

Kashmiri Pandits reject Mufti's plan

TIMES NEWS NETWORK AND PTI

Jammu: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits have rejected the Mufti Mohammad Sayeed government's proposal of returning to the Valley.

The government, which claims it wants to resettle the displaced Pandits in the Valley in a phased manner, is constructing 300 flats each in Sheikhpora and Anantnag. The government claims that Pandits have shown willingness to return and have been registering themselves for allotment of flats. "The orders for the government employees to return were ready for issuance," the chief minister said at a function recently.

Alarmed by the government exercise, representatives of 3.5 lakh displaced Kashmiri Pandits rejected the proposal at a meeting on Monday.

"This is unacceptable to us in the prevailing circumstances of continuing violence and distrust," Roshan Lal Raina, representative Co-ordination Committee for Migrant camps, told newsmen. There are over 25,000 people living in six migrant camps in the Jammu region.

Mr Raina said that the government's claims of Pandits ready to return were absolutely false. He said the government was only trying to score points before the international forum.

The Committee said that massacres like those at Wandhama and Nadimarg should serve as a deterrent to any hasty action by the government vis-a-vis the return of the Pandits. "Any Central or state government proposal for the Pandits' return should be discussed with the representatives of the community," Mr Raina added.

Meanwhile, there were reports of violence in the state. Two women were injured in the cross-firing between militants and security forces, even as militants set afire seven houses in Poonch and Udhampur districts on Sunday night, according to official sources.



The police grapple with activists of the Jammu and Kashmir Salvation Movement, an organisation of released militants, in Srinagar on Monday during a demonstration to highlight the alleged human rights violations by security forces.

In the Gool forest belt, security forces captured two top Hizbul Mujahideen militants after a fierce gunbattle on Monday morning. Militants opened fire on a patrol party in Vurmul and after a three-hour-long gunbattle the security forces were able to nab the two militants who made an unsuccessful attempt to flee. Both the militants had received training in Pakistan and had been operating in the Doda-Udhampur hills for the past three to four years.

In another incident, angry residents of Singhpora village in Udhampur district

demonstrated on Sunday to protest the killing of a girl in an explosion triggered by militants, a senior army officer said here on Monday.

Thirteen-year-old Shezadi was killed in the blast on Friday intended to target an army convoy, Brigadier General staff (media) G.D. Bakshi told PTI.

Seven other civilians were injured.

The Jamiat-i-Islami leader, Syed Ali Geelani, who went to console with the bereaved family, had to beat a hasty retreat after observing the mood of the people, according to Brig Bakshi.

2003

Refugee Pro
5/17

Reangs: Caught in the middle

25/11

THE attitude of Mizos towards the Brus or Reangs (also called Tuikuks) can be summed up in one sentence: *Tuikuks Pathian siam theihloh* (Even God cannot change them). In other words, the Mizos think the Reangs are "incorrigible".

The Election Commission's move to confer voting rights to the Reangs living as refugees for last six years across the border in adjoining Tripura has incensed all Mizos. Ask any Mizo — an official, politician or a journalist — and there is hardly a positive word about the Reangs from anyone.

The Reangs in Mizoram are a fairly large tribe, though, according to the 1971 census, their population consisted of only about 9,828 heads. Subsequently, they grew in number and are now the second largest tribe in Tripura. The tribe immigrated to the Mizo hills in search of fertile land. Linguistically and ethnically, the Reangs are akin to the Tibeto-Burmese tribes. The Mizos describe them as semi-nomadic with social customs akin to the Hindus. The Mizos, on the other hand, are Christians.

Education brought with itself a rise in political consciousness. It was in 1990 that the Reang Democratic Convention Party was formed with the aim to protect and promote Reang culture. This brought about opposition to the domination of Christian Mizos. The Reangs won in seven village council elections and a seat to the Lai Autonomous District Council in 1992. In 1997, another organisation — the Bru National Union — demanded an Autonomous District Council. This made the Mizos sit up. It was also during this period that the Bru National Liberation Front — a militant body — was born.

The opposition to the Reang demands was led by the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (Mizo Students Federation). The MZP issued a statement saying, "If you want to divide or disintegrate Mizoram further, it is better that you all go away." The statement had a strong element of threat. In this, the MZP was supported by the Young Mizo Association, a well-knit organisa-

The most problematic issue for the new administration in Mizoram is likely to be that of the Reangs, writes HEMENDRA NARAYAN



A pre-election rally at Kawnpui constituency on the outskirts of Aizawl. — Eastern Projections

tion which has units in all towns and villages in Mizoram. But their relationship ran into bad weather and the matter came to a head when Lalzawmliana, wildlife game watcher of the Mizoram government, was shot dead by BNLF in October 1997. In retaliation, Bru houses were burnt and this led to their exodus to Tripura and Cachar in Assam. Aizawl had, at one stage, accused the National Liberation Front of Tripura, a banned group dominated by Reangs, of providing arms and training to BNLF cadres. However, the relationship between BNLF and NLFT later withered.

Since October 1997, following atrocities, as many as 35,000 people of the Reang tribe crossed over from Mizoram to Tripura. Stranded in six camps in North

Tripura, their's is a story of uncertainties.

The unease has been heightened ever since the Election Commission conferred voting rights to some of these refugees. "My job is to ensure free and fair polls and no one who is an Indian national and is above the age of 18 can be deprived of his/her voting rights," the chief election commissioner had argued in Aizawl before the polls, much to the chagrin of Mizos. The official line of the Mizoram government is that the Reangs had left for Tripura "on their own volition".

Names of 14,616 adults were first collected from among those in refugee camps, of which 5,787 could be traced to previous electoral rolls. After the due process of registration, the number of voters totalled 4,266 and only 20 per cent

of them finally turned up to vote from the camps on 20 November at the two special booths set up by the Commission well inside Mizoram. Those who wanted to vote were brought in vehicles from Tripura.

The move for inclusion in the rolls started with a memorandum by the Mizoram Bru Refugee Committee. The matter went up to the Gauhati High Court. The Mizos were furious. An organisation called the Save Mizoram Committee — formed last year with membership from all political parties including the Congress and the BJP and powerful groups like YMA and MZP — opposed it vehemently. There was even the threat of boycotting the polls. Only two parties representing other minorities — the Hmar People's Convention, representing the Hmars, and Ephraim Union, representing the Jews — were not part of SMC. None of the political parties dared to say word of sympathy to the Brus. The distrust was so strong that there were allegations of Central funds provided to Tripura for the refugees staying in Tripura district being stashed away to the BNLF.

Currently, the BNLF is engaged in negotiations with the Mizoram government. No solution seems to be in sight even after eight rounds of interactive talks, the last being held in July. The BNLF has toned down its demand and is said to be willing to negotiate for something less. The Mizoram government has demanded that BNLF cadres should surrender.

The imbroglio would certainly be the most complicated problem that the new government in Mizoram would face. The points of difference between the two sides relate to determining the number of refugees. The Tripura government has opposed the Mizo government's position and has always been asking the Centre to pressurise it for early repatriation of the refugees. With the two neighbouring states locking horns over the issue, it is the hapless Reangs that are the worst sufferers.

(The author is the Lucknow-based Special Representative of The Statesman.)

Refugee-ridden Shillong for Karbi-Anglong blocks merger

Press Trust of India

SHILLONG, Nov. 18. — With more than 4,000 persons having fled to Meghalaya from Assam's Karbi-Anglong district, the Meghalaya government today said that it had been negotiating with successive Assam governments for a re-transfer of the two troubled blocks in Karbi-Anglong to Meghalaya as majority of the population there were Pnars.

The additional deputy commissioner of Jaintia Hills district, Mr Jyrwa said 4,241 Khasis and Pnars, who fled Karbi-Anglong, have taken shelter in various camps, and they are being provided with relief by the administration.

Karbi student better

SHILLONG, Nov. 18. — The condition of the Karbi student, who was set on fire here yesterday, is improving.

Eldrin Tisso, a student of Sacred Heart Theological College, is admitted at the Nazareth hospital here with 70 per cent burn injuries. Tisso was picked up by unidentified criminals from his hostel and taken to a jungle before he was beaten up and set on fire, police said.

Tisso is a resident of Sahjong village in Diphu, Karbi Anglong. — PTI

An official release said that Meghalaya had been consistently negotiating with Assam for a re-trans-

fer of the two blocks to Meghalaya's Jaintia Hills and Ri-Bhoi districts. The release also said that till the blocks are re-transferred, the Meghalaya government did not have any "constitutional responsibility" in the area.

The blocks, the release said, had been transferred to the then United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District of Assam vide an official notification on 12 April 1951.

The release denied that the Lapang government had failed to tackle the situation and said the chief minister, home minister, chief secretary and the DGP were in constant touch with their Assam counterparts over the influx of people from Karbi-Anglong to Meghalaya.

The refugee in India

By Rajeev Dhavan

There is no category called 'refugee' in Indian law. Refugees have no special due process rights... India's law must match its humanitarian goals.

NDIA'S REFUGEE policy remains a paradox. The Tibetans have made Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh their home. The Sri Lankans have been housed in camps in Tamil Nadu. Court orders protect the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh. The Bangladeshis, Afghans and Burmese, among others, have been allowed into India and are treated with relative humanity — even if under some pressure from the police, the threat of deportation and of subsistence livelihood. India's refugee record amidst many contradictions remains tolerable and responsible. The paradox is the harshness of the Foreigners Act 1946 — getting worse with every proposed amendment — and India's refusal to join the Convention on Refugees of 1951. Conversely, India permits the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) to operate — respecting, but not always, its certification of refugees.

The paradox is baffling: there is humanism in India's refugee record contrasting with an abject refusal to formalise its legal responsibilities towards the refugees, consigning them to the limbo of *ad hoc* treatment. But, let us draw the canvas. There is a clear distinction between a 'migrant', the displaced 'homeless' and 'refugees'. Since World War II, more people have migrated across the face of the earth. Some migrants have done well in transplanted conditions. 'Migrants' need protection from discrimination and some affirmative action to overcome disadvantage. The displaced 'homeless' need similar protection, but also socio-economic help to meet their 'homelessness'. Against all these, the 'refugees' stand in a class of their own.

Both the 'migrants' and the 'homeless' suffer a terrifying predicament. They are those who have fled their homes and cannot return because they "have a well-founded fear of persecution" — that they will be harassed, tortured and even put to death. The "refugees", on the other hand, are a trapped lot who live in dual fear of not being allowed to stay in the countries they have fled to or return to the persecuting country of their origin. The issue is: what do we owe to these doubly damned people? Does India have an answer?

