

Indefinite shutdown cripples Nepal's tea region

Life in eastern Nepal, including the country's tea garden district bordering India, came to a grinding halt Tuesday as ethnic protesters began enforcing an indefinite shutdown even as the government held parleys with an umbrella group in the capital.

The tea garden districts - Ilam, Jhapa and Morang - and neighbouring districts Panchthar, Taplejung, Sunsari, Dhankuta and Terhathum were hit by the protest called by a mountain community, the Limbus, who are demanding an autonomous state for themselves in eastern Nepal.

United under an organisation called the Limbuwan Rajyaparishad, the community said the protest would continue till the government heeded their demand. The protesting group is asking the government to give them an autonomous state before the crucial election in November.

Nepal's official media said the transport sector had been the worst affected due to the strike with only cycles and rickshaws plying in eastern Nepal.

The shutdown comes even as four ministers Tuesday held negotiations with an umbrella group of ethnic communities, the Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasangh, in a bid to avert the threat of further closures from Thursday.

Ironically, though the Girija Prasad Koirala government has held parleys with three ethnic communities, who are demanding separate autonomous states, the talks have not led to tangible results and each group has been threatening fresh protests.

The other protesting groups include the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, with whom the government held two rounds of talks in the last fortnight. Both ended inconclusively after the government ignored the forum's demand for the dissolution of the present parliament and government.

Another dissenting band of hill people, the Chure Bhawar Ekta Samaj, earlier said it had satisfactory parleys with the government who agreed to release their imprisoned leaders. However, now it is accusing the government of not fulfilling its promises.

To add to the government's woes, the Maoists, who are holding a plenum of their representatives nationwide to decide future strategy, have asked their leadership to demand the abolition of monarchy before the election - a demand that is being opposed by Koirala and his Nepali Congress party.

Nearly 2,500 representatives who have gathered here for the meet that began Friday are expected to renew pressure on party supremo Prachanda to quit the government when the plenum ends Thursday.

So far, Prachanda has ruled out leaving the government or breaking the ceasefire. However, he is asking for a fully proportional electoral system now though his party earlier agreed to a mixed electoral system, another demand that is likely to be opposed by Koirala.

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