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## Communications and Media

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### Forgotten People: The Biharis

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### Forgotten People: The Biharis

#### Why are the Biharis forgotten?

Displaced by the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the once urgent push for a solution to the Bihari situation has faded with time, creating the kind of chronic, nagging situation that gets lost in the political shuffle. Often called "stranded Pakistanis," the Biharis--Urdu-speaking, non-Bengali Muslims--have lived in refugee-like circumstances in camps in Bangladesh for more than three decades. Because they were displaced by the creation of a new nation, no country accepts responsibility for the group. As a result, the fate of more than 240,000 Biharis has been debated, but never determined.

#### The People and the Land

Slightly smaller than Iowa, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated and poorest nations in the world. Though the majority of the population is agriculturally employed, floods and cyclones plague the country, handicapping farming efforts. Bangladesh has tried to diversify its economy through industrial development, but there still are not enough jobs for the burgeoning population. An estimated 35.6% of the population lives below the poverty line.

The population of Bangladesh is 98% Bengali, with tribal groups and non-Bengali Muslims -- such as the Biharis --making up the last 2%. The primary religion is Muslim (83%), followed by Hindu (16%); the remaining 1% are Buddhists, Christians and animists. The literacy rate of the country is 43.1%.

Bangladesh, formerly known as East Pakistan, seceded from West Pakistan to form an independent nation in 1971. The war for independence was bitter and bloody, and was followed by 15 years of military rule. Though democracy was restored in 1990, the political scene remains volatile, and the country is often charged with human rights violations. The current President of Bangladesh is Iajuddin Ahmed, and the Prime Minister is Khaleda Zia.

### Categories

- Committee/Programs:**  
 Humanitarian Policy & Practice, Refugees (CMRA)
- Region of Activity:** South Asia (SAR)
- Countries of Focus:**  
 Bangladesh
- Program Areas, Sector:**  
 Human Rights, Refugees and Displacement

## Anatomy of the Conflict

Originally from India's Bihar State, the Urdu-speaking Biharis moved to then East Pakistan in 1947, at the time of India's partition. When East Pakistan moved to secede and civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan in 1971, the Biharis, who considered themselves citizens of Pakistan, sided with West Pakistan. In December 1971, however, East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh, and the Biharis were left behind as the Pakistani army and civilians evacuated.

Denied permission to emigrate, the Biharis found themselves unwelcome in both their chosen country -- Pakistan -- and the new nation that had just formed around them -- Bangladesh. While Pakistan feared a mass influx of Biharis would be costly and could potentially stir passions in an already fragmented population, the newly formed Bangladesh scorned the Biharis for having supported the enemy. Neither country offered citizenship or aid. The Biharis were left in limbo, where they languish to this day.

The Biharis formed organizations -- including the Stranded Pakistani General Repatriation Committee -- and began lobbying for relocation to Pakistan. They fought back with marches and hunger strikes, and were frequently arrested and imprisoned in Bangladesh. Pakistan responded sporadically, and between 1974 and 1992 some 175,000 Biharis were relocated to Pakistan. Efforts were erratic and disorganized, however, and often resulted in the division of families. Parents were separated from children and wives from their husbands with the promise that additional relocation would follow, though it often did not. Husbands and wives, who have not seen their spouses and children since the 1970s, are living in camps today.

Two generations of Biharis now live in camps. The older generation still longs to return to Pakistan, but for many of their children, Bangladesh is the only home they have ever known. Over the last few years, the younger generation has begun pushing for citizenship in Bangladesh. In the spring of 2003, a high court ruling in Bangladesh allowed 10 Biharis to assume Bangladeshi citizenship with voting rights. Though the ruling split young and old, for many it was the first true sign of hope for a future outside the camps.

## Humanitarian Conditions

Between 240,000 and 300,000 Biharis currently live in some 65 camps in Dhaka and across the country. Though conditions vary, the camps are notorious for cramped conditions, poor sanitation, and shortages of electricity and clean or running water. Kitchen facilities are communal, and residents must wait for hours to use the toilets. Journalists visiting the camps have called conditions "squalid" and "deplorable."

There is little economic opportunity for the Biharis in or outside the camps. Jobs in Bangladesh are scarce, and loans for small business supplies like looms and cloth are virtually nonexistent. Those who manage to start businesses must combat the rampant crime in the camps, both at the hands of fellow Biharis and local Bengalis, who resent the Biharis for ethnic and political reasons. Arson is a weapon of choice of those targeting

the camps, and fires spread like monsoon floods devouring homes and lives.

The cultural ramifications of life in the camps have also proved dire for the Biharis. In addition to being severed from family members through erratic resettlement policies, young Biharis find it tough to find the space and income needed to marry and lead traditional lives. As a result, some 20,000 unmarried girls living in the camps prove easy targets for sex traffickers. For many girls, any life seems more promising than one in the camps. The Biharis' statelessness as well as the conditions in which they are forced to live in Bangladesh merit immediate international attention.

Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:

\* The international community, led by UNHCR, renew efforts to resolve the situation of the Biharis in Bangladesh. For some, the preferred solution may be relocation to Pakistan; for others it may be affirmation of citizenship in Bangladesh. For vulnerable persons and groups, resettlement to third countries may be the best option.

\* Pakistan and Bangladesh be encouraged to accede to, and adhere to principles of, the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

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