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No Light at the End of the Tunnel for Stranded Pakistanis

Faiz Al-Najdi, Arab News

For most Pakistanis Dec. 16 comes and passes as just another day. However, for the stranded Pakistanis, cooped up for the past 33 years in shanty camps throughout the urban sprawls of Bangladesh, it's a day that haunts them incessantly. For, on this dark day in 1971 they lost their homeland which overnight changed its name from East Pakistan to Bangladesh.

The fall of Dhaka was not the end of the great tragedy; it was a new beginning for patriotic Pakistanis who refused to go along with the separatist elements there and chose to fight instead, alongside the Pakistani Army in defense of their homeland. While the Pakistani Army along with some civilians (and their family) from the erstwhile Pakistani establishment posted there could manage a safe passage to India as POWs, these Urdu-speaking former Pakistanis were literally abandoned there at the mercy of the Mukti Bahini, an armed wing of Awami League and cohorts of the Indian Army.

In the aftermath of this great tragedy, first the local miscreants illegally and forcefully occupied their homes as part of a premeditated plan. Following this, they were forced to take refuge in the open and barren lands in the vicinity which later took the shape of "the camps" per se that in fact exist today.

In the beginning they were given to understand that those were temporary arrangements pending their full repatriation and rehabilitation in West Pakistan — the former name of the present Pakistan. They were kept under this illusion for years together during which the young grew old and the old perished without their dreams being realized. During these painful years they had a choice to accept Bangladeshi citizenship which they had 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 and historically:

- According to reports, after the fall of Dhaka and after 93,000 POWs (including some civilians) were taken into the Indian safe custody, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered nearly 540,000 of the surviving Urdu-speaking Pakistanis who wanted to be repatriated to Pakistan.
- As a follow-up of the Shimla agreement of July 2, 1972 a tripartite agreement was concluded in August 1973 among Pakistan, India and Bangladesh in New Delhi. As per the agreement about 250,000 Bengalis were airlifted from Pakistan

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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 non-Bengali stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh were agreed 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.

- 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.

- In November-December 1982, some 4,600 were repatriated again to Pakistan after a year of no publicized plans. The \$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.

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

- A population census of stranded Pakistanis was carried out in 1992 jointly by representatives of the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh together with one representative each from the Rabita Trust and the stranded Pakistani community. The same was verified then as 238,000. Pakistani citizenship/ID papers were prepared for each of them and are in the safe custody of the Rabita Trust Office in Dhaka.

- In September 1992, the Pakistani high commissioner with the help of Rabita Bangladesh (a subsidiary of Saudi Arabia-based Rabita Al-Alam Al-Islami) began issuing identity cards to stranded Pakistanis, which was later suspended for reasons not cited.

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

- On Dec. 1, 1995, the Organization of Islamic Conference pressed Pakistan to allow for the return of Biharis stranded in Bangladesh and living a miserable life in the camps there.

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

- Ten stranded Pakistanis were granted voting rights after the High Court in Dhaka declared on May 6, 2003 that they were citizens of the country.

It is evident that this issue has festered enough and the jittery questions before Pakistan, Muslim Ummah and the international community are: Should they continue to languish like this forever? Will that day ever dawn when their sustained

loyalty and patriotism for Pakistan be redeemed? Will their long patience for honorable settlement in Pakistan ever be rewarded?

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