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High return of Afghan refugees surprises many

By B. Muralidhar Reddy

ISLAMABAD, JULY 28. What started as a trickle with the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan towards the end of last year has now become a flood. Much to the surprise of experts in the region, more than 1.2 million Afghan refugees have returned home from Pakistan alone.

The refugee return is three times more than the expected number since the voluntary repatriation initiative began in March this year. The return is all the more surprising given that the law and order situation in most of the provinces in Afghanistan has gone from bad to worse since the collapse of the Taliban. Barring the capital city, Kabul, warlords are back in business in all major towns. The much promised economic and social reconstruction by the world community is yet to begin.

Such has been the pace of the exodus from cities like Peshawar, the capital of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan, that the character of the city has begun to change. House owners, who made the maximum on account of the influx, are actually lamenting the



An Afghan refugee woman along with her children takes shelter under a truck from the scorching heat of the sun at a refugee camp on the outskirts of Kabul. — AFP

departure of the Afghans.

And it is no small change. Before the collapse of the Taliban, people in Peshawar were constantly complaining about the Afghan refugees. The presence of a large population of Afghan refugees also held the threat of a socio-economic conflict. The enterprising Afghan refugee was dreaded by the Pakistani business community.

The mass return has forced the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to cut some programmes in Afghanistan and to refocus its operations. Accord-

ing to the UNHCR, the dramatic flow of refugees since the Afghan Transitional Authority took over is the largest such repatriation movement since Iraqi Kurds returned to their homes in 1991, following the Gulf War.

The agency said many observers doubted the forecast that 1.2 million people would return in 2002. At the time, the UNHCR and host governments expected that 400,000 returnees would leave Pakistan and Iran, and that another 400,000 internally displaced Afghans would return home during the year.

BEHIND Vasudev's barely closed eyelids, dreams break violently... dreams of returning to his native village in Kashmir Valley, to his apple, walnut and almond orchards stretched over acres of land... dreams of basking in the sun of his homeland... where his ancestors had been living for centuries till he was hounded out by Islamic extremists. Spending every single moment of his frail life in the past one decade remembering his native place with a burning desire to go back to his roots may not seem a

rotting in the various camps in and around Jammu city. Despite the lapse of 11 years since the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley, nothing has changed for these over 3,50,000 people. Those who belonged to a better strata of society, migrated to Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore. But those who had no option were put up in these camps. The sense of deprivation, hurt, and alienation is very evident among the displaced Kashmiri Pandits. To make them even talk about their sufferings is a massive

REFUGEES in their own land

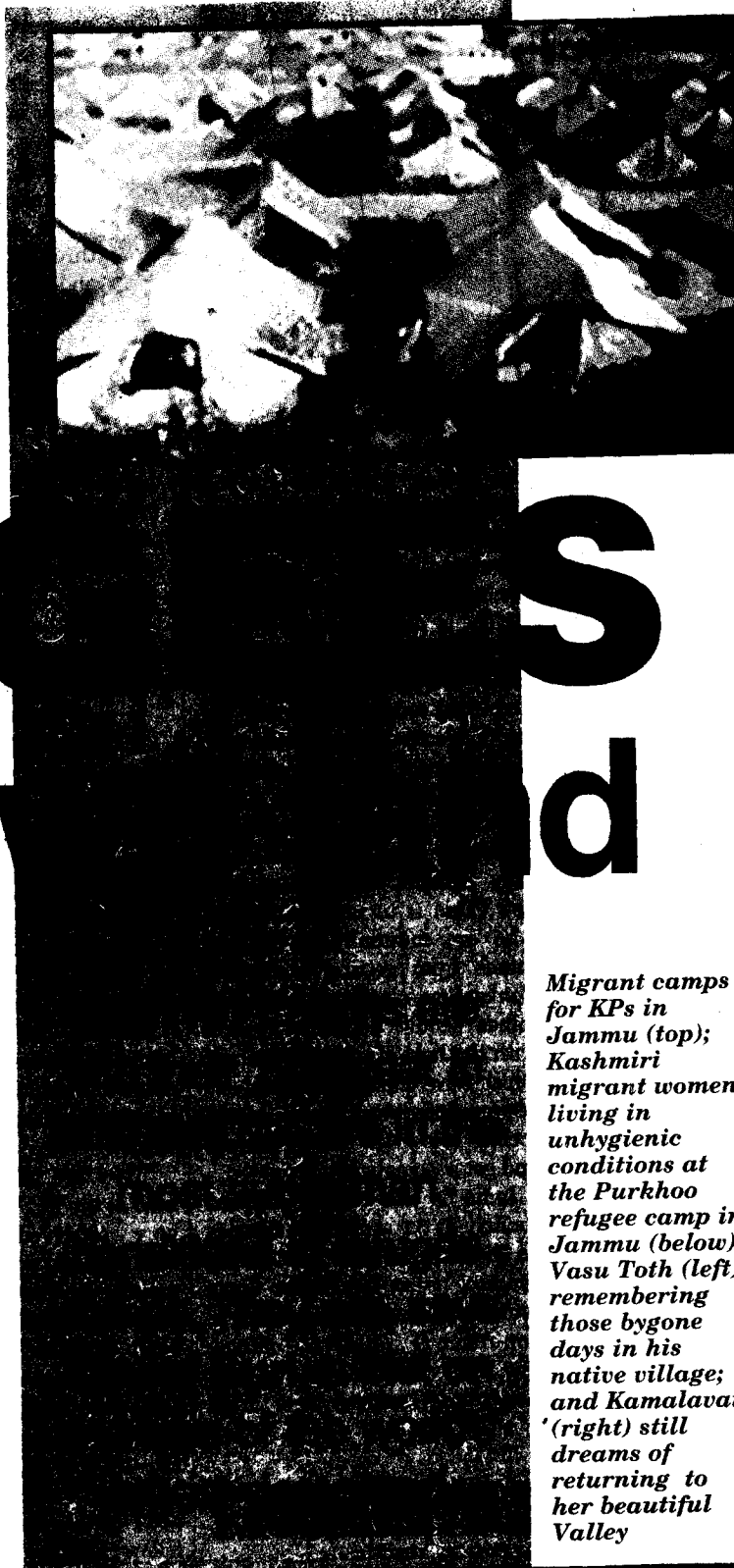
very easy thing for a septuagenarian, but this is what has kept him going, all alone, bereft of his near and dear ones. Mention the prospect of his return to Kashmir Valley and "Vasu Toth", as he is affectionately called in Mishriwalla refugee camp (near the Akhnoor border in Jammu) becomes nostalgic. His eyes fill up with hope. Still.

