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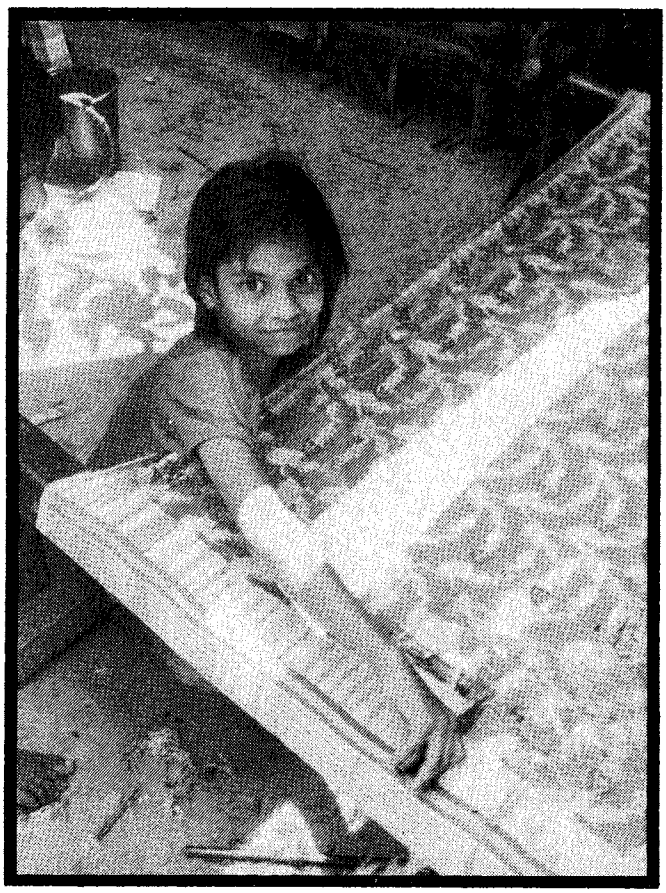
LIVING ON HOPE

by Carol Rose

Nasim Khan left his home in India in 1947 for what he thought would be a better life in the newly-created Muslim nation of Pakistan. He settled in the heart of East Pakistan: Dhaka.

When East Pakistan declared itself the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1971, Nasim Khan fought alongside the Pakistani army to keep East and West united. But with India's military assistance Bangladesh won the war and its independence.



Unwanted guests: A Bihari girl embroiders a silk sari at a refugee camp in Bangladesh.

Nasim Khan was stranded. Long ago he had abandoned his home in India and was unwelcome to return. His adopted country of East Pakistan no longer existed. He was branded a traitor in the newly-liberated nation of Bangladesh.

His only hope remained in moving to what was left of Pakistan. Twenty years later, he is still waiting to go there.

"We fought for Pakistan, stood for Pakistan, voted for Pakistan," says Khan, now the Chief Patron of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee. "Without us, there would be no Pakistan."

