

Refugees in South Asia and Impact on Regional Security

-By Nishchal Nath Pandey

When nowhere seems safe,
And it's the only place you can go.
When nothing makes sense,
And it's the only thing you know.
When the fear is so much it hurts,
And the pain just can't be healed.
When your life is no longer yours,
And your home no longer anywhere.
When all you can do is run and not look back,
And hope that someone cares !

- Louise Allcock

Background:

History of mankind is repeatedly interspersed with mass expulsions of people forced to flee from famine, wars, revolutions and natural disasters. Early examples of the movement of refugees around the world in considerable number include the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors from Spain in the late 15th century, the flights from religious persecutions to the New World in the 16th and the 17th centuries and the exodus of the émigrés in the French revolution. The 20th century witnessed the greatest of refugee flows than at any point of history. The partisan of India, breakup of the Ottoman Empire, creation of Israel and Bangladesh, civil wars in Sudan and Nigeria, independence of Algeria, westward surge of the Polish after World War II, Paraguayans settling in Argentina, Ugandans in Kenya, Jews from Arab nations to Israel the list can go on and on and is likely to extend into the future¹.

However, until the 20th century there was little or no methodical attempt to help refugees for either repatriating them to the place of origin or for their re-settlement. Clearly, it seems that the refugee problem is older than the concept and the definition of the refugees. After the First World War, international organizations were created to give

¹ Martin Ira Glassner, *Political Geography* (John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2nd edition, 1996) pp. 635-636. See also Ineke Haen Marshall (ed.) *Minorities, Migrants and Crime* (Sage Publications, London 1997).

assistance and finally in 1921 the League of Nations appointed Fridtjof Nansen its high commissioner for refugee work. Later the International Labor Organization and the Nansen International Office for Refugees took charge. Nansen effected repatriation wherever possible by even arranging 'Nansen Passports' which gave the holder the right to move around freely. But the Second World War further displaced civilian populations in huge numbers. At the War's end the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) had the responsibility of caring some 8 million "displaced persons". With the end of UNRRA, the UN created the International Refugee Organization to carry on its work. Since 1951, the office of the UNHCR has coordinated international activities and worked for independent solutions. Despite its best efforts, there are approximately 22 million refugees in the world today.

In the last 50 years, there has been an increase in awareness in both scholarship as well as pedagogy to the complexities of the movements of people, caused by varied reasons ranging from "forced booting out" by oppressive regimes to ethnic or political violence and colossal natural calamity as well as economic chaos. Economic globalization and the end of the Cold War meant to be "a liberal humane place, with liquid nationalism" have furthermore led to the steady rise in cross-border flows since 1990. With a host of intra-state conflicts centering around ethnicity, separatism and religion; mass exodus of people living in make-shift huts have become a stark reality of the New World Order. According to the World refugee Survey, 2003 published by the U.S. Committee for Refugees, "Afghanistan, Palestine, Myanmar, Sudan, Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Vietnam, Somalia, and Iraq are the top ten principal sources of refugees". Just when this paper was being written, the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in the Greater Darfur region of Sudan, where a violent conflict has been raging since early 2003 has resulted in thousands of people dead as a direct or indirect consequence of the on-going conflict. About 2 million people - a third of the entire population of the Darfur region - are badly affected. 1,000,000 people have been displaced within Sudan and approximately 200,000 people have fled across the border into Chad. Serious violations

of human rights have been reported by the UN and human rights organizations and observers warn that the humanitarian situation may only get worse².

