

Bangladesh, India in historic land swap after 70 years

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Dahala Khagrabari (Bangladesh): Bangladesh and India will this week finally swap tiny islands of land, ending one of the world's most difficult border disputes that has kept thousands of people in stateless limbo for almost 70 years.

At one minute past midnight tomorrow, some 50,000 residents along the border will light candles and celebrate their "new found freedom" following a historic deal sealed between the two countries' prime ministers.

"The 68 candles mark our 68 years of endless pain since 1947 and the agonies and poverty we faced living in no-man's land," said Golam Mostafa, who lives in an Indian enclave in the Bangladesh district of Kurigram.

Mostafa and other residents of the 162 enclaves -- small pockets of one country's territory surrounded by the other -- lack basic services such as schools, clinics, power and water because they are cut off from their national governments.

Under the agreement finalised in June and coming into effect tomorrow, the "islands" will effectively cease to exist, as each country will assume sovereignty over all enclaves in its territory.

Residents can choose to live in India or Bangladesh and will be granted citizenship. They can stay put or choose to move across the 4,000-kilometre long border.

With the land swapping less than 48 hours away, excitement has gripped the enclaves, with villagers holding feasts, rehearsing their new national anthem and preparing for celebrations including traditional games.

"It's like Eid day here. It's like a new found freedom," Rabbul Alam, who lives in the Indian enclave of Dahala Khagrabari, some 400 kilometres north of Dhaka, told AFP.

One of the weirdest enclaves, Dahala Khagrabari is situated in Bangladesh's northernmost district of Panchagarh, is surrounded by a larger Bangladeshi enclave, which is circled by an even bigger Indian one.

"For an outsider, it is difficult to know who is a Bangladeshi or who is an Indian here. Even we get confused.

Only some concrete pillars mark which part is Bangladesh and which is India," Alam said.

The enclaves date back to ownership arrangements made centuries ago between local princes. Local legends say the enclaves were the result of 18th-century chess games by two competing princes.

The parcels of land survived partition of the subcontinent in 1947 after British rule and Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence with Pakistan.

Bangladesh endorsed a deal with India in 1974 in a bid to dissolve the pockets, but a souring of ties in the next few decades meant India only signed a final agreement in June during a visit to Dhaka by premier Narendra Modi, keen to strengthen regional ties.

- PTI