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Kathmandu, Nepal

**FLIGHT FROM THE THUNDERING DRAGON**  
Refugee Stories from Bhutan

by Carol Rose

In the first three months of 1991, an estimated 25,000 Bhutanese citizens fled their homeland for the border regions of Nepal and India. Many had been raped, tortured or imprisoned. All had abandoned their land, homes and belongings. Many had lost family members and friends. In the absence of international assistance, these refugees were surviving on hand-outs from the already impoverished local population. By March, a United Nations officer assessing the Bhutanese refugee situation in Nepal described it as "desperate."

I traveled to the border region of eastern Nepal in March to hear the refugees' stories and assess for myself their material conditions. There were around 5,000 Bhutanese scattered across four districts of Nepal. Local police said another 50 to 150 were crossing daily into Nepal over the open border with India.

At dozens of remote outposts, refugees gathered to talk with me in the hope that I might convey their stories to the outside world. Listening to their voices, it became clear to me that these people risked death if they returned to Bhutan. Nonetheless, nearly all said their greatest wish was to go home.



They asked only for water. A Bhutanese woman and her child enter Nepal at the Kakarvitta border post.

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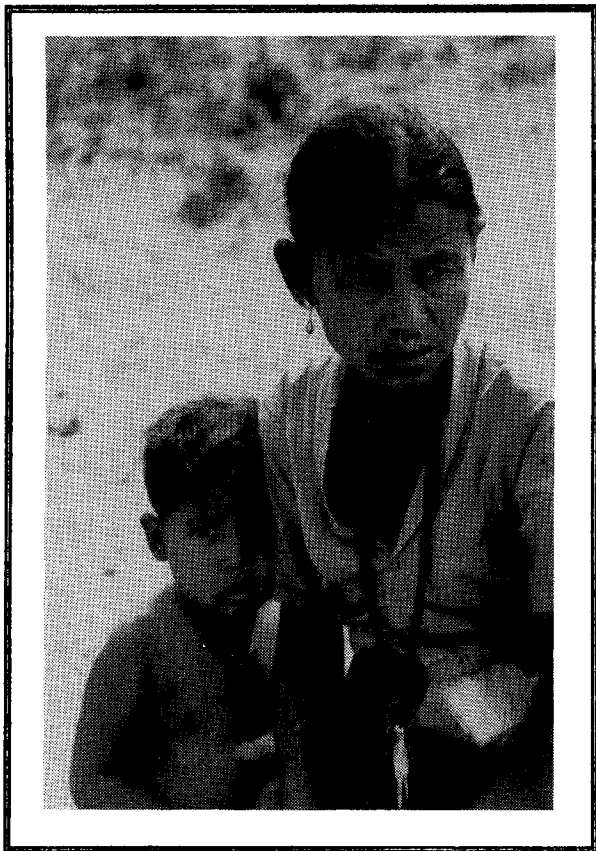
Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on the cultures of South and Central Asia, with particular focus on refugees. Photographs by Carol Rose.

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## ORIGINS OF THE INFLUX

Known as the "Land of the Thundering Dragon," Bhutan is an isolated Himalayan kingdom ruled by the 35-year-old King Jigmie Singhye Wangchhuck, who was enthroned in 1974. The king is a Buddhist who belongs to the minority Drukpa ethnic group, whose ancestors came from Tibet.



Waiting for assistance: a Bhutanese mother and child by the Timai River.

In contrast, most of the refugees are ethnic Nepalese farmers with Bhutanese citizenship, whose ancestors moved to Bhutan under a 1624 labor agreement between the governments of Nepal and Bhutan.<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries, they maintained a separate ethnic identity in Bhutan by marrying women from India and Nepal who share the same Hindu religion.

Following a census that showed the ethnic Nepalese were close to becoming a majority ethnic group in Bhutan, the king in 1985 ordered a mandatory "ethnic integration" program. He set forth a Code of Conduct telling the people what to wear, how to eat, where to worship and what language to speak. In effect, the king tried to impose the "Druk" ethnic identity on the entire country. Those who fail to follow the code face forced expulsion from the country, fines, imprisonment, loss of citizenship and seizure of

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<sup>1</sup> Nearly 70 percent of the refugees in Nepal hold Bhutanese citizenship cards. Although most are ethnic Nepalese, at least 200 Sarchop refugees are at various camps in India. Sarchops, who originated from Northeast India, comprise 30 percent of Bhutan's total population, which ranges between 600,000 and 1 million people. Ethnic Nepalese comprise just over 50 percent of the total population, and the ruling-class Ngalongs, or Drukpas, who originated in Tibet, comprise some 16 percent of the population. (Sources: The Rising Nepal and the Student Union of Bhutan.)