There are through various routes that security can be threatened by refugees or by migratory movements - when refugees or migrants work against the regime of their home country, when they pose social, economic or cultural threat to the host country, or even when the host country uses them as instruments to threaten the home country.³ Nowadays, grave humanitarian consequences of the failure of state capacity to protect and assist its own citizens can also lead to outside intervention. There is a growing tendency to link "sovereignty" with "responsibility."⁴

Case of South Asia:

The case of South Asia is poignant, pertinent and problematic. The largest migration of South Asians occurred in 1947, accompanying the partition of India into two nations - India and Pakistan on the basis of religion. In the nine months between August 1947 and the spring of the following year, by unofficial counts, at least 18 million people were forced to flee their homes and become refugees; at least a million were killed in communal violence.⁵ In the later years, the plight of the growing millions of refugees in South Asia is swamping the resources of their host countries as well as those of the UNHCR. All South Asian countries involved suffer from overpopulation and extreme poverty. Refugees who have been dispossessed but are returning to their homeland-as in Afghanistan-are inevitably in need of assistance but their own countries and the U.N do not have sufficient resources.

With multifarious causes of refugee origination not mitigated, South Asia hosts one of the world's largest numbers of refugees even today. This phenomenon has created the

² "EU Humanitarian Aid for Greater Darfur-Sudan" ><http://europa-eu-un.org><

³ Warren Zimmermann, "Migrants and Refugees: A Threat to Security?" in Michael S. Teitelbaum and Myron Weiner (eds.) *Threatened Peoples-Threatened Borders* (Universal Book Traders 1995) p. 90

⁴ Read, *The Responsibility to Protect* "Report of The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty" (International Development Research Centre publisher, Dec. 2001)

⁵ See Patrik French, *Liberty or Death: India's Journey to Independence and Division*. (London: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1997). See also Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan India 1983)

following problems [*either to the refugee generating or the refugee hosting country*] that pose as one of the greatest sources of non-traditional threat to security in the region:

- Economic burden
- Political complexities
- Diplomatic pressures and embarrassment
- Legal challenges
- Environmental degradation
- Sociological and psychological impact
- Rise in drug abuse/prostitution/unemployment/petty crimes
- Rise in tension among various ethnic and religious groups
- Adverse affect on law and order

"[Therefore] with the expansion of the concept of security, refugees today are regarded as a source of non-military threat to national security. While scholars and policy makers have devoted time and resources to the study of refugees *per se*, not much work has been done on the implications of the presence of the refugees on the security of the state that hosts them."⁶ This is further accentuated by the wicked fact that the "state" in South Asia and its "authority" has not yet solidified itself and both the "state" and "nation-building processes" continue to generate turmoil and displacement. Therefore, while proper analysis of the links of insecurity and refugee inflows inside South Asian states needs to be properly carried out, it has to be understood also that the refugees themselves are products of conflict and insecurity situations and their presence further exacerbate conflict, tension and insecurity.

The actual security implication of the refugee movements need to be assessed *apropos* to the refugee generating [home state], the refugee receiving [the host state], and external aspects of home and the host states' security. "The home state, by driving its citizens out,

⁶ Suba Chandran, "Refugees in South Asia: Security Threat or a Security Tool" in P.R Chari, Mallika Joseph, Suba Chandran (eds.) *Missing Boundaries* (Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 2003) p. 151

exposes itself to international criticism and embarrassment, pressures and even intervention for atrocities on its own people. Whereas, the security implications of the refugees in the host country are far-reaching and multi-dimensional evident both in relations to internal and external security."⁷ This trend is witnessed in a four-way traffic of the refugees i.e. movement within the region; movement from the region; movement into the region; and movement within the country of domicile.

On the other hand, a major problem is that a maximum number of refugees in South Asia have been absorbed inside the region itself. The refugee management process in the region is not uniform and there have been shifts in terms of policy framework and strategy to mitigate its adverse impacts on the society, its polity, economy and the environment. Three factors-humanitarian, economic responsibility and national security-largely shape state's attitudes in either accepting or declining the refugees but interestingly all South Asian countries adopt haphazard and *ad hoc* policies on this intricate issue. The realization that refugees are people, they need family support and reunion and that they too need freedom, seldom dawns in the outlook of the refugee generating countries and the end result is delay and separation, and a useless life in pitiable conditions behind barbed wire.

