



# NOWHERE PEOPLE

UNWANTED AND STATELESS IN ASIA

Over 11 million people worldwide are affected by 'statelessness', or are denied or have been stripped of the fundamental right to citizenship. They belong to no country, have been deprived of almost all economic, social and civil rights and have been forced by governments to live on the margins of society. They are the unwanted and the unwelcome.

In this on-going project, *Nowhere People*, I have spent the last year photographing some of the most desperate stateless groups in Asia: the Bihari in Bangladesh, the Rohingya from Burma and stateless children born to Filipino immigrants in Sabah, Malaysia. The devastating effects statelessness has had on each group are very similar as well as the core reasons for their statelessness: an intolerant majority and a State's fear that its national identity is being threatened. Yet most of all, the discrimination, disempowerment and social exclusion stateless groups endure only perpetuates the deterioration of their shattered cultural identities, which unfortunately passes from one generation to the next.

At a time when States are held to higher standards of human rights and governance, stateless ethnic groups look to the international community for solutions yet are largely ignored and forgotten.

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY GREG CONSTANTINE

BEST VIEWED ON COMPUTER SCREEN





# NOWHERE PEOPLE

## THE BIHARI

Abandoned and  
Forgotten in  
Bangladesh

**I**n a town three hours north of Dhaka, a group of young men sit and discuss their futures. "We were born here in Bangladesh," they say. "We belong here in Bangladesh, and all we want is to see a solution sometime in our lifetime."

Once a prosperous and privileged community, the Urdu-speaking Bihari in Bangladesh lost everything. During Pakistani rule from 1947 to 1971, the Bihari held government jobs and university degrees. They owned land and ran small businesses. They possessed bank accounts and skills that provided them with economic opportunities. However, in 1971, civil war in East Pakistan resulted in the birth of Bangladesh. Suddenly, the Bihari found themselves surrounded by an intolerant Bengali majority. They were fired from government jobs, told they no longer





owned their land and were forced to flee into 66 'temporary' camps throughout Bangladesh not only for their own protection but also to await possible repatriation to Pakistan. Only a fraction would be repatriated.

Thirty-five years later, over 300,000 Bihari continue to live an impoverished, hand-to-mouth existence inside the same 66 camps throughout Bangladesh. Unrecognized as citizens of both Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Bihari belong to no country and sink further into the dark margins of society. They receive little or no humanitarian assistance, are refused admittance into almost all government public schools and universities and are prohibited from holding even the lowest paying government jobs.

Now, two generations of Bihari men and women have been deprived of the resources and skills needed to provide for their families and contribute to the progress of their community. With both Pakistan and Bangladesh refusing to recognise and grant them citizenship, and having been all but forgotten by the international community, the Bihari sit in a desperate state of limbo - helplessly watching as a third generation enters the world, stateless.

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It is common for several generations to now share the same living space. A family of ten lives in an 8x10 living space. Prior to 2003, Bihari children in camps were denied access to government public schools. Today, they are still denied admission to secondary level and university education. Like many Bihari families, poverty, the lack of economic opportunities and access to education force children into the workforce. Camps have seen little maintenance in 35 years, most are littered with garbage and raw sewage. Though protected by law, forced evictions in the camps are common to make way for private development. (next page)









Food aid was discontinued to the Bihari in 2004, making it more difficult for families to provide for themselves. It is not uncommon for men to leave their wives to marry local women to obtain Bangladesh citizenship. Many older Bihari feel bitter towards Bangladesh for how they have been

treated and still desire to be repatriated to Pakistan. Most camps are now comprised primarily of people born after 1971. Young Bihari consider Bangladesh their home and feel it is essential they are provided with the rights granted to all Bangladeshi citizens. Without citizenship, the Bihari have no social safety net to turn to.

Without citizenship they are denied equal access to healthcare, social services and education. Without citizenship, they are not permitted to obtain legal employment, to travel freely or to fully participate in political decisions that directly impact their future. Without citizenship, they have little or no rights and because they have no rights, they become vulnerable to exploitation, harassment and a number of human rights abuses. As a result of statelessness and the deliberate denial of citizenship, generations of ethnic groups have not only been left paralyzed by poverty, discrimination and an absence of power and choice, but they have also been forced to live undignified, disenfranchised lives, invisible to the public and desperate to reclaim their shattered cultural identities, especially in Asia.



# Greg Constantine

Since 2003, Greg Constantine has worked on long-term stories about: North Korean refugees in Asia; life in modern-day Tokyo; struggling communities along the US/Mexico border, and the lives and struggles of a group of recently paroled women living in Watts, Los Angeles.

His photographs have appeared in several international publications and have been utilized by organizations like Refugees International, Human Rights Watch and Medecins Sans Frontieres. His work has been exhibited internationally at: The Museum of Tolerance and the Southern California Library of Social Studies and Research in Los Angeles; the National Assembly Building in Seoul, South Korea and at the Fricke Fine Arts Rotunda in Pittsburgh.

In early 2006, Greg moved to Southeast Asia and began work on his most recent project, *Nowhere People*, which focuses on the struggles of stateless ethnic minority groups in Asia.

Work from this recent, on-going project has been nominated for *UNICEF Photo of the Year*. An exhibition of his work on the Bihari was chosen to be exhibited from Nov. 9-18, 2006 at the National Academy of Art in the international photography festival, *Chobi Mela IV* held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In addition, his work on the stateless Rohingya from Burma was chosen to be presented at the *Angkor Photo Festival* in Siem Reap, Cambodia, Nov 25-Dec 1, 2006.

Comprehensive edits and high res images from all three essays are available upon request.

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