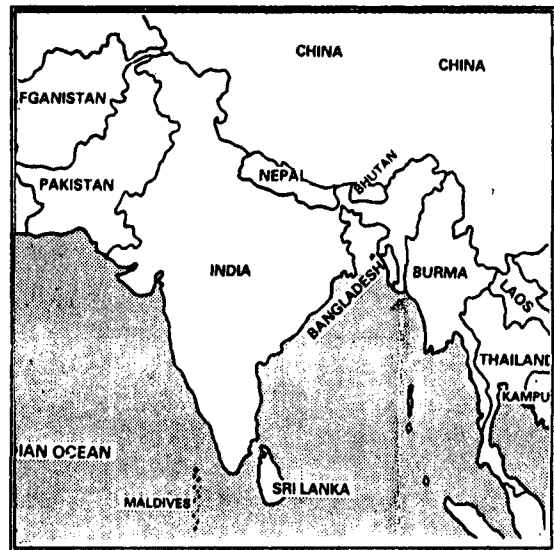
their property. The death sentence is in place for anyone who speaks against the "king, kingdom or government" of Bhutan. The Druk regime is alleged to have killed 500 people, imprisoned 2,000 demonstrators and expelled more than 30,000 of its citizens.<sup>2</sup>

In response to government repression, a group of around 60 ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan formed the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) in June 1990, the only political party in Bhutan. Its stated goal is to abolish the forced integration program and transform the king from an absolute to a Constitutional monarch. On September 19, 1990, the BPP organized non-violent demonstrations across Bhutan in which tens of thousands of Bhutanese participated. Party leaders assert that at least 400 demonstrators died and 1,000 were injured when Bhutanese soldiers opened fire on the unarmed protestors.

The BPP has contributed to the violence as well. According to Barbara Crossette, of The New York Times: "...dozens of Government properties have been blown up or burned, bridges destroyed, and buses and trucks hijacked...At least 38 policemen or soldiers have been killed or wounded, the King said, and 168 people kidnapped for ransoms as high as \$30,000."<sup>3</sup>

R.K. Budathoki, 35, president of the Bhutan People's Party, admits that the BPP uses strong-arm tactics to elicit cooperation from the people. "Sometimes when we have a rally we have to tell people that if you don't come we will beat you and take punitive measures," he said.

Budathoki also said the BPP has pushed between 1,000 and 2,000 refugees back into Bhutan when they tried to flee the country. "It is a real disadvantage to the party if all these people leave," said Budathoki. "If their house is burned and they leave, then it is hard to identify their existence



Bhutan and Nepal: Set in the heart of South Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Narad Wagle, "In the Morass of Crisis," published in The Rising Nepal, February 26, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Crossette, "Bhutan Struggles to Stop Militants," The New York Times, April 14, 1991.

in Bhutan. Also, we need them there to protest."

Violence against ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan has escalated dramatically since the beginning of this year. In January 1991, the King announced that all "non-nationals" -- a term that seems to be applied to anyone who does not obey his Code of Conduct -- were to be expelled. In March, the government began arming and training volunteer militias to carry out the king's expulsion order. Refugees tell of marauding soldiers who beat, rape, loot and otherwise terrorize entire villages, forcing the people to flee their homes.

#### JOURNEY TO THE BORDER: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

On March 15, I caught a commercial flight from Kathmandu to the rural city of Biratnagar, the capital of Moran district and one of the areas hardest hit by the influx of refugees from Bhutan.



A young Bhutanese girl looks out across the flood plains of the Timai river.

Moran district is part of the "Terai," or plains, a vast stretch of land along Nepal's southern border with India. The Terai is home to nearly half of Nepal's 18 million people. In contrast to the northern mountain regions of Nepal, the Terai has a distinctly Indian flavor. The weather is subtropical, the food is hot, the religion is Hindu, and people speak a mix of the Nepali and Hindi languages.

