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A PEOPLE IN LIMBO

For Stranded Pakistanis, the December Airlift Cannot Come Too Soon

by S. Bari and Sharier Khan

FOR twenty years, pockets of Bangladesh have remained forever Pakistan. The sound of Urdu fills the streets. Schoolchildren honour Quaid-e-Azam. A generation of Biharis has been born, and has reached majority, and has known only confinement in a camp.

Two hundred and thirty-eight thousand of them live scattered in camps all over the country, poised between two lands, unwanted, uncertain. Political promises have vanished into thin air, over and over again. Bangladesh has breathed a sigh of relief, Biharis have packed their belongings: but few have actually been flown "home." Last month, a new agreement was reached, and a wave of tentative hope is washing over the camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Memories in the Camp

A cluttered alley leads into the squalid Geneva Camp, so called because of the Geneva convention regarding refugees. In his tiny office, consisting of a bed and a few chairs, Joint Secretary of the Stranded Pakistanis Repatriation Committee Abdul Jabbar receives visitors.

The Biharis' trauma began two generations ago, in the grip of the convulsions that shook the subcontinent apart. In August, 1947 the largest single human migration recorded in history uprooted families and redrew religious lines. From East Bengal, some one crore Hindus fled to India, leaving the East bereft of much of its skilled and educated labour. Only half that number of Muslims left India to try their luck in the eastern wing of the new Islamic nation.

Among these arrivals, many of whom had left behind substantial holdings, were nearly half a million Biharis. They believe they were instrumental in building the new country, and had sacrificed in the name of Pakistan. "We were welcomed," insists Abdul Jabbar. "East Pakistan needed technical skilled personnel, especially in the telephone, telegraph and the railroad services."

"My father had left 150 bighas of land in order to come and live in Pakistan," Jabbar recalls, obviously enjoying the trip down nostalgia lane. "But we were happy in Pakistan. We were well-respected, many of us had land in Dhaka and good jobs. To a certain extent, we lived in harmony with Bengalis. We were devoted to Pakistan."

Throughout the period from 1947 to 1971, Biharis tended to intermarry and live among themselves in colonies in Mohammadpur and Mirpur. Jabbar argues that this is true of most ethnic minorities.

Bengalis Begin to Rebel

The Biharis view the gradually growing anti-Pakistan sentiment of the Fifties as inevitable, given the treatment of Bengalis by the

speech at the Race Course on the 7th of March, 1971, calling for independence. "Frankly," he smiles ruefully, "I was horrified. This was against everything we had worked for."

When the Awami League won 167 seats in the National Assembly out of 311, and the People's Party of Pakistan won only 88, PPP leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was not amused. The martial law government of Yahya Khan dilly-dallied over the handover of power to an East Pakistan-based Awami League.

Bhutto arrived in Dhaka for talks with Mujib. On March 24th, Jabbar was part of a six-member delegation of Biharis who went to speak with Bhutto. "We were faced with an uncertain situation, and he reassured us, 'Don't worry, you all will be okay.' Twenty-one years later, Jabbar is still here."

"I will always remember that terrible night of March 25th. The streets were empty at 8 pm when I went to my office. In the factory, Bengali workers were preparing sharp weapons, and their looks froze my heart," says Jabbar. "When the Pak army started the killing, we were all shaking in the factory, where we stayed the night."

The collaboration

When Pakistan was born, the Bihari contribution was doubtless substantial. Unfortunately for them, the country they were building ceased to exist. And any sacrifice they speak of was erased in the Bengali national psyche during the traumatic birth of Bangladesh. With noted exceptions such as Naushad Noori and Ahmed Riaz, who had supported the Language Movement, and scores of others who helped Bengali friends in need, or befriended the cause, Biharis were on the side of an undivided Pakistan and maintaining the status quo.

Jabbar admits the atrocities that Biharis took part in, and says in weak defence, "We wanted Pakistan, that was what we had left Bihari for."

He denies any involvement with the infamous Peace Committee, which worked for the Pakistani army and was responsible for the murders of many of the three million Bengalis left dead in the genocide of '71.

"I kept up with some of the freedom fighters, some of



Geneva Camp, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

day.

Nearly half a million Biharis chose to be Pakistani nationals, while an equal number opted for Bangladeshi citizenship. By 1974, more than 160,000 had been repatriated. For those left behind, over the years, anticipation has given way to stubbornness. A repatriation

"We were hopeful about Nawaz Sharif," says Jabbar, "but nothing happened for quite some time. Then Khaleda Zia went to Pakistan. We had prepared this march across India, there were 20 thousand of us gathered on the border. Then Nasim Khan (Secretary of the SPRC) called us from

prejudice Biharis face outside their community. Derogatory language is used even of established Biharis in mainstream society. "What we did in 1971 will never be forgotten," he admits, "but Bengalis who did terrible things can go around with their heads held high."

premises, staffed by Biharis, does not offer a very high standard.