The somewhat 'Euro-centric' Refugee Convention of 1951 was designed to deal with the European refugees, but extended further by a Protocol in 1967. The African nations — also facing open borders — devised a much-expanded definition of 'refugees' to include wider categories of persecuted in 1967 — as did the Americas in 1984. India refuses to join any version of the convention. The relevant statutes — the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, and the Foreigners Act 1946 — contain no special category of protection for the 'refugees' regarding their well-founded fear of persecution. They can be sent back to harassment or death in their countries of origin. This has happened in many cases — including one in the Supreme Court concerning a Sudanese who had lived in India, married a Tibetan Indian citizen, with children who were left behind.

India's law to deal with 'refugees' is inchoate. In Hans Muller's case (1955), the Supreme Court gave "absolute and unfettered" discretion to the Government to throw out foreigners. This was affirmed in Louis de Raedt's case (1991), which, at the same time, recognised that "foreigners" have due process rights including the right to be heard. Would these due process rights protect 'refugees' from non-refoulement to their country of persecution? The non-refoulement principle is the heart of the Refugee Convention which prevents deportation to a persecuting country. Should this self-evident heart of due process be recognised in India? On the intervention of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the Supreme Court prevented the repatriation of Chakmas because they had lived in India for three decades and "to uproot them... would be both impractical and inhuman".

In the Karlekar case (1992), the Supreme Court stopped the deportation of 21 Burmese from the Andamans by giving them the limited right to have their refugee status determined. This judgment — pregnant with possibil-

ities — is too skeletal to stand as a precedent. In the Khy-toon case from Manipur (1994), interim bail was granted to permit the refugees to approach the UNHCR for refugee determination — in line with previous cases of 1989, 1991 and 1992 and followed again in 1994. A Chennai court in 1992 denied the power of forcible repatriation; but in another case denied freedom of movement to refugees. In a Gujarat case of 1998, the High Court specifically acknowledged the work of the UNHCR and impliedly added value to its certification of refugee status. Amidst this unevenness, the lower courts are not always sympathetic to refugees.

Theoretically, the rights of refugees to due process and non-refoulement are ushered in by India signing the International Conventions on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (especially Article 13), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, the Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, 1966, and the Conventions on Racism (1965) Torture (1984), Children (1989), Women (1979) and others.

Although not automatically part of Indian law, some of these conventions have been read into the Indian Constitution's life and liberty provisions (Article 21) to become enforceable human rights through the aegis of the Sexual Harassment case of 1997 and others. It has even been suggested that conventions laying down a general humanitarian law are part of protected fundamental rights even if India has not acceded to or fully ratified the convention.

But, despite this theoretical protection, real legal protection evades the 'refugees' in India. Courts look to the letter of Indian law to be confronted with the stark legal reality: There is no category called 'refugee' in Indian law. Refugees have no special due process rights.

Legally, no special arrangements inure to them. The higher judiciary sometimes recognises their predicament; and, sometimes ignores them altogether. The Government places a

premium on its absolute power of deportation. At the same time, it relaxes its power in some — but not all — of the UNHCR certified cases. Sometimes housed in detention centres, the predicament of refugees is pitiable. If anything is to be achieved, concrete legal steps need to be taken. This is also what the NHRC has said in its Seventh and Eighth Reports of 1999-2001.

What are these concrete steps? First, India must seriously consider joining the Convention of 1951 as amended. This is a humanitarian convention which ensures that the 'persecuted' get a fair deal. The humane principle of non-refoulement does not restrict the Government's power of deportation but restricts only the place to which the deportation can be made.

Second, in its revision of the Foreigners Act 1946, a special category of 'refugee' foreigners needs to be indented with a proper procedure for certification, due process, non-refoulement rights and special support mechanisms. Contrary to what the Home Office thinks, this will strengthen India's security concerns by reserving maximal protection for the truly persecuted — to separate them from the others.

Third, the model law, proposed by Justice P.N. Bhagwati's South Asia eminent group, should be urgently considered for implementation. Fourth, there is nothing to prevent India from passing regulations under the present Foreigners Act 1946 to provide immediate protection to refugees by distinguishing them as a persecuted class to protect them. Fifth, India should consider bilateral negotiations in the South Asia region to find solutions.

Sixth, as a major power of the region, India should take a leading role in evolving a regional convention and regional mechanisms — as the Africans have done in 1967 and the Americans in 1984. When we deal with refugees, we are dealing with those persecuted many times over. India's law must match its humanitarian goals — for which it is justly known. This will not affect its 'security' concerns but will enhance them. This can be done by executive orders now — pending comprehensive legislation.

LAW AND SOCIETY

U.K. move on refugees from two countries

10-15 216

By Hasan Surroor

LONDON, JUNE 20. The British Government has decided to slam the door on asylum-seekers from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh by adding the two countries to its list of 'safe' nations whose citizens are presumed not to need protection in another country.

But the decision, announced by the Immigration Minister, Beverley Hughes, was attacked by civil rights groups which claimed that the political climate both in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh was still too uncertain to regard these countries as 'safe.' They were particularly concerned about the inclusion of Sri Lanka, where, they said, the peace process had not yet stabilised sufficiently.

"We believe that the peace process is still very fragile and the British Government should wait for the situation to become

more stable," a spokesperson for Amnesty International told *The Hindu*, adding that in Bangladesh 46 people were reported to have been killed allegedly by the army and the police last year alone. "Can you call it a safe place" she asked.

The Refugee Council said the decision to put Sri Lanka on the "white list" of presumably safe countries showed that the British Government did "not take the protection of refugees seriously."

"The situation remains fragile and many individuals are still at risk, evidenced by the 170 successful appeals (for asylum) in the first three months of this year," the Council said.

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are among the seven new countries which have been added to the "white list" introduced last year to restrict the flow of refugees into Britain from countries which are considered free

from political persecution. There are now 24 countries from where asylum applications are presumed to be unfounded, and there is no right of appeal once an application is rejected.

The Government justified the decision citing the peace accord in Sri Lanka.

"The countries that we are adding to the list today are generally safe — individuals from these countries are not routinely fleeing for their lives and do not routinely need our protection under the Geneva Convention," Ms Hughes said.

She added that the move was part of a "continuing drive to stop the widespread abuse of our asylum system."

There has been a flood of refugees from Sri Lanka since the outbreak of ethnic conflict and, according to the Home Office figures, last year alone more than 3,000 Sri Lankans applied for asylum.

Tibetan refugees face Chinese punishment

Statesman News Service & AP

BEIJING/ KATHMANDU, June 2. — China will punish a group of 18 Tibetans who illegally crossed into Nepal and were sent back to China last weekend, a Communist Party newspaper said today.

"These Tibetans illegally entered the territory of Nepal, violating the relevant laws of the government of China," the *Global Times* said, citing a Chinese foreign ministry statement. "Their behaviour will be punished under the law." The Foreign Ministry didn't immediately respond to requests to confirm the report.

On Saturday, the Nepal government had clandestinely deported back to China a group of asylum seekers from Tibet, ignoring requests by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for their custody.

The group, mostly farmers, included four teenaged girls, three boys below 15 and three children below 10. The oldest member of the group was 30. "They were trying to escape to Nepal because they said they had no freedom and rights in Tibet," said Mr Wangchuk Tsering, representative of the Tibetan Refugee

Welfare Office in Kathmandu.

"Some of them were monks who said they were not allowed to practise their religion and wanted to reach the monasteries in Dharamshala. Some of the girls said they wanted to go to India for education since education was costly in Tibet and it didn't teach Tibetan language or customs."

USA raps Nepal

KATHMANDU, June 2. — The USA today strongly reacted to the Nepal government's deportation of 18 Tibetan refugees to the Chinese government. "The US government deplores the Nepal government's deportation of 18 Tibetan asylum seekers to China," a press release issued by the US embassy here said. The action not violated international norms and also tarnished government of Nepal's long standing and well-deserved reputation for tolerance. — PTI

Criticising the deportation of the asylum seekers, Mr Tsering said: "This is the first time the Nepalese government has officially handed over Tibetan refugees to China and that too in Kathmandu and on a Saturday, which is a government holiday when no official work is done."

"There must have been immense pressure put on them by the Chinese

authorities to stop the refugees from escaping as their tales of being suppressed in Tibet would give the lie to the Chinese government's claim that Tibetans are happy in China. We are shocked and grieved that Nepal deported them in spite of appeals by the UNHCR. Those deported people are bound to face torture, imprisonment and hard labour and will certainly continue to remain under observation even after that."

Refugee stages macabre protest

By Hasan Suroor

MS
119-121
LONDON, MAY 27. An Iranian refugee has become the public face of the anger and frustration among Britain's asylum-seekers after he stitched his lips, eyes and ears together and started a hunger strike in a dramatic protest against the threat of being deported.

Abas Amini (33), from Nottingham, decided to risk his life rather being sent back to Iran, where he claims he faces persecution, after the Home Office said it would appeal against the decision to grant him asylum. If the appeal succeeds, Mr Amini could be deported but meanwhile his health is causing concern as he is refusing to take antibiotics or painkillers despite signs of infection.

Doctors warned that he would "rapidly deteriorate" if he continued to refuse food. "He is very weak and dehydrated through not drinking anything for several days," a doctor attending on him told journalists.

Mr. Amini, who has a bottle of petrol at hand



and threatened to burn himself if he is forced to eat, told one newspaper through his stitched lips that he came to Britain to escape torture in Iran. "I spent many years in prison being tortured; I was forced to flee here. Shouldn't a human being have a square foot of earth to live on-to live in peace"

A spokesman for the International Federa-

tion of Iranian Refugees said there was "no doubt" that Mr. Amini would be executed if he returned home. Described as a left-wing poet, Mr. Amini was said to have been "repeatedly jailed and tortured" for his writing.

The Home Office said it could not comment on individual cases, but called Mr. Amini's action "deeply regrettable".

28 MAY 2003

THE HINDO

Pandits won't be forced to return to Valley: Advani

Statement News Service

NEW DELHI, March 12 - Mr LK Advani, said today that Kashmiri migrants are still not convinced about their safety in the Valley. This appeared to be a message to the Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed who has announced that his aim in life is to resettle the Kashmiri Pandits in the Valley. During Question Hour in the Rajya Sabha today, the Deputy Prime Minister said "the yardstick for their (Kashmiri Pandits) return will be safety". Asserting that the return of the Pandits would be the real barometer of normalcy in Kashmir, he

said they would not be forced to return unless they were convinced of their own safety.

Mr Advani said the Centre had provided Rs 10 crore to the state government for resettlement of Kashmiri Pandits in two localities of Khrbhawani and Mattan, as planned by the Mufti government. "Nobody will be pushed. If (the plan) will be implemented with their consent. Unless they are made to feel secure, they will not be pushed," he said while replying to a supplementary by Jammu and Kashmir's former chief minister Dr Farooq Abdullah.