Like 225,000 other so-called "Biharis," Nasim Khan is a stateless person, unwelcome in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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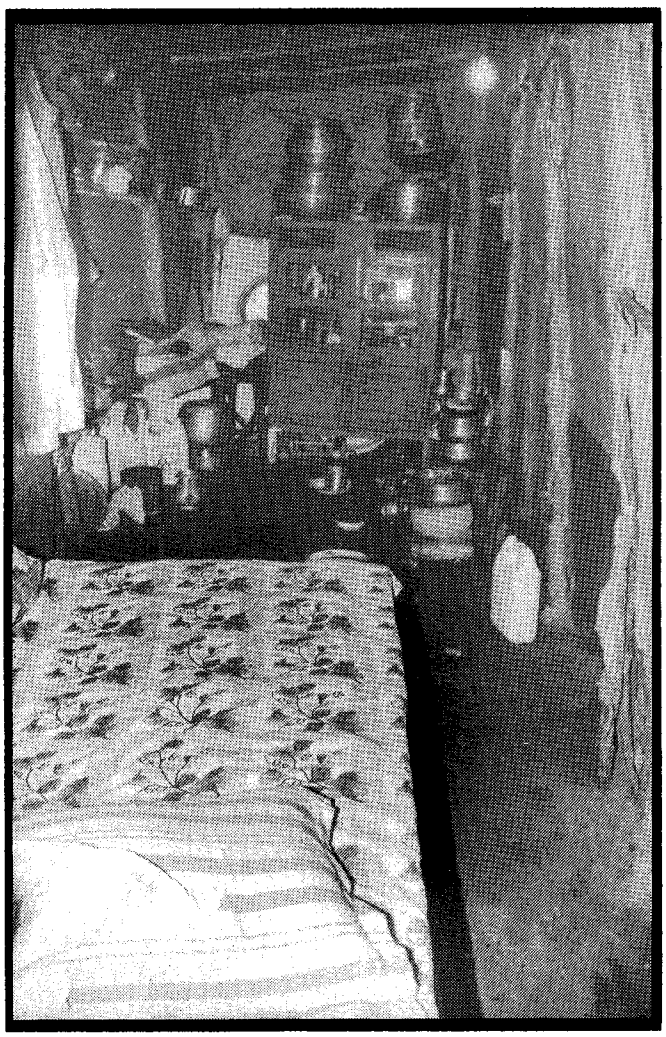
Most Biharis live in the 66 squalid refugee camps scattered across Bangladesh. They do not qualify for "refugee status" or protection from the United Nations because they have not crossed an international border. By a quirk of history, the border crossed them instead.

"We are unwanted persons in Pakistan, we are unwanted persons in Bangladesh, and we are unwanted by the United Nations," he said. "We are the most unfortunate people on the globe."

Walking through the "Geneva" refugee camp just outside of Dhaka, you see his point. Dirt alleyways, some no more than three feet wide, connect long sheds divided into cell-like rooms with low ceilings. Entire families of eight or more people share a single room no more than 10-by-15 feet, furnished with woven rope beds and a few meager possessions -- cups and saucers, clothing, a radio -- stacked in the corners.



This small room is typical of the space available for a Bihari family of five in the Geneva refugee camp in Dhaka.

Unwashed toddlers run naked through the alleys, some sleep on the ground amid the garbage and flies. Older children squat around quilting frames in poorly-lit rooms; their tiny hands are ideal for doing the intricate embroidery for which the Biharis have become famous. One sari embroidered with gold thread will bring the group of children around 60 taka [$1.80.] It will sell in the upper-class Bangladesh markets for 15 times that amount.

Outside, a dozen women crowd around a tube well, waiting their turn to collect drinking water in large aluminum pots. There are only five wells for 3,500 families in this camp. Two taps haven't

worked for more than a week. Latrines constructed above the local spring have contaminated the drinking water -- a feat of true engineering stupidity. The women won't use the toilets during the daytime, however, because there are no doors and thus no privacy.

Kushung Bibi, an old woman, explains how she has survived in these conditions for more than 20 years: "After the [1971] war, the railroad company sent us here in a truck and marked us as non-Bengalis," she said. "But I live on, knowing that I will go to Pakistan and have a big house, a latrine, and my own water well."

A dreaming look comes into her eyes: "It is going to be wonderful there."