Generally, a comparable illustration can be cited of the impact of refugees in individual South Asian states i.e. effect on the economy (*which even otherwise faces difficulty in sustaining its own populace*), a bearing on the law and order situation of these countries (*which even without these refugees is prone to violence and perpetual disturbance*), impact on the overall political situation of these countries (*which remains murky and unstable*), and the general pressure on the environment that sends off-shoots to the region as a whole. Whereas identical consequences of the general impact of the refugees inside South Asian countries has been a hallmark, it occasionally leads also to strained bilateral relations affecting overall regional accord and harmony.⁸ With easy availability of small arms, landmines and explosives to fuel armed movements by refugees, the presence of

⁷ S.D Muni and Lok Raj Baral (eds.) *Refugees and Regional Security in South Asia* (RCSS, Colombo 1996) p. 24

⁸ Read Nishchal Nath Pandey "Security in South Asia: A Future Perspective" in *Future of South Asia: A New Generational Perspective* (IFA/FES, Kathmandu 2004)

large scale "idle minds" in one's territory always produce unease rather than sympathy among governments of the host countries.

Refugee Condition in South Asian States:

The UNHCR definition of refugees states that "[they] are people who flee their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. A refugee either cannot return home or is afraid to do so".⁹ Additionally, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has developed into a major trouble for at least some of the South Asian countries like Nepal.

India:

According to one estimate, some 3, 45,000 refugees were living in India alone at the beginning of 2002, that included: 1,44,000 from Sri Lanka, 110,000 from TAR - China, 52,000 from Myanmar, 15,000 from Bhutan, 12,000 from Afghanistan and 5,000 to 20,000 from Bangladesh¹⁰, and nearly 300 from other countries. Additionally, refugees from Chin state in Myanmar have been fleeing to Mizoram in India since 1988. In early 2003, their number in Mizoram rose to 50,000. These Chin refugees face the danger of being either expelled or arrested unlike those from Sri Lanka or Tibet Autonomous Region, whom India protects as refugees.¹¹

Being the largest country in the region, the second most populous nation in the world with porous border and also being a democracy, India has had to receive the inflow of refugees from any given conflict situation around the region. Its democratic credentials, a free and an open polity and media inspire political activists fighting for democracy to live

⁹ see UNHCR website >www.unhcr.org<

¹⁰ Bangladeshi economic migrants in India is estimated to be about 12 million according to Minister of State for Home Affairs of India Sriprakash Jaiswal. Read: "The Bangla Bogey" *The Times of India*, (July 29, 2004) p. 12

¹¹ Chin refugees come under "Government of India's Foreigners Act-1946" which makes no distinction between illegal immigrants and refugees.

inside India and struggle for their cause. Others from poverty stricken places are enthused to take-up low wage jobs in Indian cities. However, there is always a sizeable section in India that is opposed to welcoming refugees from outside worrying unemployment, scarce resources, poor law and order situation in Indian states which is further complicated by refugees from other countries.

Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka began fleeing to India in 1983 when violence broke out between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. Although, many of the refugees have been repatriated over the years, at present 61,000 are living in 103 government run camps in Tamil Nadu. An additional 20,000 refugees live outside the camp. Since the outbreak of hostilities in Sri Lanka, several lakh Muslim Tamils have fled the island. As of mid-1999, approximately 66,000 were housed in 133 refugee camps in south India, another 40,000 lived outside the Indian camps, and more than 200,000 Tamils have sought refuge in America, Canada and other western countries. Following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the refugees have restrictions on their freedom of movement and are treated with some degree of suspicion by local police. The refugee camps have been moved away from the coastal areas to isolated interior regions so as to prevent contact amongst refugees between different camps.

With the ceasefire and the initiation of peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the security situation in Sri Lanka has improved considerably. Tourism is up and the economy too is growing. Several thousands of refugees have returned perhaps accounting to nearly 10 percent. But, the refugees are not convinced that the ceasefire will hold. Plus there is fear of the LTTE which still recruits child soldiers and since most of their homes lie in high security zones occupied by the Sri Lankan Army, returning back does possess certain degree of nervousness among these refugees.¹²

Seasonal economic migrants, criss-cross the Indo-Nepal open border regularly from both sides. Today there is a large number of Nepalese settlers from the Maoist affected areas of rural Nepal in India, the official numbers of them being unknown. Human trafficking

¹² "Sri Lankan Refugees in India: Hesitant to Return" >www.refintl.org<

mainly the trafficking of Nepalese girls for prostitution in major Indian towns such as Mumbai and Delhi is yet another pestering problem for both India and Nepal.

