

# Refugees in South Asia II

Imagination is more important than knowledge  
— Albert Einstein

## Looking Out from Within

# Muslim Refugees in Sri Lanka

by Darshini Anna de Zoysa

THE displacement of Muslim people in Sri Lanka owing to the continuing civil war has called for a broadening of the UN definition of a "refugee" to include Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as well as economic migrants. Drawing on this literature and fieldwork which was conducted in Summer, 1997 while living with Muslim "internal refugees", I point out that in an age of mass diaspora, the notion of a fixed refugee identity has little heuristic value. This is the case for both refugees as well as development practitioners who wish to transform the initial relief operations which are based on humanitarian and ethical concerns into planned interventions whose benefits can be sustainable in the long term.

The simplified division of the island's population into the binary opposition "Tamil minority" versus "Sinhalese majority" ignores the fact that the Muslims living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces were forcibly evicted from their homes at gunpoint between October 21-26 1990 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (hereafter the "Tamil Tigers") who are fighting for a separate nation (eelam). The emergence of a new political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was a challenge to the Tigers' demand for eelam as it strove to represent the interests of all Muslims living in predominantly Sinhala as well as Tamil areas, and shook the basis of the concept of an exclusively Tamil homeland. Yet the fact that the Tigers have subsequently engaged in a self-criticism of their decision to forcibly evict the Muslims while admitting that the damage has already been done (so that relocation remains politically unfeasible) reveals the extent to which the Muslims have sought peaceful co-existence with the more

powerful groups within the Sri Lankan polity.

### Refugee Assistance

For comparative purposes fieldwork was conducted in a refugee camp (welfare centre) and more permanent "settlement village". Refugees living in camps are generally economically worse-off than refugees resident in settlements, although the latter are nonetheless more internally differentiated. The genesis of more enterprising "merchant refugees" and Middle East returnees whose huts are adorned with Samsonite suitcases can be noted. These pioneers have drawn on their experience as emigrants, traders and smugglers to harbour hope in the "rags to riches" dream and the "great beyond". Their pioneering spirit has given rise to the "footloose" character of refugees who not only move from one camp to the next, but moreover join the burgeoning ranks of international migrants. All the same, most will never make it.

Whereas Northern Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are increasingly keen to involve all refugees in implementing assistance programmes, this is not necessarily shared by Southern NGOs (SNGOs) or Governmental Organisations (GOs). While there is growing concern in the North to circumvent "top-down" development and encourage "refugee participation" in relief operations, refugees themselves regard continuing rations and welfare support as inalienable "entitlements". Insofar as refugees are internally differentiated along class lines, refugee leaders who have explicit political aims, as well as more enterprising "Merchant refugees" who are economically better off privately despise the homogeneity and passivity that is implied in the label, yet publicly clamour for refugee status to ensure that the monthly ra-

tions and claims for asylum are met. Any attempt to transform the emergency welfare situation (rations) into sustainable development (credit, income-generating activities) is thus perceived as abandonment by the international community, a perception which is further aggravated by the fact that the very political crisis which precipitated the refugee situation may not be resolved for several decades.

The majority of SNGOs arise from within the refugee camps themselves, and have been involved in small-scale development work even prior to displacement. They nonetheless comprise members of the elite who are regarded by poorer refugees as misappropriating donors' aid to assist members of a particular community or village. However, insofar as a key coping strategy entails that assistance to kin takes precedence over that which is extended to strangers, what is often labeled by NGOs as "corrupt" practice is not recognised as such by the SNGOs themselves. The difficulty in maintaining Islamic food taboos (haram) and sharing food from the same plate owing to the rationing system is also highlighted. Moreover, refugee administrators' ignorance of Muslim religion and culture meant that non-segregated public toilets were not used by the refugees. *Sharia* (Islamic law) and *fiqh* (praxis understanding) on how one ought to act and live as a Muslim stipulates a set of impurities including excrement, intoxicants, corpses, blood, dogs and pigs, along with detailed rules on how to purify impure water. While the rules on going to the toilet allow one to go to the toilet in the open air provided there is a screen, easy access to pure water is essential in the case of ablution as the person must first wash the hands and feet, and wipe the

head before prayer which is engaged in at prescribed times five times a day. Yet in the refugee context these are largely absent.

