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Citizens of Nowhere: The Biharis of Bangladesh

By Cammy Wilson

The Biharis of Bangladesh certainly look like refugees. They sit in dozens of squalid camps -- as many as 250,000-300,000 people, officials say -- occupying dilapidated thatch and bamboo hovels, frequently no larger than four by six feet, not even sufficient space for some families to all sleep at the same time. Men and women alike are painfully thin and some children seem virtually translucent, the veins and bones readily discernible underneath the skin.



Two Bihari children. The arms and hands of the eight-month-old baby are virtually transparent.

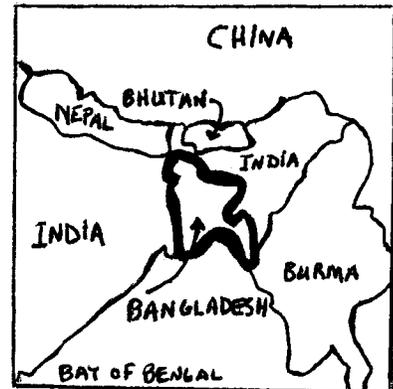
Yet the Biharis are not the focus of any of the major international aid organizations, though the Biharis' living conditions make those of the Kampuchean camps in Thailand look like bastions of comfort. Ironically, ten years ago they did receive aid -- food, milk for their babies, medical attention for their sick and the temporary building materials for the shanties in which they still live.

"The fact that there were 300,000 Biharis here in 1971 was of great concern to the world press," said an international consultant in Dacca. "Today the fact that there are 250,000 still here is of no concern to anyone. It's sort of like Cambodia. Last year, Cambodia was a big thing in the States. This year it is not."

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To understand what has happened to the Biharis, try to imagine the following scenario. The U.S. Government one day announces that the country's Italians are no longer citizens. Other Americans then rush to occupy the Italians' homes and businesses, dumping the former occupants out on the street (if they're lucky). Many Italians are beaten, raped, killed. Courts, police and officials provide no relief. Italians are fired from their jobs, pensions are no longer paid. All but the most menial employment is denied the Italians and many Americans are too fearful of their countrymen to hire Italians for even temporary menial labor.

Eventually the Italians are herded into camps, largely for their own safety; some Italians can look from their huts into the homes they once owned. This is what has happened, not to the Italians of the United States, but to the Biharis of Bangladesh.



Who are the Biharis? How did they get where they are and, most importantly, why do they linger there year after year?

The answers to those questions illustrate how it is that many international problems -- large as well as small -- never seem to get solved. If a refugee situation persists over a number of years, it is a sure sign that one or more countries is benefiting. Refugees are looked upon as humanitarian problems, the living flotsam and jetsam heaved overboard in one political struggle or another, a colossal human amoeba that oozes over borders, draining the pocketbooks and the patience of the world.

Quite the opposite is often true. While having nothing to call their own, refugees nonetheless may have great value for their richer brethren, who successfully use them for their own purposes. Corrupt officials in a host country may make money from a refugee effort; a superpower may reap a propaganda windfall; or the refugees themselves may serve as an important bargaining chip in a game in which they have no stake. The latter is the case with the Biharis, who are duped into believing they will all one day be granted citizenship by Pakistan, a country to which they have never been, but with whom they imagine they share an affinity.

* Map taken from U. S. State Dept. bulletin.

The Biharis do not fit the usual definitions for refugees. They haven't fled their country because of religious or political persecution, nor have they fled because of flood, famine or natural disaster. They are not economic refugees, fleeing poverty for a better economic life elsewhere. In fact, they haven't fled at all: Bangladesh is their home.

While they do not meet one of the typical definitions for refugees, the Biharis meet the most basic criterion of all: they're treated like refugees. Their "host" country -- their homeland -- has taken away their citizenship and its rights. They even have a new name.

"We call them nonlocals," said Bangladesh's Home Minister.

Most Biharis were born in Bangladesh. Others received citizenship when they moved to Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) after the Partition of 1947, when territory on either side of India was sheared off to the Moslem states of East and West Pakistan. Many of the Biharis of Bangladesh came from the Indian province of Bihar, but the name is used to (erroneously) designate any of the people who migrated to Bangladesh.

The current conflict dates back to Partition, in which West Pakistan, lying all the way across the Indian subcontinent, gained administrative control over East Pakistan. Both the West Pakistanis (now Pakistan) and Biharis speak Urdu, while the Bengalis, the majority of Bangladeshis, speak Bengali.

