

Biharis in Bangladesh

Alternative Name: Stranded Pakistanis

Location: 66 Camps in Bangladeshi urban areas

Population: 255,000 (0.2 % of the 1998 country population of 127, 567 million. The country population is drawn from the US Census Bureau.)

Religion: Islam

Language: Urdu and Bengali

Group type: national minority

[Click here to view General Chronology](#)

Risk Assessment

The Biharis have three of the four characteristics that encourage future protest: significant political restrictions; Bangladesh's short history of democratic rule; and support from kindred groups such as the Mohajirs in Pakistan. It remains to be seen if mounting Bihari frustration coupled with continuing Pakistani intransigence will lead to a new violent phase in the Bihari struggle for repatriation. Bangladesh has generally been indifferent to the plight of the Biharis; however, in recent years it has actively pressed Pakistan to repatriate the stranded Pakistanis. A minority of Biharis recently applied for Bangladeshi citizenship, but most others are still lobbying to return to Pakistan.

Analytic Summary

The Biharis, who are also referred to as the Stranded Pakistanis, are urban dwellers who reside in some 66 camps throughout Bangladesh. They have lived in these camps since the early 1970s after the Pakistani civil war led to the creation of Bangladesh.

The Biharis share a common religion with the majority Muslim population. However, they speak multiple languages including Urdu and Bengali and have different social customs than the dominant Bengalis (LANG = 2). The Biharis are also physically distinguishable as they are ethnically related to the residents of neighboring India's Bihar state (RACE = 1).

The residence of the Biharis in present-day Bangladesh is the result of the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent and the creation of India and Pakistan. At that time, around one million Biharis migrated from India to East Pakistan. The Biharis were a skilled workforce who could speak Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, and thus they were able to fill key bureaucratic and private sector positions in East Pakistan. The Bengalis of East Pakistan, resentful of West Pakistani domination, turned their hostility toward the Bihari community. During the East Pakistani struggle for independence in 1970-71, the Biharis sided with the West Pakistanis and some Biharis joined armed movements to support them. Following India's military intervention which helped to ensure the creation of Bangladesh, clashes between the Biharis and Bangladeshis ensued. The Biharis were stripped of their properties, several thousand were jailed, and the majority were to reside in camps in urban centers. The Biharis chose to move to Pakistan as their cultural ties were closer with the West Pakistanis. Pakistan initially agreed to the repatriation and some 163,000 Biharis were resettled in Pakistan by 1981.

Developments within Pakistan have severely limited any further repatriation. The Biharis are primarily Urdu-speakers like the Mohajir community that resides in Pakistan's Sindh province. Violent disputes between the Mohajirs and the Sindhi-speakers in Pakistan led the Pakistani government to fear that any future repatriation would tip the balance in favor of the Urdu-speakers and spark further violent unrest in Sindh province. The Stranded Pakistanis are at risk as they are subject to discrimination; they are disadvantaged due to past discrimination; and they support political organizations that advocate greater group rights.

It has been almost three decades since the Biharis were first installed in the 66 camps throughout Bangladesh. They suffer from severe demographic stress. Conditions in the camps are dismal as public health facilities such as clean water and sanitation are very limited and restrictions on employment have led the Biharis to suffer from food shortages. Government policy ensures that they are not allowed to

freely reside in other areas of the country.

The Biharis are considered as stateless as most have neither Bangladeshi nor Pakistani citizenship. As a result, they are denied basic political rights such as the right to vote and recruitment to the civil service, police, military, and political office (POLDIS00 = 4). These political restrictions severely limit the group's economic opportunities and continue to perpetuate their poverty and underrepresentation (ECDIS00 = 2).

Most Biharis are still seeking repatriation to Pakistan but there is a growing minority that has resigned itself to living in Bangladesh and is thus seeking Bangladeshi citizenship. Economic concerns are also a major issue as their lack of citizenship restricts the types of employment they are able to obtain.

The group is represented by conventional organizations that promote group interests. The major organizations include the Nasim and Ejaz factions of the Stranded Pakistanis General Rehabilitation Committee (SPGRC) and the Committee for Rehabilitation of Non-Bengalis in Bangladesh. The majority of group members support these organizations. The Biharis are a strong identity group that has not experienced any intragroup violence since the early 1990s (COHESX9 = 5). They are politically supported by the major Mohajir party in Pakistan, the MQM, and the camps in which they reside are partially funded by the Saudi-based NGO, the Rabita Alam Al-Islami.

The electoral victory of the Muslim League in Pakistan in 1997 raised hopes of a renewal of the repatriation program but to date no action has been taken. The last time the Biharis were repatriated to Pakistan was in 1993 when Prime Minister Sharif accepted 321 people. The issue was again put on the backburner when a military coup in Pakistan led to General Musharraf taking over in October 1999. The Bangladesh government has largely been indifferent to the plight of the Biharis while also continuously pressing Pakistan to repatriate them.

To date, the Biharis have engaged in various protest measures including hunger strikes and demonstrations to press for their return to Pakistan or alternatively, for a minority, for the granting of Bangladeshi citizenship (PROT70X to PROT98X = 3). They have not engaged in any violent activities that would be considered as a rebellion against state authorities.

References

1. Lexis/Nexis Reports, 1990-00.
2. Minority Rights Group (1982) "The Biharis in Bangladesh," Report No. 11, Fourth edition, London.
3. Minority Rights Group (1990) World Directory of Minorities, Chicago and London: St. James Press.
4. Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) (1991) "The Adivasis of Bangladesh: Children of the Forest," An MRG International Profile.
5. Timm, Father R. W. (1991) "The Adivasis of Bangladesh," December, London: Minorities Rights Group International (MRG).
6. Wilmer, Franke (1993) The Indigenous Voice in World Politics: Since Time Immemorial, Newbury Park, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Shin-wha Lee with Aamena Malik, 05/09/94 Deepa Khosla, 02/03/96, 06/02/99, 05/06/02
--