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Unwanted and Forgotten

Jessica Lim

It has been more than 30 years, but little has changed for the Biharis stranded in camps all over Bangladesh. In fact, recent events seem to indicate that their situation is worsening.

Two weeks ago, the Power Division of Bangladesh cut off the power supply without warning to all 66 camps, alleging the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management had yet to pay an outstanding bill of 44.8 crore taka (US 7.5 million) on behalf of the camps.

During the 10 days it took to resolve the situation, 5 people died from the heat in the camps where the narrow lanes and small rooms make proper ventilation almost impossible. The water supply became contaminated with sewage, and camp residents said they had no choice but to continue drinking it.

"It is a matter between two ministries, but we have to suffer for it," said Mr. Abdul Jabber Khan, head of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC).

He also said the sum demanded by the Power Division was ridiculous, and in 1999, the electric bill only came up to 1.5 crore takas. "In the first place, there are no meters here. How did they measure the bill?"

Refugees International (RI) estimate about 200,000 to 300,000 Biharis are currently housed in 66 camps all over Bangladesh. With sometimes 10 or 12 people sleeping in a room the size of a modern apartment's toilet, the people spilled out to sleep on the unpaved streets when the power cut made the heat at night unbearable.

Mohammad Faqub, 35, said that when the camps were formed in 1972, they did not fight to have more space, expecting to return to Pakistan.

"But we are still here, and everyday the number of people increases."

Often referred to in Bangladeshi newspapers as "stranded Pakistanis", these people were displaced when Bangladesh gained independence from West Pakistan in 1971. With neither country offering citizenship, they have lived as stateless people for the past 34 years.

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In Brief

SLUMS: REFLECTIONS OF OUR MODERN SELVES

The widely used word 'slum' has gained new meanings and dimensions as has it been generalized. Not only this, its meaning is constantly defined by its users— when it is used by the upper segment of the society it is clearly classified by their superior social status. >> [details](#)

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Their situation has been highlighted by Refugees International, which has been urging both the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments to work together to find a solution. However, progress has been slow and not forthcoming.

Throughout the years, the SPRGC has been constantly fighting to be returned to Bangladesh, having been given empty reassurances from both sides time and time again.

Between 1974 and 1992, some 175,000 Biharis were relocated to Pakistan, but efforts has yet to resume despite promises made by Pakistani and Bangladeshi officials to the SPGRG.

Members of the group claim all they want is to return to Pakistan with their families, even though more than two generations of those in the camps were born and bred in Bangladesh.

One of them said, "How can you think that I will leave my children behind?"

A small yet significant breakthrough occurred in 2003, when a High Court ruling allowed 10 Biharis to assume Bangladeshi citizenship with voting rights.

Newspaper reports back then cited one of them, 24-year-old Mohammad Hasan saying, "We have always considered ourselves Bangladeshi citizens. I am prepared to die for the cause of this nation."

For the rest of the Biharis that are still not considered Bangladeshi citizens or do not want to be Bangladeshi, the future looks bleak.

Without citizen rights, they are unable to obtain jobs in the government sector or work as professionals. They claim that even those who are educated are discriminated against. Their children cannot study in local government schools because the family cannot afford to pay for education, and children have been turned away before after the school found out they were Biharis.

In Geneva camp, located in Mohammadpur, Dhaka, a school has been set up by the SPRGC for camp residents. However, teachers are paid only 500 takas a month, and it is entirely supported by donations from their own people.

The people in the camp look just like any Bangladeshi, only that they are Shiite Muslims, while majority of Bangladeshis are Sunnis. They also have a different mother tongue, Urdu, although they are just as fluent in Bangla.

The camp residents say that times were better when the International Red Cross were looking after them.

"Back then, we received 17 different food items. Today, we don't get anything at all," said Mohammad Ismail, 50.

Their food relief programmes was halted by the District Commission, which says there was an administrative problem with the committee handling the programme. It is not known if it will be resumed. Meanwhile, both the young and old in the family have to work in order to survive.

Camp residents seem disillusioned about receiving any help. They say that although they have been visited by so many people, with so many reports being written about them, they have yet to see any sign of improvement.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has offices in Bangladesh, but have remained uninvolved despite recommendations from Refugees International.

According to the UNHCR office in Gulshan, the Biharis do not fit their specific definition of “refugee”, and hence are out of their jurisdiction. They were unwilling to comment further.

Abdul Khan expressed disbelief at the explanation. “They say, ‘You are just like a refugee, but you are not a refugee’ – is this even fair or correct?”

“The UNHCR has told us before that they require both the governments to resolve this issue – we are still waiting.”

It must be noted, however, that the UNHCR does get involve in situations even if the people there are not considered to be “refugees”. For instance, the organization set up camp in Aceh, Indonesia, after the Boxing Day tsunami devastated the town. Although the Biharis are no longer in any kind of obvious crisis, their plight remains no less important to address.

(Author is presently doing an internship in Drik/Dhaka)

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