

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Mizoram: A new state is born

The successful election augurs well for future stability in this sensitive area.

The Mizo National Front (MNF) of former guerrilla leader Laldenga won a decisive election victory Feb. 16 in India's northeast territory of Mizoram, a mountainous 21,000 square kilometers of land sandwiched between Bangladesh and Burma, and inhabited by half a million people, most of whom belong to the hill tribes.

The elections, like Mizoram's accession to statehood on Feb. 20, will set out the "Mizo Accord" of June 30, 1986 between the Rajiv Gandhi government and then-exiled Mizo leader Laldenga. The accord brought to an end 20 years of insurgency and turmoil, supported by China and meddled in by many other powers, in this strategically sensitive region.

The holding of elections for a new 40-member assembly, after a three-week campaign where the MNF was pitted against the Congress (I) and the People's Conference of Brigadier Sailo, was a victory in itself. Previously outlawed and driven into separatist insurgency, MNF stood on its own for the first time, on a commitment to the democratic process and the integrity of India.

The MNF won an absolute majority, bagging 25 out of 39 seats declared. The Congress (I) figured a distant second, with 12 seats, and the People's Conference got 2. Voter turnout was very high at 75%.

The victory for Mr. Laldenga—who was in exile until a little less than a year ago—only confirmed what Congress leaders associated with the late Indira Gandhi knew when, in 1976, they first began the process of

bringing Laldenga and his MNF back into the political process: The MNF is and always has been the repository of the Mizo people's hopes and aspirations.

The Front originated as the most effective group of famine relief workers, with Mr. Laldenga at its head, in 1961 in the wake of the 1959 famine that ravaged the Mizo hills, then part of Assam state. The demand for independent statehood arose from the Assam administration's abject failure to help relieve the devastation of the famine.

The organization was banned in 1966, following violence committed by MNF workers against the Indian army based in Mizoram. There were also reports that Mr. Laldenga was in contact with the government of Pakistan. The ban was lifted in 1976, and then reimposed for two years in 1982, when talks between Laldenga and the Center, as the central government is called, broke down.

The Congress sweep in the 1984 elections against opponents of the MNF was due to their campaign promise to bring Laldenga and the Center together for a settlement. Now, with the MNF in the election, it was no use voting for stand-ins. With the exception of former Congress chief minister Mr. Lalthanhawla, now deputy chief minister under Laldenga in the interim government, all four Congress ministers were routed.

But while decisive, the MNF's victory was not a landslide. The Congress showing is respectable under the circumstances, and will be an impor-

tant factor in administering the new state. The Congress base in Mizoram is broad: The party won seats in all three districts, and retained its traditional hold in the area populated by various ethnic minorities.

The Congress campaign was particularly constructive in setting forth the issues: maintaining stability and moving ahead with economic development.

"We need in regions like Mizoram a government that has the vision, capability, and commitment to overall development," Rajiv Gandhi told a large public meeting in the state capital, Aizawl, at the conclusion of his two-day campaign tour. "We want to usher in a new era of development in Mizoram so that young people may get more opportunities."

Gandhi reiterated his regret that prolonged insurgency and violence had prevented Mizoram from developing like other states and emphasized that it was the Congress that had brought peace.

The prime minister also discussed details of the economic package the Center has adopted in an effort to make up for lost time. The annual central allocation for Mizoram has been increased from \$6 million to \$10 million for 1987-88, and the subsidy for transport on the Aizawl-Silphar Highway—the only road connecting Mizoram to the rest of the country—increased by 100%. The quantity of rice, cement, paraffin, and other petroleum products supplied to the state were also increased.

Gandhi's package focused on the improvement of infrastructure—water, power, transport, and communications improvements. The package also includes establishment of a watch-assembly plant, a vegetable and fruit-processing unit, and an industry growth center at Lungmual.