Rabeya, who is 12, admits shyly that she has Bengali friends. She does not want to fly to Pakistan, she says: "I've never been there."

Munna and his brother Zafar attend Nannagar junior high school. Though Zafar is 16, he is only in class 8. "I had to drop out of school often," Zafar claims, "in order to work, since my father cannot make enough to feed the family." He wants to go to Pakistan, and is excited by the prospect of an airlift as early as December.

due to begin in '73 sputtered to a stop as Pakistan claimed it did not have the money to transport the Biharis.

In 1976, disillusioned, the Biharis formed the Stranded Pakistanis Repatriation Committee (SPRC). "We realised that Pakistan was not accepting us as bona fide

Pakistan and confirmed that Zia and Sharif had reached an understanding. Pakistan has agreed to accept initially 3000 families this coming winter. (see accompanying story).

Life In The Camp

Some 18 thousand Biharis are crowded into the

Many of the camp inhabitants complain of discrimination against them because of their background. "If I go to a school myself to ask for an admission form for my son, my accent gives me away," alleges one parent. "I am forced to send a relative who speaks proper Bengali."

Biharis who have gone into business, as many shop-owners testify, are often forced keep a Bengali partner. "Just to keep the peace" with local extortionists.

The Second Generation

Munna and his brother Zafar attend Nannagar junior high school. Though Zafar is



Yet life takes its course in the confinement of camp quarters

administration. Jabbar is non-hypocritical about his blind love for Pakistan, but admits equally wholeheartedly, "Bengalis were right to demand their language in '52." For his part, "I do not believe that any one language is the language of Islam. Any Muslim has the right to fight for his mother tongue."

Realising that economic deprivation was fuelling the anger, the Bihari community began worrying about their own safety. In 1970, Jabbar was a youth of 25, working for Bengalis at a leading cigarette company. As the political arena became increasingly tense, he noticed growing personal antagonism, though "my personal relationships with Bengalis were quite warm."

March, 1971

Jabbar was among the thousands who heard Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's rousing

whom were of-Bihari descent." Jabbar regrets that, "no one remembers that some Biharis fought for Bangladesh." Hard to remember, critics say, when the Bihari population itself chose to be Pakistani after independence.

Independence and Repatriation

In the days following Pakistani surrender, Biharis in their traditional strongholds of Mohammadpur and other neighbourhoods did not immediately react. In fact, aggression against Bengalis went on in these areas. When eventually overwhelmed by Bangladeshi forces, Biharis were asked to choose their nationality. Many Bengalis consider this to have been an excessively generous gesture, "considering the fact that they wanted nothing to do with us," says one noted politician of the

citizens, and we had to agitate to get some attention," Jabbar angrily remembers. Secretary Nasim Khan announced that Bhutto had put a stop to repatriation.

The Bihari diaspora, in western countries and the Arab world, came to the aid of the SPRC. Now there are sister organizations all over the world, trying to raise money for repatriation. Awareness of the Bihari issue grew. They came by their epithet of the "Palestinians of south Asia."

At the SAARC summit in 1985, Pakistan admitted its responsibility. Another accord, another change of administration, another stalemate. Benazir Bhutto's government was none too keen on these new additions to a tense nation, and insisted local opinion was hostile to newcomers.

approximately 20 to 25 bighas of Mohammadpur camp across the country. 66 camps house the remaining population. In Geneva Camp, two toilets serve every fifteen families. Mainly in the care of the Saudi Arabian organization Rabita, the camps languish in complete neglect.

Reportedly, rations are two kilos of rice per head per month, donated by the government of Bangladesh. Some camp inhabitants claim they do not receive this regularly.

Facilities are minimal, living conditions guarantee total lack of privacy, and a dissatisfied populace simply waits and waits for something to happen to them. When someone wants to visit, leaders of the community often object: "Is our camp a zoo for all to come and gaze?"

Jabbar understands the



Committee Leader is Optimistic

by Rahat Fahmida

WHILE the leader of the Stranded Pakistanis Repatriation Committee (SPRC) in Dhaka, Nasim Khan, is all optimistic about the recent repatriation agreement, most of the residents are still sceptical about the issue.

Pakistan has agreed to start the long stalled repatriation of 238,000 stranded Pakistanis from next December, an outcome of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's recent visit to Islamabad. Pakistan has promised to take 3,000 families in the first batch.