The local hotel in Biratnagar is the "Namaskar," a shady colonial-style structure that specializes in bed bugs, torn mosquito netting and an absence of running water. Here, one can experience first-hand the infamous Terai mosquitoes, whose tiny size in no way hinders their ability to inflict welts the size of half-dollars on any unveiled flesh.

Within 10 minutes of

arriving at the hotel, I fled its confines to explore my surroundings. It cost around 20 cents to have a barefoot bicycle rickshaw driver take me on a tour of the city. We set off as the sun began its descent across the plains, transforming bamboo groves and palm trees into black silhouettes against a mango-colored sky.



Virtually all of the refugees are women, children and the elderly. Most of the young men have been imprisoned, killed or have joined the resistance forces.

Sugary harmonies of Indian film music blared from radios in every roadside shack. Barefoot children along the road kicked soccer balls made of knotted wads of rubber bands. Women dressed in red, gold or blue saris promenaded past, brass water jugs balanced nonchalantly on their heads. Men gathered in tea houses or stood outside their shops, chatting as they sipped Orange Fantas in the hot evening breeze. Cows, sacred in the Hindu religion, wandered down the middle of the road, stopping periodically to graze on roadside garbage heaps.

After a night battling the bed bugs back at the hotel Namaskar, I caught the 5:00 AM bus for a four-hour overland trip to the India border, where a massive refugee influx had been reported. The bus was crowded and uncomfortable, but I was too tired to care and just curled up by the window, watching the flat beauty of the Terai as we sped along.

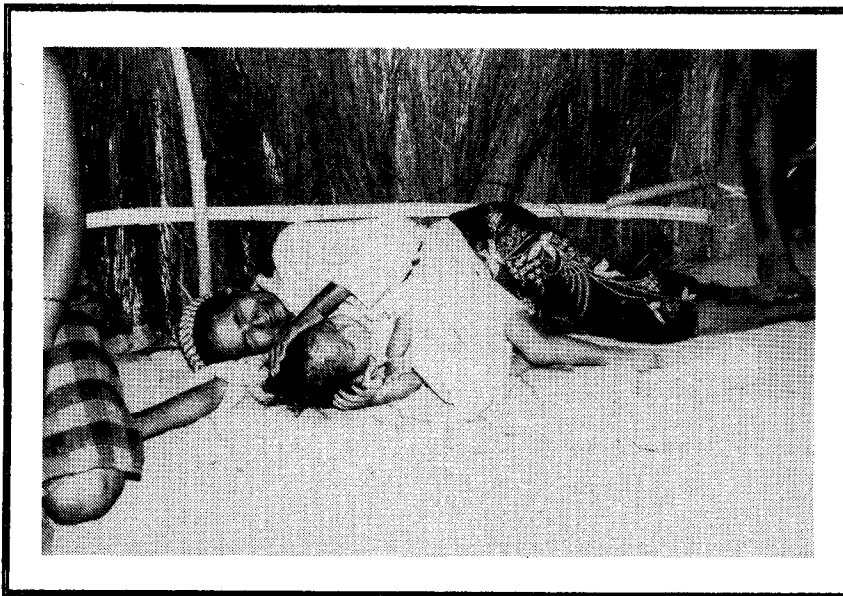
My destination was a small city named Birtamod, where I had the name of a bookseller, Dhital, who could direct me to Bhutanese leaders and refugees. Dhital's shop is the local hang-out for intellectuals, printers, schoolteachers and journalists in Birtamod. After promising to read my palm at a later date, Dhital took me to meet D.P. Kaflay, of the Bhutanese People's Party (BPP).

Kaflay is a chubby, dark-skinned man of about 30 years who left Bhutan after he married a Nepalese woman, in defiance of Bhutanese law. His political involvement began with the People's

Forum for Human Rights, an organization formed in 1988 in response to the law imposing "Bhutanization" on all ethnic groups in Bhutan. When the forum's leader, T.N. Rizal, was kidnapped and extradited from his home in Nepal in 1989, Kaflay and other forum members formed the Bhutan People's Party (BPP). In less than a year, this core of young men has set up a sophisticated operation from inside India and Nepal to promote resistance within Bhutan. The BPP publishes Nepalese and English newspapers, operates refugee camps in India and Nepal, and organizes resistance cells inside Bhutan.

