

# South Asia Analysis Group

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## **BHUTAN: Refugee Crisis- No end in sight: Update 39**

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**by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan**

It was in October 1990 that the first batch of refugees reached eastern Nepal from Bhutan and the first camp was established with the help of the locals. From then on within a few months, the flow from Bhutan became a torrent and now over 100,000 Nepalese of Bhutanese origin are in seven camps, all in eastern Nepal. Another estimated 30,000 refugees are outside the camps in Nepal and India. Their whereabouts are not known.

The sad part of it is that not one of the hundred thousand refugees from the camps has been repatriated.

Since January 1999, the South Asia Analysis Group has been following the refugee crisis closely and on many occasions made constructive suggestions to solve the crisis. But so far our suggestions have not made any dent on both Bhutan and Nepal as also India who we feel should have been associated in solving the crisis from day one.

Many officials in India conversant with the issue have given the standard reply that it is a bilateral issue between Bhutan and Nepal. Technically they are correct, but in reality it is a problem which has the potential to destabilise the region and hence the need for India to intervene in the interest of India, Bhutan and Nepal.

Only recently in June 2004, did I have the opportunity to interact with Bhutanese officials and know their point of view. One could understand their fears on ethnic management and the consequences of uncontrolled demographic changes. A book on Lepchas of Sikkim titled "Lepcha- My Vanishing tribe " by A.R.Foning- (Chyu-Pandi Farm, Kalimpong) vividly describes how an innocent tribe like the Lepchas have been reduced to insignificance by aggressive

migration from neighbouring regions.

Yet, a way could be found between the justifiable fears of those in charge of Bhutan and the genuine cases of many innocent and hardworking Nepalese who had to leave their hearth and home due to misdemeanors of a few politicians who precipitated the crisis.

On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1999, we said that "Bhutan is not ready for any cataclysmic change" and that the refugee question has the potential to derail the evolutionary process. The King on his own has realised the need to take the country forward by an evolutionary process and a new constitution is in the making. In our update dated 20<sup>th</sup> June 1999, we had said that a "solution can be found if only flexibility is shown on both sides." That flexibility is yet to be seen.

Nepal on whose soil the refugees are languishing is in no position to take any initiative. It is beset with its own problems, all man made, with no end in sight. Despite brave and some times assuring statements from leaders that come out periodically in the Nepalese media there is no consistent or persistent move to tackle the refugee problem. It appears to be just one more item in the media particularly in the numerous afternoon/evening tabloids.

It therefore remains with Bhutan and particularly the Bhutan King and the Indian government to tackle the problem urgently to the satisfaction of all. Any delay will have possible repercussions on which we will discuss later in this update. The refugees should also understand this situation. They should think of what is doable what cannot be done.

#### **Poor Performance and delay of JVTs both in verification and in harmonisation:**

Both Bhutan and Nepal started preparations for joint verification in January 2001. It was only on March 26 that the team actually started physical verification. Only towards end December, 2001 did the teams complete actual verification and interview with the families. This was only for one camp- the Kudenabari camp which consists of about 12,500 members.

On June 18, 2003, the results of the verification were formally announced after one and a half years!

The breakup as announced was

Category I- ( Bhutanese Citizens) 293 members- 2.4 %

Category II- ( Bhutanese who "voluntarily" gave up their citizenship and left 8995 - 70.55 %

Category III- Non Bhutanese 2948 -----24.2 %

Category IV- Bhutanese having a "criminal" record 347– 2.88 %

There were many discrepancies in the results announced. Many felt that too strict a standard was used to identify the citizens. There have been allegations right from the beginning from 1990 that those coming under category II were forcibly evicted and made to sign on forms the refugees did not understand that they were surrendering their citizenship.

Be that as it may, it has taken almost three and a half years to complete one ninth of the verification. There has been no further move to continue the verification. If it had taken three and a half years for verifying and then harmonising one ninth of the population in the camps, by a logical extension it is going to take a minimum of over 20 years! The refugees are not going to wait that long. Already the youth component of the camps is over 50 percent and it will increase further.. They have no openings for employment, for higher studies beyond the tenth class and above all, no where to go. Can any country in the region having open borders with everyone else afford to keep such a large number of restless youth?

Already we see signs of some of the youths joining the Maoist movement in Nepal. A few months ago it was estimated that over 200 youths may have joined. The figure will be more now. There are indications that in the Bhojpur attack ( 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2004)in Nepal, some misguided youths from the camps joined. In that particular incident 32 security personnel of Nepal were killed and 10 taken as prisoners.

