging in acts of violence such as looting government properties, kidnapping and murdering local villagers, attacking government forces, etc. Initially they were armed with weapons left behind by the Allied and Japanese forces during the Second World War. Afterwards, the underground Nagas received training in the use of sophisticated arms and ammunitions from the erstwhile East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and China. Later, the Naga Home Guards was reconstituted as Naga Army. By 1960 they have recruited some local Nagas from Ukhrul, Mao and Tamenglong. The Naga underground setup in Manipur as it was then had both (i) civil and (ii) military set up.\footnote{Op. cit, p-357.}

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was established on 31 January, 1980.\footnote{Bleeding Manipur, Phanjoubam Tarapot, op. cit, p-181.} Isaac Chisi Swu, S.S. Khaplang and Thuingaleng Muivah were the Executive Chairman, Vice-Chairman and General Secretary of the Council respectively. Henceforth, the Nagas of Manipur got more immediately concerned with the Naga rebellion. The Naga outfit broke into two factions in 1988 - one led jointly by Isaac Chisi Swu, a Sema tribe of Nagaland and Thuingaleng Muivah, a Tangkhul from Manipur (NSCN-
IM) and the other led by S S K haplang, a Pangmi Naga from Myanmar (NSCN-K). The cadres of the two groups have been targeting each other in factional fights since their split. The main aim and object of the two factions are the same, i.e., to liberate Naga areas of India and Myanmar in order to form a separate and independent Nagaland and to maintain a separate identity of the Nagas. When they said Nagaland, it included four hill districts of Manipur which will cost the latter more than 60 percent of its geographical area. At present, both the factions of NSCN are undergoing peace talks with the Government of India.

Although some of the Kuki militant organizations gained ground before, it was mainly aftermath the Kuki-Naga ethnic clash of the 1990s that Kuki armed struggle got a new impetus. Kuki underground outfits like the United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), the Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), the Kuki National Front (P) and the Kuki National Front (MC) have a common goal of a separate state of the Kukis. Both the Kuki National Front (KNF) and the Kuki National Army (KNA) were formed in 1988. The UKLF and the KRA were organized in 2000 while the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) and the KLA were formed

142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
in 1990 and 1991 respectively. These organizations are fighting for a separate Kuki homeland to be carved out from the Kuki inhabited areas of Myanmar and some portions of Thoubal, Ukhrul and Chandel districts of Manipur and the whole of Churachandpur district of the state.\footnote{Bleeding Manipur, Phanjoubam Tarapot, op. cit, P-179.}

Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) aims at maintaining a separate identity of the Zomis comprising of Paite, Simte, Vaiphei and Tiddim Chin tribes while Hmar Revolutionary Army (HRA) wants to protect Hmar community from the aggressive nature of the Kukis, Mizos and other larger communities. Hmar Peoples Convention (HPC) is another Hmar outfit fighting for a Hmar autonomous district council to be carved out of Hmar inhabited areas of Mizoram, Manipur and Cachhar district of Assam.\footnote{Ibid.} Most of the Kuki militant organizations operating in Manipur have recently signed an agreement for Suspension of Operation (SOO) with the Government of India. Now, they are in the initial stage for a peace talk with the Government.

According to an intelligence report, about 19,590 insurgents were operating in both valley and hill areas of the state by 2001. While the report
estimated about 9070 insurgents in the valley, about 11,510 others were agile in different parts of the hill areas of the state, New Cachhar hills of Assam and some parts of Nagaland. The report pointed out that the number of arms including highly sophisticated weapons such as AK 47, rocket launchers etc., possessed by the insurgents was about 11,635. It estimated 4,975 weapons for insurgents who were operating in the valley of Manipur while about 6,660 were in the hands of militants in the hilly region including parts of Nagaland and New Cachhar hills of Assam. The number of overground workers or sympathizers of the outfits ranged between 78,360 and 97,950 in this region. 146

Major insurgent organizations of the state, as of now, are UNLF, RPF, KCP, PREPAK and KYKL in the valley area, NSCN (IM), NSCN (K) and UKLF, KLA, KNF (P), KNF (MC), ZRA, HRA and HPC in the hill areas. The People's United Liberation Front (PULF) is also active in the Muslim dominated pocket of the state, Lilong. There are official evidences of some of the outfits having their training or base camps in neighboring countries particularly in upper Myanmar, Sylhet region of Bangladesh etc.

