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[Home](#) > Bhutan Update No.21: The Refugees have no option but to internationalise their problem.

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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 09/21/2012 - 08:25

Note No. 143

22.01.2002

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" The lesson of Bhutan and other refugee crisis around the world is that refugees return only if other countries make it happen. The bright glare of the outside attention is the key."- Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch- in American Wall Street Journal 6-8-99.

In a paper on Bhutanese refugees titled "International concern on Bhutanese Refugees"(www.geocities.com/bhutanese-refugees/introduction.htm ^[1]), a point that is forcefully made is that the Lhotsampas (southern Bhutanese of Nepali origin) were forced to leave the country not because of civil war or foreign intervention but because of the racist and ethno centric policies of those in power. Another equally devastating comment which appears to be true is that the Bhutanese refugees "are not the root cause of themselves-but they are the effects or symptom of the deep-rooted crisis of Bhutanese polity which stresses the need for a distinct 'national identity' but does not envision forging this identity to encompass the diversity of the nation's cultures."

How else can one explain the lackadaisical way in which Bhutan is treating its refugee problem? It is going to be more than a month since the joint verification team completed the verification of the Khudanabari camp with a population of just over 12,500. There are yet over 87,500 persons in various camps besides another almost 30,000 outside the camps. The team had taken eight and half months to complete one camp and it is more than a month since the two delegations left for their respective capitals. There is yet no word when the verification will be resumed and it looks that it is going to take many, many years for the completion of verification alone. What are the refugees supposed to do? Await the benign intervention of India or

internationalise the issue?

It appears that the Nepalese team has taken the view that an overwhelming majority of the refugees have documentary evidence of residence in Bhutan and had given affidavits of forcible expulsion from Bhutan. There could therefore be no distinction between category 1 and 2 namely, Bhutanese citizens unlawfully evicted and those who "voluntarily" migrated. As for those involved in criminal courts, it is for Bhutan to deal with those who violated Bhutan's laws and Nepal has nothing to do with this.

We have said it before and we say it again. There was no basis for categorisation of refugees into four groups and further harmonisation of the groups when there could be only two groups namely Bhutanese and Non Bhutanese. Further evidence that the so-called voluntary migration was never voluntary and that people were compelled to leave the country due to physical abuse, coercion, threats, harassment and intimidation can be seen from the paper on "voluntary migration of Bhutanese citizens" (This paper explains the whole sale pre printed forms in Dzongkha used with pre printed letter numbers, names and destinations by Bhutanese officials to evict the Lotsampas. In one of our earlier papers we had mentioned that the law relating to voluntary migration was meant for individual cases and not for whole sale eviction. What the government did was in anticipation they got the printed forms ready and compelled thousands to flee from their homes.

The Hague-based Habitat International Coalition whose basic objective is dedicated to action for the recognition, defence and full implementation of everyone's right to a secure place to live in peace and dignity in all countries, conducted a fact-finding mission to South Bhutan between September 23-October 1, 2001. The team was specially sent to verify the claims of the Bhutanese refugees that their lands were given away to northern Bhutanese settlers under the Bhutanese government's resettlement programme.

The team besides interviewing 25 refugee families from the camps in Nepal, actually visited selected villages in Bhutan to verify the claims. Their preliminary findings included

- * The Royal Government of Bhutan has been settling North Bhutanese in the lands of the South Bhutanese refugees as physically seen in the cases studied.
- * Not all the North Bhutanese settled in the Southern districts are landless as the government was claiming. Land has been given to army and police officers and/or their relatives, especially the land close to the road or the big houses.
- * All the refugees want to go back to their lands from where they were evicted.
- * The refugees from Khudanabari camp (camp where verification has been completed) are unhappy that the verification team left out details on their land and housing property claims while examining them.

* The refugees would like their representatives, the UNCHR and UNHCHR (office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the office of UN High Commissioner for Human rights respectively) to be included as parties in all the talks and the joint verification process)

* People at various places indicated the urgent need for the Government of India to play an active role in resolving the Bhutanese refugee crisis.

One of the recommendations made by the Habitat International Coalition was that in addition to the inherent role to be played by the governments of Bhutan and Nepal, the government of India must also play an active role to facilitate the speedy return of the refugees to Bhutan. This is a point the South Asia Analysis Group has made repeatedly before. It is not just a bilateral problem between Nepal and Bhutan. Both the countries have special relations with India which has a responsibility to ensure stability in this part of the region. Many of the refugees who were forcibly evicted recall that in the initial stages of their eviction they camped in the Indian territory for a few days. Then came the word from Delhi that they should all be transported to Nepal! In this India connived with Bhutan government to get the refugees onto the camps in Nepal. Indian refusal to intervene on the technical ground that it is a bilateral issue is not based on any genuine concern for stability of the region but to please the Bhutan government.

Many analysts point out that the position of the Bhutanese of Nepali origin in Bhutan is similar to the position of the people of Indian origin in southern Nepal. Imagine a situation if Nepal had treated the people of Indian origin in a similar fashion in evicting them from their hearths and homes in a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing. Will India be a silent spectator? Critics would quickly point out that the introduction of democracy in Nepal has had a positive effect and that there is less discrimination. It is just a question of time before the citizenship bill which is getting postponed on some ground or other will be passed.

This is not to say that the advent of democracy in Bhutan would help solve the problem. The King is still the most important and major institution in the country. He is still the unifying factor. It is said that from July 1998 a council of ministers has been made responsible for the State administration. Yet for all practical purposes it is the King who takes all the major decisions. Many of the refugee leaders talk nostalgically about their association with the King and their fervent hope that he would still change his mind and reverse the process in taking the genuine refugees back.

One expected the King to make some mention of the refugees now languishing in Nepal and steps the government proposed to take in solving the issue in his address on the National Day (Kuensel of December 22- 28, Vol.XVI No. 50). Instead, we find him lamenting that in the event of the government taking action to remove the ULFA and Bodo militant camps, people living in the security affected areas between Lhamoi Zingkha in the west to Daifam in the east may have to be moved out to other places making more than 80,000 of them refugees in their own country! Another refugee problem in the making! And this too will affect only southern Bhutan.

Solution through bilateral talks appear to be failing. Nepal's efforts to seek assistance from India has failed. The refugees have no option but to approach other countries to intervene. International intervention appears to be inevitable.

In a recent book on Bhutan (Himalayan Kingdom, Bhutan- tradition, transition and transformation; A.C.Sinha) the author in the opening paragraph mentions that Bhutan claims to be the only South Asian country without a population problem. I would add that like other South Asian countries Bhutan too has an ethnic problem but unlike in other countries, it is easiest to solve. But will it?

Category:

Notes ^[2]

Countries:

Bhutan ^[3]

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Links

[1] <http://www.geocities.com/bhutanerefugees/introduction.htm>

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

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