

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

Home > Bhutan Update No.19: Talks on Refugees fail

Bhutan Update No.19: Talks on Refugees fail

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 09/21/2012 - 08:21

Note No. 137

21.11.2001

by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan

In search of harmonisation: Despite intense discussions for two days and four rounds of talks at the foreign secretary level meeting between Nepal and Bhutan ended in failure. Bhutan repeatedly emphasised on categorisation of the refugees into four groups while Nepal held the view that all bonafide Bhutanese citizens should be taken back. Thus the two positions were diametrically opposite and no common ground could be made. Nepal having been trapped into agreeing to categorisation and placing them into four slots and Bhutan having caught the Nepal government in the wrong foot, could it be said that Bhutan now wanted to take full advantage of the situation and get rid of as many of Lhotsampas (Bhutanese of Nepali origin) as possible, in its larger design of ethnic cleansing of the country?

The crux of the problem was- Nepal wanted only two categories- Bhutanese and Non Bhutanese while Bhutan stuck to categorisation into four groups. The foreign Secretaries of Nepal and Bhutan met in Kathmandu between from November 5 to 8. The two sides according to Kuensel, "held a frank and full exchange of views but could not harmonise the position of their governments on the four agreed categories of refugees." Dasho Ugyen Tshering, the Foreign Secretary of Bhutan said "In view of differences on some issues, the positions could not be harmonised."

Two points made by Bhutan on behalf of both the delegations appear curious. One was the remark of the Foreign Secretary of Bhutan that both sides have "an agreement to complete the harmonisation and verification process *simultaneously*". Another was the press release from the Bhutan Foreign ministry which said that both expressed their "firm resolve and commitment to arrive at a lasting solution to the issue of the people in the camps in Nepal through *bilateral process*." (Emphasis ours).

It is not clear whether the Nepalese delegation had agreed to the two formulations which go against the interests of the refugees. Earlier Nepal had requested India to intervene and settle the issue and had on many occasions said that it is a trilateral problem and not a bilateral problem. The refugees on their part having given up any hope of India getting involved, sought international intervention. As recently as November 2, Michel Dupoizat, the UNHCR Representative said that UNHCR while optimistic about the talks said that it was willing to play any role in solving the refugee impasse if the two countries sought its cooperation. (Kathmandu Post)

Secondly, if the idea was to do the harmonisation and verification simultaneously, then the joint verification teams which have been interviewing the refugees from the Kudenabari camp should have decided the merits of each family then and there. What harmonisation does Bhutan expect to do when all the records were with them even before verification? Harmonisation to what purpose? To get rid of those refugees who were coerced to leave their homes?

It appears that Nepal has finally realised the folly of agreeing into four categories of refugees for verification purposes earlier: After two rounds of talks, the Spokesperson of the Nepalese foreign ministry said that Nepal had emphasised on limiting the categories to two- bonafide Bhutanese and the non-Bhutanese. This amounts to doing away with two other categories- those who were supposed to have willingly left Bhutan after signing the migration forms and those with criminal records. The Spokesperson also indicated that Nepal had urged Bhutan to take back all the Bhutanese to their country and that all Non Bhutanese will have to leave the camps. This leaves the Non Bhutanese no place to go. Will they be assimilated in Nepal itself outside the camps? What happens to those who are unwilling to go on the legitimate grounds that they will be harassed?

Repatriation- when?-Differences have also risen about the time table for the repatriation of the refugees. While Nepal's Minister of State for Foreign affairs, Arjun Jung Bahadur Singh declared that repatriation will follow suit soon after verification of the first camp is over, the Bhutanese sources indicated that Bhutan will not facilitate repatriation until it completed verification of all the camps. Even with the accelerated rate of 16 families a day it would take another five years for the verification exercise to be completed! In effect Bhutan does not want to take any refugee back in the foreseeable future!

In our view, the problem of those forcibly evicted should be solved first, before any talk of harmonisation is thought of. The first phase of verification of Kudunabari camp should be over by December, 2001. It has come to light that over 95 percent of the people interviewed have some kind of document to prove their citizenship. Of these over 75 percent would come in the category of those who were supposed to have signed the voluntary migration forms.

Bhutan's approach was very simple. Since the bulk of the refugees belong to the category of those who had migrated "voluntarily" as seen from the results of the verification of the first camp, if only they could convince Nepal that they had actually volunteered, then the refugee problem from their point of view can be taken as solved with Nepal having to take care of the bulk of the refugees.

