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## BHUTAN: The refugees are looking for a solution in their own way: Update 40

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**Note No. 239**

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**by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan**

*"If the refugee problem is not solved, their joining the Maoists may become a reality" -Durga Bhattarai, Nepalese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson.*

It is getting increasingly clear to over hundred thousand refugees languishing in the camps that there is no hope of returning to their home land. They have now realised that by sitting in the camps for nearly fourteen years and depending on both Nepal and other well intentioned agencies has only brought them misery and frustration and an increasing number of youths who have no avenues for employment are questioning the elders and the politicians the wisdom of continuing in the camps.

There is little wonder that some of them have joined the Maoists and their ranks are likely to grow.

In the recent National Assembly proceedings in Bhutan, some members claimed that a large number of refugees have joined the Maoists and expressed concern of a possible threat to Bhutan's security. Amidst these charges, the speaker of the assembly made the extraordinary claim that as many as 2000 (two thousand) refugees living in the camps have joined the Maoists. While the figure is very high, there is no doubt that about six hundred inmates have quietly joined the Maoists. They have not left the camps and there is no way of ascertaining either the names or the numbers who had joined.

Years of delay, hollow assurances from both Nepal and Bhutan and the fear of reduction of funds for the refugees have all contributed to the helplessness, anger and frustration of the refugees.

The Resident Representative of UNHCR, Abraham says that "Protracted refugee situations are prone to give rise to an increased frustration and this can only give ground to anti social behaviour and in extreme cases militancy." Some of the refugees are certainly moving into the extreme case category. Of

late there have been instances of crime which was not the case a few years ago. The inmates of both Sanichare and Beldangi camps are seen to be more prone to commit crimes. A recent instance quoted in the press was the arrest of 13 refugees in Urlabari area that revealed that many refugees have been involved in hold ups and robbery.

The foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Durga Bhattarai of Nepal was more explicit. While denying any knowledge of the refugees joining the Maoists, he said that it could become a reality if the refugee stalemate drags on for long.

The American Ambassador to Nepal also made an indirect reference and said that the issue "underlines the necessity of repatriation to take place."

### **But is anyone listening?**

#### **The Kudenabari Incident and thereafter:**

Ever since the Kudenabari incident of December 22, 2003, the process of verification of the remaining camps and the repatriation process which were due to begin by February 15 has been stalled. Firstly, Bhutan demanded a full scale investigation and report on the incident and punishment of the guilty. When the report arrived *a few months later*, Bhutan objected to certain portions of the report exceeding the brief. The offending portion related to the recommendation in the report that Bhutan may show some "flexibility" on the conditions being imposed on those eligible to return. Surprisingly, the investigation failed to name the culprits though everyone knew who they were.

With Nepal government willing to delete the offending portion and Bhutan not insisting on reopening the investigation of the incident, the road for resumption of talks is clear.

It is said by the State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Prakash Sharan Mahat that Bhutan government had "agreed to hold talks" to start the repatriation process.

It has taken nine months for Bhutan government to agree to start the talks again and left to them it may take another few months to start the verification process of the remaining camps. We have noted before that judging by the way the verification process of the first camp of Kudenabari has dragged on, the whole verification process will take many, many years and this will not be acceptable to the refugees.

### **Refugees are therefore likely to deal with the issue themselves;**

In the absence of any pressure on Bhutan to speed up the repatriation of the refugees, it looks that the refugees would deal with the issue themselves. They no longer want to continue in the camps with no clear objective of their future.

As a first step, some families have handed over a memorandum to the Home Ministry, the UNHCR and foreign diplomatic missions to explore the options of locally integrating the refugees in Nepal and resettlement in third countries. We have in our earlier update 39 suggested a possible solution with Bhutan, western countries and India absorbing the bulk of the refugees.

In a similar vein, the UNHCR had also suggested three options for a permanent solution. The first option is repatriation of the refugees and the other two are, integration in Nepal and re location in willing third countries. There are indications that western countries would be willing to accept a substantial number. UNHCR would also be willing to help in the assimilation process. **But what could trigger the whole process is the willingness of Bhutan government to start the repatriation process of the refugees already verified, allotted and harmonised.** Without this no agency or other governments would be willing to take the first step.

As a second step, many of the more well to do families of the refugees have already purchased lands near the border on the Indian side and would move in once the repatriation starts. It is not clear as to how many have thus purchased lands but the number is said to be substantial.

The third and more serious from the security point of view of all the three countries, Bhutan, India and Nepal will be radicalization of the youths in the camps who have no alternative but to join the militant groups. These youths have watched the Maoist movement in Nepal.

While the Maoists were initially ignored in 1996, now they see that everyone in Nepal ( the King, the government, the political parties inside and outside the government, Human rights groups etc.) vying with each other to talk to the Maoists.

**As one of the leaders said "Now the Bhutanese authorities are not talking to us. But there will come a time when they would come rushing to talk to us."**

Kuensel of July 17, 2004 has said that a comprehensive census will be held next year and data on every person and every house hold will be recorded. Once it is done, the picture of the demographic pattern in Bhutan will be clear.

As it stands, it is believed that the Nepali population within Bhutan would be around 25 percent or 162500 if the total population is pegged at 650000. An additional intake of 20,000 refugees would raise their population to 28 percent and 30,000 would raise it to 30 percent. It is our belief that Bhutan is in a position to take back at least 30,000 of the over hundred thousand now in the camps and it will not materially alter the demographic pattern and Bhutan need not be afraid of any ethnic imbalance!

It is in the interest of all, that the refugee problem is solved and solved quickly before it gets radicalized and internationalised.

**Category:**

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