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There has been no further progress in the efforts of both Bhutan and Nepal to find a solution to the vexed question of refugees in Nepal outside the formal talks that are still going on between the countries. Two rounds of Secretary level talks took place between the two countries since the last update and all they decided was to *work out the procedure and parameters of categorisation* for the ministerial level talks.

Bhutan does not appear to have given up the idea of joint operations against ULFA and BODO militants. A new twist is being given to the proposal that the operations will be carried out solely by the specially trained Bhutanese security forces with backing from Indian Security Forces. Our reservations on the joint operations mentioned in our last [update no 9](#) [1] still hold good and Bhutan should desist from such an adventure until the refugee problem is solved.

The most important event since the last update was the release of Tek Nath Rizal on 17th December 1999. He was among the 200 prisoners released on the silver jubilee of the King's coronation. Of those released, 40 are presumed to be political prisoners. Rizal was sentenced to life in 1993 and the Bhutan government had repeatedly declared that Rizal will be released only after the successful conclusion of the bilateral talks between Bhutan and Nepal on the refugee question. It is still unclear what prompted the King to release him.

Rizal was declared as a "Prisoner of Conscience" by the Amnesty International, London. Soon after release it is learnt that Rizal had requested for an audience with the king. There is no information whether the King had granted the audience. There are demands from the Refugee community already that Rizal should be involved in the bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan.

In the month of January this year, Ms. Julia Taft , US Assistant Secretary of State for population, Migration and Refugee Bureau visited Thimpu to discuss among other things the refugee question. This was a follow up of her visit to the refugee camps in Jhapa, Nepal in October 1999. The Norwegian Foreign minister Kurt Vollebaek visited both Kathmandu and Thimpu and made a first hand assessment of the refugee question.

On Feb. 11, about a hundred demonstrators most of them Bhutanese refugees took out a rally and handed over a memorandum to the foreign minister of Nepal. The memorandum pointedly demanded that India should participate in the talks and that the repatriations should be done under the aegis of UNHCR or any other competent international body.

Prime minister Bhattarai of Nepal , who has since resigned also declared that he would raise the issue of the Bhutanese refugees with Indian leaders during his next visit, *as the refugees have entered into Nepal after crossing Indian territory*. Indian leaders do not appear to be moved and they continue to maintain that it is a bilateral problem to be settled between Nepal and Bhutan, **not withstanding the fact that the Indian authorities took care to see that the refugees fleeing Bhutan were taken over and escorted to Nepal border during the crisis.**

Mr. Pierre Sane, Secretary general of the Amnesty International participated in a discussion programme held in Kathmandu on Feb. 22 with the leaders of the Bhutanese Refugees. He said that "Every Bhutanese refugee should have the right to live in his home land in a dignified manner. Amnesty International is serious about the dignified and safe repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees to their country. The Bhutanese government should respect and guarantee human rights in the country." In the same discussion forum, Rori Mungovan, Regional Director of Amnesty International said that the Bhutanese problem was drawing international attention.

A Nepali Delegation headed by the foreign secretary Murari Raj Sharma attended a Secretary level meeting at Thimpu in mid February. On return he said on Feb. 20 that they have decided to hold another round of talks since Bhutan had requested time to discuss the "refugee verification" process.

The second round of Secretary level of talks was held at Kathmandu between March 13 and 16. The Bhutanese delegation was led by the Foreign Secretary Ugen Tshering. According to the Nepalese Foreign ministry, "The talks prepared common ground work for the verification of the refugees such as joint examination of documents, printing of pro forma, sharing costs and outlining the working procedure of the verification team." Differences according to the foreign ministry were on key issues including the basic unit of identification, creating of an appeal mechanism etc. The verification process is to be discussed at the ministerial meeting to be held later.

It looks that Nepal is again entering into a **trap** on the categorization process. We have said before that the categorization was totally uncalled for and that the first step should have been to allow the return of the refugees "who supposedly left their homes, fields and crops voluntarily."

The refugees feel betrayed. This should not surprise anyone. In one of the letters to the Kathmandu post someone has pertinently pointed out "that after eight rounds of talks and seven years of waiting Nepal has buckled to the pressure of the Bhutanese government on the categorization." The writer has opined that "**agreeing to verify a refugee based on the presumption that he or she might have left Bhutan voluntarily during a time when the whole of south Bhutan was under state terrorism is mute injustice on the refugee community.**"

Nepal blundered into agreeing to the categorization of refugees earlier. Let it not perpetuate the blunder by going ahead with the categorisation and betray the hundred and twenty thousand refugees who are looking upto Nepal and India to do justice to their case.

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