Kaflay's job is to gather rice from local Nepalese villagers and take it to the refugees. He is popular and trusted by the refugees, since he brings them food. He also has a motorcycle. Noting these attributes, I hired Kaflay as my "guide, bodyguard and driver" for the week. Off we went on his motorcycle, yours truly riding side-saddle behind Kaflay (and sometimes another passenger) as we buzzed along dusty paths past villages and farms. Swarms of children in each village raced after us in the ever-present Nepalese childhood game of: "chase anything that moves." Cultural taboos on touching between men and women prevented me from hanging on to Kaflay during the ride, so I remained precariously perched with one buttock on the seat and terror in my heart at every bump in the road.

Over the next few days, Kaflay and I journeyed throughout the Jhapa, Mechi, Sunsari and Moran districts of Nepal, seeking out and talking with Bhutanese refugees. Along the way, I was

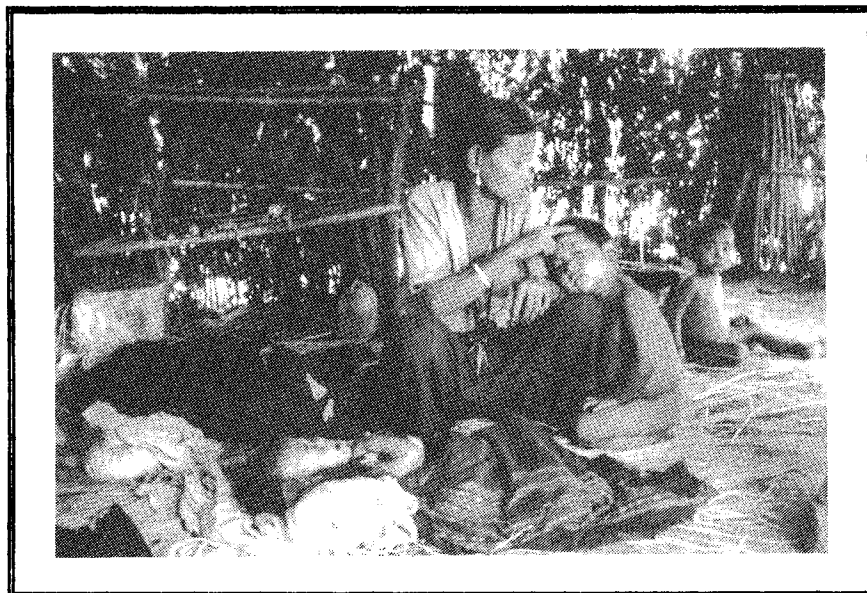


More than 200 Bhutanese refugees sleep side-by-side in a one-room shed of bamboo and grass built along the Kankai River in Jhapa district.

surrounded by the tropical beauty of the Terai: the banana groves and coconut palms lining the roads, the blistering sun of the Indian plains, the elegant balance of Nepali homes set high upon stilts. I was equally struck by the poverty. Rice paddies and wheat fields are tilled by hand, as they were thousands of years ago. Paved roads are

few and poorly maintained. There is one telephone<sup>n</sup> at the entire region. Potable water is still carried home from public water spouts.

Refugees were scattered throughout the border region, in as many as 75 different encampments. Many were living in remote outposts, accessible only by walking an hour or more over dry river beds and up steep hills, where medical care and other amenities were unavailable.



Dozens of children are suffering from disease and malnutrition. Here, a day-old newborn lies buried beneath blankets (far left) as its grandmother cares for three sick toddlers.

At the border region of Kakarvitta, I spoke with a group of 25 refugees just arriving from India. As they piled on to a jeep they had hired to take them away, none seemed to know where they were going or had any destination in mind. They asked only for water.

Nonetheless, the refugees were creating strategies for survival. Many labored in the fields of local farmers in exchange for a meal of rice and a pallet upon which to sleep for one night. Women, who make up the bulk of the refugees, spent entire days in search of wood for fuel.

