

ISAS Insights

No. 17 – Date: 19 December 2006

Institute of South Asian Studies
Hon Sui Sen Memorial Library Building
1 Hon Sui Sen Drive (117588)
Tel : 65164239 Fax: 67767505
Email : isasijie@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



BHUTANESE AND TIBETAN REFUGEES IN NEPAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

Nishchal N. Pandey*

BACKGROUND

1. The condition of the 100,000 Bhutanese refugees currently stranded in the seven makeshift camps in eastern Nepal is getting precarious with each passing day. For the last 15 years, there have been little progress in the repatriation of these refugees of Nepalese origin as well efforts to improve the conditions in their camps, particularly relating to proper sanitation, drinking water, safety and in meeting basic daily needs. It is evident that the political instability in Nepal and the dilly-dallying tactics adopted by Thimpu have caused insurmountable trouble to the refugees. The Druk regime wants to deliberately buy time and wait for the refugees to forget about going back to southern Bhutan. Kathmandu, on the other hand, has been engrossed with its own internal troubles that the issue has remained on the backburner for a considerable length of time.
2. With 15 governments in 15 years, Nepal's approach towards Bhutan on this issue has been subject to frequent review of approaches and positions. Its bureaucrats seem to be worn out by the countless rounds of negotiations with their Bhutanese counterparts. A new ray of hope emerged in November 2006

* Nishchal N. Pandey is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore. He is the Executive Director of the Kathmandu-based Institute of Foreign Affairs. He can be contacted at isasnnp@nus.edu.sg.

when Ms Ellen Sauerbrey, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for Refugee Affairs, said that, “the United States can take in 50,000 to 60,000 refugees within the next three to four years.” Almost immediately, Canada, Australia and some European countries also indicated their willingness to resettle the remaining refugees in their countries.

3. In addition to the Bhutanese, there are more than 20,000 Tibetan refugees in Nepal. The Refugee Welfare Office situated in Kathmandu began operation after the Dalai Lama fled into exile to India in 1959, and has helped to ensure the safety and well-being of tens of thousands of Tibetans crossing into Nepal from Tibet, many of them on their way to India and the United States. However, it has been a standard policy of Nepal not to call them “refugees” but rather citizens of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, “illegally” entering into Nepal. The Refugee Welfare Office has occasionally been shut down and re-registration denied, following pressures from China.
4. Hundreds of Tibetans risk their lives to cross the Himalayan range into Nepal every year. Most of them arrive in need of emergency medical care due to high altitude and freezing conditions while others are arrested mid-way through their journey. Sometimes, the Nepal government hands them over to the Chinese police which results in strong criticism from the western countries and human rights organisations. A new controversy arose on 30 September 2006 when Chinese border troops opened fire at a caravan of 73 Tibetans fleeing to Nepal through the Nangla Pass in the Himalayas. A Romanian film crew on its way to the Mount Everest and Mount Makalu region recorded the shootings.

CHALLENGE FOR NEPAL

5. Crippled with the destruction caused by the bloody Maoist insurgency which has taken 13,000 lives since 1996, Nepal has the additional burden of harbouring refugees from the neighbouring countries. Jhapa and Morang that shelter the Bhutanese refugees are considered the two most politically volatile

districts of the country. The refugees entered Nepal through India in the early 1990s as Nepal and Bhutan do not share a border with each other. At times, the refugees forcefully have tried to do the same in their quest to go back to their rightful motherland. On 3 August 2005, about 300 refugees from Beldangi Camps I, II and III moved towards the Mechi Bridge in the Indo-Nepal border. They were led by Mr S. B. Subba (Chairman, Human Rights Organization of Bhutan) and others from the Bhutan Gorkha National Liberation Front. There was a stone-throwing incident and three journalists were injured as the refugees were not allowed to cross into Indian territory by the Sashastra Seema Bala, India's para-military force. This incident naturally exposed the double-standard policy adopted by India concerning the Bhutanese refugees while greatly embarrassing Thimpu as the clash at the Indo-Nepal border received international media coverage.

