

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A birthday present for the nation

The Assam settlement closes another window of vulnerability for India's security.

Addressing a huge Independence Day rally from the ramparts of the Red Fort in New Delhi on Aug. 15, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi announced that an accord with protest leaders in the state of Assam had been signed.

"We hope that this will reduce yet another source of tension which will enable India to pay due attention to development with more speed," Prime Minister Gandhi told the nation.

"The biggest challenge before us is that of India's unity and integrity," he said. "Only 10 months back, the world was wondering whether India would remain united or be torn asunder. Today this question does not arise. Today the world is seeing a very strong and powerful India."

The Assam settlement came less than a month after Gandhi concluded an agreement with dissident Sikh leaders in Punjab. The troubles in Assam and Punjab have provided opportunities to strike at India from abroad, as in the brutal Sikh terrorist assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October 1984.

Only the two communist parties in India have declared themselves opposed to the settlement.

Indeed, Prime Minister Gandhi's effectiveness in cutting the ground out from under the plot to destroy India as an independent nation has enhanced the danger to his own life. Aware of an ongoing live assassination threat against the prime minister, Indian officials took extensive security precautions around the celebrations at the 16th-century Moghul fort, from where

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, declared the birth of the nation in 1947.

Days prior to the signing of the accord on Assam, Gandhi had visited Assam to announce that New Delhi would give priority to all-round development of the strategic northeastern border state. Largely underdeveloped and underpopulated, Assam contains one-third of India's hydroelectric potential, a third of the onshore oil and natural gas resources, along with huge reserves of coal, limestone and other essential minerals, and great forest wealth. Fifty percent of India's tea comes from this region.

The prime minister announced that a cultural center and university would be set up in Assam for the entire northeastern region of India, and appealed to the people of Assam to create an atmosphere "congenial for speedy implementation of developmental activities." It was clear from his reception in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, that he had struck a responsive chord. Within 24 hours the dissident leaders were in New Delhi negotiating to break the stalemate in the dispute which has evaded solution for six years.

The Assam dispute erupted in April 1979 when, during an election campaign, the opposition to the Congress (I) party in the state accused the Congress government of deliberately allowing foreign nationals, from neighboring Bangladesh as well as the Indian state of West Bengal, to settle in Assam. The protesters claimed that

Congress was trying to turn the local citizens into a minority group and load the electoral rolls with "foreigners" to win the election.

Braintrusts from abroad and within India moved in quickly to re-define the issue, calling it a struggle to "preserve the Assamese identity." During 1983 the agitation took a sinister turn with Hindu-Assamese defending their rights against the "infiltrating" Bangladeshi Muslims. In a coordinated move, London-based Muslim fundamentalist operators began an international slander campaign against the Indian government and Indira Gandhi.

In the last six years, waves of violence rocked the state and more than 3,000 lives were lost. Foreigners were banned. Indira Gandhi met the agitation leaders on numerous occasions in a vain effort to resolve the issue.

The settlement came at 2:45 a.m. after 20 hours of continuous negotiations. The main features of the agreement are dissolution of the Assam state assembly, controlled by the Congress Party since 1983, with new elections to both the state assembly and the 14 parliamentary seats to be held at a convenient date. The state will not be put under president's rule, usually the practice in India in the absence of an assembly, but instead a caretaker government will continue in power until the new ministry is formed.

It has been further agreed that all those who settled in Assam prior to 1966, or whose names appeared on the 1967 electoral rolls, will be considered residents of the state. Those who came to settle in Assam between 1967 and 1971 will be removed from the electoral rolls for a period of several years, whereupon they may become legally resident voters. Those who moved into Assam after 1971 will be relocated out of the state.