

Border sealing figures in talks

Hindustan Times Correspondent

NEW DELHI, Jan. 18—Several proposals to seal Assam's border with Bangladesh to prevent future infiltration were today discussed here at the first combined meeting of the Government, opposition leaders and Assam agitation leaders.

It was generally agreed that border security should be tightened further but the Government was not able to give any firm assurance on the Assam leaders' demand for erecting a barbed wire or a masonry wall all along the border.

The representatives of the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) received support from the opposition leaders present for their demand that the Government should end "repression" in the State and create a congenial atmosphere for fruitful discussions on the future of foreigners.

Home Minister Zail Singh explained to them that the Government had used minimum force in dealing with the agitation in the State. At any rate no Government could tolerate dislocation of normal life or interruption of production or violence. If the Assam leaders gave up their agitation and stopped indulging in violence, the Government would have no reason to proceed against them.

The meeting was attended by

Mr Zail Singh, the two Ministers of State for Home, Mr P. Venkatasubbiah and Mr N. R. Laskar, the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Bhisma Narain Singh and Law Minister Jagannath Kaushal.

The opposition leaders present were Mr Ravindra Varma (Janata), Mr Bhola Paswan Shastri (Congress), Mr A. B. Vajpayee (BJP), Mr Indrajit Gupta (CPI) and Mr Harikrishan Singh Surjeet (CPI-M). The Lok Dal was not represented.

Lok Dal president Charan Singh had earlier said he would not participate in the talks in view of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's attitude towards opposition unity.

The draft proposals made by the

Government and the Assam movement leaders will form the basis of a new round of negotiations. The opposition leaders will also participate. The drafts are the result of 14 rounds of talks held by the movement leaders earlier with officials representing the Government.

All-Assam Students Union General-Secretary Bhrigu Kumar Phukan told newsmen that the discussions centered mainly on continuing infiltration and steps to check it.

About the basic issue of foreign nationals, there were differences on whether to discuss the Government proposals or the 17-point draft of the agitators. Finally, it was decided that both sets of proposals be considered in detail. In this the opposition leaders played a helpful role.

Mr Phukan said the Government was likely to give its reaction to their proposals tomorrow and they would also make known their views on the official draft.

It is understood that the minutes of the discussions will be officially recorded — a point on which the Assam movement leaders have been insisting after Government allegations that they had gone back on what they agreed at earlier meetings.

Although the meeting lasted three hours, part of the time was taken up by the procedural wrangle whether the draft presented by the agitators and the Government at previous meetings should form the basis of discussions. On the question of the agitation, neither side gave in. While the Assam leaders insisted that they could not but agitate until their demands were conceded the Government took the stand that any violence or interruption of normal life would not be tolerated.

As most of the issues concerning the foreigners problem remain to be sorted out the discussions will be resumed tomorrow.

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