Relocating Pandits in the specified areas would make them soft targets for terrorists and Al-Qaida, which, in turn,

would have serious repercussions in the rest of the country, Dr Abdullah said.

Mr Advani also assured the House that the Centre would look into the problems of rehabilitation and jobs if the Pandits returned.

The government had made several attempts to persuade the Pandits to return but even though many of them had agreed, nobody returned, he said. "In fact, one reason why people chose not to return was the question of employment," he said, adding that the government would have to look into this aspect. In reply to a query from Mr Karan Singh (Congress), the minister said that migrants would be provided employment opportunities in those places where they are rehabilitated.

13 MAR 2003

Illegal immigration not checked completely: Advani

By Our Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI, FEB. 16. Reiterating that illegal migration from a neighbouring country had been going on for the past several years, the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, today said such foreigners had to be dealt with firmly and deported as per the law.

Speaking at the Raising Day celebrations of the Delhi police here, Mr. Advani said a large number of people from the neighbouring country had settled in various parts of the country and even procured ration cards and got enlisted as voters, projecting themselves as citizens of India.

Mr. Advani said this problem — which affected internal security — was discussed at the recent Chief Ministers and Chief Secretaries' conferences.

Mr. Advani said that illegal

immigration could not be checked completely. Our borders are such that even presence of security forces cannot put an end to infiltration," he said, adding that it was the responsibility of the police to contain the menace, as it formed a part of internal security.

Praising the Delhi police for having fared exceptionally well in checking terrorist activities, Mr. Advani advised it to become more people-friendly. He would suggest to the National Police Academy in Hyderabad, which organises training programmes for police personnel from across the country, to frame parameters based on which performances of the police of respective States could be studied, compared and subsequently graded.

Reacting to the Delhi Police Commissioner, R.S. Gupta's request for review of the welfare fund and housing scheme for

police personnel here, he said his Ministry had doubled the money allocated under the housing scheme and the welfare fund had been increased to Rs. 1.5 crores. He distributed gallantry and police medals.

'ISI as dangerous as Taliban'

NEW DELHI, FEB. 16. The Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, today warned that Pakistan's ISI is as lethal as the al-Qaeda and Taliban and by realising this danger the world can avoid incidents like the September 11 disaster.

"The West has realised the danger from the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but is yet to know of the equally lethal ISI of Pakistan," Mr Advani said while flagging off a rath yatra here. — UNI

17 FEB 2003

'Foreigners' will be deported: Advani

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Feb. 16. — India's stand on illegal Bangladeshi immigrants toughened today with Mr LK Advani saying "foreigners" (illegal immigrants) had to be deported "firmly but lawfully".

Without naming Bangladesh, the Deputy Prime Minister said illegal migration from neighbouring countries had increased. He was speaking at the Raising Day Parade of the Delhi Police.

"Our borders (with Bangladesh) are such that infiltration is possible even if forces are there." He asked police to step up vigilance about presence of any illegal foreign immigrants in India so that they can be deported.

"A large number of people have come here for various reasons... The foreigners are living here as Indians

and many have ration cards and got their names entered in voters' lists. They have to be sent back and it is the responsibility of police in all states to do it honestly, lawfully but firmly."

On Pakistan-backed terrorism, he said it had led to increase in security concerns on Republic Day, Independence Day and festivals such as Diwali, Dussehra and Id.

'No use of force' Reaching Dhaka, Mr Khan said India and Bangladesh had agreed not to use force to solve bilateral differences and to work together to address the issue of illegal movement of people.

He missed his scheduled flight to Dhaka this morning because the Jet Airways plane he was flying from Delhi to Kolkata arrived late — at 1.15 p.m. instead of 10.05 a.m. The Bangladesh Biman flight left for Dhaka at 12.45 p.m.

Another push-in bid

KRISHNAGAR, Feb. 16. — BDR jawans of Dharmada camp tried to push in at least 200 Bangladeshis in Nadia district's Naintola Ghat last evening. But villagers alerted the BSF and jawans were immediately deployed to prevent the push-in.

The BDR men raised their guns against the BSF jawans sparking tension.

A "war of words" broke out between BSF and BDR. A large contingent of BSF men was rushed to the area. "At this, the BDR jawans stopped abusing our men," said an officer.

This morning, a flag meeting was held between BSF and BDR near the former's Varol camp to defuse the tension. — SNS

THE STATESMAN

17 FEB 2003

Bangla admits border breach

PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Feb. 14: India appeared to have crossed the first diplomatic hurdle with Bangladesh, getting it to acknowledge the problem of "illegal immigration".

This came after hours of negotiations, including a "one-to-one" between Bangladesh foreign minister Mohammed Morshed Khan and his Indian counterpart Yashwant Sinha.

The two sides have agreed to take forward the process agreed upon in the "1992 joint communique" for handling illegal immigration. The foreign secretaries will meet in April — the venue will be finalised later — to discuss how to improve the mechanism to deal with the problem.

India, on its part, agreed to hold the meeting of the Joint

Commission on July 15 to discuss all other pending issues. The commission has not met since 1997. Indications are that working groups under it will meet first on issues such as granting Bangladesh freer access to the Indian market.

If all goes well, the two sides might even agree to a free trade area in the coming months, which will help strengthen economic ties.

"I am very, very sanguine that this will move the entire relationship forward," Sinha said after his discussions with the Bangladesh foreign minister. He was headed for another meeting with Morshed over dinner at Hyderabad House.

Morshed matched Sinha's enthusiasm, saying, "all issues were discussed candidly". He added: "We are destined to work

together and will not allow any irritants to stand in the way of our cooperation. We are very happy with the outcome".

The 1992 joint communique was signed when Khaleda Zia visited Delhi during her earlier stint as Prime Minister. It was the first official acknowledgement by Dhaka that illegal immigration was a problem that needed to be tackled jointly.

This had led the two sides to agree to a formula under which any person found crossing the border was handed over to the other side. If the nationality was in doubt, the two sides were to hold a joint verification within three days to ascertain it. This worked well for several months. But following the recent strains in Indo-Bangla ties, the formula was no longer followed. This had led to the standoff in

Cooch Behar over the nationality of 213 nomads.

Asked if India's concerns were addressed, foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal said: "The idea was to clear the air."

Morshed had earlier in the day been reluctant to acknowledge the problem of illegal immigration. He had argued that though people came from Bangladesh to look for jobs in India, most of them returned to the country after a while. Very few stayed back, he said. But he admitted that the immigration laws needed to be made "more responsible".

India claims there are nearly 20 million illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in the country.

Tomorrow, Morshed is scheduled to call on Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani.

THE TELEGRAPH

15 Feb 2003

Sops for Dhaka, with strings

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 14

INDIA AND Bangladesh began efforts to reach a middle ground on resolving the illegal immigrants issue that mars the bilateral relations.

The visiting Bangladeshi foreign minister Murshed Khan held wide-ranging discussions with external affairs minister Yashwant Sinha at a dinner hosted by the latter. Diplomatic sources say Delhi offered to Dhaka that it was willing to go more than half way to resolve contentious issues, provided Bangladesh addresses India's concerns.

Besides, offering trade concessions India is also willing to invest in Bangladesh for infrastructure development, however, Dhaka needs to respond by being a good neighbour and addressing India's security concerns.

Khan is scheduled to call on Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani besides meeting leader of the opposition Sonia Gandhi on Saturday.

Earlier, asked about India's concerns, Khan said there were internationally established rules and standards to deal with the illegal immigrants issue. Khan sought to downplay the issue of illegal migration from his country but stressed that migration laws need to be made more responsible.

Khan's visit comes close on the heels of the recent stand-off between the BSF and the BDR at the Indo-Bangla border in West Bengal. India has voiced serious concerns over the presence of over 15 million illegal migrants from Bangladesh in this country.



External affairs minister Yashwant Sinha greets his Bangladeshi counterpart Murshed Khan in Delhi on Friday. Khan is on a three-day visit to India. AFP

Immigrants abound in UP

Vijay Sharma
Lucknow, February 14

WHILE THE Centre frets and fumes over the presence of illegal immigrants on the India-Bangladesh border, the state government appears least bothered about lakhs of Bangladeshis living in virtually every nook and corner of the State, including Lucknow, for the many years.

No initiative has so far been taken to identify and deport the illegal immigrants despite the fact that dozens of reports have been submitted to the Government by differ-

ent intelligence agencies regarding the immigrants, their activities and moves to become voters. Their number is swelling at a fast pace.

Some local toughs are not only giving them shelter for a 'price' but they are also helping the immigrants in first getting their ration cards made and then getting their names included in the voters' list by greasing the palms of lower-level officials of the Food and Civil Supplies Dept and the Election Directorate.

In the state capital, a BJP leader is alleged to have taken the 'contract' for their pro-

tection and is charging a fixed amount every month from them to prevent the police from uprooting hundreds of their temporary huts in different localities of Lucknow and for helping them in collecting enough evidence to prove that they belong to their area of residence.

Most of them are engaged in rag-picking and living in abject poverty in slums near nullahs or vast vacant land on the outskirts of the city. As many as 300 families of illegal immigrants have been living in Balmiki Nagar near the Paper Mill Colony.

THE HINDUSTAN TIME

15 Feb 2003

300,000 refugees given shelter in India

By Our Staff Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MARCH 1. India provides shelter to over 300,000 refugees from neighbouring countries, including Tamils from Sri Lanka and a huge population from Tibet. In addition, there are displaced people from the North-Eastern States and Jammu and Kashmir who have been uprooted due to terrorism and internal conflicts.

Though it is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, India has had one of the best records of treatment of refugees, having seen a periodic influx from other countries over the past few decades, according to the First Periodic Report of India, 2001, on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, brought out by the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

The chunk of refugees come from Sri Lanka and Tibet, besides countries as far as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Bangladesh, Somalia and Sudan. Ethnic and religious similarities of some refugee groups also makes India vulnerable to inflow of people, not only in terms of geographical proximity but also in terms of cultural affinity, the report says.

More than 68,629 Tamil refugees live in over 130 refugee camps in Tamil Nadu and about 30,000 live elsewhere in the State. Facilities for education, medical assistance, maintenance and basic amenities have been made available to them.

As per statistics given in the report, 93,100 Tibetan refugees have taken shelter in India during the last 41 years. Of these, 68,639 have been resettled with Government assistance and provided self-employment under agriculture and handicrafts schemes. Their rehabilitation is being achieved through Central Government schemes and by relief agencies under the Tibetan administration in India.

