

The Bihari Refugees

By South Asia Forum for Refugee Rights

The history of the Bihari refugees goes back to the partition of India in 1947. Their displacement occurred in the wake of communal violence during and in the aftermath of the partition (for example, 30,000 Muslims were killed in the 'Great Bihar Killing' in October-November 1947). About a million of them migrated to the eastern wing of Pakistan (East Pakistan), (Minority Rights Group, The Biharis in Bangladesh, Report 11, 4th edition, January 1982, p. 7.) mostly from the eastern Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim.

During the period of united Pakistan (1947-1971), the Urdu-speaking Biharis were not assimilated with in the society of East Pakistan and remained as a distinct cultural-linguistic group. They generally associated and identified themselves with the West Pakistani society primarily based on a shared linguistic heritage and supported the West Pakistani governing elite in the process of capturing the economic and political power in East Pakistan. The Biharis, consequently, enjoyed government patronage and preferential treatment in various sectors of the East Pakistan economy.

Initially the arrival of Biharis and the positive discrimination of the Pakistan Government in terms of refugee rehabilitation were not resented by the Bengalis. However, the euphoria of the formation of Pakistan and the positive attitude of the Bengalis towards the Biharis was short-lived. It was over as early as March 1948 when Mohammad Ali Jinnah announced in Dhaka that "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the State language of Pakistan." During the Language Movement, the Biharis instead of supporting the Bengalis, sided with the West Pakistani ruling elite. Further, in the 1954 provincial elections and in the 1970 general elections, they extended their support to the Muslim League, which symbolized and championed the domination of the West Pakistanis over the Bengalis. They also supported the West Pakistani ruling elite and many of them actively participated in the military actions against the Bengalis in the 1971 Bangladesh Independence War. The exclusive attitude of the Biharis and their pro-West Pakistani political activities culminated with the growth of an anti-Bihari sentiment among the Bengalis.

Against the above backdrop and, more importantly, because of their active anti-independence role (for example, their participation in the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces, i.e. Razakars and Al-Shams, raised by the Pakistani authorities to carry out atrocities over the East Pakistanis), the Biharis became subject to widespread political persecution preceding and during the Independence War, as well as in the aftermath of liberation.² Following independence, the Bihari political persecution continued and their properties and houses were taken over by the Bengalis. Several government promulgations [for example, the Acting President Order I of 1972, the Bangladesh Abandoned Property (Control, Management and Disposal) Order, 1972, President's Order 16 etc.] did facilitate the dispossession of Bihari properties. As a result, by the middle of 1972, a total of 1,008,680 Biharis were domiciled in various shanty camps spreading all over Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Government announced the Presidential Order-149 in 1972 as a step towards offering the Bangladeshi citizenship to the Biharis. According to Bangladesh Government sources, 600,000 Biharis accepted the offer,³ (Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh (Dhaka: Government of Bangladesh, 1982, p. 3.) while 539,669 registered with the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) opting to return to their 'country of nationality' - Pakistan. Islamabad, however, was less interested and showed a lax attitude about the repatriation of the Biharis except those who joined the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces and surrendered with the Pakistan Army. According to a Pakistani Foreign Ministry official: "What are we supposed to do with them (the Biharis)? We have enough problems already. Besides, you must remember that they are really Indian refugees." Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the first post-1971 civilian president of Pakistan, was even unwilling to admit any sizeable number of 'Bihari refugees' to be repatriated to Pakistan.

Bangladesh in its formative phase insisted that it would establish formal diplomatic relations with Pakistan only if that country agreed to expeditious repatriation of the non-Bengalis including Biharis from Bangladesh. This insistence forced the Pakistan Government to move back from its original stance and agreed to receive a sizeable number of Biharis in the 1973 New Delhi Agreement as well as in the Tripartite Agreement of 1974 in exchange for the return of the Bengalis from Pakistan. As the first step towards implementing these agreements, the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) registered 539,639 Biharis who intended to return to Pakistan. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) facilitated the return of 108,750 Bihari refugees by June 1974. After that date, the UNHCR had to suspend the repatriation process due to exhaustion of funds. The Bangladesh Government complained to Islamabad about the slow repatriation of the Biharis and raised the issue during the 1974 Mujib-Bhutto summit. The Pakistani side, as it was earlier, showed little interest in the matter.

The post-Mujib Government undertook new diplomatic initiatives to persuade Islamabad to resume the repatriation of the Biharis. It approached the Islamic countries to exert pressure on Pakistan as well as to provide assistance to resolve the matter. Despite initial reluctance, President Zia-ul Haq subsequently, however, desired a solution to the Bihari issue on humanitarian ground. He asserted during a visit to Dhaka in December 1985 that Pakistan was ready to accept the Bihari refugees if

sufficient financial resources could be raised for their transfer and rehabilitation. In 1988, a trust agreement was signed between Pakistan and Rabita Al-Alam Al-Islami (an Islamic charity organization, hereafter Rabita) to expedite the process of Bihari resettlement in Pakistan. A repatriation and resettlement plan was drawn up which included the construction of 36,000 houses spread over 80 sites costing about \$278 million and with approximately \$30 million for community services and \$10 million for the transportation of the refugees. Despite elaborate preparations, the repatriation process could not get off the ground.

Benazir Bhutto was traditionally opposed to the idea of transferring the Biharis to Pakistan and followed the party politics (Pakistan Peoples Party or PPP) and the state policy of her father (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto) after she came to power in 1988. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, it is noteworthy, introduced the restrictive entry regulations for the Bihari refugees in the early 1970s. During her tenure as Prime Minister, Benazir did not grant the citizenship rights either to the refugees in Bangladesh or to the 100,000 Biharis who moved to Pakistan illegally since 1977. During a visit to Bangladesh in October 1989, Benazir asserted that the Biharis should be permanently settled in Bangladesh and Pakistan would help to raise funds from the Muslim world for their settlement. Prime Minister Newaz Sharif, was generally supportive to the repatriation of the Bihari refugees from Bangladesh. He undertook meaningful initiatives for the return of the Biharis. He was ready to rehabilitate them in his home province (Punjab) and officially domiciled them issuing identity cards. Although definite steps were taken for repatriation and a symbolic return of 235 Biharis did occur on 10 January 1993, it was subsequently shelved for 'logistical and practical' problems. All subsequent Pakistani governments showed disinterest in ending the Bihari issue that. It is indeed a political question rather than an economic problem.

[taken from "[Bangladesh State and Refugee Phenomenon](#)"]

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