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Pakistan agrees to repatriate Biharis
Shamshad says Biharis are not Pakistanis

DHAKA: Refusing to recognise the Biharis stranded in Bangladesh as Pakistanis, Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmad said on Friday: "We are trying to repatriate them to Pakistan on humanitarian basis." Briefing newsmen on the talks Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has had with his Bangladeshi and Indian counterparts, Shamshad said Pakistan had repatriated 63 families in the past on humanitarian basis. "We are making efforts to do so in future as well on the same ground," he added.

Shamshad said the question that they are Pakistani nationals was raised in the early 1970s and an agreement was concluded whereby Pakistan had assumed the responsibility of bringing back about 200,000 stranded Pakistanis falling in four categories, including federal government officials, their families and their relatives.

He said the process has been completed, but dispelled the impression that they are being taken back as Pakistani nationals. "Before 1971, everybody in East Pakistan was a Pakistani, but now everybody cannot be repatriated on that ground," he said.

The process of repatriation, he said, required significant material and monetary effort. "Pakistan continues to have a positive approach to help the Biharis to alleviate their problems as much as possible, but we feel that most of them can be accommodated within Bangladesh and their special skills can be utilised here," Shamshad said.

"We have shown full willingness to be helpful to them on humanitarian basis and we are in contact with the Rabita (Motamar-e-Islami) on this issue," he added. The foreign secretary said the Rabita has recently decided in a meeting to launch a fund-raising campaign and as soon as the funds are available, the remaining over 900 families will be repatriated to Pakistan.

Later, a five-member delegation of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC) held a meeting with Finance Minister Sartaj Aziz in the evening at Sonargaon hotel. The delegation led by Chief Patron SPGRC Alhaj M Naseem Khan presented a three-page memorandum to the minister.

The prime minister was also scheduled to meet the delegation, but due to other pressing engagements, he asked the finance minister to meet them on his behalf. After the meeting Nasim Khan told a group of journalists that Sartaj has asked him to persuade the Biharis, who have arrived here after 1971, to take the nationality of Bangladesh.

Those who have been stranded here before 1970 will, however, be repatriated if and when the required funds are available. The memorandum presented by the delegation calls upon the government of Pakistan to take measures for the repatriation of all the stranded Pakistanis. The delegation was of the view that General Ziaul Haq had categorically and boldly announced the repatriation of stranded Pakistanis, but the MQM jeopardised the plan by supporting the Benazir Bhutto government in 1998. The delegation said had the MQM not supported the PPP, the repatriation of all stranded Pakistanis would have been completed in 1990. The memorandum pays glowing tributes to Nawaz Sharif for his stance on the issue and said that the ideological warfare starting 5 years back was being taken ahead by Nawaz Sharif.

Commenting on the news reports, the foreign secretary clarified that 14 zones of about 1,000 houses were built under a pilot project to rehabilitate the stranded people. Sixty-two families were repatriated and settled there, he said. This process, he said, was stopped by the previous government, and this has now been restarted. Replying to a question, he said, according to an estimate, over one million Bangladeshis were settled in Karachi.

Pakistan has side-stepped a Bangladeshi call to accept hundreds of thousands of Urdu-speaking people stranded in Bangladesh for 25 years, a Bangladesh foreign ministry official said. He said Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had made no commitment to a request from his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina to take back 240,000 Urdu-speakers who have opted for Pakistani citizenship.

"Prime Minister (Nawaz) Sharif agreed that the repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis is an outstanding bilateral issue. But he made no commitment," Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Mustafizur Rahman told reporters after talks between the two leaders. "The Bangladesh prime minister explained that it was a humanitarian issue and taking care of such large number of people was also an economic burden for us," host Rahman said.