Most of the Bihari immigrants reportedly were poor -- workers and small shopkeepers -- but some had skills and money and these appeared to rise quickly under the West Pakistani leadership, who particularly favored the Biharis for low-level civil service jobs, much as European nations used minorities in countries they colonized. An affinity thus was born between the Biharis and the West Pakistanis, which provided short-term pluses for some Biharis, but one that would result in long-term torment for most.

In 1971 war erupted. Bangladeshis believed the West Pakistani administration had responded poorly, if not callously, to a cyclone that devastated Bangladesh in 1970. Then, in the first free election in Pakistan's history, Bangladesh's Awami League won by a landslide, giving it the opportunity to form a new government of Pakistan (the eastern sector was more populous than the western). However, the military government in West Pakistan refused to accept the newly elected representatives and civil war resulted. In general, the Biharis backed the official government -- that of West Pakistan, whose troops engaged in massive atrocities, according to reports. Precisely how many Biharis fought with the West Pakistanis or collaborated is unknown,

but the Biharis' precarious position as an outgroup likely contributed to the venom with which the Bengalis attacked Bihari communities. Some writers at the time say the Biharis had little choice but to unite with the West Pakistani troops, as the Bengalis immediately looked for Biharis on whom to vent their anger. At any rate, Bihari communities were plundered and sometimes burned, women were raped and many were massacred. Then, as now, Biharis were easy targets.

"How many friends of yours were killed because of Biharis?" a long-time western resident of Dacca asked a Bengali friend.

"Not because of the Biharis," he said, after a long pause. "In fact, the Bengalis collaborated more than them. But they could tell the Biharis (from the Bengalis)."

Approximately 10 million people fled from Bangladesh into India during the conflict. The majority apparently were Hindus (Bangladesh still has a 14 per cent Hindu population), whom the West Pakistanis had reportedly singled out for attack.

The war stopped after India sent its army over the border into Bangladesh, thus guaranteeing the latter's independence. The U.S. backed West Pakistan in the fray and Henry Kissinger's fury at the Indian intervention is reflected today in the cool relations the U.S. has with India.

The West Pakistanis went home -- eventually repatriated through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The Biharis stayed. Their suffering continued; rape and murder were common and providing medical treatment to the injured or food to the starving was enough to cause a riot. Relief organizations were in Bangladesh in force, primarily helping with the resettlement of the refugees who'd fled to India. Finally, due to the violence to which they were prey, the Biharis were herded into camps, which the international organizations built. Other assistance was provided, as well.

"In 1973, 1974, 1975 we were getting 17 items for relief," one camp leader said sadly. "Milk, sugar, rice, wheat, oil, soap, and nutritious food for babies -- three or four kinds of baby food -- clothes."

Today big refugee agencies are elsewhere, busy on other projects -- Africa, Afghanistan, Kampuchea -- today's "hot" spots for refugees, the areas that interest the donor nations that often for their own political reasons fund the programs voluntary groups operate.

The international market for refugee aid can be tough to crack. There are millions of refugees in groups scattered throughout the world, with the biggest shares of aid tending to go to the big media winners. Old-timers, like the Biharis, are pretty much out of the running.

"Let's face it," said one western aid official in Dacca. "The Biharis have exhausted their media possibilities."

Perhaps the most cruel aspect of the Biharis' wretched existence is the hoax that they might all be granted citizenship by Pakistan.

After the war, after the massacres and after survivors had been herded into camps for their safety, the International Committee of the Red Cross arranged for a census and each person was asked to "opt" to go to Pakistan or remain in Bangladesh. Under the circumstances, the results were not unexpected: they voted overwhelmingly to go to Pakistan. The ICRC, of course, had no means of guaranteeing the Biharis admittance to Pakistan or any other country, for that matter.



The main "street" of Geneva Camp, home to 25,000 Biharis, located in Muhammadpur, a Dacca suburb.

The vote, however, was used by the Bangladeshi government to justify their taking the Biharis' citizenship away.

"They are citizens of Pakistan, we are only too happy to see them go back home," Bangladesh's Prime Minister said in an interview.

The Pakistani government does not agree.

"If they are Pakistani refugees, everyone in Bangladesh are Pakistani refugees," says Sirdar Hasan Mahmud, Deputy Head of Mission for the Pakistani Embassy in Dacca.

The Bangladesh government is fully aware of the Pakistani position but, for their own purposes, they continue the charade.