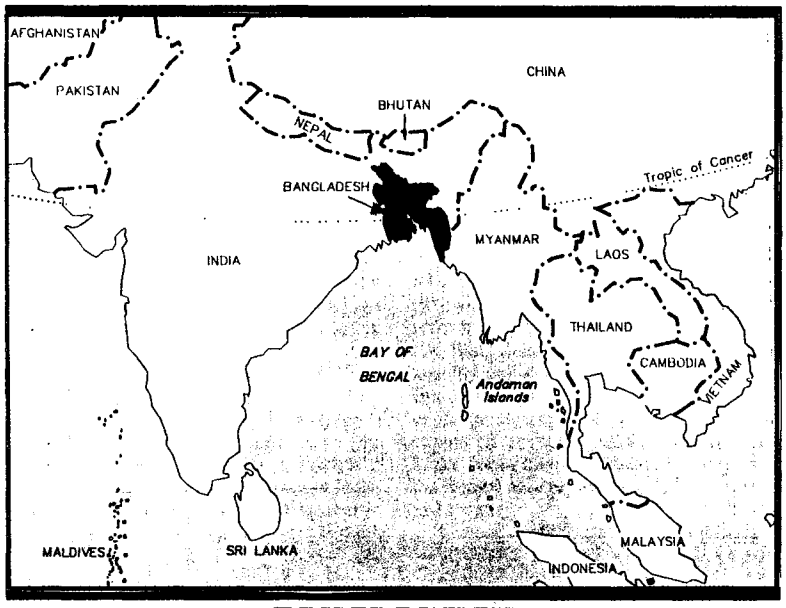
Above the narrow streets people have hung dozens of green flags adorned with white crescent moons: The flag of Pakistan.

Women crowd around one of the only functioning water taps in the Geneva camp.

East is East, but the West Rules

Those who live in the camps say they are "stranded Pakistanis." More commonly, they are called "Biharis" because they came to East Pakistan from the Indian state of Bihar after the partition of India in 1947. During Pakistan's 1971 civil war, East Pakistan broke from the West and became Bangladesh. The Biharis, who fought for a unified Pakistan, were left behind.

The factors that led to the fragmentation of East and West Pakistan -- linguistic chauvinism and politics -- are the same reasons that both Pakistan and Bangladesh reject permanent settlement of the Biharis today.



BANGLADESH & THE ASIAN SUBCONTINENT

[Source: Bangladesh: Lonely Planet Guide, by Jon Murray, 1991, p. 9]

At its creation, East and West Pakistan were unified by Islam. But they were separated by 1,000 miles of land and an even wider ethnic and language divide.

The leaders of the Muslim League -- who fought for the partition of India and creation of an Islamic homeland -- were immigrants from the Urdu-speaking regions of India. Most settled in West Pakistan, where they soon controlled the government of the fledgling state.

One of the first acts of the new government was to make Urdu the official language of Pakistan, although it was spoken by few of the nation's inhabitants. Native people of West Pakistan spoke Sindhi, Punjabi, Baluchi or Pushtun -- languages that reflect the four major provinces of the West.

East Pakistan was populated by Bengalis who spoke the language of Bangla. Although the East was economically poorer than the West, it had a distinct numerical advantage: the Bengalis made up 54 percent of the total population of Pakistan. This demographic disparity frightened Urdu-speaking leaders in West Pakistan, who had no desire to share power with the Bengali politicians of the East.

"They have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races..." -- Gen. Ayub Khan on Pakistan's Bengali citizens.

The language split was intensified by the migration to East Pakistan of 50,000 "Biharis." Educated Muslims from India's Bihar state, they were encouraged by the Government of Pakistan to run the railroad and join the civil service in East Pakistan. The new immigrants generally were more educated and well-to-do than their poorer Bengali neighbors. And like most immigrants from India, the Biharis spoke Urdu.

Language differences became the focal point for political divisions between East and West Pakistan. Discrimination by West Pakistan -- particularly laws favoring Urdu-speakers in government jobs -- angered Bengalis. In 1952, anti-Urdu language riots broke out in East Pakistan and in the Sindh province of West Pakistan.

In 1958, the Pakistani army seized power in a military coup. Pakistan's new leader, General Ayub Khan, showed disdain for the Bengali citizenry of East Pakistan, saying: "They have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races and have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the new-born freedom."[1]

The central government also exploited East Pakistan economically. Most striking was the use of jute export revenues from the East for capital imports to West Pakistan. Throughout this time, Pakistan was racked by civil disturbances. Between Ayub's coup and 1966, there were an average of 5,000 riots in East Pakistan each year.[2]

Bhutto threatened to "break the legs" of any party member who attended the opening session of the National Assembly.

