

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

Home > BHUTAN: The Refugee issue cannot be wished away; Update 38.

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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 09/20/2012 - 18:56

Note No. 223

06.05.2004

by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan.

It looks that both Bhutan and Nepal would wish that the issue of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal gets solved by itself!

One can understand Bhutan's approach to the problem- so long as the refugee issue does not create any complications internationally and there is no impact on the law and order situation in southern Bhutan and the refugees are being taken care of by the UNHCR, why should they worry?

Since the 15th ministerial meeting in October 2003 (15 meetings in 12 years), despite promises of speedy repatriation of refugees, Bhutan has been dragging its feet on some ground or other. The unfortunate scuffle at Kudenabari camp on December 22, 2003 came in handy and the Bhutanese side has for all practical purposes stopped any move towards verification of other camps. The latest stand, as we hear is that Bhutan wants "action on the ground" in punishing those involved before proceeding with the process. This stand is untenable and Bhutan cannot hold over 130000 refugees to ransom just for the foolishness and stupidity of a very few individuals and that too on a minor incident at that. The result is clear- given a chance Bhutan would not like to take even a single refugee back- whether they were citizens who were wronged or citizens who were forcibly evicted.

Rijal's fast unto death and its comic end:

Fed up with lack of progress of the refugee problem (to everyone it is still a problem and not a crisis), Tek Nath Rijal undertook a "fast unto death" on 30 March 2004. His demands were

* Internationalise verification and seek a dignified repatriation of the refugees.

* Involve UNHCR in the process.

But within three days Rizal broke his fast on an assurance from the foreign ministry of Nepal that Nepal would continue its efforts for seeking assistance from India and UNHCR. Leaders of the two major political parties Girija Koirala and Madhav Nepal quickly cashed in on the situation by offering the fasting Rizal with a drink for breaking the fast. Some of the refugees of the Beldangi camp who had started a relay fast campaign in support of Rizal had to quickly close their shop after Rizal let them down.

The whole issue in one sense was comic from the beginning. Internationalising the issue very much depended on the refugee groups themselves and there was no point in demanding Nepal government to do their job. Nepal government was not even willing to provide a travel document to Rizal to travel round the world to gather support for the movement.

Stranger still, was the acceptance of Rizal of the assurances given by the Nepal govt. representative Dr. Madan Kuma Bhattarai that they would seek the assistance of India! If only India wanted, the problem could have been solved years ago. Bhutan knows very well that India does not like a third party intervention and so has so far not agreed for a greater role for the UNHCR in dealing with the problem. This amounts to saying- I will not touch it- will not let you touch it and let the refugees suffer! This is strange logic and totally against international norms.

For a brief period the refugees were relying on the statement of the Indian Foreign Secretary that he would take up the issue of refugees on his visit to Bhutan on 26 March 2004. But nothing came out of the visit and it is not clear whether the issue was discussed at all.

Fasting unto death by a person of Rizal's stature is no small thing. This should have been well thought out before venturing. Rizal should not have first of all undertaken the fast without proper preparations and on top of that to break the fast within three days on vague assurances which had nothing to do with the demands he made before undertaking the fast. This is an unintended setback to the cause of the refugees.

The Refugee issue cannot be wished away:

For the thirteenth year running, over 130,000 refugees are languishing in makeshift camps in Nepal with no hope of repatriation. Periodical assurances given by various agencies have not helped in solving the problem. Of these refugees, a great many of them are youngsters with no means of employment, no avenues to improve their livelihood and with an uncertain future. They have waited long enough and our fears are that in due course they would get radicalised and create law and order problems both in Nepal and southern Bhutan with consequences for India too.

This may sound alarming but it could happen. In the third conference of Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and organizations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA) held from 16th to 18th March, 2004, there was for the first time a representative from the Bhutan Communist Party (Maoist) present as an observer. It is learnt that there are over 200 recruits from the refugee camps who have become members of the party. Their ranks would grow if the refugee problem continues.

It is time that a reasonable solution acceptable to Bhutan, Nepal and the refugees is arrived at. This can be done only at the initiative of India. Otherwise, in the long run, there would be another law and order problem in the north east region for India too.

Category:

Notes ^[1]

Countries:

Bhutan ^[2]

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Links

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

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