

## **Chicago Conference Discusses Repatriation of Stranded Pakistanis**

By Mutahir Kazmi

CHICAGO: The repatriation program for the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh will pick up speed in April 1998, because of the decisions made by the cabinet meeting in December last. One thousand housing units were constructed on a 96-acre parcel of land in the Mian Chunnu district in 1994 and are ready for rehabilitating the stranded Pakistanis. Thirty-two of these units have already been provided to 300 repatriated Pakistanis during Nawaz Sharif's first stint in the office. This was stated by Mr. Hasan Sharif, an official of the Rabita-e-Alam-e-Islami, at a conference in Chicago on March 15.

The conference was organized by the Rabita Trust and American Islamic College. Delegates from human rights organizations and repatriation activists demanded immediate repatriation of Pakistanis from Bangladesh. The conference concluded demanding all out efforts to expedite the repatriation without any further delay. Delegates—Mr. Hasan Sharif (Pakistan), Dr. Shafi Bezar (New York), and Dr Asad Hussain—briefed the conference about the past and current efforts to bring the stranded Pakistanis back home.

The number of Pakistanis to be repatriated is estimated to be 250,000. Answering a question as to how the figure of 250,000 was arrived, Mr Hasan Sharif confirmed that the Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh have been thoroughly documented and the figure is completely reliable. A census of the stranded population was carried out in 1992 jointly by representatives of governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh along with one representative each from the Rabita Trust and stranded Pakistani community. The population as verified and documented was agreed by all four representatives at 238000. Accordingly Pakistani citizenship ID papers were prepared for each of these Pakistanis and are in the custody of the Rabita Trust office in Dhaka. The current number is estimated to have increased to 250,000 because of new births in the stranded families.

The travel expenses of this group of 4,700 will be met out of the Rabita Trust Fund established in July, 1988, for the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis. The trust fund was started jointly by the government of Pakistan and Rabita Alam-e-Islami during General Zia's regime. Government of Pakistan provided Rs.250 million while Rabita contributed Rs.50 million. The construction of one thousand housing units has been done from the same fund. According to Mr. Hasan Sharif there is still a balance of Rs 400 million in the fund and is enough to construct additional 2000 units and to pay for the travel and rehabilitation expenses of another two thousand families of stranded Pakistanis.

Due to ethnic sensitivities in Sindh, Nawaz Sharif prepared the ground for the rehabilitation of these unfortunate stateless Pakistanis in Punjab. Many among the Punjabi leaders welcomed and supported the idea with patriotic warmth.

The trustees of the fund have planned to construct 41,500 housing units around

industrial towns of Punjab to rehabilitate the returning Pakistanis. These units will be located near Punjab towns like Gujrat, Sialkot, Gujranwala where it will be possible for the families of the stranded Pakistanis to find work easily. These Pakistanis are stated to be skilled industrial workers and good craftsman while their women folks can work as farm labors. These Pakistanis are expected to fulfill the demand for skilled labor in the cottage industry and will not become a financial burden on the society. “They will, rather boost the industrial production”, commented Mr Sharif.

Pakistani officials believe that Muslim countries and Pakistanis abroad would generously donate to help the repatriation program. The government of Pakistan and the Rabita Trust have issued a joint appeal on December 26, 1997 for donations for rehabilitation of Stranded Pakistanis. Mr Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan’s Finance Minister, signed the appeal which was published by newspapers in Urdu, Arabic and English languages. Dr Abdullah Ibn Salih Al-Obaid, Secretary General of the Rabita also signed the appeal on behalf of board of trustees of Rabita Trust for rehabilitation of stranded Pakistanis.

According to this appeal donations in foreign currencies may be sent to Habib Bank Islamabad in bank account #97073-1. “Some Middle Eastern Muslim countries, including Bahrain, Qatar, Dubai and Saudi Arabia, had volunteered to chip in the repatriation efforts in 1988. Once the repatriation efforts enter a serious stage, these Muslim countries can again be persuaded to help,” Dr. Asad Hussain said. Dr Asad is the Principal of American Islamic College and is heavily involved in the Rabita Trust Fund efforts to repatriate stranded Pakistanis.

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