In 1969, nationwide riots forced Ayub to resign. The government scheduled free elections for December 1970.

Bengali politicians, led by Mujibur Rahman, captured all but two of the 153 parliamentary seats in East Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 81 out of the 148 seats in the West. In short: the leaders of East Pakistan won the right to form a new government for Pakistan.

Frightened by the prospect of a Bengali-dominated government -- and wanting political power for himself -- Bhutto pressured the army to postpone the convening of parliament. He also threatened to "break the legs" of party members who dared attend the opening session of the National Assembly.

Three months later, Pakistan's Army launched a crack-down in East Pakistan. Soldiers of West Pakistan committed terrible atrocities against the Bengali population -- raping, torturing and looting the local people. The Indian army intervened on behalf of East Pakistan in December 1971, routing the Pakistani army and "liberating" the independent state of Bangladesh.

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[1] See Omar Noman, Pakistan: Political and Economic History since 1947, Kegan Paul International, London, 1990, p. 30.

[2] Ibid.

Silk dresses embroidered by Biharis bring in $1.80 in wages but sell for fifteen times that amount on the Bangladesh market.

Our Country was Threatened

Throughout the war, the Biharis remained loyal to the central government of Pakistan.

"We responded to a call from Pakistan that our country was threatened, so we went to the border and fought the Indian Army," says Khan. "We never fought against our Bengali brethren."

"When I dream of Pakistan I think of a place where I will live well." -- A refugee in the Milpur camp.

Many Bangladeshis refute this statement, charging the Biharis committed the same atrocities as the Pakistani army. Whatever the truth, 90,000 Pakistani soldiers were taken to Indian prisons at the end of the war and eventually repatriated to Pakistan. But an auxiliary force -- the Biharis -- were left behind, deserted by Pakistan and detested by the local Bangladesh population.

In the aftermath of the war, Biharis lost their jobs, their homes were confiscated and they were forced into camps to await their fate. They were denied citizenship in Bangladesh, so they could not vote or hold government jobs.

Twenty years later, the memory of the 1971 war is as strong as ever and the Biharis remain social and economic outcasts in Bangladesh. Most survive by selling embroidered saris, pulling rickshaws, or taking day labor as construction workers or in the brick kilns.

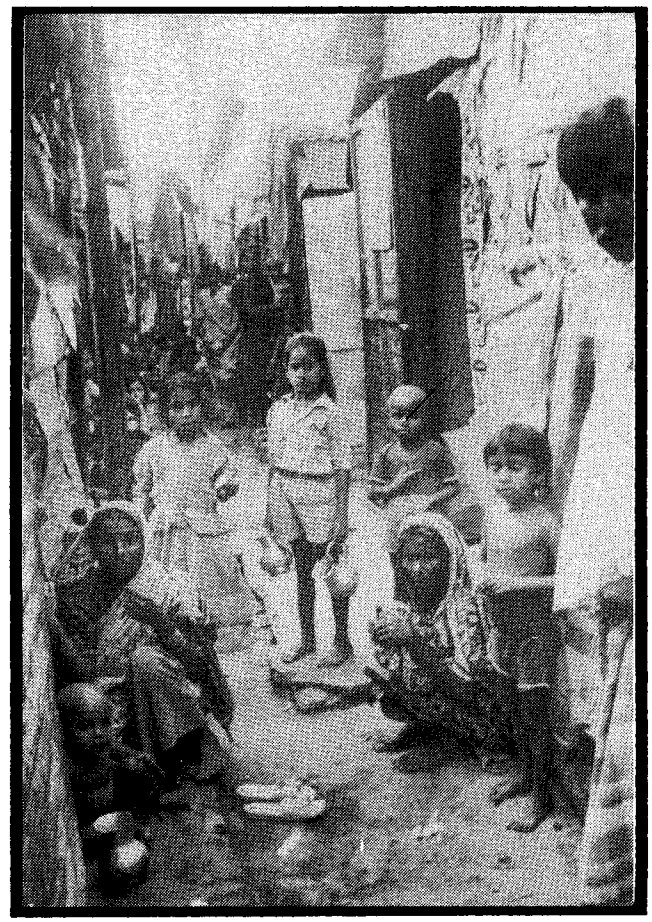
"We have doctors and engineers who are sitting idle because they cannot get jobs in government hospitals or on government construction jobs," says Mumtaz Ahmed, a doctor in the Milpur refugee camp. "My father came to Dhaka in 1947 from Bihar to work as a hydraulic engineer for the government. We had a big house in Dhaka and one in the country. Now I live with him and my wife and three children in a single room in this camp."