146 ibid.
The conflict situation in Manipur has multi pronged character. The most visible armed conflict in the state is the armed violence between the state forces and non-state forces. The central security forces operating in Manipur and state police forces are combating militants in both the hill and valley areas of the state. In the environs of the militant organizations also, there is inter-organizational armed conflict and intra-organizational factional fights at times. Clashes among valley based outfits of Manipur, fighting among hill based Naga and Kuki outfits and fratricidal killings among the valley based and hill based proscribed organizations of Manipur flared up from time to time. Besides, most of the organizations both in the valley and the hills also suffer from intra-organizational conflicts time and again. All these have contributed to the prevailing scenario of multi-dimensional conflict inside the state. One cannot foresee the subsiding of the armed conflict situation here in the near future.

4.2 Human security in the armed conflict situation in Manipur:

The armed revolution for self determination in the north eastern states of the country has claimed thousands of lives in Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Assam, etc. Many innocent civilians have become refugee in their
own homeland. Physical assaults or injuries in the armed violence are the order of the day.

Among the armed conflict regions of the country also the situation in Manipur is one of the gravest if one looks upon the quantum of human lives claimed by the ongoing armed confrontation between the regular government forces and the secessionists. In Manipur, with a population of 2.4 million only, the number of the armed violence related deaths in the past decade is added up to 2856 including 1110 civilians. The numbers of armed revolutionaries and security personnel killed during the past decade are 1249 and 497 respectively.\textsuperscript{147}

According to a newspaper report, everyday, 1000 people die of armed violence all over the world and India’s share is 12 people per day.\textsuperscript{148} In the past three years, approximately one person dies every day of armed violence in Manipur. As per the aforementioned data, the state’s share of death in the armed violence is significantly high when it is compared, taking the population parameter, with the global as well as the national figures. If the quantum of death in armed violence is compared on the basis of population


parameter, the ratio of the number of death in Manipur per day to that of the world is 5:2 and the ratio of the number of death in Manipur per day to that of the country is 50:1.4. This means that the rate of death in the armed violence in Manipur is more than two and half times the global figure and more than 34 times the national figure.

While the population of the state accounts only one tenth of the total population of the whole of the north eastern India, the state shares 45 percent of the killing statistics of the region.\textsuperscript{149} Incidents of kidnapping, killing, extortion, bomb attack, intimidation etc. are order of the day. Most of the people, in the state, are living with a fear psychosis. There were not less than 4375 crimes related to militancy during the period from the beginning of 2004 to the end of September, 2007. There were 183 cases of kidnapping, 168 cases of bomb blast, 205 cases of extortion, 175 cases of ambush, 308 encounters between underground outfits and security forces during this period.\textsuperscript{150}

According to a news report in the local daily \textit{Poknapham} on July 16, 2007 the armed conflict in Manipur, during the period from January 1980 to

\textsuperscript{149} Manipur became killing field under Ibobi regime, \textit{Hueiyen Lanpao}, Nov., 11, 2007,p-1

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
May 2007, had claimed lives of 2675 civilians and 1270 of them are from the hill districts of the state. 1314 rebels including 314 rebels from the hill areas of the state have lost their lives in different conflicts with security forces during the past 27 years. The civilian casualty is counted at 2061 during this period. The numbers of militants killed in the aforementioned period are respectively: PLA-411, UNLF-162, PREPAK-96, KCP-100, KYKL-87, PULF-23, INF-8, NSCN(IM)-66, NSCN(K)-23, KRA-18, KNF-18, KNF(MC)-47, KNA-11, KNA(P)-11, ZRA-10, NSCN(when it was united)-26 and 171 others from smaller outfits.\textsuperscript{151}

