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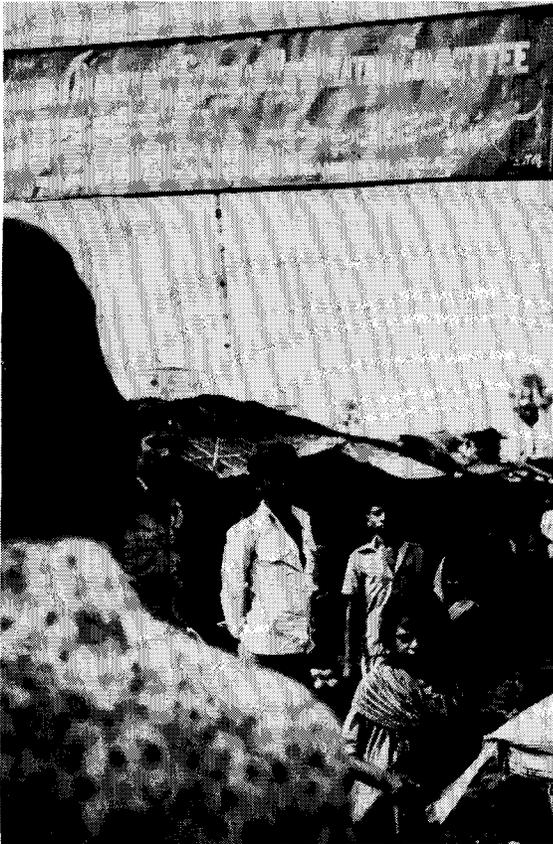
GENEVA: An International City, Refugee Style

By Cammy Wilson

Geneva is a slum of a refugee camp.

The narrow passageways between hovels often serve as living rooms, kitchens, streets and even poultry yards. In the rainy season, the passageways turn to a fetid swamp -- awash with garbage, body wastes, and debris -- rather than the general pigsty they are year round.

Water comes from an occasional pump at which rows of people typically wait to wash their dishes, their clothes or themselves -- the latter feat accomplished by dumping pans of water over



Banner for Stranded
Pakistanis General
Repatriation Committee,
one organized group at
Camp Geneva.

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one's clothes. In the dry season, the sun eventually dries the bathers' garments; in the rainy season, clothing, like everything else in the camp, may remain damp indefinitely.

There is no sanitation as westerners know it. At the edge of Geneva are several open areas where rows of children and adults alike may be seen squatting over open holes in the ground. Geneva is home to approximately 25,000 Biharis, say camp leaders, who have repeatedly brought their situation to the attention of Bangladeshi leaders. The latter readily concede the "pitiable" condition of the camps, as they put it, but take no action.

"They are only in transit," said Bangladesh's Home Minister. "A transit camp is a place where you can come for a temporary abode with the objective of going elsewhere."

The Biharis have been in "transit" now for ten years; many of their children have known no home other than the squalor of camps such as Geneva.

One of the camp's more fortunate children. Well-fed, he sleeps on a bench with a grain-sack pillow.



There are reportedly as many as 66 such encampments throughout Bangladesh, where officials estimate there are 250,000-300,000 Biharis living. The Bangladeshi relief minister says there are a total of approximately 415,000 Biharis to be resettled.

"We are hopeful that very shortly we will be able to send them elsewhere," said the Home Minister.

"Elsewhere" is to Pakistan, a country to which the camp dwellers have never been and whose officials say they will not be admitted. The Biharis, however, maintain the Pakistanis owe them a moral debt,

which should be settled by extending them citizenship.

The Biharis are presently receiving no assistance from the big international organizations that typically deal with displaced persons, nor is any major international group, such as the United Nations, apparently attempting to negotiate a settlement. The Biharis did receive assistance through both the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) at one time, but they have taken their operations elsewhere. Ironically, however, some of the good intentions of the international groups serve to keep the Biharis in the camps today.

The ICRC may have physically left several years ago but the ghost of the "option" they gave the Biharis continues to haunt the camps.

According to officials -- Bangladeshi as well as Bihari, the ICRC, with the best of intentions, conducted a census after the Biharis were grouped into camps for their safety. Basically, people were asked whether they'd prefer to stay in Bangladesh or go to Pakistan. Considering the harshness of their lives in Bangladesh, people overwhelmingly "opted" to go to Pakistan. The ICRC had no means of granting this wish. The Biharis, however, believed they had been given a real choice by an international group with clout. Thus, they continue to agitate to exercise this option.