6. It might be recalled that, according to the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949, India looks after the defence and foreign affairs of Bhutan. It wishes to see an early settlement of this issue as Jhapa is close to the 'chicken-neck' area in which a tiny piece of Indian territory separates the northeast from the rest of the country. There are reports of the formation of a Bhutan Communist Party (Maoist) and its budding association with like-minded groups throughout the red corridor that stretches from Nepal to Andhra Pradesh in India.
7. There are deep frustrations as the second generation of refugees, now in their teens, is keen for an armed struggle rather than "wasting time" in dialogue or negotiations. In fact, radicalisation may take different forms. Many refugees are encouraged from the success of the Nepalese Maoists while others want to shake hands with separatist groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom. The million-strong Nepali Diaspora in India can also turn sympathetic to the cause of their fellow brethren in Bhutan. A sub-region that is already unstable due to several ethnic and separatist movements could turn explosive if the Bhutanese refugee problem is not resolved as soon as possible.
8. In this rather precarious environment, the recent American assurance to accommodate 60,000 refugees surprised everyone. Immediately, a group of

Bhutanese refugees appealed to the Nepali government to speed up the implementation procedures regarding the United States' proposal of relocating them to its shores. This group of refugees issued a joint statement saying that a total of 399 families inside the camps were willing to submit applications for relocation. But the refugee leaders were more cautious in their approach. They termed the United States' statement "unclear" and saw a conspiracy to sideline the main issue of repatriation by taking the refugees away from Nepal. Refugee leader Mr D. P. Kafle said that influential countries should rather help the refugees return to their own homeland rather than transferring them to distant places. In addition, as has been remarked several times by Mr Abraham Abraham, the resident coordinator of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Nepal, the economic burden of providing food to the refugees is huge but the donor support has been shrinking in the last few years.

9. The process of relocating such a large number of people who neither have a passport or any other form of travel document requires substantial resources and manpower increase in the United States' mission in Kathmandu. Also, there are concerns on what these mostly illiterate and ageing refugees will do if they are taken to America.

10. At the same time, analysts are curious about the United States' motives behind this charitable gesture. It may possibly be an American design to enter into Bhutan's domestic affairs as it is the only South Asian country with which the United States does not have diplomatic relations. Harboring 60,000 Bhutanese in the United States will provide it with considerable leverage in dealing with India, Nepal, Bhutan and even TAR (China) in the coming years and will place itself strongly among the community of nations in the Himalayan range. Lately, the United States has also shown interest for an observer status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation just like China and Japan. Of course, it could also just simply be a humanitarian assistance initiative on the part of the United States, keeping in mind the concerns of the UNHCR. In an efforts to placate the growing anxiety among the diplomatic community on the United States' motives, American envoy in

Kathmandu, Mr Jim Moriarty, stated that since refugee camps are “witnessing terrorist activism which could affect north-eastern India, we are trying to help India.”

11. Regardless of what happens in the next round of negotiations between Nepal and Bhutan, it is clear that India’s role in settling this dispute between its two squabbling neighbours will be most crucial. It has considerable influence over both the Himalayan kingdoms and it would not like to see further mishandling of this problem. Will India be positive towards the relocation proposal thereby internationalising this crisis or will it still push for a bilateral settlement of the dispute among Nepal and Bhutan themselves? Veteran Indian journalist Mr Kuldeep Nayar recently criticised the indifferent attitude of both Delhi and Thimpu on this problem and said that, “it would be better if nations can set examples on how to live together rather than embarking on ethnic cleansing”. Allowing these refugees to go to America and western countries will place them on the same level as their Tibetan counterparts, thereby attracting significant international media attention. Letting them languish in the camps for an unlimited time will invite conflict in an area that has no shortage of insurrections. Both alternatives point to potential dangers in the coming years if India itself does not tactfully impress upon both countries to end this impasse once and for all.

