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by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan

Faced with increasing Indian pressure, a reluctant Bhutan finally made up its mind to move against the thirty and odd camps of Indian insurgents operating from southern Bhutan on 18th December. The Indian groups involved were ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodo land) and KLO (Kamptapur Liberation Organisation).

For sometime now, India has been pressing Bhutan government to get rid of the insurgents who have been operating with impunity from their safe hideouts in southern Bhutan. During the five-day visit of the Bhutan King in August this year, this issue came up again and it was impressed on the King that the Bhutanese territory should not be allowed to be used for activities against Indian interests.

In pursuance of a resolution of the national assembly, the Bhutan government made one more attempt in November to talk to the insurgent leaders and persuade them to leave Bhutanese territory. The ULFA and the NDFB responded to the invitation but failed to agree to evacuate while the KLO did not respond at all.

Initial reports indicate a fair amount of success to the Bhutanese forces. Though, there is no official statement there appears to be a tacit understanding on the participation of Indian security forces in the operations. A whole Indian division has been deployed on the border in support of the operations. Most of the insurgent camps have been destroyed and many insurgents have been killed. A large quantity of arms has also been seized. Some of the top leaders of KLO and ULFA have been apprehended and handed over to the Indian security forces.

Some Points of interest:

1. The first phase of the operation is over, but the harder task of consolidating the gains remains. While some of the militants have escaped to Bangladesh, a large number is still in Bhutan. The scattered remnants are expected to regroup and strike again. The bulk of the Bhutan Army involved in this operation will have to remain in the area for some time to come.
2. The Bhutanese Army trained specially for counter insurgency operations has conducted itself well. Except in chasing the poor unarmed Lhotsampas from their homesteads in the nineties they have had no experience in counter insurgency operations.
3. While one could discount such spin like the King leading the operations as in medieval times and the body counts, the Bhutanese army has fought well and had taken casualties. This would give them besides experience, lot of confidence in themselves very necessary for an army that had never fought a war.
4. The question now is the backlash. Reports indicate that Paresh Barua the ULFA leader convened a meeting of representatives of nine northeast insurgent groups at Dhaka on 19th December to chalk out a plan of action. They have demanded that all Bhutanese who visit or are on the Indian side of the border to return to Bhutan. The 48-hour Bandh(closure) called for in Assam and northern Bengal was a partial success.
5. More importantly, the backlash would affect mostly the southern Bhutanese of Nepali origin. Besides law and order problems, they would also be economically squeezed.
6. With the road network still in the development stage within Bhutan, southern Bhutanese will have to transit through Indian regions for travelling from one place to another or even to buy the daily needs of life. Their lives are in danger.
7. An estimated 5000 Bhutanese who are again mostly of Nepali origin stay for short or long periods in the Indian side of the border and making a living by selling agricultural produce and other products. They will have to close down their shops.

Implications on the larger refugee question:

The current crack down has added a new dimension to the refugee problem itself.

* Firstly, in view of the disturbed situation in southern Bhutan, the government would find a ready excuse not to settle the returnees of categories I & II, to their former homes or even southern Bhutan but further northwards! This would result in avoidable hardship and great injustice to all those who were prepared to face the uncertainties created deliberately by Bhutan government for those coming under the so

called category II who will have to re-apply for citizenship after two years. This would also result in a great shock to those in camps other than Kudenabari who are awaiting verification and subsequent repatriation.

* Secondly the Indian insurgents who manage to stay back in Bhutan despite the on going operations would try to hide themselves and operate in the regions and settlements of the southern Bhutanese. Caught up between the security personnel and the ruthless insurgents, it is these people who would suffer more and their livelihood disturbed causing further hardship.

* Thirdly, it would be a setback to the larger question of the refugee problem itself. With Bhutan actively participating in the operations against the militants at India's bidding, it would likewise expect India to support it fully in dealing with the refugees. The Bhutanese foreign minister K.Wangchuk has said that at present 30.8 percent of Bhutanese are people of Nepali origin. (The population in the camp would be about 18 percent). He declared that his government wanted to ensure that the population composition among the Drukpas and Lhotsampas are maintained within "manageable limits", so that the future of Bhutan politics is not dictated by the overwhelming majority. The conclusion is - *we would be wary of accepting all the refugees back- find some other way.* The Bhutan government is therefore expected to take a hardened stand towards the returnees allowed to return giving little concession to the language, tradition and culture of Lhotsampa community. In this Bhutan would seek India's support.

Verification in the remaining Camps:

The second round of verification of Sanichare camp has not yet begun. There are no indications that the verification would soon begun. Judging from the slow pace of verification of the first camp Kudenabari and the slower pace of processing the return of those verified, it looks that the whole process of verification and repatriation of all the refugees may take a very long time. If only the two countries Nepal and Bhutan had taken expeditious steps to settle those already verified and are in categories I & II (we maintain strongly that there is no genuine category II), the refugees could have had some hope of returning to their places with dignity and respect. This is not to be.

Options:

As it is the refugees have four options.

1. To remain in the refugee camps indefinitely. This is no option at all. Sooner or later, the refugee community that has waited patiently for the last twelve years would look for other means to break out of the impasse.

2. **Repatriation:** With the tardy progress in verification and subsequent repatriation, it looks like that this option appears to be unavailable in the immediate future. There have been assurances from Nepal government that repatriation of those verified would start soon. But there has been no activity on this score. International agencies, particularly those financing the camps will have to get active and make both the governments move. UNHCR should take the lead.
3. **Local assimilation:** There are many uncertainties in this area. Firstly the decision was taken by an unrepresentative government and may not be endorsed by succeeding governments. Secondly there has been opposition from the locals and it is now said that the Nepal government just to get over the impasse in the harmonisation process agreed to take back those willing to stay. And are not serious. Thirdly, what happens if those assimilated are not given “equal opportunities” or conversely if those locals do not get equal opportunities in terms of land and finance to settle down as given to those refugees?
4. **Third Country settlement:** Here is a possibility, which needs to be looked into in greater detail. Due to the spread of terrorist network, the docile Hindu population (refugees) who have behaved well in the last 12 years are good choice for settlement in countries willing to take them. In some countries the quota for 2003 has not been exhausted and this with the quota for 2004 could be utilised.

This would leave about 20 to 30 thousand refugees who live outside the camps mostly in India. Those in India will have to fend for themselves

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