There were about 20,800 Afghan and Burmese refugees living in India as on January 1, 1996, whose presence is acknowledged and protected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

However, more serious is the concern of 350,000 Kashmiris, mostly Pandits, who have been displaced from the Valley since 1990 as a result of long-standing conflict in Kashmir. More than 250,000 of them are living in or near Jammu, both in camps for the displaced or their own homes; an estimated 100,000 are living in other parts of the country.

A large number of families have also been uprooted from Ladakh as a result of the Kargil intrusion in 1999. The report says that 23,611 people from Kargil and 300 families from Leh have had to abandon their homes. There are also reports of displacement of 46,000 persons from Jammu along the International Border.

In the North-Eastern States, over 157,000 people of various ethnicities were displaced due to ethnic conflict. Once sparsely populated, the population of this region has swelled in recent decades with the arrival of millions of Hindus and Muslims from Bangladesh and West Bengal.

THE HINDU

2 MAR 2002

Nepal seeks help to bring back refugees

Statesman News Service

KOLKATA, Feb. 11. — Nepal has sought West Bengal's cooperation for the repatriation of Nepalese refugees who have taken shelter in Bhutan or North Bengal. The state will serve as a corridor for repatriation of the refugees from Bhutan to Nepal.

The Nepalese Ambassador to India, Mr BB Thapa, made this appeal during a meeting with the chief minister at Writers' Buildings today.

The appeal follows an agreement between the foreign ministers of Bhutan and Nepal last week. Nepal agreed to take back the refugees, who fled during recent violence in the country. They hail from the Terai region of Nepal. The envoy also sought the state government's cooperation on the economic

front, now that the "guns are silent in Nepal". The violence ended following a recent truce with the Maoist agitators.

He said as Nepal being a landlocked country, Kolkata and Haldia ports were very important for its foreign trade.

At a press conference, Mr Thapa spoke of the urgent need to bring an end to the violence in Nepal and address grievances of its people in a more democratic manner.

"Since the last two weeks the guns have remained silent, and we hope that the peace process will be a permanent one. The cooperation of India is much needed at this delicate stage. The two countries are a source of comfort for each other. We want more and more entrepreneurs, traders and tourists from India to visit Nepal."

Speaking of the action taken by the Nepalese government against ISI activities, Mr

Thapa said, "We do not encourage such actions... we will not use our territory to detriment India in any way. And wherever there have been evidence, we have acted immediately. From the King, to the Prime Minister to members of civic society -- we all understand that any action taken against India will be counterproductive to our own interest. The ongoing level of cooperation between India and Nepal must not be undermined."

He dismissed allegations that Pakistan was using Nepal to pursue anti-India activities. "I cannot question our commitment to India..." However, he agreed that the India-Nepal border was a porous one and there was no plans of fencing sensitive areas as yet.

Regarding security of tourists, Mr Thapa said: "In the recent past no tourist has been affected. The country is safer now than it was ever before."

12 FEB 2003

THE STATESMAN

ST-8

Border fix

Refugee and

Sophisticated immigration policy needed

Deputy prime minister LK Advani is right to seek to focus attention on the problem of illegal immigration, an issue with serious implications for both security and economic development of the country, but hitherto been ignored by the Centre. However, the solution he proposes seems largely unworkable. Advani estimates there are 15 million illegal Bangladeshi migrants and proposes to drive them all out, when only to identify them is a herculean task. Even otherwise Dhaka is hardly likely to accept them for the asking. Dhaka does not accept that there is illegal migration across the border, and will argue, as the week-long imbroglio over 213 Bangladeshis from the snake-charmer community showed, that those that Delhi calls Bangladeshi migrants are actually Indian citizens. Now the snake-charmers have vanished into thin air, but fresh push-in bids by the Bangladesh Rifles are reported. Delhi's strategy is to have court orders backing deportations, but given the slow pace at which judicial processes move in this country, it boggles the mind to think of the time it will be required to issue 15 million deportation orders, presuming one has already identified them.

Also, to pick on Bangladesh while ignoring Nepal, which contributes a substantial chunk of migrants, is pointless. If the idea is to plug India's soft borders to prevent Pakistan's ISI from sending in men and materials for nefarious purposes, that would necessitate plugging borders with Nepal as well, where the ISI is known to have set up shop. It makes sense for both India and Nepal to renegotiate the antiquated 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty, which allows free movement of people across the border, as Kathmandu too is concerned about Nepalese Maoists having safe sanctuary on the Indian side of the border, where they have linked up with Naxalites in Bihar and Jharkhand. It is also necessary to devote greater resources to policing the Indo-Bangladesh border, to tighten organizationally the Border Security Force whose corruption is legendary, and to stop politicians from patronizing those who cross over in the hope of cementing vote banks. It is also time to think of putting in place a channel for legal immigration, which involves work permits to foreigners for specified periods without giving them permanent citizenship and voting rights. Advani's ambition to make India less of a "soft state" is admirable, but short cuts which have not taken the full measure of the problem will not work

12 FEB 2003

THE STATESMAN

Bhutanese refugees seek India's help

Refugees Sarker in Kathmandu

Feb. 9. — Disgruntled Bhutanese refugees in Nepal are pinning their hopes on India and 13 other donor countries to resolve the repatriation impasse festering for nearly 13 years.

Over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees, who fled the Druk kingdom more than 12 years ago, have been living in seven camps in eastern Nepal administered by the UN High Commission for Refugees.

The refugees, who had been keeping their fingers crossed that the 12th joint ministerial meeting of the foreign ministers of Nepal and Bhutan in Kathmandu early this week would provide an outcome to their liking have been disappointed.

The refugees living in Nepal have been classified by the government into four categories: bona fide Bhutanese, Bhutanese criminals, voluntary

exiles and non-Bhutanese. Thimphu had earlier been insisting that it would take back only those who could prove they were forced to go into exile since its laws do not allow voluntary emigres to return. However, after the Kathmandu talks, it agreed to take back even those who left the country voluntarily. But the refugees are afraid that the discrimination would continue even if they were allowed to return. Moreover, they would like to be classified solely as Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese.

A leader of the Bhutanese Refugees' Repatriation Support Group, Mr Hiranya Lal Shrestha, is reportedly arriving in New Delhi today to discuss the situation with the Indian foreign minister.

The Association of Human Rights Activists, Bhutan accuses the Bhutan government of violating the fundamental rights of the exiled. It also says the concessions made by the Bhutan gov-

ernment are just an eyewash to curry favour with the donor community who are meeting in Geneva on 17 and 18 February. The 14 donor countries are India, Denmark, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, USA, Canada, Britain, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland and France.

The BRRSG sent an appeal to the 14 embassies in Nepal, urging them to intervene. It accused the Bhutan government of especially targeting the southern Bhutanese of Nepali origin and revoking their nationality although they have been living in the Druk kingdom for many generations and may have even altered its demography. The BRRSG said it was in direct contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of Children and Elimination of Discrimination against Women as well as Racial Discrimination.

10 FEB 2011

THE STATESMAN

Silent trip back to Bangla

PRONAB MONDAL

Petrapole (West Bengal), Feb. 9: The Border Security Force jawan barks out: "Ei buri, uth, bhag (Get up old woman, scoot)."

The old lady, who had tumbled after her sari got caught in the makeshift barbed wire fence on the Indian side of the border, scrambles back on her feet and walks about 20 yards to the Bangladesh fence. She searches anxiously for the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) jawan who must surely be on that side. He isn't there. And, carrying two blue plastic cans containing memories from India, she labours her way back into her homeland.

A quiet trek back of hundreds every day into Bangladesh through this border point in Bengal's North 24-Parganas district has begun as the eyes of the world have been peeled several hundred miles up north in Cooch Behar where a week-long standoff occurred between the two countries a few days ago over the nationality of a group of nomads.

Bangladeshis — many from Mumbai — are returning to their country under the very nose of the BDR which made such a fuss about taking back the nomads.

As if it has entered into an unwritten arrangement with its Bangladesh counterpart, the BSF, which should be arresting anyone trying to cross the border illegally, keeps its eye shut and sometimes even delivers a push or a shove. The touts on either side are doing brisk business.

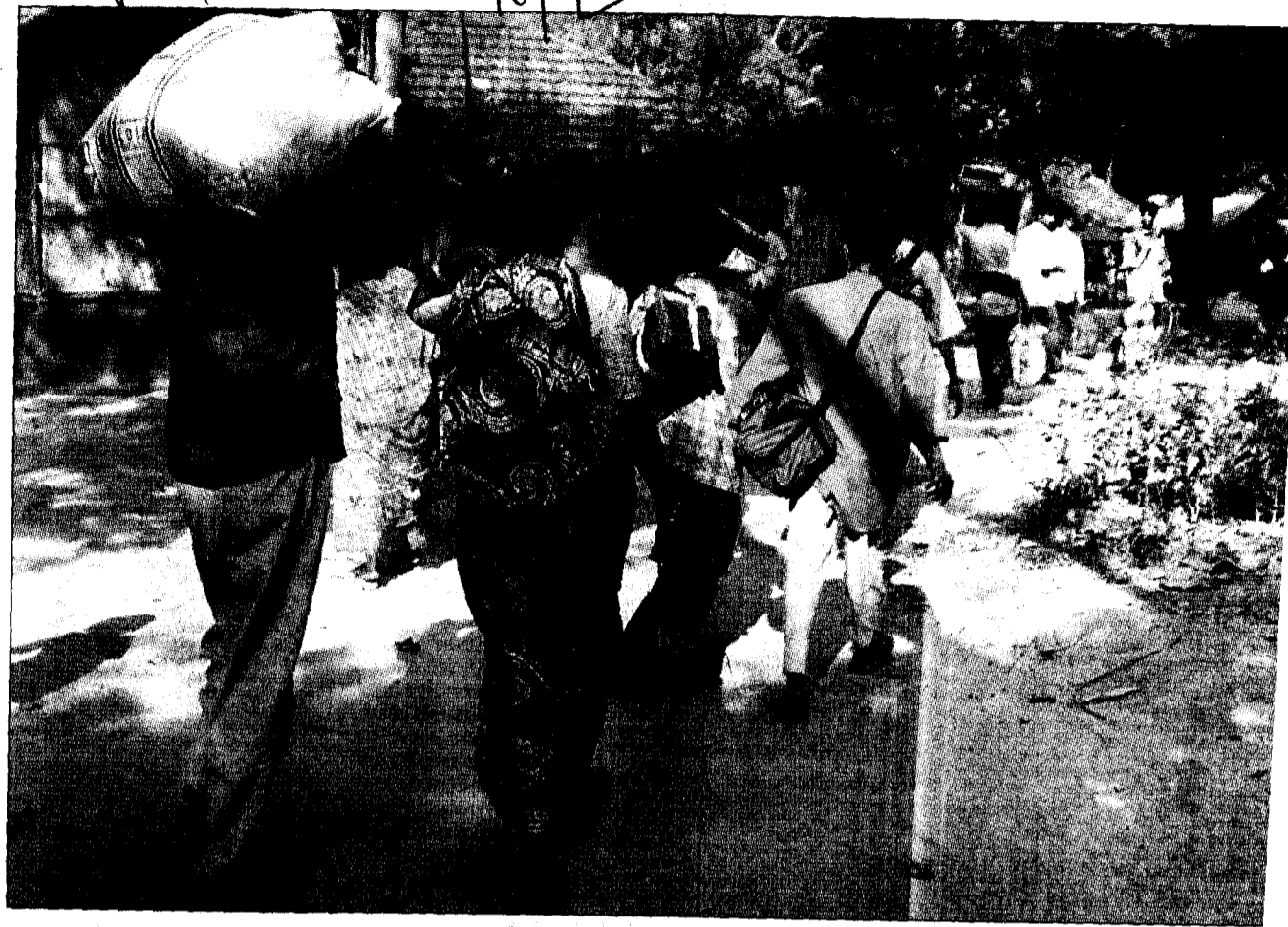
At least 500 people a day are pouring into Bangladesh through the villages, mango orchards and, of course, the gaps in the border fencing. Staying — on rent — in huts in Indian villages, they wait for the signal from touts to move across.

