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The eighth round of talks between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal on the refugees in eastern Nepal took place in Kathmandu from September 13 to 16. The respective delegations were led by the foreign ministers. Though the official Kuensel of Bhutan referred to the talks as "moving forward, but a long way to go," it looks that the two sides still continued to talk "intensively" on procedural matters only.

The Nepalese Foreign minister Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat appeared to have been disappointed with the talks. He said to Kuensel that there had been some progress, but there was a need to build on it "to find the basis for a durable and just solution to the problem." He added that he had "expected more from the talks . . . We have specific problems on how we move on the verification process . . . We have differences in perception and differences in approach on the way to move forward in the verification process."

Bhutanese sources claim that Dr. Mahat accepted the categorization of refugees into four categories and wanted the people in category ii-, i.e., those who emigrated from Bhutan should be resettled in Bhutan first.

The four categories decided in earlier meetings were

i. Bonafide Bhutanese if they have been evicted forcefully.

ii. Bhutanese who have emigrated.

iii. Non Bhutanese people.

iv. Bhutanese people who have committed criminal acts.

The talks appear to have broken down on the categorisation process itself. How does one decide the broad parameters for each category? The Bhutanese Foreign minister alleged that the Nepalese delegation did not accept the position of Bhutan that "prior commitment to harmonisation of position of each category" should be accepted before the verification process of the refugees begins.

The bi lateral talks between the two countries started in July 1993 when the Home ministers of the two countries met in Thimpu and established a Ministerial Joint Committee to deal with the refugee problem. In October 1993 the two governments agreed to place the refugees into four categories and six years hence, the two governments are still unable to agree as to what constitutes each category. While the refugees in Nepal are languishing, the two countries are still wrangling over procedural matters! What callous indifference of the politicians from both countries to the human problem of a community known for their hard work and productive capabilities?

We have maintained before and would reiterate that the categorisation agreed to was totally wrong and is a prescription for inaction. It is learnt that the present government in Nepal is embarrassed over the acceptance by their previous government on the categorisation. Clearly, Nepal knowingly or unknowingly had walked into a trap and Bhutan will take its own time, firstly to finalise a commonly accepted list (now they say the UNHCR list will do) and then to "harmonise" common positions with regard to each category. The route thus charted out is a "route to nowhere." As a first step, irrespective of the categories, Bhutan should accept those who were *supposed to have voluntarily given up their citizenship and their homes in Bhutan.*

Visit of Indian Foreign minister Jaswant Singh:

The Indian minister for External Affairs visited Nepal for four days from September 8. The Foreign Minister of Nepal Dr. Ram Sharan Mahat said that the talks covered all bilateral issues including the security concerns of the two countries. It is learnt that Prime minister of Nepal K.P.Bhattarai raised the issue of the Bhutanese refugees in eastern Nepal and specifically mentioned that a slight change in the attitude of the Indian government would help resolve the refugee issue. Jaswant Singh appears to have given no commitment as such on this issue. At the end of the visit in a press conference he said "We put forward our position strongly that the Bhutanese refugees who entered Nepal via India without hindrance should be allowed to return to their homeland in just that way, but the Indian side did not make any commitment. I hope there will be serious discussions on this." In another press conference he said "**Involvement of any third party will only serve to complicate the problem.** We recognise our limitations in the regard, and I am of the view that the problem should be solved bilaterally, amicable and peacefully through mutual talks. India has never blocked Bhutanese from going back to their homeland."

India has thus virtually washed its hands off on the refugee question. Perhaps the External Affairs Minister was not aware that the refugees who wanted to return to Bhutan peacefully were "arrested by the Indian police at the border at Phuntsoling and sent back to camps in Nepal. At the time the people of Nepalese origin were being evicted by the Bhutanese authorities, many of them were taken over by the Indian police at the Bhutan border and left at the border of Nepal.

India is tied to both countries Nepal and Bhutan by special relations. The policy of bilateralism will not work here and unless India takes the initiative, the Refugee issue is not likely to be solved in the near future.**Non involvement and not involvement, is the one that is going to complicate the problem.**

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