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How Long Will Biharis Remain Stranded?

Imran Rahman, Arab News

DHAKA, 30 July 2005 — The repatriation issue of some 250,000 stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh gets complicated with the passage of time as Pakistan and relevant organizations simply ignore it and make other issues as their priority agenda, said a study, released in Dhaka yesterday.

Who will take the responsibility of these stranded Pakistanis? Is it Pakistan, Bangladesh, UN or international humanitarian organizations? Or will the world humanity keep sitting on the sidelines and see them perishing in inhuman conditions in dark camps, the study questions.

Unofficial statistics put the number of the stranded Pakistanis between 2,37,000 to 3,00,000 sheltered in as many as 70 refugee camps now reduced to 66 across Bangladesh.

For their early repatriation, the International Red Cross had prepared a list of about 500,000 stranded Pakistanis who opted for Pakistan. By 1974, the Pakistani government had transferred 108,000 stranded people to Pakistan. The number rose to 163,000 by 1981.

In 1982, some 4,600 stranded Pakistanis were evacuated to Pakistan after a year of no publicized plans for official repatriation by the Pakistani government. The \$1.5 million airlift was financed by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The operation was done in cooperation with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Since 1982, the repatriation was stopped. As per a tripartite agreement signed by India, Bangladesh and Pakistan in 1974, all the remaining Pakistanis staying in camps were to be taken back by Pakistan.

Since the repatriation process got stalled, late President Zia ul-Huq, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and incumbent President Pervez Musharraf never declined to accept these Pakistanis. Instead, Nawaz and Musharraf made categorical assurances to the governments in Dhaka for initiating the repatriation process.

During his official visit to Bangladesh, President Musharraf also gave categorical assurance to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's government to take up this humanitarian issue on priority basis, but no initiative is seen till today, says the study, conducted by NewsNetwork, a research organization.

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Although Pakistan tries to say that it has already met its international obligation by taking back the Pakistanis who fell under the three categories, the Pakistan government assured that they would go beyond that and repatriate the remaining people once the political dynamics in that country get settled to welcome these people.

Such conditional stand by Pakistan only reflects its lack of seriousness and sincerity toward its own people languishing in camps in another country, the study says.

Biharis' Leader Suffers Heart Attack

Alhaj M. Nasim Khan, leader of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC), was admitted to a hospital in the northern district of Rangpur on Wednesday after a severe heart attack. Khan, who is in his early eighties, had suffered a heart attack earlier.

Khan is a key leader of the stranded Pakistanis, commonly known as Biharis.