### Refugee Identity

The meaning of the term "identity" is contradictory, as it encompasses a notion of uniqueness (self-identity) and sameness (the label "refugee identity"). But the notion of a bounded "refugee identity" which is contrasted with the fractured identities that are prompted by multiple diasporas has modernist overtones, and opens up a Pandora's Box as to where refugee studies stand in the study of ethnicity, nationalism and migration.

Historically the Muslims have been migrants: Prophet Mohammed and his followers fled Mecca to Medina, and his house provided hospitality and refuge to travellers and migrants. Over the centuries the Muslims have engaged in trade, and as the Sri Lankan example reveals, they settled in coastal areas prior to travelling inland. According to Muslim Law (*sharia*) the notion of distributive justice or charity (*sadaqa*) also has particular relevance in the refugee context, as the poor tax (*zakat*) is targeted towards the destitute and needy. Indeed, even near-kin are included as their care is obligatory regardless of whether or not it is prescribed in the Holy Book. Moreover, insofar as the Qur'an encourages men to have multiple wives who are *widowed* in an effort to maintain the women's upkeep, women who have lost their spouses during the civil war are generally cared for by the community and mosque. The *zakat* is a central concept in understanding people's dual identities as Muslims and refugees who must collectively rely on a range of coping strategies, and depend on external humanitarian assistance. Given the killing of men at the hands of the Indian army and

Tigers, the centre-place given to widows in the Qur'an is actively reproduced within the refugee context. Thus whereas to the sceptical non-Muslim who is living outside the refugee camps the pivotal role of the mosque in promoting the entrepreneurship and welfare of Muslim refugees may seem to be exclusivist, for the insider looking out from within, the Mosque provides an important support network for the least powerful (primarily female) refugees.

The refugees I lived with embodied multiple identities as Muslim refugees who are culturally differentiated depending on whether their region of origin is predominantly Muslim or Tamil. Unlike their Tamil counterparts who enjoy statutory recognition as refugees, they are straddling the uneasy label as IDPs or "internal refugees". So despite the stigma of being labeled a refugee and reluctance to leave their new "homes", Muslim representatives continue to canvass for refugee status, and by promoting relocation to the North, look upon refugee development within the encampments with suspicion. All the same, the fact that the present write up refers to Muslim refugees from culturally different regions is crucial to our understanding of their identities as "Muslims". Their common identity as practitioners of the Islamic faith masks the fact that Muslim refugees are culturally heterogeneous, so that the relative disempowerment of Muslims who were displaced from predominantly Tamil (rather than Muslim) areas is attributed to the fact that culturally speaking, they are not regarded as "true" Muslims. The self-definer according to language, so that the Tamil word *ahadi* corresponds to the Sinhala word *anada*, even though being categorized as "deserters", the latter is often synonymous with being

orphaned.

### Rationing Aid

The concept of (extended) entitlements reveals how the rationing of aid through refugee administration has both stigmatised the refugees by enforcing dependence on monthly rations, and failed to transform the initial emergency operations into sustainable development. Being primarily a social and cultural fact, hunger thus "circulates" around the camps through disruptive relationships. Merchant refugees who are better able to "stand" on their own trade their dry rations for provisions which are of a higher quality, whilst refugees of all social classes are compelled to sell a part of their ration to poor non-refugees to purchase those items which are not part of this basket of commodities.

The above discussion can be located within the anthropological notion of the "gift" and the Islamic notion of "charity" (*sadaqa*). While the latter conception is based on unmitigated selflessness and compassion towards the destitute and needy regardless of one's faith, the former is nurtured by the implicit understanding that the gift must be reciprocated at all costs. Whereas more functionalist accounts of the gift exemplify how gift exchanges serve to mitigate rivalry and cement peace in the long term, insofar as refugees are unable to materially or symbolically reciprocate the hard-earned gift by donor agencies, they are compelled to acquiesce to the prevailing orthodoxy which dominates the administration of refugee aid. More pioneering refugees attempt to break the mould through self-settlement and the sale of provisions are thus rebuked by international aid agencies, so that the "refugee" may be unwittingly perpetuated by the very donors (and not only recipients) of aid.