Nasim Khan told 'The Daily Star' in his office within what is locally called, the Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, "I am happy. We consider it a good beginning. Twenty years deadlock has been removed. Now I hope the government of Bangladesh and that of Pakistan will not create any hurdles. We are to call 1992 the year of repatriation, and definitely the credit goes to Begum Khaleda Zia."

Detail of the repatriation will be worked out by the two countries with the help of Rabita-al Alam Islamia, which will be funding the cost of repatriation process. The cost of repatriation is estimated to be between US \$ 200 to 300 million.

Nasim Khan, 74, gave a break down of the number of people expected to be repatriated this December. According to him, each family in this camp in Mohammadpur has on an average about five members. Hence as the repatriation agreement states to take 3,000 families on the first go, the number of people comes to around 15,000. There are now about 17,000 people living in this camp. So, if all goes well about 88 per cent of the refugees in this camp in Mohammadpur are likely to be repatriated.

Nasim Khan came from Bihar with his parents to the then Bengal as early as 1914, when his father was posted here.

As Khan reported, some Biharis were taken back by Pakistan, but in a haphazard manner. "In between 1973-74

about one lakh 60 thousand were repatriated, about 9,872 Biharis went back to Pakistan in 1979, and 4,000 in 1982. These were all under government to government agreement. There are some who went back by road via India, Burma and Nepal."

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is spending about 10 crore taka a year, for ration of the stranded Pakistanis. The Urdu-speaking Pakistanis, commonly known as Biharis, were stranded, after they opted for Pakistani citizenship following the 1971 Liberation War.



Nasim Khan

'It Doesn't Really Matter': One Woman Voices her Scepticism

YASMIN is 43. She lives in a tin-roofed shed in Geneva Camp, and supports her aged husband Haider Ali, who is too frail to work. She maintains her family of two unmarried daughters by working as a cleaner in a private organisation. Yasmin is unmoved by all this talk of repatriation.

"I don't think this will work out. I have a feeling this will never happen. We have been hearing this ever since we came here," smiles Yasmin. She has lived in this camp with her family for the last 16 years. Living in a room approximately seven feet by three and a half feet, unbelievably clean, she is not too discontent with her present situation. "It doesn't really matter whether we go to Pakistan. No matter where we are; we have to work hard to earn our living." Yasmin does not expect any drastic change in her life.

Yasmin's parents came from the state of Bihar, India, during the riots in 1947. She was born immediately after, and has lived in Banagram, an area in Old Dhaka, where her father worked for a local factory. After her marriage she lived with Ali, who then worked at a nearby press.

Yasmin and Haider Ali moved with their five children into Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur a few years after the Liberation War, when they could not afford to pay any

house rent. The hard times began for the family. Yasmin's eldest and only son, Anwar and her eldest daughter Baby, went off to Pakistan with Yasmin's parents in 1975. Ever since, they are completely out of touch with the family they left behind in Bangladesh. Yasmin's woes show when she discards them as her children.

Left with three daughters — Shahnaz, Jasmine and Nasreen, she struggled to educate them and at the same time train them in embroidery and tailoring. Still refusing to accept Bengali as the medium of learning she could not really progress with their education.

About a year and a half back Yasmin married off Shahnaz to a mechanic, staying in the same camp. "The best part of it all is," according to Yasmin, "that they did not demand any dowry!"

Yasmin spends most of her time after work looking after her ailing husband, as most of her household chores are done by her two other daughters. Not really enthusiastic to go back to Pakistan, Yasmin said, "When the repatriation starts, it might turn out that we will not go at all. We feel quite comfortable here. And now I would be able to pay my rent for a small one-room accommodation. I only pray to Allah that both my daughters and I can go on earning a decent living."

Bengalis would hate us less and we would live just like any other minority here."

Such matter-of-fact children are not reflections of their parents, most of whom dream of a perfect Pakistan. "We hear we will be given two-room houses and 80 square yards of land. I have also heard we'll be given jobs according to our qualifications," claims Jabbar. "There is no prejudice against Biharis in Pakistan, it is a land of Muslim brotherhood." Many Biharis do not share this enthusiasm. "What difference will it make," asks Munna's mother Mariam, "We are poor here as well as there."

office, enshrined pictures of local deities adorn the walls: Jinnah, who Biharis claim is their inspiration, and Ziaul Huq, "because he was so supportive of the Bihari issue." A tiny photograph of the Ayatollah Khomeini completes the picture. Outside in the muddy alleys, Urdu film songs struggle with the stench in the air, and Pakistani flags adorn shop walls.

A little bit of Pakistan is waiting to go home. A people who have chosen to remain in limbo build their castles in the air. The December airlift cannot come too soon.

Photos: Pavel Rahman