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India-Myanmar border Free Movement Regime

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Why is in news? What is the India-Myanmar border Free Movement Regime, which the Centre is planning to end?

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on January 20 announced that the Centre has decided to **fence the entire length of the India-Myanmar border to stop the free movement of people.**

The two countries share a **largely unfenced 1,643 km border**, which goes through the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

Shah said in Guwahati: "Our border with Myanmar is an open border. The Narendra Modi government has taken a decision that the India-Myanmar border will be secure and the whole border will be fenced like the Bangladesh border. The government is reconsidering our Free Movement Regime (FMR) agreement with Myanmar, and is going to end this ease of coming and going."

Free Movement Regime:

The FMR is a **mutually agreed arrangement** between the two countries that allows tribes living along the border on **either side to travel up to 16 km** inside the other country **without a visa.**

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It was implemented **in 2018** as part of the Act East policy, at a time when diplomatic relations between India and Myanmar were on the upswing.

In fact, the FMR was to be put in place in 2017 itself but was deferred due to the Rohingya refugee crisis that erupted that August.

The regime has been reviewed from time to time, and most experts agree that the FMR needs better regulation. As the crisis in Myanmar escalated and the influx of refugees increased, India suspended the FMR in September 2022.

Need for FMR:

The border between India and Myanmar was **demarcated by the British in 1826**, without seeking the opinion of the people living in the region.

The border effectively **divided people of the same ethnicity and culture** into two nations without their consent.

The current India-Myanmar Border reflects the line the British drew.

People in the region have strong ethnic and familial ties across the border. In Manipur's Moreh region, there are villages where some homes are in Myanmar.

In Nagaland's Mon district, the border actually passes through the house of the chief of Longwa village, splitting his home into two.

Apart from facilitating people-to-people contact, the FMR was supposed to **provide impetus to local trade and business**.

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The region has a **long history of trans-border commerce** through customs and border haats.

Given the low-income economy, such exchanges are vital for the sustenance of local livelihoods.

For border people in Myanmar too, Indian towns are closer for business, education, and healthcare than those in their own country.

Reasons for scrapping FMR:

The **illegal migration of tribal Kuki-Chin peoples** into India from Myanmar is one of the key issues in the ongoing Manipur conflict.

While the Meiteis have accused these illegal migrants and the **alleged “narco-terror network”** along the India-Myanmar Border (IMB) of fomenting trouble in the state.

Although beneficial to local people and helpful in improving Indo-Myanmar ties, it has been criticised in the past for **unintentionally aiding illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and gun running**.

The border runs through **forested and undulating terrain**, is almost entirely unfenced, and **difficult to monitor**. In Manipur, less than 6 km of the border is fenced.

Since the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, the ruling junta has launched a **campaign of persecution against the Kuki-Chin peoples**.

This has pushed **large numbers of Myanmarese tribals** across the country’s western border **into India**, especially into Manipur and Mizoram, where they have sought shelter.

Mizoram, where a large section of the population has close ethnic and cultural ties with people across the border, has set up camps for more than 40,000 refugees, despite protests from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.

Impacts of migration from Myanmar to Manipur:

Manipur too has received a **chunk of illegal migrants** in the last few months. A committee set up by the state government to identify such migrants in 2023 put their number at 2,187.

In 2023, Manipur Chief Secretary Vineet Joshi wrote to the Assam Rifles, expressing concern over reports of **718 new infiltrations from Myanmar**, and asked the paramilitary force to identify and deport them.

The Manipur government has alleged that village chiefs have been **illegally settling migrants from Myanmar** in new villages in the hills, leading to deforestation.

An **eviction drive against these new villages** became the flashpoint between Kukis in the hills and the government last March, leading to violence in the state.

Problem of drug trafficking or terrorism:

Several insurgent groups such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), and small groups of Kukis and Zomis have **built camps** in Sagaing Division, Kachin State, and Chin State (in Myanmar).

They took shelter there, **obtained arms, trained cadres**, and, most importantly, **engaged in illegal activities** such as smuggling drugs and selling weapons to raise funds. This is possible **because of the porous borders and frequent misuse of FMR**.

Therefore, **managing and administering the border areas** effectively is pertinent for reducing drug trafficking and illegal cross-border movement on unfenced borders.

Data from the Manipur Chief Minister's Office show that 500 cases were registered and 625 individuals were arrested **under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act** in Manipur in 2022.

A **large quantity of narcotics**, including heroin, opium, brown sugar, and ganja, crystal meth and yaba (methamphetamine and caffeine), and **prescription drugs** such as the stimulant pseudoephedrine and analgesic spasmoproxyvon, were seized, several thousand acres of poppy were destroyed during the same period.

The value of the drugs seized or destroyed is estimated to have been more than Rs 1,227 crore in the international market.

What can happen if FMR is removed?

Given the **interests of the local population**, however, neither the complete removal of the FMR nor full fencing of the border may be desirable. Livelihoods will be impacted and essential travel for health care and education may be hit.

Sources in the security establishment **said it is not easy to plug illegal immigration or drug trafficking** across an unfenced border in treacherous terrain.

Even with **robust patrolling and intelligence**, people do sneak through, especially when there is no hostility towards the immigrant on our side.

FMR or no FMR, it is not an easy task. And all borders, even the fenced ones, are struggling to deal with drug trafficking.

Way forward:

Border Fencing: The government plans to fence about 300 km of the border, with a tender expected soon.

Regulatory Revisions: Experts suggest refining the FMR to better regulate movement while maintaining cross-border ties.

Infrastructure and Trade: Enhancing infrastructure and formalizing trade at designated entry points could mitigate some negative impacts.

Community Engagement: Involving border communities in decision-making is crucial for effective and sensitive border management.