Refugees' discourse surrounding the "gifting" of international aid pivots around the monthly rations which they have been receiving - along with threats of removal - since 1990. The dry ration comprises lentils, sugar, flour, rice and cooking oil, but as the ration is of low quality and excludes necessities such as fresh fruit and vegetable, clothes, transportation and medical care, a portion of the ration is sold to obtain hard cash. Further, with time merchant refugees who are better endowed have come to sell their entire ration for produce of higher quality. Middlemen blatantly gather outside the cooperative centre to purchase the rations and thereafter sell these to people who, though more impoverished, are not type-casted as refugees, but may be Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims resident outwith the camps. The sale of rations receives much criticism from non-refugees who are ineligible to receive rations in their own right. They therefore point out that the hand-out has rendered the refugees lazy and spoiled, as they are no longer compelled to work to make ends meet.

The dearth of employment and forced "leisure" within the camps is a point of contention among refugees themselves. While refugee status has compelled Muslim women to take up income-generating activities, women as well as men suffer stress which accompanies boredom and the virtual impossibility of making ends meet. So whereas the monthly ration is often mis-recognised as a disincentive to work, the lack of employment following the rapid influx of refugees into the region does not provide the requisite "pull" for them to find independent means to "stand alone".

The situation facing Muslim refugees in Sri Lanka is by no means novel, and the literature

on refugee studies is littered with the ethical issues surrounding the administration of refugee entitlements. It is variously pointed out that the requirement to "count" refugees is highly oppressive, as it is central to the ideology of control that permeates refugee aid. Drawing on the anthropological conception of the gift it is pointed out that such humanitarian considerations are not free from self-interest even if the gift is exchanged by international donor communities rather than individuals. As pointed out above, the gift requires symbolic and material reciprocity, and demarcates the power asymmetries between the donor and recipient of aid. Thus whereas in instances where exchange occurs between Muslims few strings attached, the situation is reversed in the case of emergency aid, as the recipient, by definition, is unable to reciprocate the gift. As a result refugees are delineated according to the deserving and the undeserving poor. They are expected to accept the gift wholeheartedly, and never barter, sell or invest it towards their daily upkeep. The marking of rations as "donations" and the encampment of refugees in an attempt to efficiently administer the gift further reproduce the system of patronage, yet it precludes either party from any mutual obligation whatsoever.

In conclusion, drawing on the concepts of "wickedness" and "trustworthiness", I caution that such practices are not intentionally malevolent. However, insofar as they are *mis-guided*, they may suffer similar pitfalls as the ideology of Tamil freedom-fighter who, by forcibly removing the Muslims from their homes, were "simply" following orders from above.

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# The Bhutanese Refugees' Right to Return

by Shobahakar Budhathoki

ACCORDING to article 14 (1) of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution," which recognizes the status of refugees. At present the Bhutanese state is experiencing a period of political instability and internal insecurity as the movement for establishing human rights and democracy gains momentum which is being resisted by the hegemonic ruling elite and feudal social structure. The Bhutanese political leadership had used various assimilationist policies to suppress people in the name of national integration, i.e. "One nation and one people." Polification of linguistic, cultural, ethnic and religious identities has made the position of minorities within the Bhutanese state vulnerable. Repressive policies and actions such as intimidation, denial of nationality, forcible eviction by the Bhutanese state to attain "national integration" led to the eviction of a large number of minorities in southern Bhutan. Since 1989, 100,000 Lhotshampas have left southern Bhutan and sought refuge in Nepal and another 20,000 have fled to India.