During 1980 to 2000, 15 politicians of the state had also been killed including Thokchom Bira of the Communist Party of India, Retd. Major AK Nilakamal, former minister Mutum Deven, former MLA K Binoy and Nameirakpam Chandreshore (former candidate of Nambol Assembly constituency) of the Manipur People's Party, former Chief Minister of the state Yangmaso Saiza, Lungshei Saiza of the Janata Dal, ex-minister Ngurdinglen of the National People's Party, ex-minister H. T. Thungam of the Manipur Congress Party, Anking Khumlo (former independent candidate of Lok Sabha election for the Outer Manipur Parliamentary constituency),

\textsuperscript{151} Poknapham, Dec. 29, 2000, p-1.
ex-MLA Nameirakpam Bisheshwore, ex-minister Moirangthem Ibotombi and Bhartiya Janata Party, North East Co-ordinating Council Secretary Shamurailatpam Madhumangal Sharma(former candidate of Lok Sabha election for the Inner Manipur Parliamentary Constituency). Life attempts had also been faced by many politicians of the state including former Chief Minister Rajkumar Ranbir, former Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee President and Finance Minister Laishom Lalit, former ministers-R. V. Mingthing, Ningthoujam Mangi, Cungkhokai Dongel, Sorokhaibam Rajen and A. S. Arthur. Many senior officials of the state government also had lost their lives and had faced life attempts.

About 14879 militants including 12124 activists from valley based outlawed organizations have been arrested during the period. The number of NSA detainees is 1447 including 138 rebels from the hill areas of the state. Militants, during this period, had snatched 2000 arms from security personnel and cash amounting Rs 5 millions have been looted from banks and government offices. 865 militants have also surrendered to the government to come back to the national mainstream. The killing statistics in Manipur in the armed conflicts between militants and security personnel

\[152\] Ibid.
and in the fratricidal killings between the factions of the proscribed outfits in
the last decade may be looked from the following table.\(^{153}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>year</th>
<th>civilians killed</th>
<th>militants killed</th>
<th>security killed</th>
<th>personnel</th>
<th>total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>270</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>110</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>110</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td>369</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Keeping in view the commonly accepted notions of an internal armed conflict, the magnitude of the armed confrontations between the government forces and militants, and the quantum of human life claimed by the same in Manipur, it may be contended that no term with a lesser intensity than an armed conflict will be able to describe the prevailing situation in Manipur.

4.3 Covering Manipur: Reporters' paradise versus Pandora's Box

Manipur is an armed conflict torn state. The problem has hit every aspect of life here. Whether it is development work taken up by the government for the welfare of the people or an entrepreneurial venture started individually for his or her own livelihood, nothing is left untouched by it. Encounter and fake encounter, ransom and kidnap, attack and retaliation, ambush and booby trap, extortion and threatening at gun points are becoming daily news stuff whenever someone picks up a newspaper published in Manipur or tunes the news bulletin of AIR, Imphal or views the ISTV news program and the DD News of DDK, Imphal. Government offices are sometimes locked during office hours by unknown persons. Corruption
is rampant, nepotism and discrimination is at its zenith, justice and fair play is at its nadir.

The prevailing situation obviously provides good fodder for the media. Wherever they go, journalists get meaty news stories and eye catching photographs. Unfortunately, the situation is also ripe with dangerous possibilities concerning the security of everyone including the journalists. There are possibilities of journalists offending one or the other party involved while reporting on the happenings in this situation of armed conflict. This may, in turn, invite the wrath of a powerful group or an influential individual. Subsequently, this may again open up a Pandora’s Box for the journalists, and they shall have to contend with the consequences. This has compelled many a media person to think twice before publishing a news report that ought to be there in the front pages of daily newspapers lest it offends some powerful group or individual for the best known reasons.

Alluding to the looming threat to the journalists of the state, the former Governor of Manipur, Dr. S S Sidhu once wrote to *the Sangai Express* daily: “The journalists in Manipur have often been at the receiving
end of different non-state players. From plain physical threats to veiled intimidations and imposing dictates to follow certain advices of various power players appears to have become the norm. At times, some local organizations (social and cultural), at the behest of UG outfits, seem to carry an impression that media should dance to their drum beat. Nothing can be more dangerous than that.”  

