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[Home](#) > Bhutan Update No. 17: the refugee question should be solved before it takes a political colour

Bhutan Update No. 17: the refugee question should be solved before it takes a political colour

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Note No. 133

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by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan

Bhutan cannot expect stability of the Kingdom until the refugee problem is solved. The King of Bhutan while attending the *tendriyil* ceremony of the fourth elected lhengye Zhungtsho chairman, Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk said on August 8 that "it was important for Bhutan to have a strong and stable government to fulfill the aspirations of the people. The Bhutanese system must continue to evolve to meet new needs and new challenges." The political reforms which empowered the people, he added " had been initiated to meet such challenges."

Unless the King takes a personal interest and solves the festering issue of thousands of southern Bhutanese refugees now languishing in Nepal, he would never get a strong or a stable Bhutan in the near future. To say that the reforms so far made has permitted active participation of the people and improving the well being of the entire population is untrue unless he meant the northern and the eastern Bhutanese were the "entire people." If one traces the history of the southern Bhutanese movement, it could be said that initially the king's fears and panic reaction were based on the movement taking political contours threatening the well being of the government. But he turned it into a human problem, a human rights problem by evicting innocent people who had nothing to do with politics and who did not know any other country other than Bhutan. The longer the solution takes, greater is the possibility that the movement will take a political turn that should cause concern not only to Bhutan but also to India and Nepal.

Slow motion verification will have to change. The eleventh round of bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan took place between 20th and 23rd August, 2001 at Thimphu. Dr. Ram Saran Mahat, the Finance minister of Nepal was appointed as special envoy of the Prime minister to represent in the capacity of

Foreign minister. The Bhutanese delegation was represented by Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, the foreign minister. During the meeting the two governments are reported to have agreed to "accelerate the verification process" by "bifurcation of the JVT to conduct separate activities simultaneously." As if to justify the slow motion verification that is going on, the foreign minister said "since the mechanism is very elaborate, spelling out every detailed aspect of the verification process, there has been no conflict, no differences, between the two teams so far and as long as we adhere to this mechanism there should be no problems."

There could of course be no problem when the Nepalese members of the verification teams think that they are there in the verification as "observers." In our earlier update we had said that at the present rate of 10 families a day, it would take nearly seven years to complete the verification alone besides another three years for the so called "harmonisation process" and then repatriation. (www.saag.org/notes2/note131.html ^[1])

As on September 4, 5989 individuals or 955 families have been verified. After the bifurcation of the verification team, about 16 to 18 families will be verified each day. Even at this rate it will take more than four years to complete the verification of 100028 Bhutanese individuals now in organised UNHCR camps. Unless the verification process is speeded up with at least five verification teams, there is no possibility of completing the verification in the next two years.

It is learnt that the two teams now in position hope to complete the verification of Khujunabari camp by October end which itself is very doubtful. There is yet no official information that the two governments would start discussions on those individuals verified so far from one camp or would wait till verification in all the camps is over. It is hoped that they start negotiations soon after the completion of one camp.

It is not clear what the attitude of Bhutan government is going to be during the so-called harmonisation process. To us, there could be only two categories- Bhutanese and Non Bhutanese. In recent history except in cold war days when people in communist countries fled voluntarily to escape oppression and for better life, there could be no instance where in peaceful conditions people would voluntarily give up their prosperous life and go to a place unknown to them as refugees. The other side of the coin is that some of the refugees who are educated and who were holding positions in the government feel that the Bhutan government may make false charges against them for "forcible" repatriation. This is where the UNHCR comes in.

UNHCR should be associated. With India continuing to be indifferent and Nepal having its own problems with Maoist insurgency, the refugees have nowhere else to go except to seek help from the international community. It is therefore necessary to involve the UNHCR in the repatriation process. Since the UNHCR has been maintaining the refugee camps and had worked hard for their welfare, it is necessary that they are present and available to oversee the rehabilitation of the refugees.

All these points will be relevant if only the Bhutan government is sincere in taking back its citizens. It looks that the refugee problem has become a blessing in disguise for the King. While the joint verification of the Bhutanese refugees is taking place at a snail's pace, the government is working overtime to settle the northern and eastern population in southern Bhutan from where the southern Bhutanese have been forcibly evicted. Some of the settlements of the refugees have been dug up and demolished and are now unidentifiable. It will be near impossible for those refugees if and when they return to settle in their old areas and most likely they will be given land in an inhospitable terrain.

The Maoists are looking for recruits amongst refugees: In our last update we had mentioned that youths of the camps numbering more than fifty have joined the Maoist ranks and more are likely to join. We have since received information that the youths in camps at Goldhop and Beldangi are being forced to join their ranks. The Maoists representatives are telling the youths that they are wasting their time doing nothing and that they should join the movement. A few clashes have taken place near these camps. It is a question of time before more youths join. Even if the youths do not stay for long with the Maoists they would get necessary arms training, an experience which in the long run is not good for either Nepal or Bhutan or even India.

R.K. Budathoki assassinated: In a bizarre incident, R.K. Budathoki President of Bhutan Peoples' Party since 1990 was brutally assassinated on 9th September, 2001 at Damak in eastern Nepal. He was attending a meeting of party workers and youths. The killing is claimed by Akhil Krantikari Vidhyarthi Sena which primarily consists of class 9 and 10 students of various refugee camps. The person who killed Budathoki with a Khukri is identified as Ram Subedi in his early twenties from Sanischare refugee camp. The organisation itself was not known in the camps and if it had existed before there could be more serious developments in future if no solution is found to the refugee question soon.

Bhutan claims that ULFA has agreed to dismantle four camps within Bhutan: After several rounds of talks between ULFA representatives and Bhutan, it has been reported by Bhutan government that ULFA has agreed to "dislocate" four of their bases inside Bhutan by December end. In the 79th session of the National assembly, discussions centred around the presence of ULFA militants inside Bhutan causing security concerns. Bhutan had been under intense pressure from Indian authorities to have joint operations to eliminate the camps and some battalions were trained for counter insurgency warfare. In one of our earlier updates, we had pointed out that joint operations would be unwise given the nature of the terrain, lack of proper trained personnel and equipment and above all a not so friendly population in southern Bhutan where thousands have been evicted. There is also an economic aspect, as any disturbance in southern Bhutan would choke the supply lines of essential commodities to northern and eastern Bhutan. It is not clear where the ULFA militants would go once the four bases are closed. Most likely they would get redistributed to other camps within Bhutan!

Category:

[Notes](#) [2]

Countries:

[Bhutan](#) [3]

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Links

- [1] <file:///E:/saag/www/notes2/note131.html>
- [2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/notes>
- [3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/bhutan>