Anger at plan that puts 4 million at risk of losing Indian citizenship

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Residents hold their documents as they stand in a queue to check their names on the final list of National Register of Citizens (NRC) at a NRC Sewa Kendra (NSK) in Burgoan village in Morigoan district on Monday, July 30.

New Delhi (CNN) — A day after a controversial citizenship audit put a question mark on the status of an estimated 4 million Indians living along the country's border with Bangladesh, the Indian government faced scathing criticism from political opponents accusing it of trampling over human rights of its people.

A draft of the so-called National Register of Citizens (NRC) was released Monday, amid popular anger over illegal migration into Assam, which shares a porous border with Bangladesh.

Proponents of the registry say it will help root out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, but the move has prompted fears of possible deportation among Assam's hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims.

The government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said it would not move to deport anybody, and would allow time for a lengthy appeals process for those left out of the registry.

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Many of the Assam minority Bengali community have lived in India for decades, crossing the border into the state during the bloody Bangladesh independence struggle in 1971. Many others can trace their history back even further, arriving before the independence of India in 1947.

Modi's political opponents -- who forced Parliament in New Delhi to adjourn multiple times Tuesday amid a heated debate over the issue -- maintain the registry is discriminatory.

The principal opposition Congress party said it wasn't enough to allow people left of the list to file appeals. It called on Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to ensure that the process is fair -- and that it doesn't discriminate against people based on their religion, a concern voiced by many given Assam's multi-ethnic make-up.

"We don't want that anyone in our country who is a genuine Indian -- based on his caste, religion or his ethic roots -- to be sent out of the country. This should not happen. The onus should not be on an individual, the onus should be on the government as well," said senior Congress leader, Ghulam Nabi Azad.

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'Rendered stateless'

Criticism was also forthcoming from international human rights bodies.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) highlighted the lack of an official policy for people who might eventually be excluded from of the final list, saying it could effectively render them stateless.

"Assam has long sought to preserve its ethnic identity, but rendering millions of people stateless is not the answer, said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia Director of HRW.

The concern was echoed by Amnesty International, which said the exercise "may render a significant number of people stateless."

"It is possible that the process will arbitrarily deprive people, who have lived in India for decades, of their nationality," it said in a statement.

Indian lawmakers hold placards protesting against Assam's National Register of Citizens outside of Parliament in New Delhi on July 31, 2018.

But the registry has also drawn support among BJP hardliners. In the nearby state of West Bengal, BJP State President Dilip Ghosh said that if brought to power, the party would seek to replicate the process in the state.

"There are more than 10 million illegal immigrants here and because of whom there is pressure on the security of the country, security and economy of the state. We have to free West Bengal from this," said Ghosh.

West Bengal, which also borders Bangladesh, is governed by the Trinamool Congress Party.

Ghosh's comments are likely to intensify the political battle around the registry issue, with opposition lawmakers accusing the BJP of aggravating longstanding social and communal tensions in return for votes.

"This is absolutely vote bank politics and election agenda," said Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, at a press conference Monday. "They are Indians but they have become refugees in their own land," she added, referring to those not included in the final draft of the registry.

A resident holds documents on his way to check his name on the final list of National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Kuranibori village, in Assam's Morigoan district on July 30, 2018.

Appeal process

In a statement Monday evening, the leader of the opposition Congress party Rahul Gandhi called on the government to "swiftly to resolve this crisis."

"There are reports pouring in from all corners of Assam of Indian citizens finding their names missing in the draft NRC, creating massive insecurity in the state," said Gandhi.

"I appeal to all members of the Congress party to help maintain peace and help all those against whom an injustice has been done in the draft NRC, no matter what their religion, caste, gender, linguistic group or political affiliation," added Gandhi.

The government has said people who have been excluded from the latest NRC draft will have until late September to file appeals and claim citizenship. It is unclear how long authorities will take to conclude the appeals process.

Out of the state's 32.9 million population, 28.9 million people have been recognized as legal citizens by the draft.

Assam is the only state in India to have a citizenship register. It was created in 1951 to identify Indian citizens from illegal migrants from East Pakistan.

An updated NRC was ordered by the Supreme Court of India in 2014 and the process began in 2015.

The cutoff date to be eligible for Indian citizenship is March 24, 1971, a day before the onset of the Bangladesh Liberation War.

CNN's Manveena Suri contributed to this report.