He further added, “The media fraternity in the state was, no doubt, working under difficult circumstances. The Fourth Estate often comes under considerable strain in this beautiful state and it should be the endeavor of every citizen to ensure that they are enabled to function freely. Only then true flavor of democracy can be savored. The journalist fraternity in Manipur also needs to do some retrospection and introspection. Has the profession really been judicious in the exercise of the freedom of expression that it has enjoyed? They need to desist from sensationalizing the incidents without verifying the facts. A major section, if not the entire state’s privately owned media, have often allowed themselves to be used as a medium for issuing death threats and summons to individuals.”

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154 Dr Sidhu greets TSE on 8th B’day, The Sangai Express, Imphal, September 11, 2007, p-1
155 Ibid.
The former Governor of the state also put in that it was important that the freedom of press is balanced with responsibility. The civil society organizations also need to ponder over their stake in the matter. There can be no justification for any armed outfit to decide what should be printed and what should not be. This is best left to the professionals to decide. The professionals are the journalists and not the cadres of any UG outfit.\textsuperscript{156}

An editorial comment of a local English daily published at Imphal once observed: "Nobody is saying that no pressmen can get hurt. Pressmen in other parts of the world have suffered worse fates. In covering war or semi-war zones, as the case certainly is in Manipur, probability of pressmen suffering injuries is high. However, it also needs to be emphasized that no pressmen would have protested had the injuries been caused without any intent. They would merely have been treated as tragedies, unfortunate but with little room for anybody’s remorse. It is an occupational hazard that all those who work into the profession are willingly exposed to, if the attack was not deliberate.\textsuperscript{157} However, problem arises when those who have been offended by certain reports started retaliating the individual journalists.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{The Imphal Free Press}, Imphal, December 27, 2000. p-2
Media persons are often subjected to harassment even when they produce their identity cards. In fact, many of the potential antagonists became even more contemptuous when the reporters show their identity cards. This is what insulted and infuriated the press community the most. What made the entire situation even more atrocious was the fact that attacks also had come from "supposedly disciplined, uniformed forces, which ought to understand the significance of press identity cards, issued by government recognized media houses or in the case of many, by the government's own Directorate of Information and Public Relations, and which incidentally also bear the national insignia of the Ashok Pillar". ¹⁵⁸

In addition to the professional hazards from the security personnel, the newsmen of the turbulent state also do get dictates from outlawed organizations. The media persons are sometimes targeted for not being toed on the lines the proscribed outfits asked for. The aforementioned message from the constitutional head of the state and editorial comment of the *Imphal Free Press* per se puts in plain words the difficult situation the journalists of the state are experiencing with while performing their duty with the Damocles' sword hanging above them.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid
4.4 Media under siege in the armed conflict situation in Manipur:

The Imphal correspondent of *the Hindu*, Iboyaima Laithangbam wrote that the media in the insurgency affected states of the north eastern region have been under constant pressure from proscribed underground organizations, which have been relentlessly trying to arm-twist them into becoming their propaganda machinery. The situation in the border state of Manipur in this regard is particularly appalling. Rival factions of militant organizations have time and again imposed regulations, actually improbable conditions, on the local media, kidnapped or killed media persons, planted bombs in media offices and issued threats forcing distraught media persons to go on strike until the outfits backed out.159

In Manipur three newspaper editors, Rajkumar Sanatomba (1993) of the Manipuri monthly *Kangla Lanpung*, Lalrohlu Hmar (1999) of the dialect daily newspaper *the Shan* and Thounaojam Brajamani Singh (2000) of the English daily newspaper *the Manipur News* and an electronic media journalist Yambem Megha (2002) had been shot death by unidentified gunmen. Only in the case of Lalrohlu, the Hmar Revolutionary Front (HRF), an underground organization operating in the southern part of the state

159 Stop Press, *the Frontline*, Nov.16, 2007, p-40
claimed that it was responsible for it. Others went unclaimed and state
government has been so far not successful even in uncovering those who
were responsible for the murder cases. In another case of attempted to
murder, in 2007, L. Chinkhalian, editor of the Manipur Express, had a
narrow escape when gunmen opened a fusillade of fire at his car.