The Bhutanese refugee crisis is not only a matter of concern for Nepal, which has been affected by the large number of Bhutanese refugees, but also for the international community that has been dragged into the crisis management process by Bhutan. Bhutan is deliberately trying to stall the repatriation process by prolonging the bilateral

talks with Nepal while carrying out an active campaign among the international community to disband the refugee camps and to pressure Nepal to integrate the refugees in the Nepalese society. Given this double pronged strategy of Bhutan regarding the refugee repatriation process, one can hardly expect that the crisis would be resolved through bilateral talks.

The repatriation of the Lhotshampas from Nepal will not be an easy process as the Bhutanese state's attitude on the issue of diversity is unaccommodating. The state authority unwillingly allows the only practical for a larger country where a diversity of customs, tradition and culture enriches that nation. A small country like Bhutan cannot afford the luxury of such diversity which may impede the growth of social harmony and unity among people. Such attitude will make Bhutanese state authority unwilling to allow the Lhotshampas, who are minorities and linguistically, culturally very different from dominant Drukpa community. Moreover, the existing Citizenship laws are discriminatory. The law states that anyone who has migrated voluntarily from Bhutan automatically forfeits his/her citizenship and will not be allowed to return to Bhutan. This can be used against the several thousand minority refugees who have been forcibly evicted and compelled to sign voluntary migration forms. Given the current scenario the future looks very bleak for the Bhutanese refugees.

**Green Belt Policy**  
This policy was designed to

### Genesis of Bhutanese Refugee Problem Discriminatory New Citizenship Act

The Citizenship Act of 1985 was enacted in order to use it as a tool to defranchise and to forfeit citizenship southern Bhutanese people. The Act was given a retrospective effect from 1958 and was implemented through a national consensus carried out in southern Bhutan only. A "cut off point of 1958" was announced to determine Bhutanese citizenship and people were asked to produce the land tax receipts of 1958. Those who could not produce the tax receipts were listed as illegal immigrants and served notices to leave the country. By the end of 1988, the government had listed the presence of 100,000 illegal immigrants.

### Racial Discriminatory Cultural Policy

Before 1988 the government followed a liberal cultural policy allowing all ethnic groups to follow their own custom and tradition. But under the new cultural policy the government has declared the Drukpa dress, language, and cultural traditions to be compulsory for all ethnic groups. The southern Bhutanese dress, language, culture is banned and Nepali has been removed from the school curriculum.

**Green Belt Policy**  
This policy was designed to

resettle the non-Lhotshampa northern Bhutanese in fertile southern Bhutan. The government compelled the southern Bhutanese to sell their land at fixed government prices and many were forced to migrate to India and Nepal because of this land policy.

### Refugee Influx into India

The massive influx of Bhutanese refugees into India began after the 1990 crackdown by the Bhutanese military against the pro-democracy protester. The military arbitrarily arrested, detained, tortured, and murdered people. The refugees fled to India and took refuge in West Bengal and Assam. Several petitions to the district authorities, state officials, central government and Delhi-based United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) failed to secure relief for the refugees in India.

### Problems of Bhutanese Refugees Concerning Repatriation

Several rounds of bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan have failed to produce any concrete results. The negotiation process reached a deadlock in 1996. Bhutan is trying to prolong these talks in order to delay the repatriation process and force Nepal to integrate

the refugees. This is apparent from the steps taken by the government of Bhutan which has allotted the land belonging to the refugees to people of other ethnic groups and fired minority government officials who are related to the refugees in order to consolidate its anti-refugee position in the decision-making bodies. It has also vigorously campaigned among the international community to disband the refugee camps. Nepal has failed to take a strong stand since it lacks a standardized policy on refugees. Another stumbling block is the categorization of refugees and the failure of the two governments to harmonize position on each of the categories. The categories are—Bhutanese citizens who have been forcibly evicted and who have voluntarily migrated, non-Bhutanese people and Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts. This categorization is not an acceptable method for verification. The verification ought to be based on two categories—Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese. Moreover, the categorization is based on Bhutanese Citizenship Laws, which stipulates that anyone who voluntarily migrates automatically forfeits his/her citizenship and cannot return to Bhutan. This does not conform to the norms and principles of human rights.