In the first week of June, the Nepal Police arrested four men and one woman from the Beldangi camp for their involvement in the Maoists raids. They have been kept incommunicado by the Police and the Amnesty International has already expressed their fears about their safety.

Seven Bhutanese refugees were arrested with fire arms outside the Beldangi camp. Many more are escaping from the camp.

It is established by now that a small group in the name of Bhutan Communist party has emerged from the refugee camps. A representative of the group attended the third meeting of the Coordination Committee of Maoists Parties and Organisations (CCOMPOSA).

Another incident though unrelated was a joint raid of the Maoists of Nepal and MCC of India on an Indian Police Post in Bihar on July 16.

It is now well known from the interrogation of Kiran a Standing committee member of Maoist communist party of Nepal now in custody of West Bengal Police that KLO of North Bengal had working relationship with the Maoists of Nepal. Earlier before the Bhutanese action, KLO had camps in southern Bhutan.

These are the shape of things to come in the sensitive region of eastern Nepal, southern Bhutan and North Bengal!

### **Verification Process is stalled:**

A small incident that occurred at the Kudenabari camp on December 22, 2003 appears to have stalled the verification process. The Bhutanese side wanted Nepalese authorities to make a full scale investigation and send a report. A report has since been sent sometime in April/May 2004. The Bhutanese authorities do not appear to be satisfied with the report. The report is said to be a secret one and we are unable to make any comment on the report. What is

troubling is that this incident a minor one ( there was no conspiracy) has derailed the entire verification process!

Avoidable delay in completing the verification process is likely to have serious consequences. In May the officials of UNHCR have formally informed the refugee leaders of a cut back in support to the refugees and to find alternatives.

The net result will be that

1. The refugees issue will get internationalised, if it had not started. Representatives of various NGOs and members of diplomatic Corps from Kathmandu have begun visiting the camps regularly. International observers do not accept the Bhutanese view that those coming under category II voluntarily surrendered their citizenship to lead the life of a refugee.

II. More serious, is the slow and steady radicalization of the youth in the seven camps.

A solution has therefore to be found now and immediately before the situation gets out of hand.

### **Repatriation Process should have started by now:**

It is not clear why the repatriation process has not started by now. After all, 293 members of category I and 8995 members of category II are available for repatriation. At least the first category of 293 members should have left by now.

It is not a feasible idea to complete the verification of all the refugees in the seven camps before repatriation could be begun. The refugees are not going to wait. It is a human problem. What then could be a possible solution?

If we take the proportion of the numbers of various categories so far verified and by extension the hundred thousand refugees would come approximately in the four categories.

Category I: 2400

Category II. 70550

Category III 24200

Category IV 2880

Of these, those coming under category III, I.E., Non Bhutanese may be left out. Those coming under Category I have a right to go back to their places and no one can stop them. Those outside the camps in India and Nepal numbering about 30,000 will have to fend for themselves wherever they are and no country can take any responsibility.

The problem will arise only with regard to Categories II & IV numbering about 73, 430.

### **Bhutanese Point of view:**

In discussions with Bhutanese officials two main points come through. First, they believe ( though I think they are mistaken), that there are vested interests who want to keep the refugees confined within the camps and do not let the problem be solved. Two, there is a definite demographic threat from southern Bhutanese. According to them, the illegal immigrants particularly since 1961 have increased their numbers by cross marriages, reverse adoptions, illegal acquisition of land and falsification of documents.

They maintain that there had been no discrimination against the lawful citizens of southern Bhutan.

It appears to me that it is the demographic threat that troubles them. A figure of 25 percent was given to me as the number of Nepalese now living in southern Bhutan and for optimum ethnic management they are in no position to increase their numbers.

### **A Solution?**

If a solution outside the verification process is to be decided, the first move the Bhutan government should take is to repatriate those refugees who come under Category I from the Kudenabari camp. This would go a long way in assuring the international community and the refugee themselves that Bhutan is genuinely interested in taking back its citizens.

The next move should be to decide about the 73430 refugees left. It is expected that about ten percent may opt to remain in Nepal.

Bhutan will have to take a substantial number of these. Informal sources reveal that western countries including Canada and USA may take a large number that could be of the order of 30,000. India could also pitch in for some numbers with monetary aid and resettlement facilities within India and Nepal.

Perhaps this is a doable solution provided there is flexibility all round.

### **Category:**

Notes <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Countries:**

Bhutan <sup>[2]</sup>

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