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The Immigrants That Nobody Seems To Want

DACCA, Bangladesh (UPI) — When the Indian subcontinent was partitioned in 1947, a million Moslems migrated here to escape the bloody communal riots in Hindu-dominated India.

Now, 30 years later, they find themselves in almost the same situation of being unwanted by the society where they live.

But this time, some 400,000 of them cannot get out.

Often called the Biharis because many of them came from the Indian state of Bihar, they are non-Bengali speaking Moslems who staunchly supported the Pakistani army in the last days of East Pakistan — now the independent state of Bangladesh.

That was more than enough to incur the wrath of the native Bangladeshis, who consider every non-Bengali speaker an agent of Pakistan and an enemy of "liberation" from that country.

During the Indo-Pakistani War that led to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, the Biharis and the Bengalis were killing each other.

When the war ended, some 107,000 Biharis were exchanged in a huge airlift for 171,000 Bengalis — including 28,000 soldiers — stranded in West Pakistan.

Another 18,000 Biharis, uncertain about their fate in a newborn country hostile to them, fled secretly to Pakistan.

But some 400,000 Biharis were still in Bangladesh when the

airlift came to a stop after the last Bengali stepped off the plane from Pakistan.

The reason given at the time for ending the airlift was a lack of funds. But it is generally believed now that Pakistan was reluctant to take more Biharis.

The majority of the Biharis who chose to go to Pakistan, but failed to get there, were herded into 11 refugee camps with tumbledown huts and filthy surroundings.

Fearing resentment from the local population, the Bangladesh government has discouraged publicity about conditions in the camps. Authorities fear such publicity would evoke mass pressure for the immediate "repatriation" of the Biharis to Pakistan.

Similarly, under the government of ousted Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan also tried to suppress information on the issue for the same reason.

Pakistan at first refused to take any more Biharis because it feared a political backlash at home. But under international pressure and on humanitarian grounds, Pakistan recently said it will take another 25,000 of them, but has not made known when or how it is going to be done.

Even if Pakistan did accept 25,000 more Biharis, there would still be about 375,000 of them stranded in a country which does not want them.