"The Biharis are a sensitive question," said Mr. Emran Ali Sarker, Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation. "Their welcome is over long ago. We're expecting every day that Pakistan will take them."

Nor is there a lot of sympathy for an outgroup in a country where much of the population suffers.

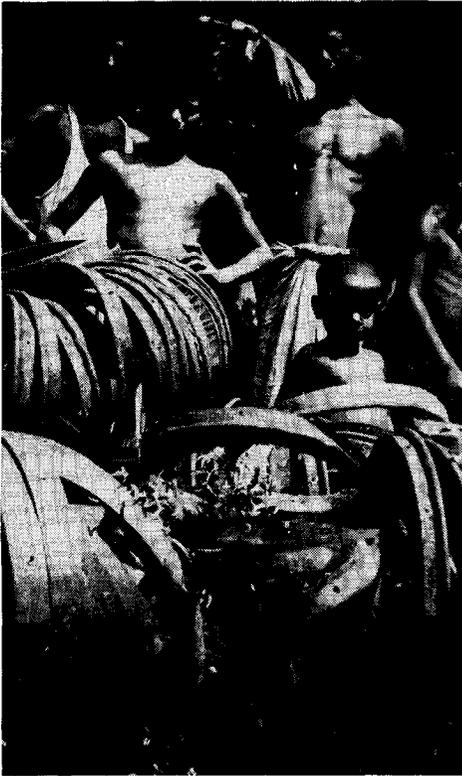
"At least they do not starve for the whole day or for many days together," said Enayetullah Khan, editor of Bangladesh's HOLIDAY magazine. "But there are thousands of Bangladeshis who live without food for the full day or for many days together so that they eat many uneatables."

Indeed, Bangladesh is not a cornucopia. Its approximately 90 million residents exist on a per capita income of less than \$100 per year.

The Biharis manage to survive mostly by a few days' work here and there, they said, and by the single food ration for which they are eligible: three kilos (6.6 lbs.) of wheat per adult per month and half that amount for children. The women sometimes work as servants or beggars or prostitutes.

Some Biharis have managed to find employment and live outside the camps; they have generally been better educated and have had friends among the Bengalis. Well-off Biharis have been able to obtain passports and to leave the country, legally or illegally. Passports are said to be readily purchasable in Bangladesh, in fact, for 400 taka I was told I could get one complete with my own picture ("it would have been better if you'd been wearing a sari," the man who offered to procure the passport said). All together, the relief minister said there are "about 417,000 Biharis left to be repatriated."

Regardless of the general plight of Bangladeshis, the Biharis suffer in ways the Bengalis do not. As he continued to speak, the editor himself made this point.



Bihari men and boys --
Their ribs as countable
as the curved metal
casings nearby.

"Physically they are in camps," he said. "There is too much crowding, it is difficult to maintain hygienic conditions. And they are psychologically ill -- because they want to go to Pakistan in their hearts."

There are those in Dacca who say the two governments have already made a secret agreement -- some time ago -- on the Bihari question. It is in the interest of neither government to publicly admit to this, however, as the Biharis who have nothing of value themselves are of value to both governments. The Bihari leaders themselves talk of such an agreement, but it is in their interests, as well, to keep the hope of going to Pakistan burning in the hearts of their people. This they do -- with meetings, petitions, marches.

Thus, the Biharis are victims of a three-way game played among the Government of Pakistan, the Government of Bangladesh and a group of the refugees' own leaders.

Other nations -- those that have nothing to gain one way or the other -- pay no mind.

"I don't think anyone in the Embassy will speak on this on the record," said Carl Taylor, Jr., political officer for the U.S. Embassy in Dacca. "I think it is not appropriate for us to be on the record for something in which we aren't involved."

Bangladesh is one of the most successful countries in the world in attracting foreign aid. It has received billions and billions of dollars in aid since independence. The largest donor, the U.S., funnels hundreds of millions into Bangladesh every year, much in the form of food. The aid does not come without strings.

"There's no such thing as aid without strings," says Richard Podel, deputy director of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bangladesh operation.

None of the aid is earmarked for the Biharis, officials said, and none of the strings apply to a settlement of the Bihari situation.

"To my knowledge the matter of the Biharis has never come up in the two years I've been here," Podel said.

Meanwhile, the aid continues to flow to the Government of Bangladesh. The international refugee organizations are occupied elsewhere. The wheels of international politics continue to turn and the Biharis, in their camps, are Citizens of Nowhere.

Coming: The Biharis speak out on the political game in which they're caught.