

Millions left off citizenship list in India

NEW DELHI

The census in one state has prompted concerns over discrimination

BY KAI SCHULTZ

The Indian government has released a draft list of citizens living in a northeastern state that excluded about four million people, raising concerns about the possible detention and deportation of ethnic minorities there.

The list, released Monday, is part of a longer process started a few years ago to update citizenship records in the state, Assam, which has borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh. Officials in Assam have sought to justify the move partly by citing unchecked immigration to the state from Bangladesh.

Many, however, feel that the update has disproportionately left off Muslim migrants and would pave the way for discrimination against minorities. Security in Assam was tightened before the draft was released, in an effort to curb protests.

Shafiuddin Ahmed, a Muslim teacher living in Assam, said that he had submitted his passport and other docu-

ments as part of the effort to update the citizenship list but that his name was among those left off the draft. Nine of his family members were on the list, but two of his brothers were also omitted, he said. "What will happen to me?" he asked in a telephone interview. "They may send me to a detention center. How will my family eat and live? I have all these uncertainties in my mind."

Government officials and lawyers have stressed that there will now be an appeals process and that the final list will probably include many people not on Monday's draft.

But Ricken Patel, the executive director of Avaaz, a global human rights organization, urged vigilance.

In a statement, Mr. Patel drew parallels to Myanmar's stripping of rights and protections for ethnic Rohingya in 1982. The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group, have long faced discrimination in Myanmar, which denies them citizenship. Last year, hundreds of thousands were violently expelled from their homes in Myanmar and pushed into dense, squalid refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh.

Mr. Patel expressed worry that a similar scenario could develop in Assam. After the governing Bharatiya Janata Party, which has ties to far-right Hindu nationalist groups, ascended to power after national elections in 2014, reports



Villagers waited to get their documents verified by government officials in the state of Assam, India. A draft list of citizens in the state has excluded about four million people.

of crimes against India's minority Muslim population have risen across the country. The Bharatiya Janata Party also controls Assam.

"The international community is fighting to stop a process that is alarmingly on track to potentially render millions of people stateless, and vulnerable to indefinite detention, violence or

worse," Mr. Patel said in the statement.

The list, which is called the National Register of Citizens but only applies to Assam, was last updated in 1951, and government officials have said the records are in desperate need of revision. Upamanyu Hazarika, a lawyer who works on migration issues, said the number of illegal immigrants living in

Assam now reached into the millions.

But the decision to update the register has inflamed passions in Assam, where anti-immigrant demonstrations in the 1980s culminated in the massacre of around 1,800 people in several Muslim villages. In the past few decades, the proportion of Bengali Muslims in Assam, home to over 30 million people, has climbed, but observers have pointed out that the jump could relate to higher birthrates among the Muslim community and not to migration from Bangladesh.

In December, the state government released an early draft of the citizenship list, which left out some 13 million people. In some cases, children were on the list, but parents or members of older generations who often do not have citizenship documents were not. Families said they feared being torn apart, and several suicides were linked to the long, bureaucratic process.

Monday's draft shaved the number of excluded to four million, and Aman Wadud, an independent lawyer in Assam who works on migration cases, said, "no one has been rendered stateless." The appeals process would continue, he said, and a date for the release of the final list has not been set.

"There is no mechanism to deport people, and that question shouldn't arise now," he said in a telephone interview.

"Just because your name is not there, doesn't mean that you can't cross the hurdle."

In an interview with The Indian Express newspaper, Sarbananda Sonowal, the chief minister of Assam, said that the final list "will have names of all the genuine Indian citizens residing in the state." Earlier this year, Mr. Sonowal said illegal immigrants would be immediately stripped of their constitutional rights.

But Mr. Patel, the rights activist, said that the period to file an appeal, a little under two months, was too short and that Muslims may face stricter paths to citizenship if the government passes a bill introduced in 2016 that makes it easier for many non-Muslims, including Hindus who fled across the border from present-day Bangladesh in 1971 during a brutal war, to stay in India without documents proving their citizenship.

"It's just Muslims who will likely have to go through a complicated, unfair appeal with no right to counsel ending in no hope of staying if they lose," Mr. Patel said in the statement.

The deportation of illegal migrants is rare in Assam, but the state government recently announced plans to build a new detention center for "foreigners" it plans to evict.

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.