Today, around 600 people scurried through, with babies in their arms, at Petrapole in two shifts. Most were from Mumbai — some had been living there for as many as eight years — and admitted that they were returning to their homeland which they had left in search of a living.

Khokon Mistri was one of them. He had been living in Mumbai for eight years but decided that it was no longer safe to remain there without "adequate proof of India citizenship".

"Police there have turned on the heat and I felt it wiser to move before being forced to (do so)," he said, moments before going back to his own country with his wife and four children.

Another waiting to go was Sheikh Moinuddin. He lived in Mumbai for close to two years, working as a zari worker, but chose to return to his coun-



Bangladeshis on their way to the border at Petrapole. Picture: ...

try (Satkhira district) with his wife and mother because he, too, felt that the "pressure was building up". Pressure cookers, television sets, clothes and trunks and other household items are what they were going back with.

The route they are taking is also predictable: from Mumbai to Howrah, from Howrah to Sealadah, and from there to Jayantipur, Angrail, Chakdah, Petrappole, Sutia, Bagdah and other places that are nearest to their homes on the other side of the border.

Despite the nudging from the BSF and the eyes-firmly-shut policy of the BDR, it's the touts who are again making a killing in these abnormal times. It's they who liaise between the lower-level personnel of both agencies, informing them of the exact time when they should "look away", and help in the crossover, as they do in normal times.

Villagers on this side of the border, too, are witnessing an upturn in their fortunes. Each returning person pays at least Rs 20 to the owner of the hut where he/she is biding time for the border-crossing hour, each hut accommodates at least 10 people, which means an extra income of at least Rs 200.

The commandant of the 100th Battalion of the BSF, Ajay Singh, admitted that there "could" be Bangladeshis going back to their country with the help of touts.

■ See Page 10

THE TELEGRAPH

10 FEB 2003

States back Advani on illegal immigrants

SF-10
9/2

Refugee pm

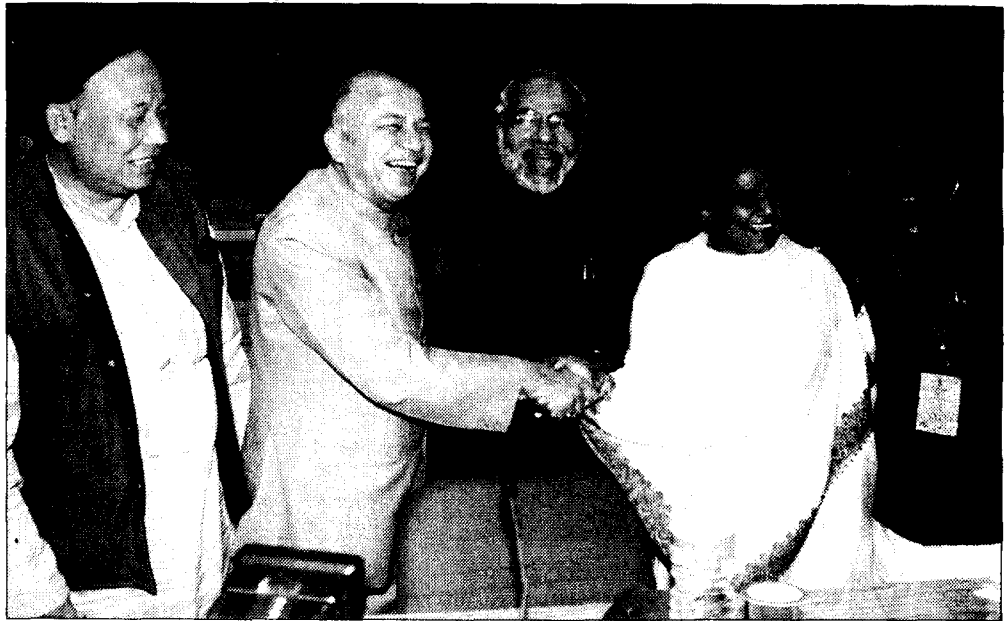
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Feb. 8. — Deputy Prime Minister Mr LK Advani's call for a drive against illegal immigrants received a filip today with state governments backing him at the chief ministers' conference and clearing a resolution that called for a special drive to detect and throw out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

This was the second time in the day that Bangladesh was under discussion at the conference of chief ministers on internal security.

Earlier, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee had, quoting reports, accused Pakistan's ISI of using territories of Nepal and Bangladesh to pursue its anti-India agenda and called upon states to mount well-coordinated anti-Naxalite operations, under a unified command, if necessary.

Mr Advani clarified that New Delhi would not reconcile to the fact that there were already an estimated 1.5 crore population of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in the



Mr Ibohi Singh, Mr Sushil Kumar Shinde, Mr Narendra Modi, Miss Mayawati and Mr Babul Marandi at the CMs' meet on Saturday. — PTI

country, choosing to look towards merely preventing plugging the holes along the border.

The chief ministers and their representatives — a little over a dozen CMs had attended the conference — were unanimous at the conference that action should be taken against illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

he said, suggesting that the problem had been overlooked for too long a time. He did not believe that political patronage that the illegal immigrants had been receiving in the country would come in the way.

There were, however, indications that New Delhi might concentrate on perfecting its paper

work before packing off the illegal immigrants to the Indo-Bangla border, Mr Advani said. Where desirable, court orders for deporting the illegal immigrants would be issued. This would make it difficult for Dhaka to contest India's claims on the nationality of the immigrants as in the recent crisis, he hoped.

Bangla border row ends

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Refuse to

New Delhi: The stand-off between India and Bangladesh over the group of 213 persons stranded on the Indo-Bangla border for the last one week ended on Thursday.

The 'illegal migrants' left the zero line in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in the wee hours of the morning.

While India claimed that the 'illegal migrants' were taken back by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), the latter refuted the claim.

The storm evaporated as suddenly as it had erupted, but not before India had secured an important concession, with Bangladesh foreign minister Moreshed Khan agreeing to come to Delhi to discuss the issue.

By focussing attention solely on this one episode of intrusion, where the migrants publicly proclaimed their Bangladeshi nationality under the glare of TV cameras for nearly a week, the Indian government also secured some sympathy for its concerns.

5/1 3/2

Although the invitation to Mr Khan was extended by external affairs minister Yashwant Sinha, who called him on Wednesday evening, the call was made only after Bangladesh high commissioner Tufail Haider spoke to Mr Sinha.

The dates for Mr Khan's visit will now be finalised through diplomatic channels.

Meanwhile, deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani said on Thursday that although the immediate crisis on the issue of the stranded Bangladeshis was over, it was necessary to find a long-term solution to the problem. "By their (Bangladeshis) going back, the immediate crisis is over but the problem of illegal immigration remains and needs to be resolved," Mr Advani told reporters.

BDR personnel took back the immigrants, mostly snake charmers, between 2 a.m. and 2.30 a.m. in small batches, following which the tension eased considerably, a senior BSF officer said.

12
Feb-11

Cooperate in settling illegal immigrants issue: Advani

By P.S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE, FEB. 5. India today called upon Bangladesh to "cooperate" in resolving the issue of "illegal immigration" and ruled out any efforts by New Delhi to form an international coalition of its own to fight "cross-border terrorism from Pakistan".

The Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, L.K. Advani, told the international media here that the status of Jammu and Kashmir was a settled issue and that New Delhi "will not allow peace to be held hostage to the resolution of... differences" with Pakistan. These differences should be sorted out "by dialogue", he said but also implied

that talks could take place only in an atmosphere of peace without "cross-border terrorism". Answering a question on the latest tensions in New Delhi's ties with Dhaka,

Mr. Advani said he "would urge the Government of Bangladesh to cooperate in this matter and see that illegal immigrants (who had come) to India are taken back by Bangladesh". Indicating that a "decision" was taken some time ago that illegal immigration should be "stopped and reversed" so as to enhance India's internal security, he asserted that the current crisis could be traced entirely to Bangladesh's stance all along that there had been no illegal

immigration into India at all.

Mr. Advani, who sought to advance New Delhi's security-diplomacy as distinct from strategic diplomacy during his current visit to Thailand and

Singapore and the recent tours of Qatar and France, said that India, however, had "no intention" of fashioning an anti-terror coalition of its own on the international stage. "In physical terms, concrete terms, we do not look to any other country to help us in our battle. We (only) expect from the international community a broad commitment that they would not assist directly or indirectly any country which promotes terrorism," he said.

THE HINDU

- 5 FEB 2003

Bangla Foreign Minister likely to come

By Our Diplomatic Correspondent

NEW DELHI, FEB. 5. A possible visit by the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Morshed Khan, to New Delhi was discussed between the External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha, and the Bangladesh High Commissioner, Tufail K. Haider, today.

Mr. Haider, who called on Mr. Sinha, was informed by the latter that he would be happy to receive Mr. Khan, sources said. The timing of the visit is being worked out.

When contacted, Mr. Haider said he had requested a meeting with Mr. Sinha a few days ago, which materialised today. The prevailing situation on the India-Bangladesh border came up for discussion, he told this correspondent. There was complete agreement on the need to arrest the "slide" in relations between India and Bangladesh. The need to de-escalate the situation surrounding the 213 persons on the "zero line" also figured in the discussions, he said.