Of the remaining, Bhutan has "made up" a formidable criminal record of all those activists who had served in Bhutan administration or those who took part in demonstrations thus making it impossible for them to return and fight which according to them are politically motivated and foisted. Only very few will be then left who can then be taken care of.

Since these tactics failed at the foreign secretary's level, Bhutan would now try at the minister's level the same approach and if it fails would not hesitate to cut a deal at the highest level at the expense of the refugees. This possibility cannot be ruled out.

The VMF scheme by its very nature is meant for individual cases and thousands upon thousands would not have volunteered to go to an unknown land and an unknown future giving up all their possessions. Coercion at the state level was freely used. Of many instances we give one more which shows how the state authorities used all their means to get the voluntary forms signed by the refugees before they were driven out.

* Four individuals Bom Bahadur Magar, Budha Maya Magar, Harka Bahadur Magar and Bir Bahadur Thapa, of Block Lepony of Sarbhang district and now at Kudunabari camp had this to say.

* On 29th February, 1992, Ram Bahadur Ghaley, Mondal of Leopaney Block(village headman) called a meeting of the villagers at his residence at Toribari. The Dzongrab (Assistant deputy Collecotr) was present when the villagers assembled. The Dzongrab asked the people to sign the voluntary migration forms. When the villagers refused to sign the forms, there was a heated discussion and the Dzongrab took out his pistol, fired a shot in the air and threatened that they will have to face such consequences if they do not sign and leave the country. Displaying his pistol he said " This is not a toy. It is a pistol. I have come only with a few policemen. If the forms are not signed, I will come back with the army and you will face dire consequences." They had to sign the forms and leave the country.

* In another case, San Bahadur Biswa of village Jinchila, Block Changka, District Dagana had no money even to go to the border and the Police took him in their vehicle and dumped him at the border town Sarbhang 60Kms away on 21 Jan, 1993. He had to borrow and find his way to Kudunabari camp. Could such a person have volunteered to go to a far away place like Kudunabari unless he was coerced?

Bhutan's security and the Southern problem: In a long essay in six parts published in Kuensel on "perceptions of security" by Karma Ura, the problem of southern Bhutanese figures in the last part. Since it has been published without any caveat, views expressed there should be taken as the official view of Bhutan. A few points that need to be analysed are

- * Bhutan was not spared of Nepali immigration since late 19th century, when Nepalese had reached as far as India's north eastern borders of Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya and Assam.
- * The Gorkha land movement as well as the triumph of Nepali Congress in Nepal unleashed a domino effect on Southern Bhutanese whose imagination of what might be politically possible was suddenly inflated. (thereby arguing that the refugee problem was politically motivated!)
- * Those people whose citizenship was in doubt, fomented dissent and stirred political agitation.
- * The controversy over gho and kira- dress for men and women respectively and omission of the third language in schools in southern Bhutan in 1989 became opportunistic issues of dissidents to rally the Lhotsampas and insurgency was launched to bring mob pressure.
- * Lacking technology and military strength Bhutan has attempted to rely on non military alternatives such as national identity for cultural cohesion and neutrality to renew its long-term security.

These points and more mentioned in the paper deserve a detailed study. At another point, the writer has accused the Nepalese media of uni-focal emphasis on the human rights question at the expense of the legality of citizenship!

The question Bhutan needs to address itself is- whether ethnic cleansing would bring long term security? The answer is "No". It is clear from the paper referred to, that Bhutan has embarked on ethnic cleansing for its long term security. When the controversy over the dress, language etc started, very few Bhutanese took part in the demonstrations. Most of the refugees now languishing in the camps had nothing to do with such controversies. Many of them were ordinary farmers who depended on the land for their survival and had no time for politics. Should the entire community of souther Bhutan be penalised just because a few took up the social issues? Is Bhutan assured of long term security, by keeping away over hundred thousand refugees of whom many will be young and restless youths out of the country? With Bhutan not willing to start repatriation for another five years or more, will not the youths get radicalised and seek a non peaceful solution?

The refugee problem needs to be solved urgently. It is in the interest of the stability of Bhutan and adjoining regions. The problem will get out of hand if the human rights and social organisations within the camps do not merge together and elect a leader of some international stature to channelise their energies towards a peaceful resolution of the problem. For this there is no one better suited than Tek Nath Rijal to lead the movement Will he take up the challenge?

Category:

Notes [1]

Countries:

Bhutan [2]

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/note137>

Links

[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/notes>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/bhutan>