

'PERSECUTED MINORITIES' FROM PAK, BANGLA

Issue of long-term visas: MHA tightens deadline for states

RAHUL TRIPATHI

NEW DELHI, JULY 16

WITH THE proposed Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, hanging fire, the Union Home Ministry has stepped up its effort to expedite grant of long-term visas (LTVs) to "persecuted minorities" from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The number of LTVs granted to Pakistan nationals from 2011-2014 stood at 14,726 (UPA tenure) while 15,244 Pak nationals were given LTVs till July 16 this year, according to the MHA.

As per new guidelines, the state government will have to clear proposals for grant of LTVs to Hindu minorities within 21 days, failing which approval of the Centre deemed to be taken, officials confirmed. Earlier, the state government had 45 days to process the proposals, which led to inordinate delays and corruption, they said.

After the NDA government came to power, several steps have been taken for simplification of LTV and Citizenship for Hindu minorities from neighbouring countries. There is also a provision to allow free movement of LTV holders within States and UTs where they are staying instead of restricting their movement within the place of stay. MHA further relaxed norms for those staying on LTV, allowing them to buy property, open bank accounts and obtain PAN as well as Aadhaar cards.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani na-

tionals from minority communities who entered India before December 31, 2014, are exempted from provisions of Passport Act and the Foreigners Act, as per the relaxed norms.

The new norms were introduced by MHA in wake of the arrest of a senior Home Ministry official Pankaj Mishra by Rajasthan anti-corruption bureau along with three others for allegedly demanding and accepting bribe from Pakistani immigrants applying for Indian citizenship or extending long-term visa. The MHA suspended Mishra and ordered a review of the guidelines.

A senior MHA official said, "After a review, we have reduced time-frame for States to clear LTV proposals. In case of delay or objections, State authorities will have to notify for technical hold, within a period of 21 days, failing which, the Centre will start processing the applications."

According to the MHA, about 30,000 Pakistan nationals have been granted LTVs from 2011 to 2018 out of which the maximum number of proposals, 6092, was cleared in 2018.

The MHA had in 2016 proposed amendments to the Citizenship Act that would have helped those granted LTVs secure Indian citizenship without much difficulty. However, the changes have been opposed by most Northeastern states and Opposition parties who raised objections to grant of citizenship based on religion.