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At the end of 1999, Bangladesh hosted an estimated 53,000 refugees (all but 100 of them Burmese) and 238,000 Biharis who were living in refugee-like circumstances. The vast majority of the Burmese, some 52,000, were ethnic Rohingya. Bangladesh recognized only 22,100 of the Rohingya as refugees. The remaining Burmese refugees, some 1,000, were ethnic Chin. The 100 non-Burmese refugees were of various nationalities.

During the year, 1,128 Burmese Rohingya and ten Somalis repatriated from Bangladesh. An estimated 80,000 Chakmas and other Jumma peoples were internally displaced in Bangladesh, including some 20,000 former refugees in India who had repatriated in recent years.

Burmese Rohingya

Some 250,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh from Burma in late 1991 and early 1992. Although local people initially welcomed the Rohingya, who are closely related to Bangladeshis ethnically and culturally, within months relations turned sour. Between mid-1992 and 1997, more than 230,000 Rohingya repatriated. Some returned voluntarily, but Bangladesh forced or coerced most into returning.

At the end of 1999, only some 22,100 of the Rohingya who entered in 1991 and 1992 remained in Bangladesh. They lived in camps run by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, as many as 30,000 other Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in recent years, bringing the total there at year's end to some 52,000.

UNHCR sought to introduce food-for-work and other programs that would help the refugees in the camps become less dependent on international aid. But the Bangladesh authorities would not agree to such programs because they did not want the refugees to integrate locally. The Bangladesh authorities continued to press for the refugees to repatriate, although most refused to go back. Burma also resisted their return. Nevertheless, after several years during which few Rohingya refugees repatriated to Burma, 1,128 did so during 1999.

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The Bangladesh authorities did not recognize the 30,000 more recently arrived Rohingya as refugees. According to the U.S. State Department, Bangladesh "effectively denied first asylum to the new arrivals it encountered by categorizing them as illegal economic migrants." The State Department added that Bangladesh "turned back as many [Rohingya asylum seekers] as possible at the border, and denied UNHCR officials access to those who did enter the country successfully." Because these Rohingya fled Burma for similar reasons as other Rohingya who are considered refugees, and because Bangladesh denied them the possibility of seeking asylum, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) considers them refugees.

Many of these "new arrivals" lived in Cox's Bazar, often crowded several families to a house. There were few jobs, so most survived by seeking day labor, and, in the most extreme cases, by begging. Local people blamed the refugees for rising prices, lower wages, and increases in crime. Bangladesh permitted UNHCR to interview some 500 Burmese in Bangladesh jails. According to UNHCR, none qualified as refugees.

Other Refugees

UNHCR recognized some 100 other refugees of various nationalities, mostly Somalis and Iranians. According to the Chin Human Rights Organization, as many as 1,000 Burmese Chin refugees entered Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1998. They fled forced labor, forced portering, and other abuses by the Burmese military against ethnic minorities in Burma's Chin State. The Bangladesh government did not recognize the Chin as refugees. However, because they fled for reasons similar to those of ethnic minority Burmese refugees in Thailand and India, USCR considers them refugees.

Biharis

Some 238,000 Biharis, many of whom consider themselves citizens of Pakistan, lived in Bangladesh in refugee-like circumstances. The Biharis, who are Muslims, moved from India's Bihar State to then-East Pakistan in 1947, at the time of the partition of India. In 1971, following a bloody struggle for independence, East Pakistan became Bangladesh. The Biharis supported Pakistan in the conflict. After the conflict ended, many moved from Bangladesh to Pakistan. However, most were too poor to make the move. They remained stranded in Bangladesh, waiting for the day when Pakistan would send for them.

Over the years, Pakistan has often promised to resettle the Biharis in Bangladesh. It has never done so, however,

not only because of the cost, but also because the Biharis' arrival could exacerbate existing ethnic and political tension in Pakistan. In recent years, Pakistani leaders have given mixed signals regarding the Biharis—some say that Pakistan has no intention of accepting them; others say only the lack of resources prevents Pakistan from welcoming them.

This cycle of acceptance and denial played out again in 1999. According to the *South China Morning Post*, while visiting Bangladesh in early March, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said, "The stranded Biharis are not Pakistanis." However, Sharif later reportedly told Bangladesh's prime minister that only a lack of resources prevented Pakistan from accepting the Biharis. The Bihari leadership continues to demand that Pakistan honor its obligations toward them. However, a growing number of camp residents—a large majority of whom were born in the camps and have never been to Pakistan or Bihar—were tired of waiting to go to Pakistan and wanted to integrate in Bangladesh.

Returned and Displaced Chakmas

In December 1997, the government of Bangladesh signed a peace accord that ended a 25-year conflict with the *Shanti Bahini*, an insurgent group primarily comprised of ethnic Chakmas. The *Shanti Bahini* sought the expulsion of Bangladeshi Muslim settlers from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh. They also pressed for greater autonomy for Jummas, ethnic minorities indigenous to the CHT, the largest of which is the Chakmas.

In the mid-1980s, Muslim settlers' appropriation of land belonging to ethnic minorities caused some 64,000 members of those groups, the vast majority Chakmas, to flee to India and more than 60,000 others to become internally displaced.

Although Chakma refugees began repatriating from India (where the government did not welcome them) even before the 1997 peace accord, the signing of the accord paved the way for the repatriation of the entire refugee population. The accord promised the Chakmas restitution of their land, greater participation in government, and a reduction in the Bangladesh military presence in the CHT.

The government did not fully honor those promises. Some returnees were able to reclaim their land, but estimates of those who could not ranged from fifteen to fifty percent or more. The government reportedly did little to help them do so. A Chakma representative told USCR that as many as 20,000 of the returnees living with friends and relatives or in public buildings could be considered

internally displaced. On August 20, Bangladesh authorities forcibly evicted 12 returnee families from a school building where they had been living since returning from India. According to local sources, the police injured several women and children during the eviction.

The government also did not reduce its military presence in the CHT, drop pending criminal charges against former *Shanti Bahini* members, or move toward devolving some powers to local groups, as promised.

The security forces continued to harass the ethnic minorities and to support Muslim settlers unwilling to give up the land they took from the Chakmas. According to a report by the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Center, in April, Bangladesh police killed two Jummas and injured dozens more when they fired at demonstrators in Khagrachari.

In October, a clash between Jumma youth and the police turned into a major assault by the Bangladesh military on Jumma civilians. The incident began when several Jumma youth argued with a police officer who they claimed had molested a young Jumma woman. After the initial clash, a contingent of Bangladesh soldiers supported by more than 150 Muslim settlers attacked a crowd of Jummas, killing three men. The army-led mob then burned down several Jummas' homes and ransacked a Buddhist temple. Two days later, Jummas reportedly set fire to 17 homes belonging to Muslim settlers.

Dissatisfaction with the government's failure to comply fully with the terms of the peace accord led to the formation of a new Chakma opposition group, the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), and to dissent within the Chakma community, including attacks by some radicalized Chakma elements against former *Shanti Bahini* leaders.

The situation of more than 60,000 Chakmas and other Jummas who became internally displaced during the last three decades also remained unresolved at year's end. Many still did not have access to land, education, and other social services. "Most of these displaced people are now living in remote and inhospitable hill and forest areas without a decent livelihood and with no access to health care facilities," said a report to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

Following the 1997 peace accord, the government formed a task force to address the rehabilitation needs of the displaced. At the end of 1999, however, the task force had not acted on their behalf.

NEWS AND REPORTS

06.16.2003 • [USCR Welcomes Bangladeshi Court Decision on Citizenship for Biharis \(Press Releases\)](#)



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