

Arunachal govt plans to 'rehabilitate' Chakmas and Hajongs in other states

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Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu has announced that "rehabilitating" the Chakma and Hajong "refugees" in other states is his next big target as the issue has remained unresolved for decades.

"We have solved the long border disputes with Assam by signing a historic Accord recently. Now I want to move on to another big problem, which is the rehabilitation of the Chakma and Hajong refugees. They were provided shelter in the eastern part of our state in the 1960s due to religious persecution in Bangladesh. Since then they have been living in poor conditions, they don't have proper housing or livelihood options. I feel sad when I visit those areas...I am in touch with the Centre and a few states for shifting them out of Arunachal Pradesh and rehabilitating them," Khandu said at a function to celebrate National Panchayati Raj Day at the state capital Itanagar, on Monday.

Chakmas and Hajongs were settled between 1964 and 1969 in parts of Changlang and Papum Pare district following an ethnic clash and a dam disaster in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of erstwhile East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). But tribal groups have been agitating for years against their settlement in Arunachal Pradesh, saying the same has posed a threat to the identity and culture of the local communities. Their numbers are now estimated to be over 65,000.

The BJP government in the state is in favour of settling them outside Arunachal Pradesh even as the National Human Rights Commission and the Supreme Court had asked the Centre to offer Indian citizenship to the Chakmas and Hajongs years ago. Union law minister Kiren Rijiju, an MP from Arunachal Pradesh, also favoured resettlement of the Chakma and Hajongs in other states.

Opposing Khandu's proposal, the Chakma Development Foundation of India (CDFI) on Tuesday said calling the Chakma and Hajongs "refugees" is "prejudicial".

"The Chakmas and Hajongs were settled by the Centre, the competent authority of the then North Eastern Frontier Agency, from 1964 onwards and those born in the NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh are citizens of India by birth. There is no provision in the Constitution of India empowering any state or the Union Territory to declare a non-resident and therefore forcibly remove from its territorial jurisdiction. Most of those who had migrated during 1964-1969 have already died and those who are alive cannot be removed from the state as per the directions of

the Supreme Court in its 1996 judgment in NHRC Vs State of Arunachal Pradesh case," said Suhas Chakma, the founder of the CDFI.

The CDFI founder also blamed the Arunachal Pradesh government for the deplorable condition of the Chakma and Hajongs living in the state. "The Chief Minister must realise that the deplorable economic conditions and extreme poverty have been created by the state by denying all the rights and facilities in the past 60 years."