

Bangladesh/Pakistan: Bihari Refugees Stranded In Bangladesh Since 1971

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Refugees International says the Biharis have been in the refugee camps in a very inhuman condition for more than three decades

Refugees International recently announced that 11 million individuals worldwide are essentially "stateless" – that is, they are not citizens of any country. Among them, Refugees International cites the more than 250,000 ethnic Biharis, who have been living in refugee camps in Bangladesh since 1971. Refugees International has called on the United Nations and specific countries to take measures to address the problem.

The Biharis are Pakistani nationals, essentially stranded in Bangladesh since 1971, when the former East Pakistan became the independent country of Bangladesh. They once lived in the Indian state of Bihar, but migrated from India in 1947 after the partition of India. At that time, more than three thousand kilometers of India separated West and East Pakistan.



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However, the Urdu-speaking Biharis in East Pakistan could not assimilate with the surrounding Bengali society there and remained a distinct cultural-linguistic group. They generally identified with West Pakistani society and associated themselves with the West Pakistani governing elite.



Pakistani Army Commander in the Eastern Command, Lt. General A. A. K. Niazi, signing the Instrument of Surrender in front of Lt. General Jagjit Singh Aurora, Commanding in Chief of India and Bangladesh Forces in Dhaka, on 16th December, 1971

In the early 1970s, civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan, and the Biharis sided with West Pakistan. In December 1971, following a war with India, Pakistani forces surrendered to a joint command composed of Indian and Bangladeshi forces and East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh.

After Pakistani army and civilians were evacuated, the Biharis found themselves unwelcome in both countries. Since then, most of these Biharis have been living in refugee camps in Bangladesh, hoping to be repatriated to Pakistan.

Successive governments in Islamabad have stalled on the issue of their repatriation, says Shamsheer Chowdhury, Bangladeshi Ambassador to the United

States: "Those who have declared allegiance to Pakistan, those who

remain committed to their allegiance should be repatriated to Pakistan because they are actually stranded Pakistanis. They have never taken Bangladeshi citizenship."



Ambassador Chaudhry says Bangladesh itself produced about ten million refugees during the civil war, most of whom took refuge in neighboring India. They returned to a liberated East Pakistan, which soon became the independent country of Bangladesh.

In the 1973 New Delhi Agreement, Pakistan agreed to receive a sizable number of Biharis in exchange for the return of Bengalis living in Pakistan. But the exchange soon came to a halt.



Bangladeshi Ambassador Shamsheer Chowdhury actively participated in the War of Liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Ambassador Shamsheer Chaudhry says Pakistan's domestic politics and its lack of interest in receiving the Biharis prevented a permanent settlement: "We have been consistently telling the Pakistani government including President Musharraf that there is need to address this issue seriously with the aim of finding a final solution to this, which is the repatriation of those who are still willing to go to Pakistan."

Voice of America tried to talk with some Pakistani officials about the Biharis, but they declined to respond.

However, Akbar Ahmad, prominent journalist and Pakistan's former High Commissioner (Ambassador) to Britain, says Pakistan must acknowledge that these refugees have suffered for more than three decades and deserve to be repatriated to Pakistan.

"Technically and legally, the Bangladeshi government is right because these people have declared themselves to be Pakistanis," says Ambassador Chaudhry. "Pakistan has shown sympathy with them but, in fact, has not allowed them to come and resettle in Pakistan. They have Pakistani identity, they have Pakistani papers, and their only crime in 1971 was that they believed in Pakistan and they, in a sense, voted for Pakistan with their heart."



Akbar Ahmed is Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of International Service, American University, Washington, D.C.

Bangladeshi Ambassador Chowdhury says his government continues to provide basic amenities to the stranded Biharis and has given them the option of becoming Bangladeshi citizens. And he noted that the children of these refugees have already started assimilating into Bangladeshi society.

"Many of those children born since 1971 have moved out of the camps, taken Bangladeshi citizenship, are working, going to school and enjoying facilities of a citizen of Bangladesh," says Ambassador Chaudhry. "The divide is now appearing more glaringly between the older generation and the newer generation. The new generation speaks Bangla, but does not speak Urdu. They went to school in Bangladesh, were educated there, have jobs and have married Bangladeshi girls. They have absolutely no interest in Pakistan, which is fine with us."

In the early 1990s, the government of Pakistan agreed to accept 250,000 Bihari Muslims

residing in Bangladesh. But it never implemented the agreement. Ambassador Chowdhury says the repatriation should not be a problem if Pakistan demonstrates a willingness to accept the Biharis.

Former Pakistani Ambassador to Britain, Akbar Ahmad, agrees. He says a solution depends on Islamabad's willingness to create a positive atmosphere so that the Bihari refugees can return: " I think the best way to do this is to bring it to the notice of Pakistanis. I believe, if the Pakistanis are confronted with the moral compulsions of bringing them back, they will respond positively because Pakistan is a big country and to accommodate a couple of hundred thousand people is not such a big problem. I hope and I pray that the Pakistani leadership will show clear wisdom, it will show clear compassion and will welcome these long overdue citizens to Pakistan itself."

According to Refugees International Director of Research Maureen Lynch, the international community has largely ignored the plight of the Bihari refugees. Refugees International has asked Pakistan and Bangladesh to adhere to the principles of the 1954 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and to its 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness to end this human tragedy.

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