Electricity is provided to most of the camps ($3 a month per household) by Rabita Trust, an Islamic welfare organization financed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Some people say that Rabita trust gives a monthly ration of a few kilograms of wheat to each adult. Others say they get no wheat.

"My problems?" asks Amena Begum as she squats floor of her room, a child in each arm. "I have five children, so there are eight people sleeping in this room. The roof leaks during the monsoon so we all get fevers. The water is contaminated so I have to walk a long way two or three times a day to bring water. And the latrines are broken so that when it rains they overflow and mud and dirt runs into my house.

"My husband works in a silk workshop during the day and as a watchman at night," she continues. "But we still can't afford meat more than once a month.

"All of the women are suffering in this camp," she adds. "When the rainy season comes we can't even let our children play outside because it is so dirty. They will get fevers."



Cramped streets of a Bihari refugee camp.

Not much to sell: A refugee camp store.

Amena is hopeful that she and her family will be resettled in Pakistan this year: "When I dream of Pakistan I think of a place where I will live well. I will have access to water, a good house, and a latrine."

Showkat Ali, general secretary of the Stranded Pakistani Repatriation Committee, is more specific. "By the end of July, 10,000 of us will be resettled in Pakistan," he says. "Within one or two years, all of us will be resettled. The government of Pakistan will give each family a house, 15,000 rupees ($750) for the first six months, twelve and a half acres of land, and a job in the government. The Saudis will pay for everything."

Mumtaz Ahmed also is hopeful. "I don't know what jobs will be available for us in Pakistan, but we will do whatever jobs we find. That is how we have survived in sub-human conditions," he says. "It is Allah that keeps us going. We know that we will reach Pakistan one day. It is that knowledge that pulls us to fight for life."

PROMISES, PROMISES

During a visit to Pakistan last year by Bihari leader Nasim Khan, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised to resettle the Biharis sometime in 1992. Whether he will be able to keep that promise remains to be seen.

"I don't think the government will be able to do anything about it," says Aziz A. Siddiqui, joint director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. "It is a political issue, not a humanitarian one."

Ironically, the same issues that divided East and West

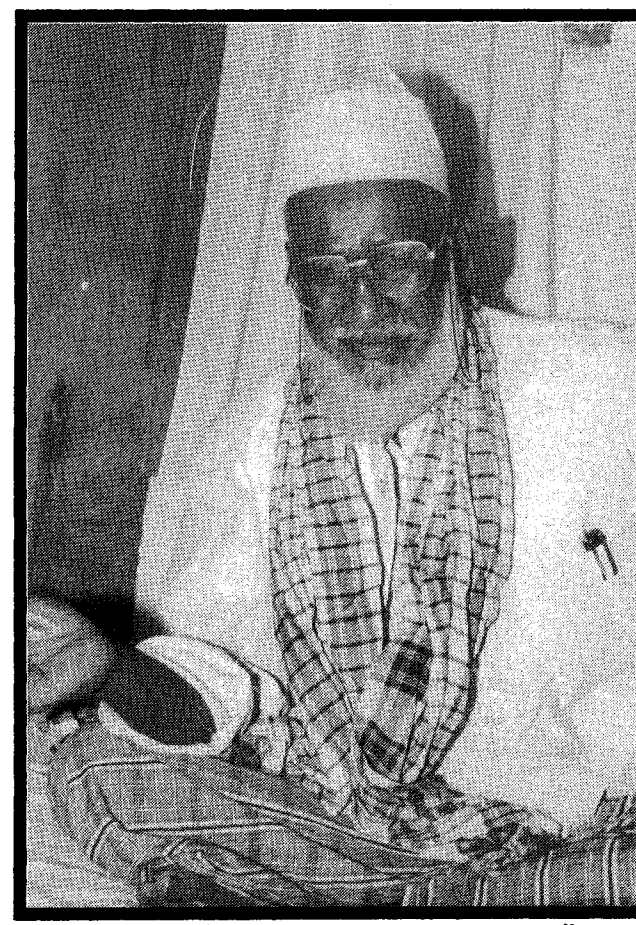
Pakistan -- language and ethnicity -- also have delayed the resettlement of the Biharis. The fear among many Pakistanis is that the Urdu-speaking Biharis will join forces with other Urdu-speaking immigrants from India in Pakistan's Sindh province. This would increase the political power of the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) -- Immigrants National Movement -- and diminish the political power of other ethnic groups in the region, specifically that of native Sindhis.