**Role of Nepal**  
Nepal has not been able to put effective pressure on Bhutan as it lacks a standardized policy to deal with refugees. The frequent changes in Nepalese government have also affected

Nepal's performance at the negotiation table. On the international front while Bhutan has taken an aggressive stand in its propaganda against Nepal on the issue of Bhutanese refugees, Nepal has made no effort to counter these. It has not even taken the matter up to the appropriate agencies of the UN or other international forums.

### Role of India

As the first asylum country of Bhutanese refugees, India is equally responsible as Nepal and Bhutan to resolve this crisis. However, it has so far evaded the issue and suggested that it should be resolved through bilateral talks. India as a regional power can exert its influence and help to yield tangible results. The refugees are fed up by the failure of bilateral talks and disinterest shown by India. They are also demanding internationalization of the matter. Internationalization will definitely help to present the true story of the refugees and refute the allegation made by Thimphu. It would also strengthen the case of repatriation of the refugees. Internationalization has worked effectively in the case of Palestinians, Cambodian and earlier Yugoslavian cases. The international public opinion could definitely influence a realistic solution to political crisis in Bhutan.

### Bhutanese Foreign Policy and the Refugees

The current Bhutanese foreign policy is aimed at stalling

the repatriation process and to diffuse the sympathy of the international community for the pro-democracy movement in Bhutan. The entire Ministry of foreign Affairs and its diplomatic apparatus has launched a propaganda campaign against repatriation and democracy movement. The Permanent Representative of Bhutan to the United Nations in New York and in Geneva is actively campaigning against the repatriation process and the Bhutanese democracy movement. The Bhutanese government is seeking for a solution outside the country.

### Resettlement

The repatriation and resettlement of the refugees will be a serious problem since the government has actively followed a policy of resettlement (forced) and many of the northern Bhutanese people have settled in the lands belonging to the refugees in southern Bhutan. This will create a conflict situation if the refugees are repatriated. The government's aim is to force Nepal to accept the refugees. Bhutan argues that the refugees constitute only 0.5% of Nepal's population and Nepal should have no problem integrating them.

### Proposed Solutions for Repatriation of Refugees

**1. Categorization:** The faulty categorization of the refugees as agreed upon by Nepal and Bhutan in October 1993 should be replaced by a method of verification that is in accordance with standards, norms and principles international human rights. The refugees should also be consulted in formulating this new verification method.

**2. Mediation:** The mediation party should be acceptable to the host country and the refugees. The involvement of UNHCR and United Nations High Commission for Human Rights should be ensured during the verification of the refugees. As the first country of asylum the government of India should also be approached to mediate. The involvement of other international humanitarian agencies is also desirable.

**3. Refugee Representation:** In order to ensure that the interests of the refugees are adequately represented, the involvement of representatives from the refugee community is a must during the bilateral talks as well as the verification process.

**4. Setting a Deadline:** To prevent Bhutan from stalling or prolonging the bilateral negotiation process, a deadline for

meeting the objectives of the talk must be mutually agreed upon before the talks are held.

**5. Task Force:** Given the frequent changes in the government in Nepal, a high-powered task force should be formed to deal with the refugee issues. This body can serve as a think tank and provide guidelines for resolving the refugee crisis. The task force may substitute of four to five members and may be formed within a Ministry, for example, the Home Ministry.

**6. Internationalization:** If the government of Bhutan shows unwillingness to cooperate with Nepal in resolving the refugee crisis, Nepal should internationalize the issue and bring it up in the appropriate international forum including the United Nations. Nepal should also take it to the UN Human Rights Commission.

