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## **Bhutan Update No. 24: The Refugee issue is not a numbers game**

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**Note No. 155**

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**by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan**

The 80th session of the National Assembly which began its proceedings on June 25 rightly focused on the two major issues facing the country:

\* The problem of over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin living in camps in eastern Nepal

\* The adamant attitude of ULFA which contrary to its earlier promises has not only not vacated the camps but established more camps in the interior.

The Home minister made a brave declaration that ULFA had actually vacated four camps promised in the June 2001 Agreement, and conceded that only six camps exist. Other reports indicate that ULFA has over thirty camps in southern Bhutan and have already indicated their unwillingness to vacate in view of the strict vigilance on the border by the Indian security forces.

It is on the question of refugees that Bhutan is seen making some moves to the detriment of the refugees now languishing in eastern Nepal. The Foreign Minister Lyonpo Jigme Thinley made a detailed statement on the joint verification so far made and claimed that it was Nepal which has been dragging its feet in coming to an understanding on the “harmonisation process” that needs to be gone through before further verification could be done. His statement could be summarised as follows.

1. The two governments had agreed in July 1993 that :

- \* Categorise the people in the refugee camps.
- \* Make known the positions of each country on the category on each of the categories.
- \* Harmonise the positions of the two countries on each of the categories.

2. The verification process began on March 26,2001. Bhutan agreed to enhance the number of members of each team to speed up the verification.

3. Just before the completion of the verification process (in the first camp Khudanabari), the Nepalese team brought up the issue of identifying the next camp that should be taken up for verification.

4. Nepal was not keen on placing the people on the four categories and that the Nepalese side did not want to harmonise the positions.

5. The Bhutanese side did not want to continue verification unless the two sides came to an agreement on what position the two sides should take on each category and see whether both can harmonise their positions to resolve the problem.

6. In their efforts to find a solution Bhutan invited former foreign Minister Bastola for unofficial consultations. A similar invitation was sent to Madhav Nepal and other parliamentarians. Mr. Nepal was quoted as saying “ that before his trip to Bhutan, he had always thought that all the refugees in the camps were genuine Bhutanese citizens and that they were forcefully evicted from Bhutan. However after coming to Bhutan and meeting with His Majesty the King, the ministers the civil servants and the people from private sector , he has changed his view.”

7. The Parliament being dissolved in Nepal and the ruling party itself being divided and undermining the position of the prime minister, the unstable political situation thus created might affect the ongoing dialogue.

It is not clear whether Mr. Madhav Nepal did make such a statement when he was aware of the conditions under which the Nepalese were driven out of southern Bhutan. If he had changed his view he has not said these on his return to Nepal. Nor did Kuensel report soon after the visit the “conversion” of Madhav Nepal.

The South Asia Analysis Group has been closely watching the joint verification and have time and again in the updates mentioned the need to expedite the process .The verification of the first camp was finished in December last year and there was no move to continue the verification. It is now clear that Bhutan in its objective of delaying the process as much as possible has frozen the talks on the ground that the two countries could not agree on “harmonisation.”

**The fact of the matter is that an overwhelming number of the 12804 persons verified from the Khudanabari camp have provided documents that they are Bhutanese citizens and were forced to sign voluntary migration forms and driven out.**

If the verification is taken to the logical end, it would end up in over 95000 of the 100,000 refugees being taken back to their original homelands which Bhutan does not want to do. Bhutan’s mala fide is thus clear and the foreign minister’s statement in the assembly is not true.

There are indications that Bhutan wants to make a deal with Nepal on the number they could take before proceeding further with verification. Verification if continued in other camps would only embarrass the Bhutanese team as almost all the families are going to produce evidence of their citizenship or of the “forced signing of the migration forms.”

Bhutan it appears is willing to take half or less of the hundred thousand. The reasons given are that the refugees have been living in an open environment for the last ten years and that if all of them return it will create political turmoil in Bhutan. It is like a person seeking mercy as an “orphan” after having killed both his parents. It was Bhutan which created the political turmoil. It was Bhutan which deliberately delayed the verification process and is even now not willing to proceed with further verification for fear of having to swallow all the untruths said before.

Worse still Bhutan would like choose the persons they would take back irrespective of the claims of the refugees or the citizenship acts. The suspicion is that they would choose only those people who are Mongoloid in their racial characteristics. This is nothing but sub ethnic cleansing and Nepal nor the world should accept such indignities and violation of human rights.

**Category:**

Notes <sup>[1]</sup>

**Countries:**

Bhutan <sup>[2]</sup>

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