For nearly two years, Sindh province has been torn apart by ethnic battles and terrorized by bandits who roam the countryside looting and kidnapping local citizens. Many people -- including the government -- say the outlaws are backed by the MQM.

"The Sindhis are genuinely worried; they have become a minority in their own province after the Mohajirs, the Punjabis, the Pushtuns and the Baluch," says Siddiqui. "The province is already militarily and aggressively divided, unable even to hold a consensus. There is no doubt that the Biharis would join the MQM. And while I wouldn't say that they are more aggressive than other ethnic groups, they are prone to intrigue and persecution complexes."

The Human Rights Commission, Pakistan's most independent human rights organization, is divided on the issue of resettling the Biharis. "Some of our members are from Sindh and are opposed to letting them come," says Siddiqui. "It is the hottest issue for us. Finally we decided simply not to take a stand."

The government of Nawaz Sharif says it will avoid fanning the ethnic fires of Sindh by resettling the Biharis in the Punjab province of northern Pakistan. But opponents of the resettlement, including Benazir Bhutto and her Sindh-based Pakistan People's Party (PPP), argue that the Biharis will immigrate to the Sindh in



Nasim Khan: "We must not be ignored."

Waiting for water and a new home.

search of jobs and to join with family members already living there.

Bhutto may have other reasons for opposing the resettlement of the Biharis, according to A. Kaiser Morshed, chairman of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

"Bhutto and the PPP view the Biharis as a Fifth Column for Pakistan inside Bangladesh," says Morshed. "Her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, never took them back [to Pakistan]. That was the biggest crime that Bhutto committed. Now Benazir is carrying on the mistakes of her father."

In contrast, the resettlement of the Biharis may suit the political plans of Nawaz Sharif. "His government has a partnership with the MQM and he is not a Sindhi," says Siddiqui. "And it suits the right-wing politicians, who have been the most persistent on this. But I don't think it is a make-or-break issue for the government, so they may not bother."

The government already has its hands full in Sindh. Last month, Nawaz Sharif sent the Army to "clean up" the province. Thousands of people have been arrested in recent weeks and the top leaders of the MQM have been charged with terrorism and murder. Many have fled the country. It appears the government has split the MQM into two factions, arresting old-time MQM leaders while helping a dissident MQM factions seize control of the organization.

It is too early to predict how the army operation in Sindh will affect the government's promise to resettle the Biharis. Last April, Nawaz Sharif privately informed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of his plans to announce a resettlement plan for the Biharis during a visit to Bangladesh in July. But that was before the recent crisis in Sindh forced him to cancel the trip, putting the Biharis on hold once again.

A DESPERATE ROAD

Nasim Khan first saw Pakistan last year, after waiting twenty years for a visa. The invitation to meet with Nawaz Sharif came only after Nasim Khan threaten to launch a "death march" with all 225,000 Biharis across the Indian subcontinent.