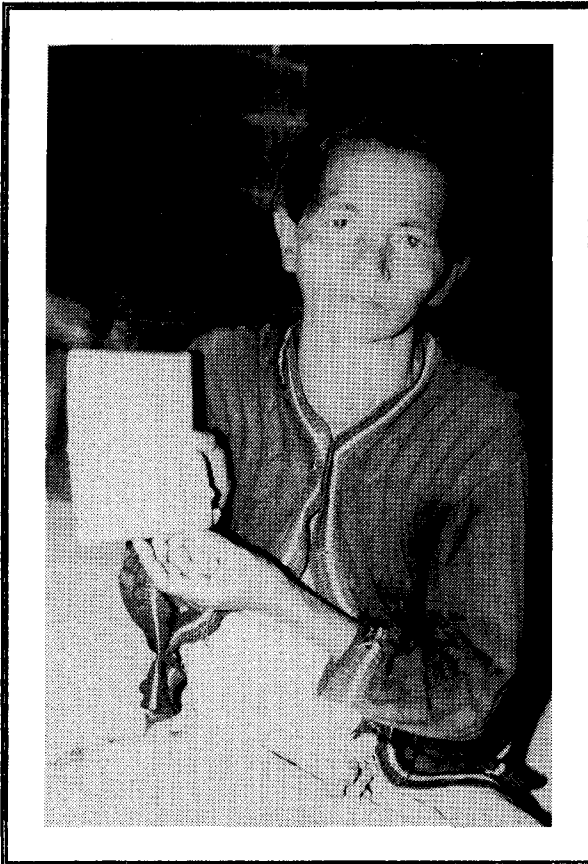
The make-shift camps that I saw ranged in size from about eight people to nearly 200 people living in a single grass shed. Housing was built from bamboo stakes and grass roofs and walls. Many of these fragile shelters were built on flood plains, where they will wash away in the summer monsoons.

Food was in short supply, sanitation was non-existent. I saw dozens of children who appeared to be suffering from malnutrition, and people of all ages in need of medical assistance.

An alarming number of women told of being gang-raped by

Bhutanese soldiers. At least one death has been confirmed by the United Nations of a woman who died from the lack of medical care from bleeding resulting from such an attack. I spoke with her 15-year-old son, who is living in a grass hut along the Timai River. He showed me the grave of his mother, dug amidst the barren rocky soil of the river bank.

In another hut along the river, a baby born the previous day lay under a pile of blankets. Its mother was out collecting firewood, leaving the grandmother to look after four babies. All looked severely malnourished, and one child was visibly ill. Its legs were paralyzed, its skin hung in folds from its body. It wailed constantly, suspended between life and death. The child was too weak to be lifted, so I squatted by its side trying to soothe its burning forehead as I murmured a prayer. I've never before felt so angry -- at the world, the Bhutanese government, the UN, and at myself for my powerlessness.



Vishnu Maya Gurung, 54, has scars covering her cheeks and nose, where Bhutanese soldiers burned her with a hot iron. She holds her Bhutanese citizenship card.

Later, an official from the World Health Organization, Dr. Douglas Khin Hlaing, told me that he expects epidemics of polio, measles and malaria, as well as increased malnutrition, within the coming months if nothing is done to improve the living conditions of the refugees.

Undoubtedly, many Bhutanese also are suffering from the psychological effects of what has happened to them. Their voices were filled with despair as they told their stories:

"In Bhutan I had a wooden plank house, with plenty of land to grow rice, maize, oranges and cardamon," said Vishnu Maya Gurung, age 54, a woman farmer. "One day the Army came looking for my son saying that he was a human rights organizer. When they couldn't find him they poured hot water on my face and held a hot iron to my cheeks. Then they pulled out my hair. When my son returned, we decided to flee. But they caught us in



the jungle and took him away, while they were beating me. Please, can't you find my son? His name is Shalbahdul Gurung. He is only 22 years old."

Asmet Gurung, age 27 is a farmer: "I was hiding in a cow-shed in the jungle when the Army came and started hitting and beating people with their gun butts," he said. "I was watching all the bloodshed when I saw the soldiers start to beat the women and girls, and realized that my mother was out there. I called to her, but the soldiers heard me and started beating me. They tied our hands behind our backs and laid us in a line, hitting us down the row. They used knives to slice the backs of our necks and bamboo poles to beat our knees. They kept asking, 'Do you love your family?' I begged them 'Don't kill me, my father and mother are old and there will be no one to feed my children if I die.' Then I began to cry. They finally stopped when they thought I was dead. They took our cows and left."

