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Home > BHUTAN: Internationalisation of Refugee Issue- gathering momentum: Update 42.

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After many hiccups in earlier times, the internationalisation of the refugee issue is finally making a start. It started with the visit of Tek Nath Rijal and Ratan Gazmere to Geneva and later to Holland and Brussels last month. The US Assistant Secretary of State of Population, refugees and Migration Arthur "Gene" Dewey visited at the same time, two of the refugee camps and the capitals of three of the countries directly involved in the crisis, Bhutan, Nepal and India. A European delegation is visiting Nepal soon to take stock of the refugee situation and in all likelihood it will be followed by a multilateral international conference on the issue of Bhutanese Refugees and the involvement of independent third party to work out a break through.

In this multilateral conference, representatives of the Lutheran foundation which sponsored the visit of Tek Nath Rijal to Geneva, UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, Donor countries and the refugees themselves are expected to take part.

These developments will not be to the liking of either India or Bhutan. At a time when the refugee issue had not developed into a major crisis as it had now, Mr. Narasimha Rao the then Prime Minister is said to have remarked that one development he would not like is the refugee issue getting internationalised. He thought that with bilateral talks between Bhutan and Nepal, the issue could be settled. But he was mistaken!

We have seen that the bilateral meetings between the two countries for more than a decade and a half have brought forth no results and the refugee population as of June 2004 has swollen to 1,04,235. We see a steady increase in frustration of the younger elements in the camps and with no hope of repatriation, the stage is set for radicalisation of some of the youths.

India by its steadfast adherence in treating the issue as bilateral has only helped to in getting other powers into the issue. Even now the visiting dignitaries have emphasised the role of India in finding a solution. This is what Tek Nath Rijal has said. The refugee leaders in all the camps without exception have maintained that no satisfactory solution can be found without India's intervention. Yet India has not moved.

The reason for India's reluctance could be seen in the excellent bilateral relations between the two countries India and Bhutan. Of the neighbouring countries, Bhutan can be considered to be closest to India. The visit of the Foreign Minister of the UPA government in mid October 2004 and his commitment to the King and his government only reiterated the strong bonds. Though initially reluctant, Bhutan moved against the Indian insurgent groups successfully. Economic cooperation has benefited both countries. Bhutan's per capita income would more than double once the Tala project comes into stream.

The formal ascension of the crown prince as the 16th Chhoetse Penlop paves the way for younger leadership and it is yet another milestone in Bhutan's history. The present King aware of the impact of developments abroad has sought an evolutionary change by making a people friendly constitution. Thus Bhutan as we see, is well on the road towards stability and prosperity.

Yet with all these, the refugee problem cannot be wished away. A satisfactory solution has to be found and as we said before, the solution has to be a "doable" one. The issue if not tackled wisely now is likely to have repercussions in the whole region.

The US Assistant Secretary of State after his visit to Bhutan between October 23-25 had declared that in his visit he was assured that Bhutan was committed to finding a lasting solution. He has discussed both in Nepal and with UNHCR various options for a solution. The three options were 1. for all the refugees to return to Bhutan. 2. The refugees to be settled in Nepal and 3. The refugees to be settled in third countries. But there could be a mix of all the three options which in our view is possible.

Some of the refugee leaders are totally against local settlement or repatriation to third countries. According to them selection of them to third country by any secret criteria would create infighting among refugees and may wipe out the repatriation option. Rijal on the other hand appears to be more reasonable. According to him, the first option i.e repatriation should be tried first before other options are thought of. This is reasonable.

But the first move has to come from the Bhutan Government. They have to take a decision on the 12,000 and odd refugees whose status has been verified and the bulk of them do come within categories I & II (They have been accepted as Bhutanese citizens though the Bhutan government contends that category II people had left "voluntarily").

The talks between Bhutan and Nepal have been suspended since December 22, 2003. There appears to be an "oral assurance" from the Bhutanese Foreign Minister to his Nepalese counterpart during the sidelines of the 59th UN General Assembly meeting.

Such assurances will not bring cheer to the refugees who have been languishing too long in the camps. Visits of VIPs to the camps and to the countries

involved may boost their hopes. But there have been too many visits and with no concrete results.

Let the three options be considered seriously and the UNHCR could take the lead in re- registration for eventual repatriation and settlement under all the three options.

This is better than continuing with the JVT process which would take another decade!

Category:

Notes ^[1]

Countries:

Bhutan ^[2]

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Links

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

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