Pakistan

Pakistan has certainly been a generous host to the Afghan refugees for much of the 2 decades. During its war with the then Soviet Union (1979-89), one-third of Afghanistan's people fled the country, with Pakistan and Iran sheltering a combined peak of more than 6 million refugees. By early 2000, 2 million Afghan refugees still remained in Pakistan and about 1.4 million in Iran. It was cited in a recently conducted survey that in Peshawar - a city of 1 million people 35 miles from the border in the northwest of Pakistan, there were four times more Afghans than Pakistanis; another 40,000 Afghans live in refugee camps south of the city. Nevertheless, since the defeat of the Taliban, the U.N. plans to help at least 1 million Afghans return. More than two million Afghans who fled from Taliban oppression to neighboring Iran and Pakistan have already been repatriated.¹³ In the mid-90s, Pakistan became increasingly hostile to those fleeing from Afghanistan because of sociological, environmental, political, and more importantly financial reasons. After 9/11, Pakistan also had to keep a closer vigil on extremist elements especially in the bordering towns and villages with a substantial Afghani refugee population.¹⁴ There are about 2 hundred thousand who fled to Pakistan during the U.S. led bombing campaign in 2001.

However, the real problem is that even after they return home; lack of education, dearth of financial resources, lack of safety, and the slow pace of reconstruction of their country make it difficult for Afghans to earn their daily living. Afghanistan has been particularly unfortunate to harbor one of the largest numbers of illiterate populace owing to the long-standing conflict and *warlordism* hence, generates refugees unintentionally.

¹³ source >www.irinnews.org<

¹⁴ Read for instance, "President Musharraf says Terror will be Crushed", *Dawn* (August 14, 2004)

Nepal

At the beginning of the 90s, Bhutan adopted a discriminatory policy and started expelling thousands of its citizens of Nepalese origin out of its territory that has led to one of the worst humanitarian cataclysms in this part of the sub-continent. These *Lhotsampas* had been living in Bhutan for generations and also owned houses, land and other property in Southern Bhutan. They had contributed significantly to the economic development of Bhutan but were victimized by the authorities for their alleged role in the pro-democracy movement of 1990.¹⁵ India too, which has compassionately harbored thousands of refugees from other countries was unkind particularly to the *Lhotsampas*. [Today] "The Bhutanese refugee problem is no longer a bilateral issue between Nepal and Bhutan. Nepal provided them shelter on humanitarian ground as they entered Nepal's territory through Indian territory more than 12 years ago. India was, thus, the first entry point of asylum for refugees from Bhutan. This crisis can be resolved with Indian cooperation [which] as an emerging great power and also a regional power, is a common friend of both Nepal and Bhutan. It should help its small neighbors in tackling this long lingering issue through its good offices".¹⁶

However, in the last 12 years, the issue of the Bhutanese refugees has remained a very ticklish, complex and a challenging problem in Nepal-Bhutan relations. Nepal has tried its best to utilize all available avenues for solving this humanitarian problem in a peaceful manner so that the refugees could go back to their motherland with honor and dignity. "The random exodus of Bhutanese refugees into the kingdom of Nepal has been a box of contention and has created [constant] uneasiness between the two countries."¹⁷ Nepalese leaders and officials have been trying to impress upon Bhutan the need for arriving at a

¹⁵ Nishchal Nath Pandey, "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: Trouble to the Host" in Vandana A. and Ashok C. Shukla (eds.) *Security in South Asia: Trends and Directions* (APH Publishing Corp. Delhi, 2004), p. 155. Read also, D.N.S Dhakal and Christopher Strawn, *Bhutan: A Movement in Exile* (Nirala Publishers, New Delhi, 1994) and Mathew Joseph C. *Ethnic Conflict in Bhutan* (Nirala Publishers, New Delhi 1999)