"I have been raped by five army men," said Shir Maya, age 20, holding her baby in her arms. "There was such heavy bleeding that I couldn't walk, and my mother carried me out on her back. My husband was taken away by the soldiers. If he finds out what has happened to me I don't know if he will take me back. Until now, I've not told this to anyone but now I am bound to tell you because I think you will help."

"The army arrested my family, locked up my house and confiscated everything," said Bahgwat Nepal, age 30, a farmer and activist in the Bhutan People's Party. "I heard I was going to be arrested, so I ran away to the jungle. But the army came that night and started harassing my wife. When we finally escaped the next day, we walked in the jungle for five days without food. We slept on the ground, using my jacket as a mattress."

"The Army came and demanded to take away my eldest daughter," said Damela Devi Chetri, 30, a farmer. "She is only 16. I knew she would be raped, so I left with nothing. Now, we need everything: food, shelter, clothing."

"I came out walking alone with my three children through the jungle. I carried one child on my back and one on my front," said Nirmalan Nepal, age 29, a farmer. "I brought only clothing for the children. We left behind our parents, our property, and all of my saris! Here we have nothing!"

"Why doesn't the United Nations take care of us?" asked Hari Baktadaha, age 24, a farmer. "They come here time after time and tell us they will help, but we get no help. This is the first time foreigners have told us such lies."

## THE AID DEBATE

The influx of ethnic Nepalese from Bhutan into Nepal provides a unique opportunity to foster integration between a refugee population and host community. The refugees speak the Nepali language and share common religious and cultural practices with the local people. The generous response of local Nepalis to the plight of the refugees further suggests that there is little danger of alienating the host community by providing foreign assistance to the refugees.

Soon after the Bhutanese started arriving in Nepal in January, the Nepal office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sent three missions, two including Nepali government officials, to assess the seriousness of the situation. I traveled with one of these missions for a day and a half. The team included officials from the World Food Program, UNHCR, the World Health Organization, CARE International, the United Nations Development Program, the Nepali Foreign Ministry, and the Nepali Home Ministry.

Although the assessment team saw much of what I saw, its members failed to agree on such basic issues as: Is there an emergency? Should there be any assistance? During the subsequent two months, the debate over how to cope with the refugee influx illustrated how political and bureaucratic concerns, rather than humanitarian considerations, dominate the formation of refugee assistance policy.

The key anxiety voiced by some of the mission members -- particularly those from the Nepali government -- was the fear of attracting more Bhutanese across the border from India. The danger was that an assistance program in Nepal, without a parallel plan in India, would have a "pull" effect.

"The government of Nepal has some difficulties recognizing or giving assistance to refugees coming from the same [South



"Look what they have done to our children," says a Bhutanese mother, displaying the scars from wounds she says were inflicted on her daughter by Bhutanese soldiers.

Asian] region because it could hamper relations with the government of Bhutan," said Eugenio Ambrosi, the former protection officer with the UNHCR office in Nepal.

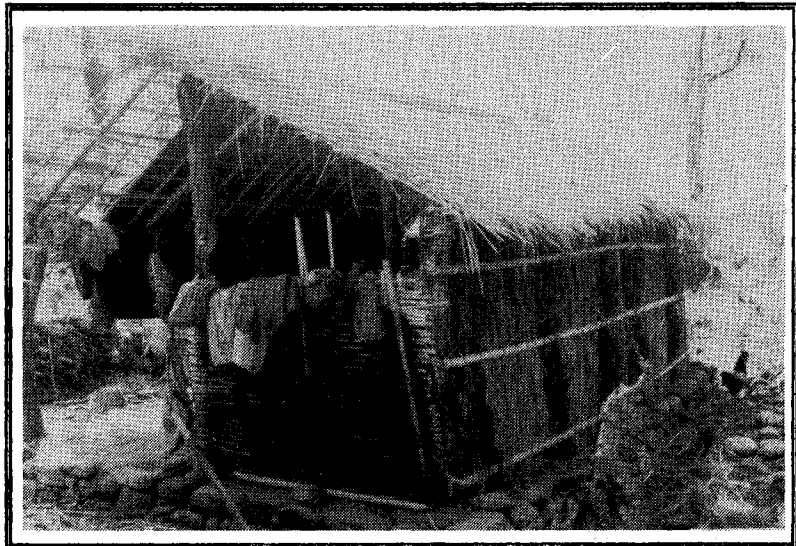
"Nepal won't take a clear stand in favor of the refugees unless India does the same," said Ambrosi. "India doesn't seem to be doing anything to help, perhaps because of its own internal political situation."