"Nawaz asked me not to press him in 1991, but promised to begin our repatriation by July of 1992," says Nasim Khan.

The announcement that repatriation would begin in 1992 hasn't improved the lot of the Biharis still in Bangladesh, says Aine Fay, director of Concern International, an Irish charity based in Dhaka.

"The mothers will throw their babies on the street and refuse to give them milk until they die. This will be our first protest." -- Bihari leader Nasim Khan.

"The government [of Bangladesh] offered land to 133 families to resettle," says Fay. "The people accepted the offer and we agreed to help them move. Both sides signed the agreement. But then Nasim Khan returned from Pakistan with promises of repatriation and the people were afraid that if they accepted the land they wouldn't get to go to Pakistan."

As in many refugee situations, the Biharis are lead by men who benefit politically by keeping the refugees in sub-human living conditions. By martyring their own people, these leaders ensure that the world does not forget their plight.

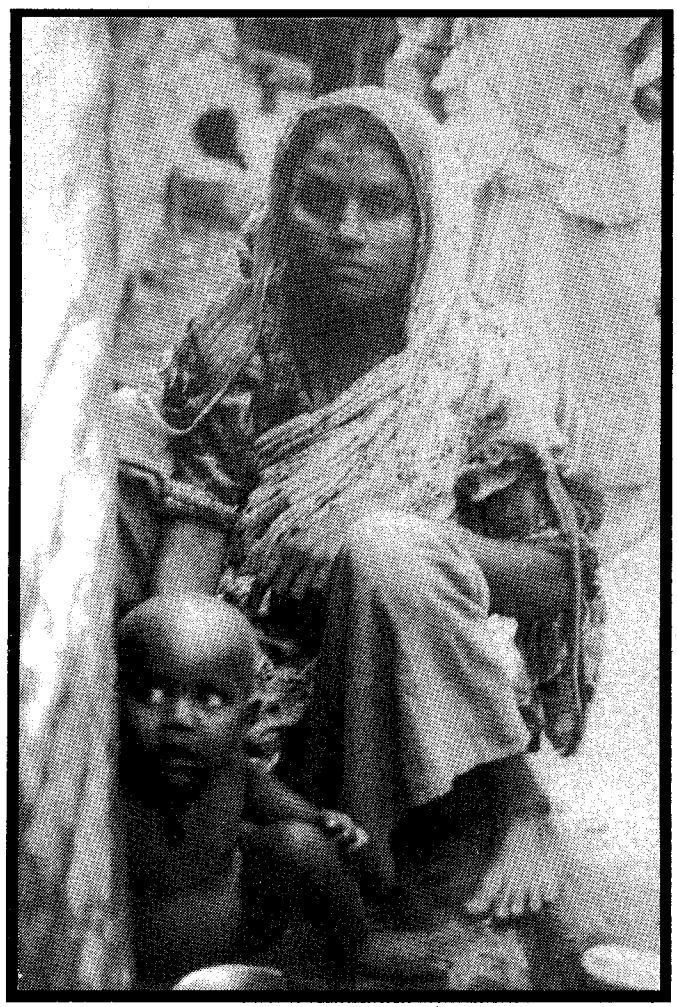
"The leaders of the Biharis keep the population agitated," says Fay. "They are afraid that if they move to better conditions the government of Pakistan will ignore them."

She adds: "If they don't go to Pakistan they will remain in horrific conditions, living on nothing but hope."

Nasim Khan says he has a plan to ensure the world will not forget the Biharis: "If Nawaz Sharif doesn't meet this [July] deadline, terrible things will happen. More terrible than people

can imagine," he says. "As a first step, all the babies under two years of age will go with their mothers in front of the press club. The mothers will throw their babies on the street and refuse to give them milk until they die. This will be our first protest.

"I believe in non-violence," he adds. "But we must not be ignored."



How much will they sacrifice?

(Photos by C. Rose and T. Harrington)

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