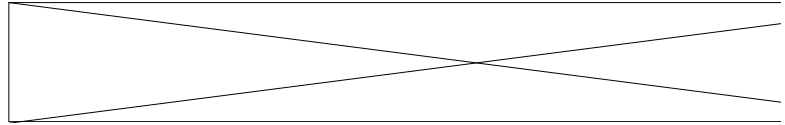
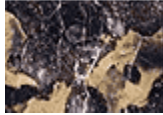


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Festering fall-out of Dhaka fall

By Faiz al-Najdi



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December 16 comes and passes away every year as another day for most Pakistanis. However, for the Stranded Pakistanis, cooped up since past 33 years in ghetto-like shanty camps thorough out the urban sprawls of Bangladesh, it's a day that haunts them incessantly. For on this very dark day in 1971 they lost their homeland which overnight became, what was then East Pakistan to Bangladesh.

The fall of Dhaka was not the end of this great tragedy; in fact it was the beginning of more to come for these patriotic Pakistanis who refused to go along with the separatist elements there and chose to fight instead, alongside the Pakistani Army in the defense of their homeland.



While the Pakistani Army along with some civilians (and their family) from the erstwhile Pakistani establishment posted there were provided a safe passage to India as POWs, these Urdu-speaking former Pakistanis were literally abandoned at the mercy of the Mukti Bahini; an armed wing of Awami League and cohorts of the Indian Army.

In the aftermath to this great tragedy, first the local miscreants illegally & forcefully occupied their homes as part of a premeditated plan. Subsequently, they were forced to take refuge on open and barren lands in the vicinity of their hometowns. These shelters later took the shape of "the camps". These camps exist to-date. In the process, most young men were hooded and whisked away; some were murdered cold-bloodedly, some landed in jails, endured tortures for years before being released as free men to rejoin their kith & kin.

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In the beginning, they were given to understand falsely that those were temporary arrangements, albeit in transit, pending repatriation to West Pakistan; the former name of the present Pakistan. These stranded Pakistanis were kept under this illusion for years together during which time the young grew old and the old perished without their dreams having realized. During these painful years they had a choice to accept Bangladeshi citizenship which they turned down and hoisted the green-white-crescent Pakistani flag instead; all in a bid to be able to return honorably to Pakistan someday.

When we look back at the time-line of this issue, this is how it stands chronologically & historically.

1. According to reports, after the fall of Dhaka and after 93,000 POWs (including some civilians) were taken into Indian safe custody, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered nearly 540,000 of the surviving Urdu-speaking Pakistanis in Bangladesh who wanted to be repatriated to Pakistan.

2. As a follow-up of the Simla agreement of July 1972, a tripartite agreement was concluded in August 1973 between Pakistan, India and Bangladesh in New Delhi. As per the agreement about 250,000 Bengalis were airlifted from Pakistan to Bangladesh, 93,000 POWs were released from the Indian custody (Bangladesh agreed to drop the demand of war crimes trial of 195 Pakistani army officials) and the Urdu-speaking stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh were to be repatriated to Pakistan. A three-point criterion was established then to determine eligibility, which included: a. Those domiciled in West Pakistan b. Federal government employees, and c. Members of the Divided Families.

3. Sequel to the New Delhi Tripartite agreement, the first batch of 120,000 stranded Pakistanis was airlifted to Pakistan in 1974. By 1982 the number of officially repatriated Pakistanis had reached 169,000.

4. In a meeting in 1978, the Cabinet Division of Government of Pakistan decided in principle to repatriate all former East Pakistan Railways employees and their family members stranded in Bangladesh.

5. In Nov-Dec 1982, some 4,600 were repatriated again to Pakistan after a year of no publicized plans. The US\$1.5 Million airlift was financed by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The operation was done in conjunction with the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).



6. In 1988 the Rabita Trust was established following an agreement signed between the late President Gen. Zial-ul-Haq and Dr. Abdullah Omar Al-Naseef, the then Secretary General of the Muslim World League and member of Saudi Shura Council. Land was allocated for some 40,000 houses in Punjab. One thousand houses were also built to rehabilitate the would be repatriated Pakistanis.

7. A population census of these stranded Pakistanis was carried out in

1992 jointly by representatives of the governments of Pakistan & Bangladesh together with one representative each from the Rabita Trust and the stranded Pakistani community. The number was verified then as 238,000. Pakistani citizenship ID papers were prepared for each of them but remain in the safe custody of the Rabita Trust Office in Dhaka.

8. In Sept. 1992, the Pakistani High Commissioner with the help of Rabita Bangladesh (a subsidiary of Saudi Arabia based charity Rabita al-Alam al-Islami) began issuing identity cards to stranded Pakistanis, which was later suspended for reasons not cited.

9. On January 10, 1993 some 325 families of stranded Pakistanis arrived from Bangladesh but this process of repatriation was later suspended on the pretext of fund constraints.

10. On 01 Dec 1995, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) pressed Pakistan to allow for the return of the Biharis stranded in Bangladesh and living a miserable life in the camps there.

11. The government of Pakistan and Rabita Trust issued a joint appeal for donations which was published by newspapers in Urdu, Arabic and English languages on 26 Dec 1997. Dr. Abdullah Al-Obaid, Secy General of the Rabita and the then Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz jointly signed this appeal.

12. An advertisement for this joint appeal also appeared in the International Herald Tribune in early 1998.

13. The US State Department, on Sept 23, 2001, categorized the Rabita Trust as an organization linked to terrorism. Rabita Trust initiated an enquiry & audit of the funds at its disposal by auditor Ferguson in 2003, which determined the charge was false. However, since the funds now stand frozen by USA this has seriously affected the program of repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis.

14. Ten stranded Pakistanis were granted voting rights after the High Court in Dhaka declared on 6 May 2003 that they were citizens of the country. The Court order followed a petition by the group who live in the so-called Geneva camp in Dhaka.

15. In June 2004, the proposal "Repatriation & Rehabilitation of Stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh on Self-Finance Scheme" which was first tabled in 1998, was re-launched with the hope that it will be accepted by concerned quarters in response to the "paucity of funds" issue behind non-repatriation of these stranded Pakistanis.

It is evident that the 'stranded Pakistanis' issue has festered enough and it's about time some jittery questions are asked at the Pakistani establishment in particular and at the Muslim Ummah and the International Community in general.

The question is: should these stranded Pakistanis continue to languish in Bangladesh like this forever? Will that day ever come when their sustained loyalty & patriotism for Pakistan be redeemed? Will their long patience for honorable settlement in Pakistan be ever rewarded?

(The author is a Pakistani expat, a writer and a human rights activist, based in Riyadh)

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