



Bangladesh

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Pakistan

South Asia

South East Asia

Central Asia

Middle East

China

World

## Bihari Refugees Unending plight of a stateless people



They do not fit in the standard definition of refugees of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The countries they claim as their own do not accept them as their citizens. They have been stateless for last thirty three years and are creation of the process of state formation in south Asia. These people who are presently staying in Bangladesh are known as Biharis or stranded Pakistanis. Though the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that “everyone has the right to a nationality” Biharis of Bangladesh are citizens of nowhere.

Pakistani refugees shout slogans and wave placards as they demonstrate during a rally in Dhaka

They cannot vote, they cannot get jobs in most professions, they cannot own property or obtain a passport. These “stateless” people face discrimination, sexual and physical violence and socioeconomic hardship. Often they are denied access to health care and education.

Biharis were an Urdu-speaking Muslim minority in a number of eastern Indian states who migrated to Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1947 when the subcontinent was artitioned. When civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan, the Biharis, who consider themselves Pakistani, sided with West Pakistan. In 1971, however, East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh. The Biharis were left behind as the Pakistani army and civilians evacuated and found

themselves unwelcome in both countries.

During the War of Liberation of Bangladesh a number of Biharis were killed by the Bengali nationalists. Most of them were displaced and their properties taken over by the Bengalis. It was not until mid-1972 that nearly a million of them were domiciled in camps through a presidential order. However, later during the same year Dhaka offered them citizenship which was accepted by some 600,000 Biharis but the remaining 539,669 "registered with the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) opted to return to their 'country of nationality' - Pakistan." Under international law, henceforth they were Pakistanis. But Islamabad did not show much interest in the issue then. However, it was forced to look at it seriously when Dhaka linked diplomatic relations with Islamabad to repatriation of those Bihari refugees that had opted for Pakistan.

Under the 1973 Delhi Agreement as well as in the Tripartite Agreement of 1974 Pakistan agreed to receive these refugees. But Pakistan's stand on the issue has always been ambiguous. After four rounds of repatriation of some 175,000 Biharis between 1974 and 1992, the rest have been left to languish in camps. Since then, the Pakistan government has consistently rejected pleas to take them back. Though leaders like late President Ziaul Huq, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and incumbent President Pervez Musharraf showed intention to find solution to this humanitarian issue nothing concrete has happened.

Today, this Bihari population in Bangladesh is estimated between 250,000 to 300,000. They live in 66 squalid camps spread across 13 districts in Bangladesh. The living condition in these camps is extremely poor. They are severely overcrowded and the space available to refugees has been shrinking over the years due to increase in population. What is worse, even this space becomes unavailable to them during the rainy season as dirt floors become deep mud. Occasionally these hutments are also destroyed by tornados and fire.

Besides, the refugees now also face the problem of forced eviction from the camp. The land cost in areas like Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Narayanganj, Syedpur or Chittagong has increased manifold over the years. Hence these camps have now become the target of land grabbers. The civic amenities available in these camps are very poor. There is hardly any water supply or healthcare facility. Education to most children is a luxury. The few schools which exist in the camps are closing down due to lack of funds. This lack of education, combined with an already impoverished economy, provides little opportunity for employment inside or outside the camps.

Life in these refugee camps is completely insecure. Over the years they have become centres of criminal activities and lawlessness. Outsiders have easy access to these camps and they indulge in criminal activities like selling drugs, illegal weapons and prostitution.

The condition of Biharis further worsened last year when they lost their government-subsidized food aid, and many families lost their homes to tornado, fire, and eviction. To bring attention to their critical condition thousands of Bihari refugees protested in Dhaka and demanded that they either be repatriated to Pakistan or given Bangladeshi nationality. The refugee leaders also said they wanted a tripartite meeting among Pakistan, Bangladesh and the representatives of the refugees to sort out this issue immediately.

The Bihari population which earlier wanted to move to Pakistan is now divided. The older refugees, who sided with Pakistan during the 1971 Bangladesh war of freedom, still believe that Pakistan will take them back one day. They also accuse Pakistan for their present miserable condition. They have formed an organization called the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC).

But, refugees under 35 years of age are increasingly reluctant to share their parents' hopes of migrating to Pakistan. Born in Bangladesh, they want to become Bangladeshi citizens. Refugee children who have been lucky enough to go to a school have picked up Bangla language. They have also adopted Bangladeshi culture. They are not very keen to go to Pakistan if the Bangladesh government gives them citizenship, voting rights and other facilities. Some refugee leaders like Sadakat Khan, president of a refugee youth organization, are now publicly making this demand. They prefer permanent settlement in Bangladesh deviating from the earlier stand of repatriation which they consider now a nearly closed chapter.

Recently, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted citizenship to ten Biharis. Though it was an important development, it has not addressed the larger problem. But definitely the verdict has fuelled hope among the people who have been leading a life of suffering for last 33 years. A permanent solution is possible only if the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh offer citizenship to the Biharis. But both these countries are dragging feet for political reasons. Pakistan thinks that it might affect the ethno-geographical balance in that country whereas Bangladesh still considers them as traitors. But a large number of Biharis have been going to Pakistan one way or the other. Hence a permanent and systematic solution would be in order with the involvement of both the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh. It will also mitigate the miseries of refugee population. International agencies like the UNHCR can play the role of facilitator and also provide resources which would be needed to settle the

refugees in the countries of their choice.

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**Home**  
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