

# South Asia Analysis Group

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

[Home](#) > BHUTAN: Bhutanese Refugees: Repatriation chances look bleak.: Update 37.

---

## BHUTAN: Bhutanese Refugees: Repatriation chances look bleak.: Update 37.

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 09/20/2012 - 19:15

**Note No. 212**

**19.02.2004**

**by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan.**

The incident at Kudanabari camp on December 22 was waiting to happen. The provocative and arrogant behaviour of the Bhutanese team and lack of proper security arrangements during the JVT visit resulted in some minor incidents. A few agitated refugees threw stones at the delegation and smashed the window panes of the vehicles of the Bhutanese JVT members. The Police then escorted the Bhutanese officials out of the camp. Besides the driver of a vehicle and two Bhutanese members receiving minor injuries, some refugees were also injured in the ensuing melee. The Bhutanese delegation left for Bhutan without even informing their Nepalese counterparts!

The Bhutanese Foreign Minister has informed the Nepalese Foreign minister that resumption of repatriation will not start until the issue of the incident at Kudenabari is solved. It is not clear what Bhutan government wants. **It looks more like an excuse to postpone the repatriation indefinitely.**

It was agreed in the 15<sup>th</sup> ministerial meeting that the repatriation process of those verified will start from the middle of February. It was also understood that the refugees would return with honour, safety and dignity.

**The Bhutanese team leader's speech to the refugees was uncalled for:**

What provoked the refugees who had assembled to meet the JVT members and hear them on the process of repatriation was the arrogant speech of Dr. Sonam Tenzing, Director in the Home ministry in Bhutan. He made three points and all the three were provocative and beyond the scope and spirit of the bilateral talks. These were:

- \* Those coming under category I ( In the verification, Bhutan has admitted they were citizens who were forcibly evicted from their homes) will not get back their original homes and lands.
- \* Those coming under category II ( those who were supposed to have "voluntarily left their properties" to lead the life of refugees) will have to stay in transit camps for two years during which they will have to prove their loyalty towards Bhutan's monarch, history, culture etc.) and only one in a family will be allowed to work. It was indicated that it would be some menial job. There was no assurance that all of them would be granted citizenship at the end of two years.
- \* There will be no review of those coming under category III (Non Bhutanese). The Nepalese side contends that there was an understanding that a review will be made and that no review took place..

### **Now what next?**

It looks that what we have suspected so long that the Bhutan government would find some excuse and not take a single refugee back no matter whether the international community likes it or not. Bhutan has successfully fooled both the refugees and Nepal for the last twelve years. Nepal beset with its own problems failed to read Bhutan's motive correctly in time. There is a genuine realisation now, but it is too late when they had given in to Bhutan's machinations from the time negotiations started between two countries on the refugees. Nepal also failed to involve India which it should have, when both Nepal and Bhutan have special relations with India and there is a vast stretch of Indian territory that the hapless refugees were pushed across before entering eastern Nepal from Bhutan.

### **The UNHCR:**

Besides the refugees, the organisation most frustrated would be the UNHCR who had taken upon itself to look after the refugees for many years at a cost of more than five million dollars annually. Despite the repeated pleas of the refugees and the Nepal government, the Bhutanese never permitted the agency any role in the verification, repatriation or post repatriation of the refugees. It is not that Bhutan had any view on this, but turned it down mainly due to Indian sensitivity.

The policy of UNHCR as made out by its high commissioner in their executive committee meeting was

\* UNHCR would involve itself in promoting self reliance projects in Nepal itself to facilitate integration of the refugees within Nepal. This was probably due to undertaking given Nepal in the JVT talks that it would accept all those refugees who wished to stay back. By making impossible and harsh conditions, Bhutan would now wait for the refugees to stay back in Nepal and it then becomes Nepal's burden. At least the UNHCR despite being marginalised has plans to integrate the refugees.

\* UNHCR will not promote return of refugees as Bhutan has denied access to UNHCR in Bhutan.

\* In vulnerable cases UNHCR will take the initiative for resettlement.

### **The Refugees:**

In one of our earlier updates ( Note no. 189) we quoted the feelings of some refugees who said " Where is the place where the voice of the refugees can be heard? And also "Refugees the so called homeless, hopeless, stateless and what else if the medium of being themselves is aimless."

They are now in a desperate situation. They have lost hope of returning to their homes with dignity. Funds for running the schools are being reduced. It is learnt that more than 8000 boys and girls of the refugees will not be able to pursue education beyond 10<sup>th</sup> standard. Avenues for getting scholarships for higher education beyond 12<sup>th</sup> standard have been closed. While India is providing scholarships for admission to government institutions and universities for Bhutanese and Nepalese, the refugees come under neither category and higher education is being denied to them. This is going to create a major social problem and there is a case for India to relax the rules and admit them with scholarships. This is a humanitarian problem and not a political or ethnic one and Bhutan government is not going to object either.

The UNHCR should also begin the initiative of settling the more vulnerable of the refugees. After looking after the refugees for so many years, it should ensure that resettlement programme however small may be, is started.

Bhutan government would have achieved its aim if the bulk of the refugees coming under category I and II refuse to return to Bhutan. There is no doubt Bhutan government would place harsh conditions for the return of even category I so that refugees are reluctant to return. It is for the refugees who have been acknowledged to be Bhutanese citizens prior to their expulsion no matter whether it was voluntary or not, to go back and call the bluff. It is only then that some forward movement in the case of refugees could be made and the attention of the international agencies and human rights organisations brought to the fore to get justice for the poor refugees.

### **India's Role:**

The refugees, Nepal government and the international organisations like UNHCR are clear that India's role is critical in solving the refugee issue. It is not a bilateral issue when both Bhutan and Nepal have special relations with India and there are also nearly 30,000 refugees within India too. The frustrated

young jobless refugees with no avenues open are likely to pour into India and create social instability. India would not like the issue to get internationalised either. It is within India's competence to mediate and solve the issue once and for all. India has a moral responsibility and earlier it gets involved better it would be for the refugees who are looking up to India as the last resort. Will India oblige?

**Category:**

Notes <sup>[1]</sup>

**Countries:**

Bhutan <sup>[2]</sup>

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/note212>

**Links**

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

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