

South Asia Analysis Group

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BHUTAN: 15th Ministerial meeting at Thimpu on refugees: Break through? Update 35

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by Dr. S. Chandrasekharan

A rather desperate reader had once accused the South Asia Analysis Group of unnecessarily raising the hopes of the poor refugees when there was no chance of Bhutan taking any refugee back. It is in this context that we would like to look at the results of the 15th ministerial meeting.

Before official reports came in, the Kathmandu Post quoting foreign office spokesman of Nepal said that

1. There has been an agreement on swift repatriation of all refugees of categories one, two and four from the Kudenabari camp.
2. Bhutan has agreed to acquit all the refugees in category four except for the "criminal chieftains."

This was too good to be true and it is not clear why the foreign ministry spokesman mislead the Press and the refugees. Once before we had seen, UNHCR representative Ms.Ogata who was privately promised a few years back that Bhutan would take back all the refugees making a grand declaration only to realise that she had been fooled. .

But we had our doubts and we had reasons. The last issue of *Kuensel* made a strange case of welcoming the internationalisation of the refugee issue. It said

"It appears that we need a new perspective on what we all agree is a serious humanitarian problem. It is time perhaps, to draw back and take a broader view of the problem. It is time to accept the realities and adopt a doable approach."

(So far so good)

"The essence of a durable solution is that it must not destabilize any of the countries involved. It must ensure the stability of the region and therefore international interests. Otherwise, it would not be a solution."

The "catch" is therefore in the second part that a solution should not destabilize the region, which in actual fact means destabilize Bhutan.

We have heard this argument before that the return of all the refugees (estimated at 145,000- 100,000 in camps, 10,000 outside in Nepal and another 25,000 in India) will destabilize the social fabric of Bhutan and whatever may be the reasons for their expulsion, Bhutan is in no position to take back the bulk of the refugees. Bhutan has convinced the Indian authorities on these lines and it appears to be one of the reasons why India has so far refused to get involved in the refugee crisis. The Indian NGOs who are normally vocal and vociferous on issues not so important have surprisingly been silent on the ethnic cleansing that has taken place in Bhutan.

The Joint Press Release on the meeting.

The official Press release justified our doubts. There has been no change in the stand of Bhutan in taking back the refugees. The relevant decisions taken were

- * The appeals submitted by people under category 3 (non Bhutanese) will be considered by the JVT by the end of January 2004.
- * The family members of persons in category 4 (those involved in the so called criminal acts) will not be prosecuted upon return to Bhutan.
- * People in categories 1,2 and 4 **who voluntarily apply to return to Bhutan will be repatriated as per the harmonised position on these categories.** (emphasis ours)
- * Sanichare camp has been selected for the next verification.

It is clear from above, that the position of Bhutan government with respect to category 2 which forms the bulk of the refugees has not changed. The issue

here is not whether the refugees under category 2 are volunteering to go back but whether they voluntarily left their homes for leading their life in the refugee camps. If they were forced to leave their home and properties, they are entitled to go back as full citizens. The question of their volunteering to go back, apply for citizenship and wait for another two years does not arise. We have discussed this in our previous updates [186](#) ^[1] and [189](#). ^[2]

It was thought that only Bhutan government had short changed the refugees and it is getting clearer that Nepal in no small measure appears to follow the same way.

What is the way out for the refugees?

Now the refugees themselves have become very active as they feel that having waited for justice for twelve long years, it is now necessary for them to seek the help of international bodies, donors and NGOs to get them back to their home land with dignity and honour.

There has been gross injustice to the refugees. There has been proven ethnic cleansing and there have been human rights abuses. It has taken so long for the international agencies to get activated, when they were quick to act on such problems in other regions. They owe an explanation to the poor refugees who have waited for over twelve years for a reasonable solution.

Six leading NGOs, the Jesuit Refugee Service, Amnesty International, Habitat international Coalition, Human Rights Watch, Lutheran World Federation and Bhutanese Refugee Support group made a joint appeal to the donor countries (Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Nederland, Japan, USA and UK) to convene an international conference to solve the long-standing refugee crisis.

In the 54th Executive Committee meeting of UNHCR in Geneva, the Chief Ruud Lubbers asked both Nepal and Bhutan to come out with concrete results or "face action that could go any length." He pointed out that UNHCR was kept out of the process of verification and also denied access to potential areas of return of refugees to Bhutan. He made three points in the meeting-

- * to promote projects of social integration of refugees with Nepali Society.
- * to support resettlement for vulnerable cases.
- * assist in verifying whether those who wish to remain in Nepal do so voluntarily.

All the three points are not clear to us. Does UNHCR believe that all the categories 1, 2 and 4 of Kudenabari camp would like to remain in Nepal? If there is a prospect of the refugees getting back their land and of being settled in their places of residence, none of them except those married to the locals would like to stay in Nepal. What are the vulnerable cases? On what basis does one call such cases vulnerable?

T.N.Rijal in Kathmandu: T.N.Rijal who was once unceremoniously arrested and sent to Bhutan by the Panchayat regime in 1988, has mustered enough courage to enter Nepal once again. He has met both G.P.Koirala and Madhav Nepal, leaders of two leading political groups. He is said to have appealed to

the leaders to keep the democratic movement and fight for basic human rights in Bhutan. Rijal is said to have met Prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa also. It is not the time for Rijal who is heading the human rights group of Bhutan to discuss about political issues. The urgent need is to get the refugees back to their homes. Taking any other issue at this point of time would only confirm the fears of Bhutan that the refugees on their return would "destabilize " the region.

Camps of Indian militant Groups in Bhutan: While Bhutan and India have gone out of the way to ensure smooth relations between the two, it is the problem of the camps of Indian militant groups in southern Bhutan which is likely to sour the relations between the two.

There are 21 and odd Indian militant camps in southern Bhutan. Though the militants belong to three groups, the ULFA, the NDFB and KLO (United Liberation Front of Assam, National Democratic Front of Bodoland and Kamatipur Liberation Organisation), of the three thousand present, more than half of them are from ULFA.

While India has been insisting that Bhutan should take specific steps to evict the militants, the King on the other hand believes that by talking to them, the militants could be persuaded to leave Bhutan voluntarily. In the last assembly session at Thimpu, it was decided that Bhutan should make one more attempt to talk to the militants. But the militants are not likely vacate the camps by any amount of sweet talk.

Bhutan by itself is in no position to evict the militants forcibly. Bringing the Indian troops into Bhutanese soil is not an attractive proposition. Joint operations will be one way of dealing with the issue Then Bhutan will have to think of its citizens in southern Bhutan who normally transit through Indian territory to reach other remote regions in Bhutan. It is therefore unreasonable for India to insist on Bhutan using force to remove the militants all by itself unless some face saving device is thought of to get Indian assistance. The most important aspect to the whole issue is that Bhutan by its ethnic cleansing has antagonised the inhabitants of southern Bhutan. Any operation of the kind planned against the Indian militant groups would need the support and assistance of the people in southern Bhutan. Can Bhutan expect such support in south now?

Category:

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