

P2
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Centre keen on resuming Assam talks

From Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Dec. 22.

The Centre sent a message to the Assam agitation leaders today, suggesting that the Home Secretary, Mr. T. Chaturvedi, could visit Gauhati as a prelude to the next round of talks on the issue of foreign nationals. But the substantive discussions, it was pointed out, could be held only in Delhi.

It had not been possible to resume the dialogue between the Union Government and the representatives of the All-Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, apart from other reasons, because of the differences over the venue.

The agitation leaders had insisted on Gauhati while the Centre saw no case for departing from the past practice — of holding discussions in Delhi. This, the Union Government said, was necessary for practical reasons — first because, Central officials, who take part in the discussions, have to attend to other business, and, therefore, could not be away from Delhi for long.

Secondly, the discussions might entail reference to official documents, which were available only in the capital. The Home Secretary's visit to Gauhati for preliminary exchanges, it was felt, could provide a way out of the stalemate. Barring an unexpected hitch the talks

could be expected to be resumed either towards the end of this month or in early January.

Today's message was couched in conciliatory terms and, according to Central sources, reflected the official anxiety to resume the dialogue. The agitation leaders were told that the Centre did not intend to be harsh and was keen on settling the controversy, and there was an implied plea for reciprocity sentiments.

The Assam Governor, Mr. Perakash Merotra, now here today met the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the Home Minister, Mr. Zail Singh, and acquainted them with the latest political and law and order situation in the State.

The scenario, that emerged from the Governor's account was somewhat on the following lines.

The agitation was in a low key and the leaders of the two organisations would not find it easy to build up the tempo, contrary to what was the case in the past. At the same time, there was no denying the widespread sympathy for the agitators' stand on the issue of foreign nationals.

While all public activity could come to a standstill in the wake of the call for bandhs (partly out of fear), the movement of crude, plywood and other items had not been interrupted.

There was a lull in the ministry-making activity following the Centre's decision

to extend the President's rule. New Delhi's decision was based on the report of the Governor that a stable line-up in the Assembly had not yet emerged. Fresh efforts however could be expected after two or three weeks.

PTI reports:

Mr. Zail Singh, Union Home Minister, today called on the "fence-sitters" in the Opposition to come down and help the Government solve the complex foreign nationals issue in Assam.

Addressing his Ministry's Consultative Committee on Assam, Mr. Zail Singh said the Assam agitation had tied up the entire State machinery in the maintenance of law and order and appealed to the movement leaders to end the restlessness they had created in the region.

AASU publicity campaign

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) today decided to send a four-member delegation, led by its General Secretary, Mr. Bhriku Kumar Phukan on December 25 to New Delhi for a publicity campaign to explain to the Opposition leaders and press, about the present position of its movement against foreigners in the State.

The decision was taken at the executive of the AASU in Gauhati today after reviewing different aspects of the movement including the future course of action.