### Conclusion

Article 13 (2) of UDHR states that "everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own and to return to his country." However, this right has been clearly violated in the case of Bhutanese refugees. The Government of Bhutan has not shown any real interest in repatriating its citizens. Moreover, the existence of discriminatory laws and cultural policies that have been used to persecute the minorities have not been abolished. The government move to resettle non-Lhotshampas in southern Bhutan, retrenchment of the relatives of the refugees from civil service has consolidated its anti-refugee attitude. Bilateral talks have failed to produce any results for various reasons. The categorization of the refugees on the basis of Bhutanese Citizenship Laws is a major obstacle in resolving this crisis through bilateral talks. Furthermore, the failure of the Nepal government to take a firm stand has given Bhutan the chance to delay the repatriation process. The question of the safety of the refugees once they return home given the unaccommodating attitude of the Bhutanese government also looms large. Given the current unaccommodating attitude of the Bhutanese government there are two options for the resolution of the refugee crisis. The Bhutanese refugee issue could be resolved if democracy is established in Bhutan. Secondly, the Nepalese government should internationalize the issue and take it to the international community and donor countries to pressure Bhutan to take back its citizens.

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# Rohingya Refugees, Locals and the Passage to Unsettlement

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It is understood correctly that it is possible to downplay the argument as it is often upheld by the government and many a scholar on refugees, that the government and the police took over (albeit only to hand over the task to international aid/humanitarian agencies, including the UNHCR) simply because the number of refugees was too much for the ordinary citizens to handle. This, I like to contend, is true in so far as 'individual initiative' is concerned but not when it comes to include 'civil initiative'. The reason for the latter's failure or the limits it poses lies elsewhere.

But first let me briefly dwell on the subject of governmental takeover of the Rohingya issue and its rapid hand over to international aid/humanitarian agencies. It may be pointed out that even as late as January 1992, that is barely a month before the government approached the international community, including the UNHCR, for support, most reports indicated that the government was not doing enough for the refugees. While giving his reaction to the German news agency sometimes in the early part of January 1992, the local Member of Parliament, Shahjahan Chowdhury, lamented:

...the specter of starvation stalked the rows of refugee camps built and banked on Dhaka for tents and blankets but there has been no response.

It is interesting to see that within a month of the above report, without itself getting engaged in relief operation in any meaningful way, the government calls out

for international help (15 February 1992) and throughly governmentalizes the issue of Rohingya refugees.

Admittedly, 'individual initiative' could not have sustained such a large influx. But the point that I am making here is that 'civil initiative' never got off the ground. More importantly, and somewhat tragically, it never could! The reasons, although somewhat complex, are not so hard to understand.

Civil society in Bangladesh remains highly polarized and violent. This contributes to a situation of rigid partisanship, with each political party bitterly accusing the other, often without substantiating its own position. A CPB member, for instance, once remarked that the Rohingya issue was the result of an international conspiracy and that the terrorists from Kashmir and Afghanistan had taken shelter in Bangladesh! But then, CPB was not the only party harbouring such a position. Even the Awami League suggested something similar. To cite from a report filed by Farid Hossain and published in *The Daily Star* on 7 February 1992:

Parliamentary debate on the [Rohingya] situation brought to light certain new allegations from some opposition members. While Sheikh Hasina simply demanded a clear statement from the Foreign Minister if any foreign country or Rabita (an Islamic NGO) has set up any training camp in Chittagong Hill Tracts, her party member Tofiqul Alam was more specific in accusing Rabita Al Alam Islami of arming Rohingyas and training them. Farid Hossain then goes on to say: The issue of [Rohingya refugees] has

reached a point of confusion and suspicion. Thus the suggestion that an all-parliamentary delegation be sent to the area to assess the situation deserves serious thought.

Since the above was being debated in the parliament and not in a tea-stall or amongst friends, the statement made by the opposition members on the Rohingya issue merits serious consideration. Actually, there are two things here. Firstly, how far is Ukha or Teknaf (some of the places where refugees have taken shelter) from Dhaka that the members of Parliament are not being able to assess the situation 'properly' at all? Or, is it a manifestation of the Capital City-centrism that we have referred to earlier, implying that the border is too far away a thing for the members to consider with some seriousness?