¹⁶ Mohan P. Lohani, in "Five Questions" *The Telegraph Weekly* (August 4th 2004)

¹⁷ Biswo Pradhan, "*Diplomatic Strategy for Nepal*" (Mrs. Durga Devi Pradhan publisher, Kathmandu, 2003) p. 135

durable and lasting solution of the problem through bilateral negotiations. Despite efforts to arrive at a solution through the bilateral process, the issue has become internationalized.¹⁸ Newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Nepal James F. Moriarty has recently said in an interview that the question of the repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees is very important as people are not meant to live their entire lives inside refugee camps. "The United States which gives 25 percent of the total assistance provided to the refugee camps obviously has economic stake to settle the problem and close down the camps", he has stressed.¹⁹ The United States has additionally put pressure on the Druk government of Bhutan for the resolution of the Bhutanese refugee problem.²⁰

Nepal and Bhutan - both kingdoms, land-locked and both situated in almost the same politico/geographic reality in between India and China have many things in common on the basis of which bilateral relations can be strengthened in the areas of tourism, trade, culture, sports, intellectual exchanges, etc. The people to people contact between the two kingdoms have been going on since time immemorial and it is this bond of cultural and religious affinity that needs to be nurtured in the days ahead. One such interesting illustration of the intimate relations between the two kingdoms is evident from a paragraph of a famous memoir of Yab Ugyen Dorji, father of the 4 queens of Bhutan. In his memoir, "*Of Rainbows and Clouds*" (written by HM Queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk), Mr. Dorji recollects that during the restoration of *Sangchhoekar dzong* in Bhutan, the central idol of Guru Rimpoche on the first floor of the *Utse* was under the patronage of the queens themselves. The head and hands of the idols were refined by silversmiths in Bhutan and the brass work was done in Kathmandu closely supervised by his wife's uncle.

"As a predominantly Buddhist country, Bhutan sees many of its people going to Nepal and India on pilgrimage as many holy sites for Buddhists include Bodhgaya and Lumbini are in [these countries]. Bhutanese pilgrims maybe encouraged to visit these places so

¹⁸ *Report on Nepal's Foreign Affairs 2002-2003*, (Institute of Foreign Affairs, Kathmandu, March 2004).

¹⁹ "Perspective" *The Spotlight newsmagazine*, Vol. 24. No. 33 (July 23-24, 2004)

²⁰ Dev Raj Dahal, "Effects of War on Nepal" >www.fesportal.fes.de<

that appreciation for culture and history of another country is increased."²¹ However, this complicated issue of the refugees needs to be resolved without further delay. Dilly-dallying, indecision, and a deliberate game of buying time on the part of Thimpu with the hope of forever shelving this core issue might actually fan the flame of frustration among the refugees who are one hundred thousand in number, are idle and situated near the strategically important chicken-neck area of India.²² If these idle minds out of utter impatience or exasperation join hands with the Maoists or with numerous outfits fighting for varied causes in North Eastern India, the whole sub-region will be up in flames. In such an unwanted scenario, Bhutan will find itself to blame for the sheer disregard to the complexity of the problem and indifference to the need towards swiftly arriving at a lasting solution. "While, there does not appear to be a danger of a full-blown conflict breaking out, between them [Bhutan and Nepal], the tensions that arise from the ethnic divide are a source of perennial concern."²³

Even so, until the issue is amicably resolved, Nepal will continue to face tremendous economic, political, sociological, environmental and cultural bearing arising because of the Bhutanese refugees at a time when the Maoist insurgency has crippled its national economy and diverted the attention of its security apparatus. Hence, not only for India and Nepal but for Bhutan too, which has recently embarked on a course of sustainable economic development by harnessing its natural resources whereupon its per capita income has risen manifold in the last decade; a lasting solution of this refugee entangle would mean a relief from international pressures, an end to serial negative newscasts in foreign media and a cessation of strained bilateral relations with Nepal.