Another sad element of the situation is the families that have been divided. According to Bangladeshi officials, the ICRC and the UN did repatriate about 109,000 people to Pakistan -- largely Pakistani soldiers and civilians, former central government employees, members of divided families and hardship cases. In order to possibly qualify under the "divided family" category, some Biharis managed to send out one or more close family members in the airlift. This was not the type of divided family the Pakistanis had in mind, however, and it has not been inclined to grant citizenship to Biharis on that basis.

Agencies come in for a fair amount of criticism on this subject, as officials handling the airlift overlooked -- if not abetted -- Bihari efforts to send individual family members ahead. Hindsight, of course, is always better than foresight.

It is understandable that the Biharis wish to leave Bangladesh, a country which holds many bad memories for them. However, they press their claims for citizenship in Pakistan not on persecution but on their belief that Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims.

"We sacrificed everything for the sake of Pakistan," one leader said. "We came over here, we sacrificed property and belongings to follow the nation of Pakistan."

Thus, the Bihari reasoning goes, they chose Pakistan and supported Pakistan in the civil war of 1971, when Bangladesh gained its independence -- all at great personal sacrifice. Therefore, the Biharis say, if Pakistan lost territory in the war, so be it, but they should be "repatriated" to Pakistan, as that country's civilians and regular army units were.

The Pakistanis take the position that the Biharis can hardly be repatriated to a country in which they've never lived (apparently repudiating the idea that East Pakistan was ever part of West Pakistan). Further, they point out that Bangladesh is a Muslim homeland. However, it is a homeland in which the Biharis are non-citizens.

Finally, the Biharis maintain that their support of Pakistan and the language they share with Pakistan makes them unacceptable to Bangladesh. The Biharis have made numerous appeals to the Pakistanis.

"I have outlined the situation to the Pakistani ambassador here," said one leader, who described somewhat gleefully how they gathered "about 30,000 Biharis" to surround the ambassador when he came to see camp conditions.



Curious children stand
in mud at Geneva.

Camp leaders also understand their disadvantage in being within their own country vis-a-vis gaining refugee status. Refugees are normally regarded as people fleeing over international borders. Thus, in August of 1979, the Biharis began a march to India.

"We embarked on a long march when we got no response from either government (Bangladesh or Pakistan), so we decided to cross the border and go to Pakistan through India."

A camp spokesman said they gathered "about 50,000 people together" for the march toward the border. Bangladeshi troops were called out to seal the border, said the Biharis, who say 26 people were killed and about 150 wounded in the melee. The Biharis blame Pakistan for the bloodshed, charging that Pakistan requested the Bangladeshi government to prevent the march, "to save their black faces because of not deciding the issue." Bangladesh would have had its own reasons for preventing the march: the last time India received an outpouring of Bangladeshi refugees, she invaded.

Nowadays, the Biharis mount demonstrations, they write letters and call on groups and individuals they believe can help their cause.

"I have discussed the issues involved with the President of Bangladesh, with the Foreign Minister and with many other ministers," said one leader. "We have written to all the international agencies, to the United Nations . . . We have written . . . Islamic agencies, Christian agencies, but where is the melodrama?"

As the mullah's call to prayer began in the distance, the camp leaders, seated at the long wooden table inside the meeting-room hut grew more and more agitated.

"We've decided because there's a culture for us in Pakistan and our mother tongue is Urdu and we'll get basic rights in Pakistan, we've decided if both governments do not agree we'll embark on a long march to Pakistan through India," one man said excitedly. "We will self-immolate by fire . . ."

When I walked out of the hut, back to the mud and refuse of the lane, back to the bloated bellies of the smiling and staring children, the voices continued to rise and fall in the room behind me in Urdu, the language not of Bangladesh but of Bihar and of Pakistan. In front of me hurried a small child, a girl who in the States might be thought to be five, possibly six years old. Her legs were rounded in the shape of a hoop.



This little girl's bent legs served her well as she ran from the camera.

"She's nine year's old," said a camp guide. "She was born at the time of liberation of Bangladesh."

Ironically, the same war that brought liberation to Bengalis brought a kind of incarceration for the Biharis, one with no parole in sight.

"Despite all the assistance and the passage of almost seven years, some of the camps still represent the most abysmal living conditions which can be found anywhere on earth," wrote Canadian Arthur A. DeFehr in an analysis for the Mennonite Central Committee. "They should remain clearly etched on our collective conscience and provide an incentive for all of us to search for an alternative."

DeFehr wrote his report in 1978. It is now 1981 and the camps have deteriorated even further.

Geneva -- the home of the ICRC -- may symbolize Switzerland's success as an international-thinking country, but the other Geneva is a slum of a refugee camp -- and a symbol of international failure.

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