

Assam talks: Hopes rise with accord on border checks

From Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Oct. 31.

Central Government representatives today succeeded in convincing the Assam agitation leaders of New Delhi's anxiety to secure the State's border with Bangladesh against future infiltration. This hopeful indication — the first of its type since the negotiations began — was available after today's round of talks between the officials and representatives of the All-Assam Students Union and the All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad:

With it, the discussions on ways to strengthen the security of the border, lasting nearly nine hours spread over two sittings, concluded and the way was cleared for taking up other points like the principle of detection of foreigners and detection of other names from voters' lists and their dispersal to other States or deportation to the country of their origin. The talks will be resumed on Monday.

The AASU chief, Mr. P. K. Mahanta, described the outcome of today's discussions as a "tentative agreement" between the two sides, subject to approval by the Government, on the one hand, and the executive committees of the two Assam organisations, on the other.

Police also to patrol?

The "agreement", according to him, visualises barbed wire fencing along the border, construction of roads, wherever feasible, demarcation of a specified stretch of area as no-man's land and joint patrolling of the border by Assam police and the Border Security Force.

According to Mr. N. Bora of AAGSP, 50 per cent of the problem had been resolved as a result of today's agreement. Another agitation leader said that an overall agreement could be reached in the current series of discussions.

A Home Ministry spokesman merely reported the end of today's five-hour round which, he said, was confined to modalities for strengthening the border. He did not talk of a "tentative agreement" perhaps because that would imply initial reluctance on the part of the Government to devise means for protecting the border. The Government, it was stated, was anxious to take all effective steps and had noted the suggestions made by the agitation leaders.

In a subsequent clarification, the Home Ministry spokesman said that questions relating to physical barriers along the border, like provision of barbed wire fencing, construction of a wall or roads and demarcation of no-man's land were being considered by a committee, while suitable arrangements for patrolling had already been made.

Agitacionists satisfied

Agitation leaders appeared satisfied because, according to them, the Government side had gone beyond repeating general assurances about checking infiltration and discussed specific measures. They saw willingness on the part of officials to understand their viewpoint.

The official team included the Home Secretary, Mr. T. N. Chaturvedi, the Additional Secretary, Mr. M. L. Kampani, the Joint Secretary, Mr. K. M. L. Chhabra, and the Law Ministry Joint Secretary, Mr. P. K. Kartha.

The AASU was represented by Mr. Mahanta, Mr. B. K. Phuken and Mr. N. Sarma and AAGSP by Mr. N. Bora and Mr. Atul Bora.

CPI-M's warning

The CPI (M) central committee, now in session here, meanwhile released its resolution on Assam. Perhaps because the party was not aware of the latest trend of the dialogue between the Centre and the agitation leaders, the resolution talked of a virtual breakdown of the negotiations.

In the committee's view, the 15-point proposal put forward by the agitation leaders showed their adherence to the earlier "disruptive stand". The resolution reiterated that 1971 should be the cut-off year for detection of foreigners and warned the Government that the move to re-open discussions on the 1961-71 period would be utilised by the other side to intensify the agitation. While being critical of the Congress (I) move to instal a minority Government in Assam, the committee was inclined to support the efforts of other non-Congress (I) parties for a popular Ministry, provided they came out unambiguously against the agitation.

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