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The update on Bhutan was delayed in the hope that there could be a break through in the refugee issue. As it turned out, though much noise was made both by Bhutan and then Nepal no progress was made. Meantime, the United States took a hand with a proposal to bridge the differences between Bhutan and Nepal. In the absence of any initiative from India, it is good that the US government finally stepped in though it is not certain whether the incumbent Bush administration would continue with the initiative.

It may be recalled that in October 1999, Julia Taft, Assistant Secretary of State, Refugee affairs visited the refugee camps and Bhutan. During her discussions with Bhutan King she is reported to have informally mentioned US's willingness to sponsor the cost of refugee resettlement programme in Bhutan through the SCF (USA) and Ford Foundation.

Bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan:

Bhutan and Nepal are set to have another round of talks on December 24 at Kathmandu. The discussion would continue to be on the procedure to be adopted for verification of refugees. Progress if any so far in the talks has been that Nepal appears to have finally resigned to categorisation of refugees into four groups.

The crux of the issue on verification is that while Nepal wants a family based verification, Bhutan wants verification on individual basis. The suggestion of U.S.A. is a combination of both- first identify the head of a family who in turn identifies members of his/her nuclear family who will then be interviewed for categorisation on an individual basis.

The RTM expresses concern on the Refugees issue:

The International community represented by more than 80 delegates had a round table meeting on November 7, and expressed concern over the refugees issue as also the presence of ULFA and BODO militants in Bhutan. Lyonpo Jigme Thinley, the foreign minister admitted that two issues are of grave importance not only because they carried serious implication for the nation's security but they could have a negative impact on the country's development.

Thinley said that there were now about 96000 people "claiming" to be Bhutanese refugees. He went on to brief in detail the talks held between Bhutan and Nepal in the eleven rounds of talks that preceded. There appeared to be differences even on minimum age of the people to be subjected to verification. While Nepal proposed 25 years, Bhutan insisted on 16 years on the ground that the "bulk of illegal economic immigrants normally belong to the age group between 16 and 35." It is now ten years since the refugees left their homes in Bhutan and those who are 16 now would hardly have been six years old at the time they left Bhutan. They will have no valid identification details and it looks rather unfair to subject them to an interview now.

What is surprising is that both Nepal and Bhutan have conveniently skirted the issue of those refugees who were forced to "voluntarily" give up their citizenship and move to Nepal. They would form nearly thirty percent of the total now in camps and their citizenship is not an issue either as they were citizens of Bhutan before they left and accepted as such. The issue here was whether they really gave up their citizenship voluntarily.

The mystery of the list of 3000 refugees provided by UNHCR:

In the course of the briefing to RTM, Thinley referred to the provisional list of 3000 people in the camps provided by UNHCR which was accepted by Bhutan and not by Nepal.

It appears that former foreign minister Dawa Tshering once said in an interview to "Nation" in Bangkok that there was no problem for Bhutan to take back people of mongoloid origin (Gurungs, Magars, Tamangs, Limbus and Sherpas) of the Nepali group if they agree to respect and adopt the tradition and culture of the main stream Buddhism.

The leaders of refugees claim that some of the persons in the camp believing that they stand a better chance of being repatriated converted themselves to Buddhism. One UNHCR field officer by name Robert Cooper thus made out a list of 3000 people who were mostly "neo Buddhist" communities and handed over the list to Bhutan without concurrence from Nepal. Nepal has asked for withdrawal of this officer from the UN team.

The UNHCR has since made out a complete list of refugees in the camps in Nepal. And both Bhutan and Nepal have the list. The text of the statement of Mrs. Ogato to the UNHCR Executive Committee meetings where the U.N. Secretary General was also present is given below. It said

The problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal has also been difficult to resolve. I visited Bhutan and Nepal in April. My impression is that we could be close to a solution for some 100,000 refugees who have been languishing in camps in Nepal for several years. They are emphatic in their desire to go home, without preconditions. In this case, the obstacle to a solution is not conflict-but rather, different interpretations on how to screen the refugees for return. I urged both governments to bridge the remaining differences. I suggested a formula and made UNHCR data available. Nepal accepted Bhutan has not. Until this happens, people continue to be deprived of their legitimate right of return.

Joint Operations:

It is understood that the joint operations by the security forces of India and Bhutan against the ULFA and BODO militants have not begun in earnest. Bhutan appears to be still negotiating with the militants to withdraw voluntarily.

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