Earlier, the Foreign Office spokesman said Bangladesh had rejected an Indian suggestion for "joint verification" of the 213 persons who remained on the "zero line" dividing the two countries for the sixth day in a row. He told presspersons that the verification could have been done "one-by-one" or by journalists from the two countries. However, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) did not concur with the Indian offer.

The spokesman said the issue of the 213 persons also came up for discussion at a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee at-

tached to the External Affairs Ministry. The Committee was told of the efforts made by India to resolve the issue through diplomatic channels in a friendly and cooperative manner, he maintained.

At the meeting, Mr. Sinha, spoke of the importance of economic diplomacy in the overall context of India's diplomatic efforts. It was pointed out at the meeting that obduracy on the part of Pakistan had led to delays in both the SAPTA and SAFTA processes.

Mr. Sinha hoped that these trade-related issues would be addressed by Pakistan with the requisite degree of sincerity. Mr. Sinha reiterated India's position on Iraq and referred to his recent meeting with nine heads of Indian missions from the Gulf region in Abu Dhabi. The Minister said he had also assured Indian communities living in the region that they should have no cause for concern.

PTI reports:

Amidst the border tension, India and Bangladesh have agreed to extend the tenure of the existing bilateral trade treaty for three months until May.

Official sources said the treaty, expiring on February 4, 2003, has been extended since the two sides have been unable to finalise the changes sought in the existing treaty.

Extension of the bilateral trade treaty also comes close on the heels of India granting deeper tariff concessions on 111 items exported from Bangladesh, under the fourth round of SAPTA.

5 FEB 2003

No easy way back

Before identifying foreigners staying illegally in India and deporting them, the government should chalk out a foolproof action plan, if does not want to raise an unnecessary storm, BIBHUTI BHUSAN NANDY



IN POLICE CUSTODY: A Bangladeshi family detained at Barasat Police Station.

WHAT happens to the 213 people stranded on no man's land between India and Bangladesh? India identifies 213 illegal immigrants and tries to send them back. But Bangladesh refuses to take them, saying they are not citizens of that country. Dhaka says New Delhi wants to throw out Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims as part of its "religious cleansing" drive. The result: more than 200 people, women and children among them, are forced to spend four days and nights out in the open without adequate food and shelter. Where do they go from here? Before we seek an answer to the question, let's find out why matters came to such a pass.

In the early 90s, mounting problems of cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and the North East and unmitigated demographic invasion from Bangladesh made the government think of introducing identity cards in "specified areas" to help identify foreigners.

A chief ministers' conference on Illegal Migration from Bangladesh (New Delhi, 28 September 1982) endorsed the idea, but successive governments failed to implement it.

In such a backdrop, the Centre's recent decision to create a National Register of Indian Citizens and

issue Multipurpose National Identity Card to every citizen is a welcome development. But the way it's being implemented has raised legitimate doubts both about the intent of the government and the outcome of the programme.

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani announced the government decision at a meeting of state chief secretaries and director-generals of police, tasking the bureaucrats to "launch a drive to identify, locate and throw out" the 20 million aliens living in the country illegally.

There can be no two opinions about the urgency to deport all illegal immigrants before the MNIC project gets underway. But the sheer number of the immigrants masquerading as Indian citizens under the protective wings of powerful vested interests has turned the essentially administrative problem into an extremely complex and sensitive political issue.

No efforts to cut the Gordian knot will succeed, should the Centre adopt a unilateral approach omitting to rally a national consensus behind the move. It was impolitic of the NDA government to begin the deportation programme without consulting the governments of states that share an international border.

Though the CPI-M in West Bengal, like the Congress in Assam, has created this Frankenstein's monster (illegal immigrants) to build captive vote banks, chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has taken umbrage that "the decision has been taken without talking to us." Attempts to push back a handful of illegal immigrants have already created a face-off between the Border Security Force and the Bangladesh Rifles. For its part, the Bangladesh government has, as usual, stated that there is no illegal immigration from Bangladesh.

Clearly, despite past experience, the North Block mandarins and their intelligence advisers either did not anticipate or underestimated the fierce resistance the deportation operation would encounter from the immigrants, their political godfathers here and the right-reactionary BNP-Jamaat regime in Bangladesh.

The chief ministers' conference had discussed a multi-pronged strategy focused on a whole range of specific measures, but bureaucratic ineptitude, reinforced by the constraints of coalition governments in later years, relegated the issue to the background.

When it was in the opposition, the BJP was stridently vocal against

illegal immigration, but since after coming to power in 1998, the party and its front organisations have maintained enigmatic silence on the matter.

It is next to impossible to deport illegal immigrants en masse, for they have acquired all the hallmarks (even if fraudulently obtained) of citizenship: ration card, voter's identity card, birth and domicile certificates, et al. Any such attempt could end up in endless litigation, physical resistance, a worse stand-off with Bangladesh and much else. A more pragmatic, if less ambitious, approach is to concentrate on preventing further infiltration and detecting and deporting the relatively recent arrivals that are yet to strike roots in the country and still have vital interests and family ties in Bangladesh.

Securing India against the menace of illegal immigration is too complex and daunting a task to be accomplished by any simplistic half measures. Implementation of even a modest plan outlined above would need to be based on a national consensus, strong political will, an unrelenting immigration and border management regime and focused diplomacy on a sustained basis.

Such a comprehensive action

plan must focus on:

- * Creation of a self-contained immigration department entrusted with formulating and implementing a national immigration policy (there is none at present) *mutatis mutandis* modelled on the US Immigration and Naturalization Service;

- * Appointment of border commissioners with appropriate intelligence and task force complements to detect illegal immigrants and lodge them in segregation camps pending deportation. They will be responsible for border fencing within a given deadline. They are to be vested with powers to order preventive detention of racketeers promoting infiltration, harbourers of illegal immigrants and their collaborators including BSF personnel and other officials;

- * Commissioning the services of the UN High Commission for Refugees and other international agencies in repatriating the illegal immigrants;

- * Sustained diplomacy geared up to bring international pressure on Bangladesh to prevent persecution of the religious and ethnic minorities and to persuade the donor countries and international organisations to earmark a part of their aid to Bangladesh for projects meant to create employment opportunities in the economically lean and migration-prone areas;

- * A public awareness campaign at home and abroad explaining the gravity of the problem and its adverse political, economic and security implications for the region.

While these strategic measures are expected to minimise the impact of the "push factors" behind illegal immigration, the action plan must also include tactical steps to blunt the "pull factors":

- Safeguards against easy access to certain unintended benefits such as ration cards, admission to educational institutions, etc;

- Safeguards against acquisition of immovable property;

- Safeguards against inclusion in voters' list;

- Administrative and legal safeguards against employment.

The NMIC system may have to be kept on hold in specified areas affected by infiltration and concentration of illegal immigrants till significant progress is made in repatriating them to their homeland.

(The author is former additional secretary, Research and Analysis Wing, Cabinet Secretariat, retired director-general, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and former National Security Adviser, government of Mauritius.)

Border tug-of-war tells on refugees

SUBRATA
NAGCHOUHDURY
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 4

THE status of the 213 people stranded at the zero point on the International Border between Bangladesh and India remained undecided till late in the night, almost five days after the stalemate began in Cooch-Bihar district of West Bengal between the BSF and the BDR.

Even as the crisis deepened, there was hardening of stance on both sides. The Cooch-Bihar district magistrate and the BSF confirmed today that one company of Bangladesh army has been deployed close to the site. The BDR also started digging a trench about 150 meters from the zero line today. On the Indian side, the BSF amassed arms and weapons and reinforced its strength by deploying about 200 personnel today.

Meanwhile, deputy chief of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees Weimeng Limkabaa, when contacted in Delhi, said they are "ready to assist in finding an amicable solution if we are asked to do so." She added the UNHCR cannot intervene on its own. "We are not in a position to give an assessment about the nationality of the stranded people. Neither can we de-



Stranded Bangladeshis stand in queue while their children play at Satgaichi in Cooch-Bihar on Tuesday. PTI photo

scribe them as stateless," she said.

The stranded snake charmers continued to suffer today for want of food and drinking water. The leader of the group — Din Islam — who was severely assaulted yesterday and sustained serious head injuries could not be given anything more than first aid. Many children are suffering from cold. At least 12 snakes have died in the past five days.

The snake charmers today urged the BSF not to send them back through the same corridor where they are stranded. When the BSF asked them to shift about 50 meters from where they've been squatting, they said: "The

BDR and the Kankramari villagers will kill us if we move towards their side." They urged the BSF to take them to some other point on the border and let them go back on their own.

The BSF also evacuated about 150 women and children along with cattle heads from villages of Chenakata, Satgachi and Balargat close to the International Border. Only the menfolk were allowed to stay back.

Cooch-Bihar DM Chandan Sinha said he has sent his report to the government mentioning that the BDR threatens the stranded people with dire consequences if they returned.

BSF, BDR leave it to governments

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 4

THE Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) today left it to their respective governments to resolve the issue diplomatically.

Officials at the BSF headquarters said there were no flag meeting between the two sides today and the BDR was waiting for directions from Dhaka. The Indian side was, however, hopeful, that the issue will be resolved by tomorrow with Bangladesh accepting their nationals back into the country.

MEA spokesman confirmed that Bangladesh was yet to respond to India's aide memoire urging it to take back the people stranded in "no man's land" for the past five days.

"Our stand is clear that we are not going to let these people come into Indian territory. It's upto them (Bangladesh) to decide when they want to take them back," said a senior BSF official. He claimed it had been "proved without any doubt" that the snake charmers were Bangladeshi nationals.

filed for Migrant World *11-19*

It would be a bad joke, if it weren't so tragic: The country's home minister orders the deportation of 'illegal' Bangladeshi immigrants unaware that another arm of the same ministry will quietly veto the instructions. Unaware also that Bangladesh would refuse entry to the thousands of migrants already packed into a train headed for its borders. Further, that the hapless lot, now rendered non-citizens, would wearily make their way back to the country they had made their home. It's a sequence so bizarre, it jars the senses: That globalised India, with a proud population of emigrants — pravasis, H1B visa holders, even illegal migrants — should think nothing of turning out immigrants settled on its own soil. Inevitably, then, the train to Bangladesh brings to mind searing images of another time 55 years ago: Images of frightened men and women huddled into trains shuttling across partitioned India. It was clear from the beginning that 'operation illegal immigrants' was a political move, and as much has been borne out by the proven impracticability of the proposal. Granted, a large unaccounted for immigrant population can pose difficulties. But the solution to this lies in seeing migrants as less a legal than a humanitarian problem.