Secondly, even if we consider that there is an element of truth in the allegation (although I must add that none of the members ever substantiated their claims), one needs to ponder whether the timing of the accusation was right. After all, by the first week of February 1992 (that is, at the time of the parliamentary debate), some 70,000 Rohingya refugees had already crossed the border and were living in dire conditions inside Bangladesh. It seems that the opposition, quite ironically like the government, was more concerned with the security dimension of the refugee flow than the plight of the refugees. Such insensitivity to the refugee issue on the part of political parties and that again, those in the opposition is shocking given Bangladesh's own experience in 1971.

There is also another dimension to partisanship in the context of refugees and that is, the use of the refugees, at least some of them, as voters. This is, indeed, something of an open secret in the border region. Many locals are of the opinion that they play a critical role in Union Parishad (local elections) not in national elections. Some even went on to point out that the chairman of Teknaf Sadar got elected by making some refugees voters.

Without judging the merit of this allegation, it can be said with some certainty that some of the refugees, albeit with the connivance of the local authority, became voters and participated in elections. As one resident of Kutupalong Camp confesses with the support of a local representative, I even got paid handsomely for becoming a voter.

Similarly AH of Kutupalong Camp and AJ of Nayapara Camp, both became voters with the active support of the local chairman, suggesting thereby that political parties play a formidable role in making refugees voters.

What could not be ascertained is the extent of the practice or more precisely, the exact number of such (if I am allowed to use the word) refugee voters. But even if we hold that the number of such refugee voters is not so great and hardly merits serious attention (which is marked contrast to some of the allegations made), the fact remains that political parties, particularly at local elections, are in the business of making refugees voters. Indeed, in the midst of the refugees' flight for refuge, the need for reproducing the power of political society, including the government, is never

lost in the minds and activities of the political parties. But then, other refugee-related activities are politicized as well.

Take the case of construction work, for instance. It has been alleged that since 'big money' is related to refugee work, the party in power (here the BNP) takes the opportunity to keep up its position by way of handing down the contracts of refugee-related construction to its members and supporters. It is quite likely that the opposition would resent such BNZ-ization of contracts and construction and start suspecting all kinds of sympathy or support of the ruling party for the refugees.

In order to gear up support at the local level, the pro-opposition RRAC has condemned the (BNP-led) RCC for harbouring Islamic fundamentalism and for trying to earn money by prolonging the stay of the Rohingya. To further catch the attention of the local people, it holds the Rohingyas directly responsible for the deforestation in the region. In this, incidentally, they were backed by the forest department, which claimed that till September 12 (1992) the refugees have destroyed forest resources worth Taka 740 million. But as Philip Gain goes on to say:

The refugees who collect fuelwood from the forest are unlikely to cut down big trees as claimed by the forest department. The big trees are usually cut by timber smugglers in collusion with corrupt forest officials. With nothing much to do save picketing, civil society falls back on the government and through the benevolence of the latter, on international aid/humanitarian agencies. Limits of civil response, however,

raised the specter of policing and confining the refugees. And this is something the Rohingya refugees have always dreaded for it only signalled the replacement of one kind of confinement with another. Indeed, it is in the midst of this policing and confinement that repatriation or rather a home journey to another kind of confinement and policing began. Out of the total 250,955 refugees, 229,591 have already been repatriated under the supervision of the UNHCR, incidentally to the same old life and living.

### In Lieu of Conclusion

In recording the somewhat tragic experience of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, one particular question loomed like a shadow, would the civil society have responded differently if the refugees had landed not in some far-off, peripheral border region but in the Capital City of Bangladesh? The question merits attention not only for disclosing the shocking apathy of the Dhaka-based civil and political groups, particularly in the beginning of the refugee influx, but more importantly in putting forward the contention that a country is informed not by an unformed civil society but by multi-formed civil societies. This is particularly important from the point of view of setting an agenda for recovering and reinventing the space and role of civil society with respect to refugees.

(This is an abridged version of a paper presented at a Refugee Conference in Amsterdam and Soesterberg recently. The author teaches International Relations at Dhaka University and is Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives.)

The topic of our next issue is: **Mastanocracy**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Intiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Center For Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: intiaz@bnagla.net