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Free Press

Jerks and jolts mark Assam talks

Free Press News Service

NEW DELHI, Jan. 18: The talks on Assam for a solution of the foreigners issue—the first ever in which the opposition leaders are associated—began here today and even after three and a half hours discussion, remained inconclusive.

The three constituents of the meeting today—the Government leaders of the Assam movement, and the opposition leaders in Parliament—will meet again tomorrow afternoon. All the 19 rounds of talks hitherto were confined to the Government and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad).

Today's talks started with a discordant note, but a cordial atmosphere followed soon after, resulting in a "meaningful discussion" of India was evolving to sustain as put by Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, president, Bharatiya Janata Party, when approached by newsmen.

At the beginning, the AASU and the AAGSP representatives objected to the presence of Mr Nihar Ranjan Laskar, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs. The Assam leaders said that Mr Laskar was elected on foreigners vote and as such he could not be recognised.

Mr Vajpayee, supported by Mr Ravindra Varma of the Janata Party and Mr Bhola Paswan Shastri of the Congress (S), did not agree with this view. They said that Mr Laskar was validly elected and his election had not been challenged. Besides he was a member of the Council of Ministers. At this, the agitation leaders withdrew their objection.

Before the talks progressed, the Assam movement leaders demanded that the participants should stand up for two minutes as a mark of respect to those who had died in police repression. All stood up, including the ministers participating in the meeting.

The opposition leaders congratulated the AASU and the AAGSP leaders for participating in the talks in spite of the Government repression.

Then began the substantial talks beginning from the outcome of the meeting on August 23 between the Government and the movement leaders when the Government claimed that "a near agreement was reached." This was questioned by both the opposition and the agitation leaders. The former asked what was the meaning of "near agreement" and the latter explained that they had submitted a revised draft on September 23.

After some discussion it was virtually agreed that effective steps would be taken for security

of the border. A final decision is expected tomorrow.

A suggestion was also made that "foreigners" should be removed from the voters' list and a fresh election be held on the revised electoral rolls so that the Government that would be formed may tackle the foreigners problem. But the Government side pointed out that many among such people (foreigners) were genuine refugees.

The opposition leaders, however, explained that refugees could not be treated as citizens until and unless they had gone through the legal and constitutional procedures laid down for this purpose. Further discussion on this will be held tomorrow.

Before the meeting starts tomorrow the Government and the opposition leaders will meet the two minority organisation representatives who are opposed to the AASU and the AAGSP. These two organisations are the Citizens Right Preservation Committee and the Plains Tribal Council of Assam.

The opposition leaders present in the meeting are: Mr A. B. Vajpayee, Mr. Ravindra Varma (Janata), Mr. Indrajit Gupta (CPI), Mr. Harikrishan Singh Surjeet (CPIM) and Mr. Bhola Paswan Shastri (Congress-S).

Gogoi meets PM

NEW DELHI, Jan 18 (PTI):

The Chief Minister of Assam, Mr Keshab Chandra Gogoi, today discussed with the Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi, the formation of his council of Ministers.

Mr Gogoi told PTI after his discussions with the Prime Minister that he hoped to finalise the composition of his ministry before his departure for Gauhati either tomorrow or the day after.

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Assam paralysed by stir

GAUHATI, Jan 18 (UND): 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.

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

The police chased away a group of people at the railway workshop at Dibrugarh.

Army engineers were deployed to man the "most essential services" today in view of the disruption caused by the "total non-cooperation" with the newly installed Congress-(I) Government.

Official reports received here said the non-co-operation programme, which began at 5 a.m. today, paralysed normal life and severely disrupted the official work throughout the Brahmaputra Valley.

However, air services, train and Government road transport system were running normally and oil production in the State remained unaffected.

Civil authorities pressed into service army engineers and technicians to run the "most essential services" such as electricity, water supply and telephone services as these were completely disrupted in most parts of the Brahmaputra Valley.

The total non-cooperation programme, however, did not affect the Cachar district in the Barak valley and two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills.

The call to observe the programme was given by the AASU and AAGSP against what they called "illegal installation of a Government with defectors and legislators elected on the foreigners' vote."