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EDITORIAL: Don't keep Bihari refugees in a black-hole

Press reports from Bangladesh say thousands of Bihari refugees protested in Dhaka on June 24 and demanded that they either be repatriated to Pakistan or given Bangladeshi nationality. The refugee leaders also said they wanted a tripartite meeting among Pakistan, Bangladesh and the representatives of the refugees to sort out this issue immediately. Nearly 250,000 'Bihari-Pakistanis' remain stranded in Bangladesh and live in abject poverty in 66 camps scattered in 13 districts of that country. How should Pakistan respond to their plight?

In all fairness to Dhaka, the onus of responsibility for these Bihari-Pakistanis lies with Islamabad while much of the blame for their present plight must also be apportioned to the Bihari-Pakistani leaders themselves. But before we go any further, let's take a look at the genesis of the problem.

Some one million Biharis first came to Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, in October-November 1947 after nearly 30,000 were killed in what came to be known as the 'Great Bihar Killing'. Most of them were from the eastern Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim, according to a South Asia Forum for Human Rights report quoting official BD documents on the refugees. Until 1971, it is generally accepted that these refugees did not assimilate and remained a distinct cultural-linguistic group. To that extent they were closer to and identified with West rather than East Pakistan's Bengali (now Bangladeshi) culture. There is evidence that they also enjoyed official patronage. Later, with the Urdu-Bengali controversy emerging, the Biharis definitely got the upper hand after the Pakistan government announced Urdu as the official language of the country. On the language issue too (and the riots that would break out periodically) the Biharis sided with West Pakistan. Similarly, on the political front, in the 1954 provincial elections as well as in the 1970 general elections, they supported the Muslim League.

Things came to a head in 1970-71. The Biharis supported the military action against Bengali insurgents and some even participated actively against the Mukti Bahini. The resentment that was growing among the Bengalis (Bangladeshis) against them resulted in the killings of

Biharis by the Bengali nationalists during and after the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Most of them were displaced and their properties taken over by the Bengalis. It was not until mid-1972 that nearly a million of them were domiciled in camps through a presidential order.

Later, the same year, Dhaka offered them citizenship through a Presidential Order. Bangladeshi official records say some 600,000 accepted this offer while 539,669 Biharis “registered with the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) opting to return to their ‘country of nationality’ — Pakistan” (SAFHR report). Under international law, henceforth they were Pakistanis. But Islamabad did not show much interest in the issue then. However, it was forced to look at it seriously when Dhaka linked diplomatic relations with Islamabad to repatriation of those Bihari refugees that had opted for Pakistan. Under the 1973 Delhi Agreement as well as in the Tripartite Agreement of 1974 Pakistan agreed to receive these refugees. As part of this agreement, the “United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) facilitated the return of 108,750 Bihari refugees by June 1974” but had to suspend operations for lack of funds. The issue could also not be resolved in the 1974 Bhutto-Mujib summit and has since then hung fire. It is periodically visited but nothing has come out of it.

At this point it is important to go back to the question of what can be done. Pakistan needs first to feel responsible for these refugees. However, taking them in at this stage is a difficult though not impossible option for a number of reasons, not least because of Pakistan’s internal problems. An attempt was made by the Nawaz League government in the early 1990s to get some of these refugees and settle them in the Punjab. But that did not work because there are no jobs in the Punjab and because of ethnic, linguistic, economic and cultural reasons these refugees will always tend to drift to Karachi in the south. But that city has already become a tinderbox. Its infrastructure is crumbling under the weight of irresponsible governance and migration to it of Pakistanis from across the country. Thus there is no way it can accommodate these refugees without further sociological upheaval. Already, nearly 100,000 Biharis have illegally migrated to Pakistan and are living on the fringes of socio-economic life in Karachi.

After decades of living in Bangladesh, it is realistic to make efforts to get these people to assimilate in that country. Those Biharis who refused in the seventies to take up Dhaka's offer now realise they may have made a mistake. Given their plight they cannot be made to suffer the consequences of it any more. They may not be averse to accepting a similar offer now. This is where Pakistan needs to start shouldering its responsibility not only in terms of helping Dhaka bear the financial burden of these Biharis but also in finding money from international sources to help Bangladesh absorb them. In the final analysis, of course, Pakistan must make arrangements to receive those among them who still insist on coming to Pakistan, despite any

demographic problems that they may unwittingly create in their chosen homeland (Pakistan).

The stranded Biharis represent a human tragedy and neither Dhaka nor Islamabad can allow so many people languish in a black-hole. The Awami League government in Bangladesh has generally tended to flog this issue to score points against Pakistan. It will perhaps be easier for Pakistan at this point to take up this issue seriously with the present government of prime minister Khaleda Zia. There are of course problems on all sides but the gravity of the situation demands that a process be initiated in good faith that aims at ending this human tragedy. *