
Stateless Biharis in Bangladesh: A Humanitarian Nightmare



12/13/2004

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In 2004 the already desperate living conditions of the stateless Biharis in Bangladesh have continued to worsen. This year alone, they have lost their government-subsidized food aid, and many families have lost their homes to tornado, fire, and eviction. They continue to eke out an inhuman existence in their camps of decaying squalor. The situation is critical and requires immediate attention.

In pre-independence India, the Biharis were an Urdu-speaking Muslim minority in the Hindu region of Bihar. In 1947, at the time of partition, the Biharis moved to what was then East Pakistan. When civil war broke out between East and West Pakistan, the Biharis, who consider themselves Pakistani, sided with West Pakistan. In 1971, however, East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh. The Biharis were left behind as the Pakistani army and civilians evacuated and found themselves unwelcome in both countries. Pakistan feared a mass influx of Biharis could destabilize a fragile and culturally mixed population, and Bangladesh scorned the Biharis for having supported the enemy. With neither country offering citizenship, the Biharis (also called stranded Pakistanis) have remained stateless for 33 years.

A permanent solution is possible if the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh offer citizenship to the Biharis. Some camp residents think of themselves as Pakistani and would like to be reunited with family members in Pakistan. This repatriation could be funded by money already put aside by the Pakistani government. Others, who have never been to and have no

family in Pakistan, can only imagine a life in Bangladesh. Those Biharis that are keen to establish lives as Bangladeshi citizens sometimes see “no other way” and marry local Bangladeshis. Others, such as 20-year-old Abdul, who survives hand to mouth as a garment factory worker, says he would like to go to Pakistan. In any case, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is not addressing the plight of the Biharis.

An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 Biharis live in 66 camps in 13 regions across the country. All camps have one thing in common – they are severely overcrowded. In Rangpur, northern Bangladesh, there are several instances where 12 or more family members sleep huddled together in a single room no larger than eight by ten feet. As families grow without access to more land, they are forced to live in increasingly small quarters. “We have no privacy,” one 9-year-old student says. In some camps dirt floors become deep mud in the monsoon season. Rainwater creates another problem for those with less than adequate roofing. A widow and mother of four told Refugees International, “We cannot stay here when it rains. We have to live in the railway station.” In September, a tornado ripped through one camp and destroyed 54 homes. Temporary structures, some with no roofs, were built, leaving no protection from the elements. On December 4, fire ripped through a camp in Saidpur, leaving two hundred people homeless. During the last year, over 150 families have been threatened with eviction, and in one Chittagong camp some residents were forcibly removed from their homes.

Lack of water and co-habitation with animals, combined with poor drainage and sanitation systems, contribute to a variety of medical problems, including skin disease, water-borne illness, upper respiratory infections and gastro-intestinal disorders. In one camp, ten wells were damaged leaving only two working wells to supply water to 650 families. In Mirpur’s Millat Camp, there was only one latrine for 6,000 people. Few medical clinics exist, and several camps have no healthcare at all, leaving entire families susceptible to both medical and financial hardship. In one case, RI entered a candlelit room where two terrified young girls hovered behind their dying father. Without a breadwinner, they face a lifetime of borrowing and panhandling.

For Bihari children, the right to a basic education has become a luxury. The school in Saardar Bahardur camp closed this year from lack of funding. In Adamgee, only six boys from an entire camp made it to secondary school.

Teachers go unpaid, students study in shifts, and requests to the Minister of Education for new books have been turned down. One teacher, who has not been paid since September said, “In this environment, learning is a lot of work for the students. There is no time to get wiser. Children work after school for money by doing handicrafts and jewelry. At home they live like animals. Their families cook, eat, work, and sleep in the same room.”

This lack of education, combined with an already impoverished economy, provides little opportunity for employment inside or outside the camps. One young man said he makes 100 taka a day as a rickshaw driver. After he pays a 40 taka bicycle rental, he is left with only 60 taka (about \$1.00) to feed his family. Those fortunate enough to find work often face discrimination and harassment. In Geneva camp, vendors complained of locals taking merchandise without paying. Others have been asked for “ransom.”

Recently, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted citizenship to ten Biharis. Small significant moves such as this are important, but do not address the larger problem. The 33 years of suffering must be addressed by the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan, the United Nations, and non-governmental agencies.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

The Government of Pakistan

- Work with the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR to offer the possibility of resettlement and citizenship for Biharis who wish to live in Pakistan.

The Government of Bangladesh

- Grant citizenship to Biharis who wish to remain in Bangladesh.
- Provide immediate accommodation and other support for people who have lost their homes to the recent fire and tornado.
- Restore relief for immediate needs, including food.
- In collaboration with local and international NGOs, ensure that each camp has enough basic amenities, including water, latrines, schools, and medical clinics, to accommodate its population.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees:

- Take a proactive role to provide relief consistent with its mandate to address stateless people in the same manner as refugees.
- Take a proactive role in securing a resolution of the Biharis' situation by facilitating an agreement between Pakistan and Bangladesh resulting in citizenship for all in one of the two countries.
- Explore options for third country resettlement.
- Increase the number of protection and legal staff dealing with global statelessness.

Director of Research Maureen Lynch and Field Representative Thatcher Cook visited Bangladesh to examine the situation for stateless Biharis in November.