On 31 July 2007, some militants presented as a gift, a well-packed
powerful bomb in the office of the Sangai Express as a warning to all
newspapers as they fail to publish a press release by a faction of an
underground outfit. Following the incident, the All Manipur Working
Journalists Union (AMWJU) had passed a resolution not to entertain press
releases from the then faction-ridden outfit which was responsible for the
unfortunate episode. Militants belonging to a faction of the proscribed
organization telephoned the newspaper editors to say that if they fail to
publish the UG faction’s press releases all editors, journalists and other staff
would be killed. The rival faction, on its part, informed the shocked editors
that they would face dire consequences if they published the press release.

Faced with these threats, the editors and journalists locked up the
newspaper offices and decided to launch a cease work agitation on August 1,
2007. The strike was called off five days later after the threat was withdrawn
with the assurance that there will be no such threats in future. This assurance was, however, forgotten in October of the same year. The editors of newspapers were threatened for refusing to publish a press release and as a result, the local journalists associated with the newspapers and the ISTV Network went on cease-work strike again from 11 to 14 October, 2007. These events are clear indicatives of the intense pressures under which journalists of the state had to suffer while trying to carry out their responsibilities.

Owing to security concerns, the extremists sometimes leave their press release bundles at any one of the newspaper offices with a clear instruction that the copies should be distributed to other media organizations. Some editors have appealed not to do the same but in vain. The AMWJU and Editors Forum, Manipur have resolved in a number of meetings that the right to edit a news item should be left in the hands of the editors and issued a general appeal not to infringe on the right. However, the armed rebels are in no mood to listen. When the editor of the local vernacular daily *Poknapham*, Shamurailatpam Gopal Sharma edited out certain portions of an underground press release, the militants were not pleased. They armed twisted him into publishing the full text of the press communiqué the
following day. Later, in another incident, he was forced to publish an apology for over a week on the front page of his newspaper. His crime was that he had published an article that was not in consonance with the policy of banning Hindi films in Manipur.\(^{160}\)

In 2006, the General Secretary of the AMWJU, Ratan Luwancha was targeted by some activists of an underground group within zero mile from the state capital, Imphal with ten rounds of bullet at his own home in the morning while he was reading newspaper. Till date, his health remains seriously affected because of the attack. P. Labango, editor of the evening Manipuri daily *Kangla Pao* also faced a bullet attack near his evening office, that too in Imphal. Bijoy Kojjam, the sitting MLA of Manipur had also luckily survived from a life attempt in 1993 when he was working as a journalist. An insurgent group also bombarded the office of an upcoming daily newspaper, *Lamyanba* again in Imphal and Irengbam Arun, the editor designate of the daily had to run and hide for life. He was spared only after much clarification in 2000.

Ban of publication of newspapers by state administration and underground elements, ban of transmission of local private TV Network by

\(^{160}\) Op cit, p-41.
state government and militant organizations, harassing journalists at reporting sites and even picking them up from their newspaper office and leaving them after torture by security personnel; and dictating terms or trying to manufacture a guided press both by legal and ultra-legal forces have been witnessed by the people of Manipur time and again. It is not the insurgents alone who are trying to browbeat media persons. Many of the editors and senior journalists of the state have been arrested on cooked-up charges by the government. Moreover, it is noteworthy that in more than ninety percent of the cases of journalists being harassed in Manipur, the culprit is either state or central security personnel.

Manipur went a step further in muzzling the media by enforcing censorship in news coverage. The Manipur government in October, 2007 issued an instruction for the local media with a clear direction not to publish any statement or handout released by the outlawed militant outfits and also any other news item that amounted to sedition. The censorship cautioned that any newspaper organization that violates the order would be dealt with severely under the rule of the law.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Ibid.
The founder President of the Editors Forum, Manipur (EFM) and founder editor of *Hueiyen Lanpao*, Bharat Bhusan, the present Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports; and former editor of the local vernacular daily, *Naharolgee Thoudang*, Nongthombam Biren, editor of the one time popular local English daily, *The Freedom*, Rajkumar Ranendrajit, to mention a few, had to enjoy state government's hospitality in jail on the charges of having nexus with militants and threatening national security through their published items though the charges were never proved. Some of them even had to taste prison life for months.

