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## Pakistanis in Bangladesh : Stuck in Alien Nation

[Sharier Khan](#)

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DHAKA, Nov 21 (OneWorld) - Some 300,000 Pakistanis, locally referred to as Biharis, living in 66 makeshift slums in Bangladesh for over three decades, are battling to establish their rights as Bangladesh citizens, after being virtually disowned by Pakistan.

Born and bred in the slums which are now their home, ten of this tribe gained voting rights in August this year, after the High Court declared them citizens of Bangladesh by birth.

"We have always considered ourselves Bangladeshi citizens. I am prepared to die for the cause of this nation," says one of the ten petitioners, Mohammad Hasan, 24, "Now that I am eligible to be a voter, I will fight to establish all my rights as a citizen."

He adds, "The High Court order is applicable not only to me but also to other stranded Pakistanis in the country."

The verdict has fuelled hopes among other Pakistanis who migrated here from the neighboring Indian state of Bihar after the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Three-decades later, Bangladesh remains an alien nation for many of them, still striving to overcome cultural barriers, like language, to gain acceptance.

For starters, they speak a different language -- Urdu -- in a society that speaks the local Bengali.

The majority of these people are illiterate and very poor, living in a sub-human condition in camps set up after Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence.

On the other hand, old-timers who sided with Pakistan during the 1971 war of freedom, getting stranded after Bangladesh's independence, keep dreaming that Pakistan will take them back

one day.

But Pakistan's stand on the issue remains ambiguous. Till 1993, it allowed repatriation of nearly 200,000 Pakistanis— three-fourth of them within four years of Bangladesh's independence.

Since then, the Pakistan government has consistently rejected pleas to take them back.

"I'll fight till my last for the cause," declares the chief patron of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC), M Nasim Khan, 82, stationed in Dhaka's Geneva camp — home to over 20000 stranded Pakistanis.

In the last 32 years, Nasim has held countless negotiations with leaders of Bangladesh and Pakistan and different international organizations for their repatriation.

In September this year, Nasim met visiting Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri to reiterate the SPGRC's demand.

Laments Khan, "We know there are 1,000 housing units constructed for us in Punjab and sufficient funds available for our rehabilitation. These are lying vacant because we cannot repatriate."

"We are here for more than 32 years. And many Pakistani leaders gave us assurances about repatriation. When Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf visited Dhaka last year, he also gave us an assurance that he will look into the matter. But nothing has come out of it as yet," quips the ailing leader.

The younger generation of stranded Pakistanis took their first practical move to establish their rights as Bangladeshi citizens in December 1996. Gathering under the banner of the Committee for Rehabilitation of Non-Bengalis in Bangladesh, they began campaigning to say that many younger Biharis can speak Bengali and have totally adopted the nation's culture.

At the same time, some 2200 families who applied for citizenship failed to get it.

The organization is also demanding that the government provide these people funds to build houses and schools — the rights they are deprived of as stranded Pakistanis.

A walk in the Geneva camp - also the biggest Bihari camp in the country — bears eloquent testimony to their pathetic condition. The camp is crammed with shanties — barely leaving walking space between homes.

Due to illiteracy and ignorance, early marriages are rampant here.

Residents complain of poor hygiene which triggers the outbreak of waterborne diseases like diarrhea, dysentery and tuberculosis.

According to the SPGRC, two of the 66 camps burnt to ashes two years ago, leaving inhabitants to live under the open sky.

"I was brought to a camp as a baby, and now have my own sons," says Abdus Samad, 30, a cobbler at Dhaka's overcrowded Geneva camp, named after the Geneva Convention. "My future is gone, but what about theirs? Our lives have been one big misunderstanding," he cries.

Like Rouf, there are at least 100,000 Biharis born after the 1971 war. To them the return to Pakistan is a dream that holds little meaning. They feel their only option is to accept ground realities.

All ten persons, including four women, who approached the court for voting rights, clearly express this sentiment.

But their daily lives are plagued with other problems.

Declares shopkeeper, Abu Sayeed, 30, "The leadership and direction of the older generation has severely handicapped the youth in terms of education. Due to their poor economic condition, most of them have to leave school after a few years."

Hasan also claims government schools refuse to admit Urdu-speaking children after discovering they are residents of the camps.

Housewife at the Geneva camp, Syeda Shabana, 20, says women here are deprived of educational opportunities. They are skilled in handicrafts, but fail to get fair wages.

Complains Jabbar, 60, "I came here in the 50s believing in Pakistan. I have been misplaced. I am still looking forward to return to my country."

Significantly, these hapless people do not conform to the UN definition of refugees, and are therefore not supported by the UNHCR.

The government spends about US \$250,000 a month to provide them basic facilities like water and electricity. Nongovernmental organization, Bangladesh Red Crescent provides three kilograms of grains to elders and one-and-half kilogram to children every month.

Most Biharis work as daily wage laborers. While the men work as rickshaw-pullers and peddlers, the women labor in Dhaka's garment factories or as domestics. Some Biharis are involved in handlooms and weaving, while others work in streetside workshops.

"Those born in the camp and others residing in Bangladesh since the 1947 partition of India are all citizens of Bangladesh," says one of the lawyers for the ten petitioners, Advocate Ruhul Kuddus Babu.

"Their citizenship cannot be taken away just because they live in the Geneva camp or opted to go to Pakistan," he stresses.

For his part, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed says the government will comply with the court judgement on Bangladesh-born Pakistanis.

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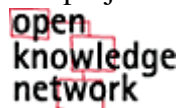
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