An estimated 20,000 Tibetan refugees in Nepal arrived between 1959 and 1989. At the end of 1989, Nepal stopped registering Tibetan refugees. Of the remaining registered refugees, some 12,000 live in Kathmandu's Bouddha or in Pokhara, Baglung, and other places. China considers these refugees as illegal immigrants. It has been a consistent

²¹ Tashi Choden, "Security Problems of Bhutan: Confidence Building Measures" in Mohammad Humayun Kabir (ed.) *Confidence Building Measures and Security Cooperation in South Asia: Challenges in the New Century*, BISS, Dhaka (2002) p. 179

²² Read "SOS from Kathmandu", *The Times of India*, (July 6, 2004) p. 16

²³ Satish Nambiar, "Promoting Transparency and Cooperation in the Region: Role of Regional Research Institutions" in Dipankar Banerjee (ed.) *South Asian Security: Futures* (RCSS 2002) p. 153

policy of Nepal that Tibet is an integral part of China. Sino-Nepal relations in political, economic and cultural spheres has grown from heights to heights since diplomatic relations was established in 1955. Occasionally, Nepal faces criticism from the U.S and some European countries as regards to its Tibetan refugee policy. For instance, expressing her dismay that the Government of Nepal deported 18 Tibetan refugees who fled on April, 2003 Senator Feinstein from California announced her intention to withdraw her sponsorship of legislation she had introduced to grant duty-free status to Nepalese garments in the United States. Nepal's Foreign Secretary Madhuraman Acharya during his visit to Washington on July 2003 discussed on the bill granting duty-free and quota-free access for Nepalese garments in the American market with Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman and Assistant Secretary of State Christina B. Rocca. He also met a number of Senators and Congressmen of Nepal's interest to lobby for the bill. The negative publicity about Nepal which had grown considerably in America following the refugee controversy was much subdued after Acharya's visit.

Bangladesh:

Bangladesh has had a lion's share of the refugee problem in South Asia. A country which once every other year faces the wrath of mother-nature in the feature of flood, torrent and drought also has to take care of the diverse implications emanating from the refugees' crux. About 250,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in late 1991 and early 1992. Many of these 250,000 Burmese that first came have been repatriated back to Myanmar. By the end of 2003, fewer than 20,000 remain. But, there is a strained relation between local inhabitants and the Rohingya.²⁴ These Rohingyas haven't received recognition as refugees from the Bangladeshi government and are considered to be illegal economic immigrants in search of work. In spite of the appalling conditions, the refugees prefer living in the slum than going back to Myanmar.

In the mid-1980s, Muslim settlers' appropriation of land belonging to ethnic minorities in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region had caused some 64,000 Chakma, to flee to India and more than 60,000 others to become internally displaced. In December

²⁴ >www.refugeesinternational.org<

1997, the government signed a peace accord that ended a 25-year conflict which paved the way for the repatriation of the entire refugees. Despite provisions in the accord for the “rehabilitation” of both the refugees and the internally displaced, the situation of the more than 60,000 Chakma who had become internally displaced during the previous three decades remained unresolved at the end of 2001.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

IDPs are the single largest population at risk in the world. An estimated 20 to 25 million persons have been forcibly displaced within the territories of over 50 countries due to violent conflicts and resulting human rights violations (conflict-induced) or by natural disasters or development projects (development-induced). With around 13 million, Africa has more IDPs than the rest of the world put together.