There is an alarming scene and a cause for concern when we look at the cumulative figures since 1997 to 2006 of the violations of the freedom of press in Manipur by both state and non-state actors. Many of these violations are effective techniques to gag the fourth estate of democracy either not to reveal disturbing truths or to warn the journalist fraternity to follow the track the pressure groups opted for.
Violations of the freedom of Press in Manipur (1997-2006):

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The Imphal correspondent of *the Statesman* and News Editor of the local cable television network ISTV, Yumnam Rupachandra observed that
Manipur, too, had seen enough "reasonable restraint" being exercised on to the press. The office memorandum of the Government of Manipur dated November 11, 2002 was one amongst many. It effectively barred all government officials from speaking to the press even if it may be of grave concern to public safety. It was however removed on protest but it cannot be said that it was not tried. The more crucial in case of the press in Manipur is its freedom of functioning within a conflict zone. Perpetual conflict atmosphere has meant an existence of several pressure points. The pull and push of the pressures have taken a toll on the press in Manipur and the formation of a strong unity amongst its practitioners has become a must.162

The All Manipur Working Journalists' Union, the apex media body today exists not so much as to fight for the wages of its reporters but to collectively meet all the challenges confronting the press in the State. The challenge comes from all angles; the government duly formed by elected representatives of the people, the armed forces, non-state actors, even NGOs and clubs. Journalists in Manipur have been shot dead and not accounted for, have been kidnapped and threatened. Press units have been ransacked by government forces as well as closed down by armed insurgents. Press

personnel have often been humiliated and beaten by security forces while on duty. Press in Manipur is less free than elsewhere in India. The cases of professional hazards faced by media persons of the state are being dealt with in the fifth chapter of the present thesis.

4.5 Reflections of the armed conflict in Manipur in mainstream and local media:

There is a gulf of difference, in allocating space and time, in the coverage of armed conflict scene in the north eastern India by the mainstream media and regional media. The outlook of the two is also different. It may be because of proximity that Jammu and Kashmir is getting better share of coverage in both national print and electronic media than the north eastern states of the country do. Because of the market imperatives of the corporate media, national print and electronic media allocates more space and time to metropolitan cities.

A study of the coverage of the seven north eastern states of India in the New Delhi editions of *the Times of India, the Hindustan Times* and *the Asian Age* for a period of one month in 1999, reveals that the three newspapers on an average do not devote even one percent of the news hole i.e., the total amount of space meant for news and other editorial items apart
from the advertisement space; for the coverage of news and views concerning the seven states. In the mainstream electronic media also the north eastern states of the country has only a rare mention, that too when there is hue and cry or an uprising in a very critical issue. Brief news that portrays the region as a hotbed of crime is a common feature in the mainstream media. The national print media’s concern of the north eastern India is only in their regional editions that have been taken up to boost circulation and to increase in advertising volume and advertising rates.

Serious reporting of the north east with a mission to give a forum of contending views in respect of the activities of the state and non-state actors in critical junctures of armed conflict or armed conflict like situations is very much lacking in the mainstream media. The issues and concerns of the confronting parties deserved to be highlighted. Offering amicable solutions to the immediate problem of the nation through the media contents will be really an immense contribution to the service of our country and the humanity as well. Media may need to go beyond the fact-deliverers and find the conflict-resolving talents. Sometimes, with conflict resolution prompting, participants, who have stake in the conflict, can be transformed

into conflict-resolving partners. The role of media in bringing together opposing points of view has been unquestioningly recognized. At this instant, added to it, is the role that media may possibly play in bringing about conflict-resolving points of view from the warring parties together at a meeting point for a composite dialogue that would lead to an amicable and everlasting solution.

