

'Stranded Pakistanis' From 1971 War Long To Leave Bangladesh

Reuter

DACCA, Bangladesh—More than 10 years after the war that created Bangladesh, 250,000 of its victims are still in detention camps here, hoping to be sent to their chosen homeland of Pakistan.

Sometimes known as Biharis because many came here from the eastern Indian state of Bihar, they were put in camps after siding with Pakistan in the 1971 civil war that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh out of East Pakistan.

They call themselves "stranded Pakistanis," and the Bangladesh government regards them as Pakistanis.

Under a 1973 agreement among India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, more than 121,000 of them were moved to Pakistan over five years. The official flow then stopped, although several thousand have managed to reach Pakistan.

Repatriation is due to resume next month when 5,000 will fly to Pakistan—at a cost of \$1.5 million borne by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But more than 250,000 still live in badly crowded camps without adequate food, medical supplies, clean water or sanitation.

Pakistan has agreed to accept the new batch on humanitarian grounds, although they do not fit into the categories set out in the 1973 agreement. It will accept those born in West Pakistan (now Pakistan), former military personnel, central government employes, members of divided families and special hardship cases.

The restrictions anger those in the camps outside the categories. They have established a militant

leadership called the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee. "Categorization like that is just an attempt to hoodwink us," said Nasim Khan, a community leader.

"We have given everything for Pakistan," he said. "We have antagonized the Bengalis for the sake of Pakistan. It will be sheer betrayal if the government of General [Mohammed] Zia ul-Haq now takes the stand that we do not qualify as Pakistanis."

The Biharis have tried protest marches and hunger strikes. "Our next move is self-immolation," Nasim Khan said. "What else can we do? The alternative is what the Vietnamese boat people did. But this is not possible because Pakistan is so far from Bangladesh by sea."

Pakistani Embassy sources here say the biggest repatriation problem is money. Others include assimilation in Pakistan and finding suitable jobs. One official said Pakistan was already overstrained by refugees from Afghanistan and by recession.

The Biharis proposed that they be moved to Pakistan by train through India, which they say would cost \$7.5 million. They believe there would be plenty of jobs in the Persian Gulf states, where their wages would generate foreign exchange for Pakistan.

Although most Biharis want to leave, a minority seems keen to accept Bangladeshi nationality. One, Mohammad Ramisuddin, a former provincial government clerk, said the Bangladesh government sold his house after putting him in a camp.

"I would be the first [to stay] if the government let me get back my house and property," he said.