It might be perfectly permissible to round up and deport illegally-staying Bangladeshis. But for this to work, economic conditions need to become more attractive across the border. Take our own pravasis. It's unlikely they would have emigrated to foreign shores in the absence of a strong push factor centred around better jobs and a higher quality of life. That they still retain strong emotional ties with this country proves the point. It is a fair guess that jobs are the biggest attraction for the vast majority of the estimated 15 million Bangladeshis living in India. To be sure, there is a small percentage of Hindus who have fled their homeland to escape repression. But in the sangh lexicon, Hindu immigrants are refugees while Muslims are infiltrators, which is an ironic legitimatisation of the two-nation theory. Besides, India is not the only country which treats certain categories of aliens with suspicion. The once haven of immigrants, the United States, has embarked on a policy of conscious discrimination against selected outsiders, as can be seen from the current plight of immigrants from Pakistan and other, mainly Muslim, countries. Before New Delhi orders a fresh crackdown on Bangladeshis, it must ponder the possibility of the current US paranoia extending to other immigrants.

Indians pushed into Bangladesh: Dhaka

Dhaka: Bangladesh, which accused India of pushing in Bangla-speaking Indian Muslims into its territory, has claimed that at least 4,000 people were being assembled by Indian security forces on the border for push-in.

"India made at least six attempts recently to push in Bangla-speaking people into the country and at least 4,000 Bangla-speaking Indian Muslims were being assembled on the border by the the Border Security Force for push-in," state minister for foreign affairs Reaz Rahman told foreign diplomats here on Sunday night.

Dhaka briefed the diplomats at the same time when it summoned Indian deputy high commissioner Dilip Sin-

ha to register its protest on the issue of alleged "push-ins".

Mr Rahman told diplomats that the timing of such "push-in" attempts on India's part was a matter of concern because they happened during joint secretary-level talks between the two countries.

However, Mr Rahman said he hoped that the situation would not be allowed to deteriorate further in view of the "humanitarian ramification of the evolving situation".

Outrightly rejecting the allegation, Mr Sinha reiterated New Delhi's concern about Bangladeshis living illegally in India. He also called upon Dhaka to acknowledge the gravity of the situation and address it in a sincere manner. PTI

Bhutan refugees go on strike

Niraj Lama in Nepal

Jan. 14. — Isolated in a remote corner of the Nepalese Terai, the Khudunabari refugee camp in Jhapa district is trying once again to draw the attention of the international public to an issue, recently forgotten but still capable of fomenting trouble in a strategic region of the subcontinent.

The Bhutanese refugees here, and from several surrounding camps, all run by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, are on an indefinite hunger strike demanding repatriation. The refugees, who are all Nepalis, were allegedly driven out by

Bhutan, and have been living here in camps for the past 10 years.

Demands for India to intervene remain as strident as it used to be among the refugees; supported also by the Nepalese political parties who express "solidarity" with them.

After protracted negotiations between the Nepal and Bhutan governments, the two countries had agreed on a "joint verification process" that was undertaken at this camp and completed in December 2001. The camp then had 12,091 members. Today the camp population stands at 13,003.

While the result of the verification — which categorised the refugees into

three groups, of which only one category was to be repatriated — are yet to be declared, it was not extended to other camps, suspended for reasons unknown. The agitating refugees are demanding that the result of the verification process be published. Seated on a stack of hay, with the "camp office" in the background, the relay hunger-strikers at the camp, both men and women, exude an air of despondency. The emotion is not surprising for people who have been living in makeshift huts with the bare minimum of basic amenities for the past 10 years, with governments unable to go beyond ceaseless negotiations. /

THE STATESMAN

15 10 3

Migration problem

Careful consideration is necessary

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani did well to identify illegal immigration into India as a serious problem, although the remedy he proposes — identifying and “throwing out” an estimated 20 million of them — is not exactly practical. Nevertheless, a debate that focuses on India’s options in the area of policy towards those who cross its borders without authorisation and stay on in the country with impunity is necessary and overdue. Immigrants are generally aided and abetted by local politicians; the CPI-M in West Bengal and Tripura and the Congress in Assam are known to be in the business of encouraging migration to build captive vote banks. The cost to the country is, however, prohibitive. A recent report by the UN’s Population Division has pointed out what CPI-M and Congress won’t admit — the country harbours, on a conservative estimate, 6.3 million of such migrants. Other population experts say the actual figure is double that, which makes a country struggling hard to feed, clothe and ensure a modicum of health care for its population absorb more migration than most rich countries and can afford it on both economic and security grounds less than any of them. The UN report also says that India’s neighbours all have immigration-unfriendly policies. It is ironic that while liberalisation is failing in other spheres, we are surely among the most liberal in the world when it comes to admitting migrants.

That said, identifying the 20 million migrants that Advani mentions is going to be a herculean task. The vast majority of them are Bangladeshi, and even if the job can be accomplished, it is unlikely that Bangladesh will agree to have them back or even recognise them as its own. Having failed to deter their entry, the only viable solution may be to grant at least some of them citizenship, while instituting measures to see that future entry is severely restricted and carefully monitored. Preparing a national register of Indian citizens and issuing national identity cards is a good first step, and the Rs 14 crore required is money well spent if the job is actually accomplished within a specific time frame. There is likely to be corruption at the level of states and cards are likely to be issued to those who do not qualify — the connivance of politicians can make the difference between success and failure. The vested interest that has been developed will not be easily overcome. None of this applies to the task of discouraging future migration, for which maintaining records is essential. Also a change of heart among politicians, assuming they have a heart, and above all, have any real concern for the country’s safety, is necessary for success. Otherwise both anti-poverty programmes and the country’s security stand endangered.

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THE STATESMAN

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9, 2003

rites of passage

BY RAISING THE illegal immigration issue, L. K. Advani has reverted to a subject which evokes an obsessive interest and fervent passions within his party. If the Union Home Minister's call to throw out Bangladeshi and Pakistani citizens staying illegally in this country has a familiarly strident ring, it is because his party has been urging their deportation for many years now. Nevertheless, two things deserve to be noted in connection with Mr. Advani's recent remarks. First of all, the manner in which he attempted to link the issue of illegal immigrants with that of internal security was unwarranted, unsubstantiated and insidious. The challenges this country faces on the internal security front go well beyond that posed by illegal immigration. For those within the Sangh Parivar, conflating the two issues has been a customary way of addressing the problem of illegal immigration, thereby giving it a communal colour and an emotive character.

The other point to note about Mr. Advani's "throw them out" call is a pragmatic one — given the enormous nature of the issue, this is much easier said than done. Illegal Pakistani overstayers, who number a little over 10,000, are not the issue here but the poverty-stricken migrants from Bangladesh after 1971 who, according to estimates, number a staggering 15 million. Given that this migration has taken place over three decades, the task of distinguishing between Bangladeshis and (West) Bengalis is far from easy. The problem is compounded by the fact that (thanks to lax procedures and political patronage) many of the Bangladeshi immigrants now hold ration cards or voter identity cards (or both). Finally, there is the issue of Bangladesh's less than helpful attitude. With Dhaka sometimes giving the impression that the steady wave of emigration to India is a figment of New Delhi's imagination, the option of mass-scale deportation is rendered even less realistic. It was probably the recognition of

the pragmatic and legal difficulties in detecting and deporting illegal Bangladeshi immigrants that made the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, last year to suggest that illegal Bangladeshi immigrants could be given work permits.

A number of factors have been responsible for the Bangladeshi influx into India. The steep rise in the Bangladesh population (which was 128 million people in the year 2000), the relatively better economic opportunities in India (and not, as many people imagine, a result of lebensraum) and the porous 4,000-km international border (which continues to be permeable despite attempts to stem the spate of illegal crossings). In its report submitted two years ago, the Task Force on Border Management estimated that three lakh Bangladeshi illegal immigrants enter India every year. Illegal immigration is a sensitive issue and it would be myopic not to see the serious political ramifications it has for India. For example, the Assam agitation between 1979 and 1985 was launched partly because of fears over the impact of Bangladeshi immigration; tensions in Tripura are also partially a result of the same phenomenon. However, rather than raising the deportation issue in a communally tinged way, the challenge is to find a way of firmly stopping further entry of illegal immigrants. Plugging the leaks along the porous border is one measure that needs to be implemented. National identity cards are another measure and the Centre has set up a pilot project for the issue of such cards in some States. But the purpose of issuing such cards must be only to discourage further illegal immigration. The procedure for issuing them should be fair and should not become a ruse to harass people by zealous advocates of deportation. Infiltration or illegal immigration is a reality that cannot be ignored. At the same time, it is important to see the issue for what it is and to refrain from exploiting it in a manner that is political, prejudiced and essentially divisive.

THE HINDU

9 JAN 2003

NATIONAL IDENTITY CARDS PLANNED

Heat on illegal immigrants

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Jan. 7. — Mr LK Advani today declared a crackdown on illegal Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants in the country and said they should be detected and deported immediately. At a meeting organised by the home ministry, chief secretaries, directors-general of police of different states and Union Territories were told to undertake the task on top priority basis.

An institutionalised multi-agency task force and joint intelligence command under the functional authority of Intelligence Bureau will be set up soon. It will ensure better coordination between states and the Centre, keep a constant tab on whether the state law enforcing agencies and various Central agencies are making a concerted effort to implement the decisions taken by the Centre, and also assist state governments, if necessary.

According to official estimates, over 11,500 people who entered India holding Pakistani passports through valid visa have overstayed and are currently not traceable. Bangladeshi immigrants estimated to be over 20 million pose the biggest threat to national security. Home secretary Mr N Gopalaswami said of the total number of Bangladeshi illegal immigrants in the country, over 10 million were in Assam and West Bengal.

Mr Advani directed state governments to launch "special drives" to detect and deport illegal Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants as they posed a threat to national security.

"Over 11,500 Pakistanis have entered the

country with regular papers and passports but have overstayed. There is no reason why our states should be soft on them," he said. "Immediate steps should be taken to identify them, locate them and throw them out. They (states) should launch drives to detect and deport these foreigners," Mr Advani said, pointing out that powers of the Centre to detect and deport illegally residing foreign nationals have been delegated to states and Union Territories. He asked the police top brass to present figures of how many illegally overstaying Pakistani immigrants were traced last year.

Voicing concern over the "serious problem" of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, he said: "The problem needs to be tackled firmly by all states."

The Centre plans to prepare a National Register of Indian Citizens and issue Multi-purpose National Identity Cards (MNICs) to them. Mr Advani said these would provide a credible individual identification system and also act as a deterrent to future illegal immigration.

A pilot project for issuing ID cards will be undertaken in 13 states after 1 April at an expenditure of Rs 14 crore.

To tackle Left-wing extremism affecting nine states, the government would provide additional paramilitary forces to these states, Mr Advani said.

Also, the Planning Commission will grant Rs 15 crore for developmental work in the affected districts for three years, in an effort to tackle the issue from a socio-economic perspective. The states have been asked to submit their plans.