Many senior journalists of the state prefer to look differently between the provincial media and the mainstream/metropolitan media with respect to coverage of social issues. Their dynamics as well as resources are also significantly different. The provincial media’s commitment to social issues of the state is more. This is so because their perspective is more inclined towards the subjects of the social phenomena than the metropolitan media which have become disinterested observers of the same events endangering the peace and development of the north-eastern part of the country.\textsuperscript{164}

The print and electronic media of Manipur is covering the armed conflict situation in the state to a significant extent even though they faced time and again professional hazards while shouldering its responsibility.

\textsuperscript{164} A Talk with Hemantakumar Ningomba, Chief Editor, Hueiyen Lampaos (Manipuri edition), on 5 October, 2008 at the newspaper’s office at Keishampat, Imphal.
Reporting conflicts here has become the greatest challenge for the journalists. They are performing their duty in a condition of great stress and strain. There have been glaring instances of journalists being targeted by separatist outfits, threatened, assaulted and harassed by law enforcing machinery of the state. They are in between the devil and deep sea in the war of attrition and varied perception of the role of media by the state administration, the security forces and the non-state actors.

Recently, a paradigm shift is coming in the coverage of armed conflict in local media. Earlier they had merely reported the gun battles between the proscribed outfits and security forces, and from time to time with editorial comments towards a solution of the ongoing conflict. But after the recent plebiscite offer by the UNLF Chief Rajkumar Sanayaima to end the armed conflict situation in the state; there is more intensity in reporting armed conflicts and discussions of its resolution modalities in academic and social circles. The policy imperatives for resolution of the same have been both widely reported and commented upon in the local media.  

There is also a compelling need on the part of the security forces operating in Manipur to believe in the impartiality of the local media in the

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165 Armed Conflict in Manipur: Reflections in Media, Research Update, op. cit, p.9
armed conflict situation in Manipur. Even if some unwanted news or words have crop up sometimes in local publications or transmissions, it won't be fair to treat it as a deliberate sedition as the local journalists are facing unpredictable professional hazards as they cannot please both the warring parties.

Sometimes, proscribed outfits used to keep their press communiqué to a newspaper office for security reasons and the same is to be collected by journalists of other newspapers and of local television network. However, there is the risk of them being misunderstood by the law enforcing agencies of the government as if they are aiding and abetting militant activities.

In a letter addressed to the then Chief Secretary, Government of Manipur, H. Jelshyam on the 23 March 1999, the Indian Army authorities charged that some of the newspapers published in Imphal not only publishes press releases of underground organizations but also distributes the same to other newspapers. The Chief Secretary was requested to initiate appropriate action against the newspapers engaging in such anti-national activities. In the letter signed by Colonel, General Staff, 53rd Mountain Division of the Indian Army, Phillip Compose; the Army asked the Chief Secretary to
forbid local daily newspapers in Imphal from publishing press releases of underground organizations.\textsuperscript{166}

The Press Council of India, on its part, is of the view that publishing the press handouts of unlawful organizations is neither against the law of the land nor aiding and abetting anti-national activities if the press communiqué of the outfits have newsworthy elements and what the mediapersons should do is just to edit the same so that the militant version is not amounted to sedition. What will be seditious, may also decided by the conscience of journalists. This does not imply that media can publish or transmit any propaganda material of the outlawed groups. The journalist fraternity should also observe the professional code of conduct and the media persons should only be media persons and at the most the messenger of peace, development and social harmony.\textsuperscript{167}

4.6 AMWJU and its activities in the armed conflict environment:

The apex professional body of the journalists of the state, All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) was born in 1974 and it is affiliated to the Indian Federation of Working Journalists (IFWJ). Smaller as well as

\textsuperscript{166} Matangi Yakofo, April 1, 1999, p-1.
\textsuperscript{167} A Talk with W. Shyamjai, former President of the AMWJU at Keishampat on 30 December, 2006.
short lived organizations like Reporters’ Forum, Manipur (REFORM), Journalists Front, Manipur (JFM), Journalists Welfare Association, Manipur (JWAM) etc. also emerged from time to time and have served the interests of local journalists. An organization of editors of local newspapers also came into being in 2003 by the name of the Editors’ Forum, Manipur (EFM). It acts in tandem with the AMWJU.

