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The optimism expressed by the Bhutanese refugees on the verification process appears to be totally misplaced and it is becoming increasingly clear that Bhutan is not going to accept any of the refugees back to Bhutan. The reasons for the refugees to lose all hopes are

- * The verification process appears to have been abandoned after the first camp at Kudenabari was completed in December 2001.
- * Nepal which appears to have been trapped in the so-called categorisation of refugees is caught up in the semantic definition of "harmonisation" little realising that this step was suggested by Bhutan to delay the process as much as possible.
- * Bhutan on the excuse that Nepal is passing through political turmoil has sought to win over senior politicians of Nepal by wining and dining them. The "charm offensive included" an audience with the King.

* Bhutan has gone about in a systematic way to destroy all buildings, gardens, fields and remnants of dwellings of the refugees- the result- the refugees will not be able to identify their places of residence now. Meantime, the Royal government of Bhutan is desperately trying to locate the reluctant northerners in southern Bhutan. The northerners being used to a colder climate are unwilling to move south. They are being showered with incentives and where this fails with threats to move south. **By any international standards this process of driving out lawful citizens of specific ethnicity and making the lands and places available to another group of different ethnic origin is nothing but ethnic cleansing.**

* The UNHCR which has been feeding the refugees all along, has expressed a view that it cannot go on feeding the refugees indefinitely and that it is time that the refugees are permanently settled. They were thinking of Nepal or any other third country. This appears to be the view of other donor countries also. No country would be more grateful than Bhutan as this would legitimise its blatant illegal action in evicting the innocent people of southern Bhutan.

It appears that the Bhutanese refugees have been abandoned finally. The refugees to their credit have behaved themselves in an exemplary manner. The UNHCR had some role to play in maintaining discipline in the camps. Strict control was maintained and anyone who left the camp to indulge in any political activity was not allowed to return and the rations for him/her was denied. Now, if the rations are denied for the whole lot of hundred thousand refugees in the camps without proper acceptable resettlement or return to Bhutan, what would they do? The leadership of the refugees in the camps is going into the hands of the younger reactionary generations. No one can predict at this stage what will happen.

The refugees themselves, unless they are forced or threatened would not like to go back any where else other than their own places in southern Bhutan. After all in the verification done so far in one camp they have proved with documents that they were genuine citizens in spite of strict citizenship laws proclaimed by the Bhutanese government from time to time.

Let us look at the citizenship law itself and how progressively Bhutan tired to place more hurdles on the Lhotsampas in gaining their citizenship.

* In 1958, the Nationality law permitted the Nepalese migrants to attain citizenship after residing in Bhutan 10 years and owning agricultural land.

* The 1977 Citizenship Act dramatically increased the period of residence for citizenship to 20 years and added a new requirement that the applicants should be able to write and speak Dzongkha and have some knowledge of Bhutan.

* The 1985 Act was made more stringent requiring sound knowledge of Bhutanese history, culture, customs and traditions and the ability to speak, read and write Dzongkha well. Anyone born after 1958 and had only one Bhutanese parent also had to apply for naturalization. Additional requirements included good moral character, no criminal record or record of disloyalty to King, country and people. All these are subjective conditions.

It could be seen that these citizenship laws were made more and more stringent to exclude the poor uneducated sustenance farmers of Nepalese origin.. Is this not one form of ethnic cleansing?

It looks that the international community is not doing enough for the Bhutanese refugees. The UN General Assembly resolution unanimously adopted in 2000, designated June 20 as "World Refugee Day". The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Rudd Lubbers on the Refugee Day, had hoped that over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees languishing in eastern Nepal would be able to repatriate to their homeland before the next Refugee day is observed. Denmark, the largest donor to Bhutan and the next President of European Union has done nothing so far. . Members of the Bhutan Refugee Support Group (BRSBG) referred to the "massive resettlement exercise on southern Bhutan which belongs to the Lhotsampas" on the World refugee Day. The German envoy on briefing the Press after the visit of EU delegation to Jhapa and Morang districts is said to have remarked that the international community was not giving enough attention to the vexed Bhutanese refugee problem. But words will not do. They will have to put more pressure on both Bhutan and Nepal to settle the issue amicably to the satisfaction of everyone including the refugees themselves.

It is tempting to say that the frustrated refugees particularly the younger lot would take recourse to violence if the problem is allowed to linger on. It is our view that the Refugees have not done enough to internationalise the issue. Secondly violence is no solution as it would only destabilise the entire Nepali population not only in southern Bhutan but also in Nepali dominated areas of North Bengal, Sikkim and eastern Nepal. There are enough legal, political and diplomatic means available to solve the problem.

India's role is crucial. We have said it before and we say it again emphatically. It is within India's means to solve the refugee problem in a very short time if it wants to. But it is not doing, we suspect, because of its close relations with Bhutan and India does not want to offend Bhutan.

But let us see what Bhutan is doing in return. Kuensel dated July 6, 2002 gives details of discussion in the National Assembly of Bhutan on the question of the militant (ULFA) problem in southern Bhutan. The question was whether the ULFA had vacated the four camps as promised in the minutes of June 2001 and where they had gone. The general opinion was that though the four camps had been vacated, the militants most probably had gone to other camps within southern Bhutan and that they are still in Bhutan because of the fact that the Indian security forces on the border are alert and that the militants are unable to leave.

Anyone familiar with southern Bhutan are aware that the border is porous and that the security forces cannot cover the entire area. Secondly the ULFA camps are bringing their rations and other supplies from India without any check from Bhutanese authorities. If the ULFA cadres wanted to leave Bhutan they could do so as they are in process of setting up camps in Bangladesh. Instead what do we see in the Bhutan Foreign minister's statement in the assembly? We quote the Kuensel of July 6, 2002, page 4.

The foreign minister, Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley, pointed out that several Chimis had implied that the government of India might somehow be involved in the infiltration of the militants into Bhutan. Some had also implied that Indian security forces were stopping the militants from leaving Bhutan. Some members had even suggested **that if Bhutan could not rely on its good friend in the south, Bhutan should look towards the north.** (Emphasis ours)

No Chimi would dare to talk against India unless he had the expert permission or acquiescence of the Palace. This should be noted by the Indian authorities.

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