

# The woes of the stranded Pakistanis

By A.K. Faezul Huq

Zafar Sheikh and Mohammed Ismaeel were originally from Mongeyre district of Bihar [India], when they migrated to what was known as East Bengal [later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh]. In fact they fled from their hearth and homes in order to save themselves from the wrath of the communal frenzy that was let loose at different places throughout the subcontinent on the eve of its partition into India and Pakistan. By early December of 1947, weeks after Pakistan emerged as a sovereign, independent country, the two friends, remarkably active and enterprising but still young, had quite settled down in the then divisional headquarters town of Khulna with whatever little savings that they could bring over from their ancestral homes in India. Soon their business clicked, as lady-luck favoured them beyond imagination and both established a roaring business. By all standards they were quite contented with a happy family and a solid running business till misfortune overwhelmed them in quick succession in early 1971. First Zafar lost his only son who was picked up and presumably killed by unknown kidnappers during the heated political movement in Daulatpur area of Khulna where he was enrolled as a fresher in a local college. That was in early days of March 1971 and only a few days later, Ismaeel's shop was completely looted and later set on fire by the mob, as politics took a nasty turn. Two months later Ismaeel lost his parents, younger daughter and a nephew in a road mishap near Jessore town. It seemed, all of a sudden, a happy family lay in shambles for no cogent reason as the country braced for a full fledged civil war. The rest is history, but that was one story of Zafar and Ismaeel that I knew too well. There were umpteen stories of such nature, woven in similar tragedies, which were never told or reported formally or even informally anywhere. Yet they form a part of our larger history that can neither be blotted or denied.

Eventually, the bulk of the Urdu speaking population [commonly known as Biharis], who had peacefully settled in certain areas of the then East Bengal after migrating lock, stock and barrel from the neighbouring districts of Bihar, started moving towards Dhaka in quest of safety, jobs, medical care and other necessities of life and were hurriedly rehabilitated by the Pakistani military commanders. A good number of Bihari youths were absorbed in the civil armed forces known as the "Razakars" — a force which was specifically formed to counter what the Pakistanis termed at that time, the onslaught of the "Mukti Bahini" guerillas, [the valiant freedom fighters], who certainly knew the terrain of East Bengal far better than their enemies. As a matter of fact our "Muktis" were fighting a final battle at different places for the nation's emancipation and ultimate independence, while the Biharis and other 'collaborators' were just fighting a lost battle — a battle that was devoid of ideals or a rational objective and appeared as disorganized as one could imagine. Soon the formal war [that India declared on the 6th of December 1971] completely sealed the fate of all the non-Bangalis left behind by the vanquished Pakistani occupation army, most of whom were taken into custody for directly collaborating with the Pakistani armed forces. The old, the women and the children were left behind and dumped in scattered refugee camps of Mirpur and Mohammedpur [later known as the Geneva camps] which were basically run by the ICRC through the local chapter of the Red Cross Society [now Red Crescent], some NGOs and a meager assistance from the Government of Bangladesh [GoB]. Some were taken across the Sitalakya river, as far as Rupganj in the district of Narayanganj.

And those camps, it must be admitted, were virtual replicas of hell on earth. Even the UN

affiliated agencies did not take any significant notice or interest in those refugee camps as they do now in our own Hill Tracts or elsewhere. Degeneration, corruption and crimes of all sorts including flesh trade which had gradually manifested itself in those cursed and condemned camps became an open secret. Morality seemed defeated due to exigencies of the situation. The government, on the other hand, in those days tried its best to sustain the stranded Pakistani refugees, but fumbled at times as its own resources just did not permit any generous action or initiative at that point of time. Conversely it had to look after and seriously think of rehabilitating more than half a million of its own population [repatriated Bangalis] who were sent back to Dhaka by the Pakistani authorities at the first available opportunity. In the meantime the Pakistani government led by late Z. A. Bhutto, sometime in early 1973 even agreed and allowed some Biharis [who had opted for Pakistan] to move on and settle in Pakistan—mostly in and around Karachi; but a large number were still left behind with uncertainty looming over their heads all through. However some well to do non-Bangali families sneaked out of Dhaka, took a flight to Calcutta and from there to Karachi by direct SAS flights that operated at midnights on Sundays in those days. Some others went via Kathmandu and never returned. Soon Pakistan closed all its doors of repatriation for its own citizens from Bangladesh on one plea or the other, despite the solemn assurances of its top leaders from time to time that “they would gradually take the stranded Pakistanis at the first available opportunity”.

Sincere efforts by the Bangladeshi governments at various time have also failed to solve this humanitarian problem judiciously, sensibly and conclusively. Today, the number of stranded Biharis in Bangladesh, who still claim themselves as Pakistanis, would be around three hundred thousand, plus. However, one fifth of the new generation of those Biharis who were born and brought up here after the holocaust of 1971, do not wish to go to Pakistan at any time—now, or in the near future. Some have learnt to speak in fluent Bangla [which their fathers and fore-fathers never did even when they should have done so]; married Bangali girls and appear to be quite contented with their families and vocations. But even then the majority are in a very bad shape and can at best be called “state-less persons”. Obviously they are a big security risk and threat for Bangladesh itself. The Pakistani government, on the other hand, has so far failed to come up with a convincing argument to justify its total apathy towards its own citizens and the International community which jumps into action at the shortest possible notice whenever the question of refugees crops up anywhere, have also failed miserably to rise up to the occasion in this case.

One expects that the government of President General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali would waste no further time and address the humanitarian issue of repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis on a priority basis. The expectations are obviously quite high this time because Mir Jamali is a sober, reliable and seasoned politician who can be trusted upto any length; and General Musharraf is one man amongst the prominent Pakistanis so far who had the guts to admit the follies of the Pakistanis in 1971 and appealed for universal forgiveness, without strings. The international aid agencies and the champions of the so-called “Muslim Ummah” should also come forward with enough funds to ensure that the whole repatriation exercise does not fall through half way. However those who wish to stay back in Bangladesh as its citizens also deserve our sympathies and the overall cooperation of our government. Let us begin a new chapter in our relationship that would ultimately benefit both the nations no doubt. And let there be no faltering this time.