OUTPOURING OF TIBETAN REFUGEES: UPSETTING THE DRAGON

12. Of the estimated 131,000 Tibetans living outside Tibet, there are 100,000 in India, 25,000 in Nepal, 2,000 each in Bhutan and Switzerland, 600 in Canada and 1,500 in the United States. Under a “gentleman’s agreement” between Nepal and the UNHCR, Tibetans arriving in Kathmandu are permitted to transit safely through Nepal. Most refugees are then transferred to the government-in-exile set up by the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in northern India, while others apply for visa for the United States and its embassy in Kathmandu provides them with the travel permit. Those who prefer to live in Nepal enter the lucrative carpet-weaving business whereas others open up

lodges and hotels. Most of the hotels in Boudha or Thamel area of Kathmandu are run by Tibetans. This has been the established pattern for the last half a century.

13. It is only when the refugees begin engaging in anti-China activities that irate the Nepal government. With nudges from Beijing, the Nepali administration sometimes hands over identified activists in the guise of refugees to the Chinese police and even closes down the Refugee Welfare Office like it did in January 2005. Immediately after the closure, Mr Brad Adams, Asia Director of the Human Rights Watch, said, “The Refugee Welfare Office has been a critical safety net for tens of thousands of persecuted Tibetans. Closing the office leaves thousands of Tibetan refugees without crucial support. It is unclear how the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which has worked closely with the Tibetan Refugee Welfare office, can continue its activities in support of Tibetan refugees in Nepal.”
14. The government’s notice of closure stated that the office was not properly registered under the Nepali law as Tibetan refugees in Nepal do not have the right to register associations or institutions in their name. Despite these stringent measures, sometimes the Nepal government itself gets caught by surprise such as in the case of the fleeing Karmappa Lama in 2000 where he was supposed to have used a helicopter from within its territory and then travelled to India where he still lives in exile. The incident, while greatly embarrassing Beijing, proved that Nepal remains an easy entry and exit point from Tibet. As such, an unfriendly regime in Kathmandu could wreck China’s tight grip over TAR (China).
15. Similarly, in June 2003, Nepal handed back escaping refugees to China and received international condemnation including that from the United States senators, the State Department, the European Union parliamentarians and the UNHCR itself. Human rights organisations, in criticising the action said, “It has set a frightening precedent for the treatment of Tibetans trying to flee to safety.” However, one can understand Nepal walking on a tight rope – squeezed by two giants on either side; it has to tread carefully in between

major international powers, donor countries and multilateral financial institutions. It can ill-afford to annoy anyone of them and this, at times, becomes a grueling diplomatic task.

16. There is little doubt that with massive mainland investment and support, Tibet is growing at a fast pace. Its population dynamics has changed too. More Han Chinese are said to be living in Tibet than the Tibetans themselves. This means that more Tibetans live outside Tibet than within. While there have been difficulties, things are getting better and constructional development, in the form of highways, bridges, dams and buildings, is the touchstone for prosperity of life in Tibet's rugged terrain. With the successful operation of the Golmud-Lhasa rail network, Tibet could see a further enhancing of its infrastructure and communication facilities in the years ahead. There are also plans to extend the rail network to Shigatse within a couple of years.

CONCLUSION

17. By the year 2050, India is projected to become the third largest economy in the world, behind China and the United States. But both these Asian countries need internal stability and the removal of political and structural barriers to growth. More importantly, they need a peaceful neighbourhood so as to concentrate on their own economic progress. The implications of a troubled neighbourhood, due to refugee crises or ethnic and separatist movements, would be very large indeed. This will only facilitate unnecessary meddling of extra-regional powers in their vicinity. It could also raise questions about the future stability, security and economic viability of the region while igniting ethno-territorial separations and, thereby, reversing the economic progress made thus far.
18. The settling of long-standing feuds, be they insurgencies, separatist movements, refugee or humanitarian crises in the South Asian nations, will, therefore, reflect positively on these two emerging Asian powers. The settling

of Bhutanese and the Tibetan refugee problems is as much in the interest of India and China as they are to Nepal, Bhutan and the refugees themselves.