A rapid response to the crisis was delayed further by political considerations within Nepal. The United Nations requires a formal request from a host government before it can implement an assistance program. Such a request was unlikely prior to Nepal's parliamentary elections in mid-May, the first multi-party elections in 32 years. During the political campaign, few Nepali officials wanted to commit themselves to anything as controversial as a plan to assist refugees.

"The Nepali government didn't want us to make a big fuss about the situation, and UNHCR was guilty of letting the government stop us," said Ambrosi. "UNHCR put the needs of the Nepali government first, rather than the needs of the refugee population entering Nepal."

UNHCR Nepal Representative, Terry Leckey, confirmed that political considerations were at the heart of the hold-up: "I cannot really explain the delay, except to say that we cannot just jump into assisting people," said Leckey, during an interview in mid-May. "Initially we considered it an emergency, but now we are still determining what to do, with the consensus of the [Nepali] government. I wish I could give you more information, but I am really in the dark."

Ambrosi resigned from the UNHCR in May, in part to protest the reluctance by the Nepal UNHCR office to request emergency assistance for the Bhutanese refugees. "It was the last chance for this office to show that we could do something for the refugees," he said,

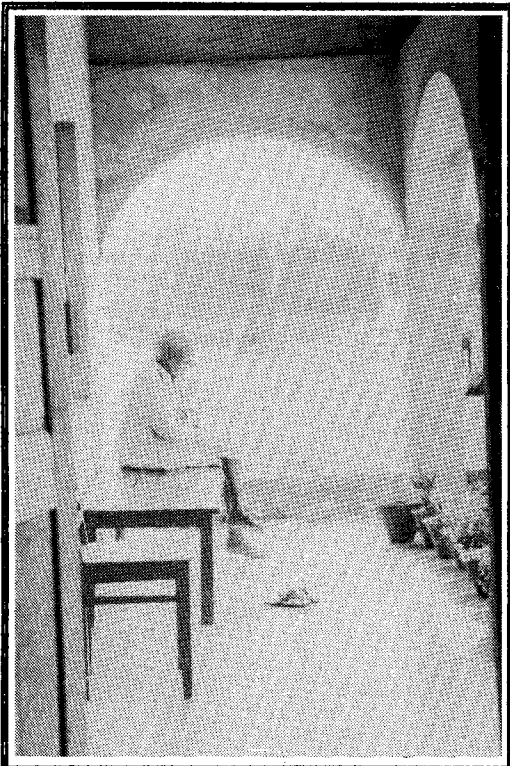


Most refugees live in grass and bamboo sheds, built in remote areas or on flood plains.

"And we missed it."

Ambrosi's resignation sparked a visit to Nepal in mid-May by Enver Jamshid, the director of UNHCR's Bureau for Asia and Oceania. Days after Jamshid's arrival -- but nearly three months after the first UNHCR "assessment" of the refugee situation -- development of a comprehensive emergency assistance program began.

At this writing, the plan is to include immediate emergency relief in the form of food, temporary shelter and medical assistance for children, the elderly and pregnant women. In the meantime, UNHCR will work with the World Food Program, the United Nations Development Program, the World Health Organization and UNICEF to create a community-based development program to strengthen local infrastructure to benefit both the Nepali population and the refugees, including a revolving-loan credit scheme and investments in education. Emergency monies to implement the plan have been promised by late May. Finally, UNHCR-Geneva has vowed to put diplomatic pressure on the government of Bhutan, directly through the United Nations system and indirectly through India, China and the United States.



The father of human rights advocate, T.N. Rizal, awaits the return of his son who is imprisoned in Bhutan.

The political issues that dominated the aid debate are not unique to the Bhutanese refugee situation. Such considerations and delays seem to be inherent to the United Nations, an organization designed to reflect the interests of governments rather than stateless people.

"Since UNHCR is a non-political organization, by statute, it creates fear among UNHCR officers that they are taking sides whenever they help refugees," said Ambrosi. "This is a contradiction that has never been solved.

"When you recognize someone as a refugee on political grounds, you are making a political statement against the country of origin," he said. "You simply cannot bring humanitarian help to refugees without making such a statement. In political terms, a low-profile refugee assistance program does not exist."