

Over the borderline

A people-oriented approach facilitated by the Centre can help resolve Assam-Mizoram row

The drawing down of tensions between Assam and Mizoram, at least at the leadership level, with the respective governments announcing the withdrawal of FIRs against the Chief Minister of Assam and a Rajya Sabha MP from Mizoram, among other steps, comes as a great relief. These actions followed the deaths of six policemen and a civilian from Assam in a violent gunfight in the border town of Vairengte in Mizoram on July 26, which exacerbated an already fraught situation between the States. The retaliatory actions such as filing FIRs against prominent representatives, at a time when locals in the Barak Valley in Assam had already imposed a blockade, disallowing trucks with essential goods from entering Mizoram, seemed to indicate that the States' leaderships were throwing away their scabbards, militating against their own moves to restore calm. After all, the governments had taken the right decision to withdraw their police forces from a four-kilometre "disputed stretch" and let it be manned by central paramilitary forces till a permanent solution is found on the border question. But the "blockade" and the damage caused to the only rail line connected to Mizoram made matters tough, culminating in the Mizo Bar Association filing a PIL before the Aizawl Bench of the Gauhati High Court against the "economic blockade". The Chief Ministers now seem committed to talks, with Assam's Himanta Biswa Sarma even suggesting that his government will approach the Supreme Court to find an amicable solution. Continuing talks without recriminations is the only way out to tamp down tensions between the two States.

The situation should never have come to this. What began as a conflict between residents of the States in the border area that is disputed between them, morphed into a violent battle between police, with paramilitary forces doing little to control or halt this. Their role in stopping the violence and securing the peace in the border areas between the States will now be paramount, even as the Assam government must compel residents to avoid continuing the blockade. An impartial inquiry into the sequence of events that led to the firing incident and the deaths must also be held so that such a situation does not recur. On the question of settling the borders to the satisfaction of both States, a concerted, people-oriented approach by the respective authorities with the facilitation of the Centre can strive to achieve that instead of a purely juridical approach that seeks to address this via the States' respective historical claims, a method that is used to settle sovereign claims. After all, both Assam and Mizoram are part of the Indian Union, and inter-State cooperation and cohesion are central to the sanctity of the federal system.