

Assam talks to be adjourned unless stir leaders relent

Hindustan Times Correspondent

NEW DELHI, July 9—The current round of talks between the Centre and Assam agitation leaders on the foreigners issue is being adjourned as no agreement has been reached on the fate of those who entered the State between 1961 and 1971.

Union Home Minister Zail Singh who has agreed to meet the leaders tomorrow is expected to tell them that by having resiled from their earlier position, they have made a solution of the problem more difficult.

Unless the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) leaders agree to consider the Centre's formulation as regards the 1961-71 entrants, at their meeting with Mr Zail Singh, they will be asked to disperse. Dates for another round will be negotiated later.

It is being made clear that under no circumstances shall the Centre agree to treat as unauthorised all those who migrated to Assam between 1961 and 1971. The agitation leaders had disclosed their hand by impliedly stating that they wanted to throw out people on linguistic considerations. For the first time since the agitation began had a spokesman of the agitators—in the present case, Mr Girin Barua—stated that they wanted all the Hindu Bengalis also to be thrown out.

For the past few days, the agita-

tion leaders have been quibbling about legal issues regarding a definition of foreigners and insisting that, except for the registered refugees estimated to number 2.14 lakh, all others should be thrown out of Assam. The talks had virtually broken down yesterday when they insisted that all those who had migrated after 1961 should be thrown out.

The Centre will propose to the agitation leaders that as differences over the 1961-71 refugees persisted consideration of the issue could be postponed. In the meantime, the AASU and the AAGSP should co-operate with the Government in the task of regularising the stay of those who came before 1961 and detecting those who migrated after 1971 whom the Government is committed to deport.

In fact, that would solve nearly two-thirds of the problem. The case of the 1961-71 entrants could be considered later when the agitation leaders had considered all aspects of the matter including the Centre's commitment to give shelter to refugees from erstwhile East Pak-

istan, humanitarian considerations and international commitments.

The Centre feels that the immediate tasks that need to be attended to are: issue of identity cards to all bonafide citizens after the process of detection and regularisation was over, maintenance of household registers and an accurate record of births and deaths, strengthening of border security and vigilance for better detection of foreigners. With the agitation still on and the administration and the police forces preoccupied with maintenance of law and order, it was not possible to attend to these tasks with seriousness. Vital national interests were suffering as a result of the stalemate over the foreigners' issue.

It is explained that a small committee of officials had to be constituted to deal with the representatives of the two organisations because their first combined meeting with Mr Zail Singh had ended in confusion. So many persons were talking simultaneously that it was impossible to conduct the proceedings. The "mini-committee" discussions also did not prove useful because the agitation leaders talked all the time about legal issues and refused to pay heed to humanitarian and other considerations.

The agitation leaders' rigidity in considering the case of the 1961-71 entrants had brought about the stalemate although in their talks with some Central officials at Gauhati earlier, they had given the impression that they were in a reasonable frame of mind and willing to come to a settlement.

The Centre is reported to have offered some alternatives to the agitation leaders, such as repeating Assam Governor L. P. Singh's offer to treat 1967 as the cut-off point for the purpose of detection, but the AASU and the AAGSP leaders did not respond.

At the official level talks it was explained to the Assam leaders that even before partition Assam had 27 per cent Bengali-speaking population. After partition, which led to the persecution of minorities in erstwhile East Pakistan, many Bengali speaking people crossed over to Assam and West Bengal as in both these States they had a cultural base. The influx of Bengali speaking people into Assam where their relations and acquaintances lived was inevitable. Therefore, citizenship could not be denied to such persons because of linguistic considerations, it is pointed out.

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