LK Advani wants the state governments to immediately 'identify, locate and throw out' all illegal Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants as they pose 'a serious threat to national security'

8 JAN 2003

THE STATESMAN

Lankan govt and LTTE agree to focus on resettling refugees

Nakhon Pathom (Thailand): In a bid to avoid any deadlock in their peace talks, Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers on Tuesday decided to side-step contentious military issues and instead agreed to focus on plan for resettlement of thousands of refugees displaced by the civil war.

During more than three hours of intense talks on Tuesday morning on the second day of the fourth round of peace talks here, the two sides discussed an action plan for resettling the people displaced during the 20-year-long ethnic war in the island. The recommendations will be taken up at the talks on Wednesday.

Government negotiator G L Peiris said the issue of resettling of displaced persons was a complicated one. "It is daunting in its proportions... The sensible thing is to deal with the problems outside the high security zone."

There were concerns that the talks, which opened on Monday, could have been derailed by a rebel demand that the military reduce its high-security zones near army camps in the north of the country to allow civilians to return to their property. The army insists that the rebels disarm before resettlement

was allowed by closing down military camps.

Mr Peiris said the progress made on the refugee issue would no doubt disappoint those who had expected the peace talks to break down on the issue.

He said the pragmatic approach of both sides was refreshing. "You have a large problem. One segment of it can be dealt with immediately and in doing so, you can provide relief to thousands of people and you can do it immediately without any difficulties."

Meanwhile, the LTTE said they were pulling out of a key panel entrusted with a major part of winding down the island's drawn out separatist war.

The rebel outfit said they were withdrawing from the sub-committee on de-escalation and normalisation to protest "unreasonable and unacceptable demands" by Sri Lankan security forces. PTI

8 JAN 2003

Opp slams musings, takes on Hindutva

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Jan. 1. — The Congress today questioned the Prime Minister's New Year-eve Goa musings equating Hindutva with Bharateeyata and also confronted the Hindutva concept head-on, terming it "political manoeuvre that stokes ill-will, violence and hatred among various communities with the single aim of garnering votes".

The CPI central secretariat dismissed the musings as Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's "traditional double talk", aimed at "hoodwinking the people and selling Hindutva as a legitimate and acceptable concept". Pointing out that Mr Vajpayee's musings didn't condemn the Gujarat riots, it said: "The Prime Minister in a subtle way has presented his musings on the basis of his understanding of Golwalkar and Vir Savarkar. Not naming RSS and VHP itself shows where his sympathy lies."

Coming within days of it demanding a ban on the VHP and Bajrang Dal, the Congress posture today signals its renewed aggression against Sangh Parivar, after swallowing the bitter pill of defeat and wide-spread criticism for its liaison with "soft Hindu" electoral tactics in Gujarat.

Party spokesman Mr Anand Sharma said Mr Vajpayee's "musing is amusing" for "equating Hindutva and Bharateeyata". Targeting the entire Sangh Parivar, particularly the RSS, Mr Sharma said the "Hindutva" concept was an attempt to distort the essence of Hinduism. In an apparent attack on the Parivar's nationalist plank, he said the RSS didn't even participate in the freedom struggle.

He dubbed the Goa musings as the Prime Minister "airing his confusion about secularism and Hindutva and India's age-old tradition of unity in diversity. The Prime Minister contends that Hindutva is liberating and brooks no ill will, hatred or violence among different communities. It's rather unfortunate that the Prime Minister, despite his forays in the field of literature and poetry, has conveniently overlooked the sense and meaning of words. Hindutva is a political manoeuvre that stokes ill-will, violence and hatred among different communities with the single aim of garnering votes".

Mr Vajpayee, he said, had often demonstrated "his mastery over words to retract his stated positions and statements. What's worse, the Prime Minister propagates the view that there's no difference between Hindutva and

Bharateeyata since both are expressions of the same thought. This is patently wrong. Bharateeyata is an inclusive world-view in which Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and believers in all other faiths set aside their theological difference to embrace Indianness."

He then reminded Mr Vajpayee that "his extended saffron family most definitely did not put aside their narrow prejudices even when it came to the great cause of Independence." The RSS, he said, "not only didn't participate in the nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, but actively dissented along with Muslim League. How can anyone forget that a follower of the RSS, Nathuram Godse, assassinated the Mahatma!"

Instead of "indulging in misleading propaganda", the Prime Minister should have used his "Goa pulpit to warn all of us of the presence in our midst of sinister foreign-funded forces, which are out to subvert the Constitution". He said it would have been appropriate had the PM "reassured us that he would use the sovereign power of his government to bring the VHP to book... and that his government would protect the Constitution".

Editorial: Goa message, page 6

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'Hindutva brooks no hatred or violence'

Excerpts from Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's New Year musings in Goa follow:

The sight of the sea and the sound of its waves can easily make one's mind wonder about the eternal and the infinite. My wandering thoughts, however, return to India. How many waves of history have crashed at the shore of our motherland! How many New Year suns have dawned on its vast expanse! In our preoccupation with the here and now, we sometimes tend to forget how ancient, and yet how enduring and self-renewing, is our civilisation, indomitable, inclusive, absorbing all the positive influences brought ashore by the tides of history and making them its own.

I recall here the ringing words of Swami Vivekananda in his essay, *The Future of India*: "It is the same India which has withstood the shocks of centuries, of hundreds of foreign invasions, of hundreds of upheavals of manners and customs. It is the same land which stands firmer than any rock in the world, with its undying vigour, indestructible life. Its life is of the same nature as the soul, without beginning and without end, immortal; and we are the children of such a country."

Our diversity is as much a source of India's greatness — and of Indians' pride in their nation — as her antiquity. Foreigners have always wondered how we can embrace so much diversity in religion, ethnicity, language and lifestyles, and yet remain a united nation. What they may not understand, and which we must never forget, is that living with diversity, and yet weaving a thread of unity and harmony through it, has been a way of life throughout India since time immemorial. This is as

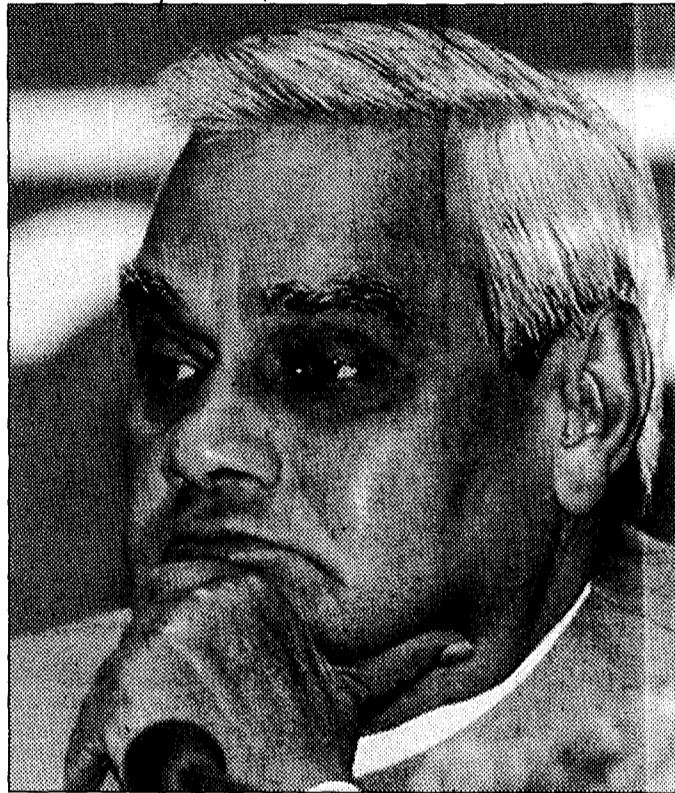
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true in Goa as it is in Gujarat, in Jammu and Kashmir as much as in Kerala, in Manipur as much as in Madhya Pradesh.

From time to time, the theme of unity in diversity provokes intense debate, even controversies. I wish to comment on two distinct voices, which have become louder after the Gujarat elections. On the one hand, secularism is being pitted against Hindutva, under the belief that the two are antithetical to one another. This is incorrect and untenable.

Secularism is a concept of the state, enjoining upon it the duty to show respect for all faiths and to practise no discrimination among citizens on the basis of their beliefs. In this sense, India has been secular since the beginning of her known history. We chose to remain wedded to secularism even when Pakistan was carved out on the basis of the spurious and communal Two-Nation Theory. This could not have been possible if the majority of Indians were not secular.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore has explained it very well. "India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, while fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their differences. The tie has been as loose as possible, yet as close as circumstances permitted. This has produced something like a united states of a social federation, whose common name is Hinduism."

Hinduism's acceptance of the diversity of faiths is the central feature of secularism in India. As Maharshi Aurobindo points out: "Indian religion has always felt that since the minds, the temperaments and the intellectual affinities of men are unlimited in their variety, a perfect



Atal Bihari Vajpayee

liberty of thought and of worship must be allowed to the individual in his approach to the infinite."

On the other hand, Hindutva, which presents a *viraat darshan* (broad, all-encompassing view) of human life, is being projected by some people in narrow, rigid and extremist manner — an unfortunate and unacceptable interpretation that runs totally contrary to its true spirit. Hindutva is an integral understanding of the entire creation, showing the way both to the here and the hereafter. It emphasises the inseparable relationship between the individual and society, as well as between man's material and spiritual needs. Hindutva is liberal, liberating

and brooks no ill-will, hatred or violence among different communities on any ground.

We need to affirm and promote that true understanding of Hindutva which is forward-looking, not one that seeks to take us back; that which makes us capable of meeting the challenges of the modern world, not one that is stuck in the grooves of the past; that which is reform-minded, and not one that protects obscurantism and injustice, against which all the reformers of the past have fought. If understood and practised in this enlightened sense, which is how Swami Vivekananda and other great patriots propounded it, the current controversy over Hindutva will be seen as

There is no difference between such Hindutva and Bharateeyata, since both are expressions of the same *chintan* (thought). Both affirm that India belongs to all, and all belong to India. It means that all Indians have equal rights and equal responsibilities. It entails recognition of our common national culture, which is enriched by all the diverse religious and non-religious traditions in India

wholly unnecessary.

There is no difference between such Hindutva and Bharateeyata, since both are expressions of the same *chintan* (thought). Both affirm that India belongs to all, and all belong to India. It means that all Indians have equal rights and equal responsibilities. It entails recognition of our common national culture, which is enriched by all the diverse religious and non-religious traditions in India. For centuries both have synonymously pointed to our national identity. Even the Supreme Court has held that Hindutva is neither a religious nor a political concept, but connotes a noble and elevating way of life.

PTI