



Bangladesh and India finally give people a nation

More than 50,000 people without nationality for 70 years now get to choose citizenship and receive the benefits.

[Syed Tashfin Chowdhury](#) | 07 Jun 2015 08:00 GMT | [Human Rights](#), [Bangladesh](#), [India](#), [Politics](#), [Business & Economy](#)

Dhaka, Bangladesh - After nearly 70 years of statelessness, more than 50,000 people will now receive citizenship and all its benefits after a historic border agreement between India and Bangladesh.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit to Dhaka resulted in the land boundary agreement with the swapping of 161 "enclaves" along the 4,100km stretch of border. A deal had been in the works since 1974 to help the tens-of-thousands living in the region, but it had not been ratified until Modi's weekend trip.

Officials and political analysts heralded the Indian prime minister's visit as a sign of deepening relations between the South Asian neighbours.

The border agreement involves the swap of 111 Indian enclaves to Bangladesh, and 51 in Bangladesh to India. Residents on either side will be able to choose the citizenship they prefer.

The 50,000 stateless people suffered from not having basic government services, but also faced restrictions on movement as they did not possess passports. Healthcare and schools were largely absent, and they were not allowed to own property or vote in elections.

"This has been a culmination of the struggle by the enclaves people over the decades," Diptiman Sengupta, an enclaves activist, told Al Jazeera. "The exchange ... will also see a new era of cooperation between the two countries."

Economic cooperation

Reliance Power and Adani, two Indian energy companies, signed agreements with Bangladesh's state-run electricity agency on Saturday to invest \$5bn in the country's power sector.

Bangladesh has long suffered from severe electricity shortages. The deals involve the construction of four natural gas plants aiming to add 4,600 megawatts of power to the grid. Two coal-fired facilities are expected to produce another 1,600 megawatts.

India extended a \$2bn line of credit to Bangladesh and 20 other agreements - including bus services, shipping, and trade - were signed.

Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of Dhaka-based Centre for Policy Dialogue, said the deals signalled a new era between the two nations.

The \$2bn credit line will likely involve the development of transportation infrastructure, he said. Over the past decade, India has been eager to secure transit rights through Bangladesh's northeast.

"This will help strengthen Bangladesh's bilateral ties with India in the short run, while also helping Bangladesh connect with East Asia in the long run," Rahman said. "Such infrastructural development will surely be helpful for Bangladesh."

Water-sharing stagnation

Still, some in Bangladesh reacted to the agreements cynically, saying it remains to be seen whether what is on paper actually comes to fruition.

India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers, including the major Teesta and Feni Rivers, and tensions have escalated over the decades amid Indian government plans to dam waterways for hydroelectricity and taking it for irrigation projects.

"There has been many similar visits by Indian bigwigs to Bangladesh in the past where deals were signed, but that has not settled many unresolved issues, including water-sharing of common rivers like Teesta and Feni," Adnan Akib, a student, told Al Jazeera.

M Inamul Haque is chairman of the Dhaka-based Institute of Water and Environment.

"Since the '70s, India has been pumping out water from this river [Feni], thus keeping it for themselves," Haque said. "Bangladesh had proposed a 50-50 share of the Feni River to India, but there has been no significant progress in sealing a deal."

Although no breakthroughs were made on water disputes, Modi said the issue remains a work in progress.

"Our rivers should nurture our relationship, not become a source of discord," [said](#) Modi. "Water sharing is, above all, a human issue. I am confident that with the support of state governments in India, we can reach a fair solution on Teesta and Feni Rivers."

Delwar Hossain, professor of international relations at Dhaka University, said disputes over water will take time to resolve.

"It took decades to solve the land and maritime boundary issues between the two countries," he noted. "There seems to be a lack of commitment among government leaders on both sides [over water]."

Source: Al Jazeera