"Unlike refugees, IDPs are not covered by any kind of international conventions or protocols. What is available is only the *"Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement"* that identifies specific needs of internally displaced persons and their rights and guarantees relevant to the protection of persons from forced displacement and their protection and assistance during displacement as well as during return or resettlement and reintegration. As the title suggests, these Principles are only for "guidance" and therefore not obligatory. Definitely, IDPs fall within the ambit of international humanitarian law and the national law of the state concerned. However, these legal provisions cannot be properly enforced due to the lack of any legal instrument for IDPs."²⁵

An estimated 157,000 persons of various ethnicities were displaced in several states in Northeast India, a geographically and politically isolated area that is home to many tribal groups. Once sparsely populated, Northeast India's population has swelled with the arrival of millions of ethnic Bengali Hindus and Muslims from Bangladesh and from India's West Bengal State in recent decades. Population growth has led to competition for land and jobs, and has also given rise to tension among various minority ethnic groups. Those tensions gave rise to ethnic and politically based insurgencies causing widespread

²⁵ N. Manoharan, *"Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) : An Overview"* >www.ipcs.org<

displacement. More than 500,000 people are today internally displaced in India from Kashmir to the Northeast.²⁶

Displacement has also occurred within Sri Lanka at various periods of history. Since 1983 the number has increased manifold. The IDPs unlike the refugees belong to all three ethnic groups - Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim. Displacement of the majority Sinhala population has been in Tamil majority areas.

In Bangladesh, it is estimated that in the direct aftermath of the general elections of 2002, an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 Bangladeshi Hindus and other minorities fled to India to escape Bangladesh's post-election violence against the minorities. An unknown number of Hindus, perhaps as many as 200,000, became internally displaced.

In Nepal, due to the on-going Maoist insurgency, a growing number of Nepalese from rural areas have taken shelter either in cities like Kathmandu, Nepalgunj, Biratnagar and Pokhara or to India in order to save themselves and their family from violence. Especially the people from the mid-west of Nepal owing to food shortages, economic bedlam and unpredictable security situation have sold off/abandoned their property in their villages and begun to re-settle in other areas. As a direct consequence, property prices in major cities have soared up. People fleeing the conflict and insecurity have tended to move among urban and economic migrants, amid continued urbanization and traditional migration patterns from rural areas to urban centers, or emigration to India.²⁷ The government has formed a nine-member task force recently led by Vice-Chairman of the National Planning Commission, Dr. Shankar Sharma to carry out a detailed study, and

²⁶ See >www.refugees.org<

²⁷The population of 12 municipalities of Nepal grew by 5.2% over the last two years, compared to 3.6% between 1991 and 2001, according to a survey gathered by an UNDP-Rural-Urban Partnership Programme conducted in 12 municipalities in 2002. This represents an increase of 80,000 rural-urban migrants in the last two years.

submit a report for providing relief to internally displaced persons (IDPs).²⁸ Although no one knows the exact figures, it has been roughly estimated that more than 100,000 people have been internally displaced in Nepal owing to the Maoist insurgency that started in 1996. But these IDPs remain largely unrecognized; receiving little assistance to cope with their displacement. Young people in particular have been uprooted from the countryside by the effects of war. Moving to cities, with families in rural areas or migrating to India, conditions for IDPs vary greatly. Displaced children in cities appear to be some of the worst affected.²⁹

Conclusion:

The strategy adopted till now by refugee hosting states in South Asia has been to try and engage the home state in negotiations to resolve the refugee impasse'. However, most of the time, bilateral negotiations are tedious, laborious and complex processes that take years even decades to reach to an amicable and an honorable arrangement. The refugees themselves are seldom represented in these negotiations. South Asia needs to focus on ways to prevent refugee flows by either political or economic means rather than pondering on what to do once the refugees are already settled in their respective territories. Nevertheless, preventive measures are not likely to succeed without regional mechanisms. It would hence be useful if SAARC would be formally involved in this process and not bilateralism rather a regional structure in order to deal with this humanitarian cataclysm in a comprehensive manner would prove useful. Although, SAARC does not permit "bilateral and contentious issues" to be brought into its agenda, what has to be understood is that almost all South Asian countries are affected in one way or the other by the presence of refugees/illegal immigrants and would collectively benefit by their regional organization getting involved into this issue. People have historically moved to places where there is safety and economic opportunity. Managing the refugee crises therefore has much to do with effectively managing the overall state and regional security.

²⁸ The Kathmandu Post (August 9, 2004) p. 1

²⁹ >www.reliefweb.int<