

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Mizo accord: hope and uncertainties

Settlement of the 20-year-old insurgency could help transform the troubled Northeast, if it works. . . .

The memorandum of settlement of the Mizoram question signed by the government of India and Mr. Laldenga, leader of the Mizo National front (MNS), on June 30 here in Delhi, is the third major "accord"—after Punjab and Assam—into which the Rajiv Gandhi government has entered into in pursuit of solutions to the legacy of communal antipathy bequeathed by Britain.

Whether it will be implemented more efficiently and prove sounder than its predecessors, both foundering now, is the subject of great debate here, both in and out of the recently convened monsoon session of parliament.

Under the terms of the accord, the Mizo separatist insurgency is to be terminated, and the front's articles of association redrafted in line with the Indian constitution. The front has vowed not to undertake support for any neighboring insurgency groupings, and its guerrillas, based across the border in Bangladesh, will surface to turn in their weapons and resume civilian life without penalties.

The present Congress government in Mizoram will step down, under the terms of an otherwise secret agreement between the MNS and Congress Party, which preceded signing of the accord, and an interim coalition government with Mr. Laldenga at the helm, will take over for the six-month period preparatory to fresh elections to an expanded legislative assembly.

In the interim, Mizoram, present-

ly a Union Territory, will be granted statehood. The new state will receive, in addition to substantial development funds and related central assistance, a university and High Court of its own.

There is no doubt that the accord is a political gamble. The potential pitfalls are not difficult to find. In the first place, there is no formal timetable for implementation in the accord itself. So far, however, there is some indication that the government has been careful to keep the momentum.

Laldenga postponed his plans to return to collect his family in London—where he has lived under safekeeping of a Christian minister as the MNS was outlawed—in order to oversee the first phase of "return to normalcy" in Mizoram, namely, the surfacing and resettlement of the guerrillas. Home Ministry officials say that the entire procedure should be completed during the first week of August.

But even in this first step, there are a series of ambiguities, any one of which could derail the entire accord. For instance, the issue of amnesty. The accord refers to the granting of amnesty for guerrillas who voluntarily come up from underground, but is silent on the fate of MNS partisans now in prison. While government officials applies only to the guerrillas underground, Mr. Laldenga has asserted that it is a blanket amnesty.

Political ambiguity centers on the role of the Congress Party. Contrary to some speculation, Mr. Laldenga has

not joined the Congress, though his son has been reportedly been working with the Party since at least 1984. In that year, Congress rode to power in Mizoram, against opponents of the MNS, on the promise to bring Laldenga and the central government for a settlement. Further, the Congress chief minister has declined to share power of deputy chief minister with Mr. Laldenga in the interim setup, and will instead step down "to prepare for the elections."

Is Congress—the only "national" party on the scene—bowing out à la Punjab and Assam, ceding yet another state to an insular regional party? Or, are reports of Congress's greater relative strength in Mizoram and reports of the MNS's near exhaustion to be believed, and has Congress coopted Mr. Laldenga into a process of fundamentally transforming the Northeast over which it is very much in control?

The answer could be critical. Already, to the public dismay of Rajiv Gandhi, Mr. Laldenga has renewed demands for "greater Mizarma"—unification of Mizo inhabited areas of neighboring states with the new state. The accord references the constitutional procedure for effecting such adjustment, but clearly states that the government makes no commitment in the matter.

Leadership to overturn the British legacy of administration on the basis of manipulating tribal sentiments and enforcing backwardness—the Northeast has been kept backward since Independence—is required.

In its absence, the process of carving and recarving the largely tribal Northeast—strategically situated as it is between China, Burma, and Bangladesh—on the basis of ethno-cultural diversities, will continue to be a dark and endless tunnel—as it will be for India itself.