The objectives of the AMWJU, as approved by its Special General Body Meeting on 1 May, 1998 are as follows.\textsuperscript{168}

- To encourage and promote study and research in the field of Journalism,
- To encourage the setting up of journalism institutions to provide training and research in various fields of Journalism,
- To establish and maintain a library catering to the needs of various organizations and students of Journalism,
- To award scholarship and prizes to deserving students of Journalism,

\textsuperscript{168} Sangeeta K., Role of Local Dailies of Manipur in Dissemination of Information: A Case Study, Ph D thesis, Department of Library and Information Sciences, Manipur University, 2004, P-83.
➢ To inculcate sense of nationalism among the people through various means of publications like journals, newspapers, magazines, books etc.,

➢ To uphold the dignity and freedom of the press in all aspects of functioning,

➢ To promote and maintain the highest standards of professional conduct and integrity and to raise the status of members of the profession and Journalism,

➢ To strive for the betterment of working conditions of journalists; especially salary, tenure of office and conditions of service and for prevention of socially unrelated automation,

➢ To institute an employment and emergency help fund and journalists’ benefit fund for the members of the All Manipur Working Journalists Union,

➢ To safeguard and promote the interests of journalists in all circumstances including securing employment, prevention and protection from harassment including threat in the course of journalistic duty.
Whenever any journalist of the state has grievances in connection with his or her profession, the problem may be addressed to the Union through the concerned media organization. The Union will discuss the matter and after considering the gravity of the grievance, will decide to do the needful to address the grievances by collective effort. AMWJU has sailed through the test of the time and unanimously fought against all odds in times of attacks, assaults, life attempts and other designs of threat to the journalist fraternity of the state through democratic means.

The Union has also framed a Code of Conduct for the journalists working in the state on the line of the Press Council of India’s Code of Conduct with local adjustments. The same was developed to safeguard the sanctity of editorial independence of the local media in the armed conflict between the government forces and armed rebels and factional fights within the militant organizations.

The Journalists Union of Manipur is among the pioneers in the northeastern region of the country in bringing into limelight the present scenario of the armed conflict situation in the region in a systematic academic debate with international humanitarian organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross. From 2006 onwards, the AMWJU is
organizing seminars and workshops to understand comprehensively the nature of armed conflict in the state and to explore the feasibilities of resolving the same amicably. The Union is also looking at the role which the local media could play in the initiation of a peace process between the armed rebels and the Government of India. The seriousness of the endeavor is well evident in the form of initiatives taken by them in organizing seminars, workshops, etc. These occasions have attracted resource persons from international fora as well as national and local intellectuals.

4.7 Concluding Remarks: Among the armed conflict regions of the country the situation in Manipur is one of the gravest if one looks upon the quantum of human lives claimed by the ongoing armed confrontation between the regular government forces and the secessionists. In Manipur, with a population of 2.4 million only, the number of the armed violence related deaths in the past decade is added up to 2856 including 1110 civilians. Everyday, 1000 people die of armed violence all over the world and India’s share is 12 people per day.\textsuperscript{169} In the past three years, approximately one person dies every day of armed violence in Manipur. If the quantum of death in armed violence is calculated on the basis of

\textsuperscript{169} Small arms bleed North-East, The Times of India (North-East edition), September 29, 2008, p-2.
population parameter, Manipur’s death rate in the armed violence is more than double the global figure and more than 34 times the national figure. While the population of the state accounts only one tenth of the total population of the whole of the north eastern India, the state shares 45 percent of the killing statistics of the region.

Here, reporting conflicts has become the greatest challenge for the journalists. They are performing their duty in a condition of great stress and strain. There have been glaring instances of journalists being targeted by separatist outfits, threatened, assaulted and harassed by law enforcing machinery of the state. They are in between the devil and deep sea in the war of attrition and varied perception of the role of media by the state administration, the security forces and the non-state actors.