

Assam talks make a promising start

From Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Jan. 18.

The first round of tripartite talks on the vexed issue of foreigners in Assam ended on an optimistic note tonight.

Although no specific proposals emerged from the inconclusive discussions, which would be resumed tomorrow, informed sources felt that a breakthrough might be possible.

Senior Ministers of the Union Government, Parliamentary leaders of five Opposition parties and representatives of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) took part in the three and a half hour deliberations.

Representatives of the AASU and AAGSP have in the past held talks with the Union Home Minister, Mr. Zail Singh, and senior officials but this is the first time that "combined" talks involving Opposition leaders as well are being held.

The talks started off on a discordant note with the demand of the AASU and AAGSP representatives that the newly appointed Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Mr. N. R. Laskar, should not be allowed to take part.

Mr. Laskar was elected to the Lok Sabha in the 1980 general election from the Karimganj constituency in Assam.

It is one of the only two parliamentary constituencies in the State where a poll could be taken then. No election was held in the other 12 parliamentary constituencies in Assam because of the agitation, and these seats are still vacant.

The suggestion was however objected to not only by other senior Ministers but also by Opposition leaders like Mr. Vajpayee (BJP) and Mr. Ravindra Varma (Janata). Mr. Laskar continued to be present till the end of the meeting.

Other Ministers who took part in the talks besides Mr. Zail Singh were Mr. Pranab Mukherjee (Finance), Mr. Jagannath Kaushal (Law), Mr. P. Shiv Shanker (Petroleum and Chemicals), Mr. Bhisma Narayan Singh (Parliamentary Affairs) and Mr. P. Venkatasubbiah (Minister of State for Home).

Besides Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Ravindra Varma, the other Opposition participants were Mr. H. S. Surjeet (CPI-M), Mr. Indrajit Gupta (CPI) and Mr. Bholu Paswan Shastri (Congress-I). The Lok Dal leader, Mr. Charan Singh,

though invited, boycotted the meeting.

The AASU was represented by an eight-member team led by its president, Mr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. The AAGSP team consisted of 10 representatives.

Homage to dead: At the suggestion of the agitation representatives all those present at the meeting stood in silence for a minute in memory of those who had lost their lives in the agitation. Homage was also paid to the police personnel who were killed in the disturbances.

Today's talks did not lead to any positive conclusions but it was more or less conceded that the proposals submitted by AASU and AAGSP in September as well as the formulation made by the Government in August last would be taken up for discussion.

On the question of preventing future infiltration of aliens from across the international frontier there was a broad measure of agreement and a unanimous formulation might emerge tomorrow.

The crux of the matter is however the dispersal of aliens who are found to have entered Assam between 1961 and 1971. No easy solution is in sight though the Government seems to be willing to go to the extent of stripping such persons of the right to vote. The AASU and AAGSP have been insisting on the dispersal of such persons from Assam.

Army engineers man essential services

GAUHATI, Jan. 18.

The 12-hour "total non-cooperation", called by the Assam agitation leaders on the foreigners issue, was, by and large peaceful today, though normal life was affected and work in all Government offices in the entire Brahmaputra valley was disrupted.

Air services and train and Government road transport were running normally and oil production was unaffected. Army engineers were deployed to man the "most essential services" like electricity and water supply.

In an incident of stone-throwing on a passing train at Haibargaon, Nowgong district, some window panes were damaged, official sources said. No one was injured.

The call to observe the programme was given by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) against what they called "illegitimate installation of a Government in the State with defectors and legislators elected on the foreigners' vote".

The Government provided armed escorts in trains and State transport buses. In most parts of the State private transport was off the road and business establishments, including banks and LIC remained closed.

Attendance in the Civil Secretariat at Dispur and Divisional Railway headquarters at Maligaon was reported satisfactory. Telephone exchanges, however, were affected. UNI & PTI

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