A native of Mujmarg, a picturesque village in the Shopian tehsil of Pulwama district in South Kashmir, the man who possessed a five-storeyed house and orchards, besides a huge expanse of agricultural land, now spends his days drawing on his hukka — a habit that has survived 60 years — in the overcrowded refugee camp. Through the dark dingy lanes of Mishriwalla refugee camp which hardly provides enough space for even two people to walk abreast, Vasu Toth leads us to his one-room encampment. Having enjoyed the salubrious air of his native village amidst poplar, willow, apple, almond and walnut trees, he doesn't yearn for much now... he just wants to sit in the sun. But not a single ray of sunlight penetrate this small dark room — "One Room Tenement" as referred to by the state government — since there's not a single window. Perhaps a prison would have been better than his caged room in Mishriwalla refugee camp.

Far from Mishriwalla lives Kamlavati in Nagrota refugee camp, situated on the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway.

"Kasheer Gachka (Would you like to return to Kashmir)?" Ask her this question and see her eyes light up immediately and her face glow. Kamlavati, another septuagenarian Kashmiri Pandit lady, gets all excited at the very mention of her homeland — Kashmir — and comes out with an unexpected answer: "Tell me to return right now and I'll do so." Emotions overwhelm her and tears well up in her eyes. "Lidder Osum Wassan (Lidder river used to flow near my house in Pahalgam)."

Kamlavati and Vasudev are among the people of their generation who still nurse the thought of going back to the Valley. But not everybody. Bitterness, anguish and pain have filled their hearts and minds. Nobody's helped them to return to their homeland. They've become refugees in their own country. Hoping against hope, any of their generation have died in the past decade, their dream of coming home dying with them. Uncertainty and distrust are rampant among the hundreds of refugees who are



Migrant camps for KPs in Jammu (top); Kashmiri migrant women living in unhygienic conditions at the Purkhoo refugee camp in Jammu (below); Vasu Toth (left) remembering those bygone days in his native village; and Kamlavati (right) still dreams of returning to her beautiful Valley

denial of fundamental rights.

Conditions in refugee camps are subhuman. Lack of healthcare, hygiene, education and other facilities have now slowly started rubbing off on their persons. Initially put up in tents for six long years in places like Muthi, Nagrota, Mishriwalla, Jhiri, Purkhoo and Batal Ballian in Udhampur, they were then settled in ORTs within the camps. But with no proper facilities. On an average, five persons live in a small ORT, provided to each family. The ORTs are a cluster of small, dingy rooms with-

privacy and security has resulted in serious health hazards — mental and physical.

The old and the infirm have met a premature death. A large number have suffered mental breakdown. Behavioural syndromes, psychological disorders, depression, panic attacks and phobias have seized all age groups. KL Choudhary, chairman, political affairs, Panun Kashmir, who himself is a noted physician, says that the most alarming phenomenon has been a very high occurrence of ovarian failures and premature



out a single window and with leaking roofs. Many a time, people have fallen in the drains as there's no electricity and the narrow lanes are too difficult to tread. Problems are manifold and each family in the camps has harrowing story to tell.

In the Mishriwalla refugee camp, there are 10 handpumps for 500 families — 2500 people. Last year, water from these pumps had developed a revolting stench and was also carrying worms. But nobody cared. "We are living in concentration camps," says Dr Agnishekher,

menopause, leading to reduced fertility span. Negative growth has been further aggravated by a high death rate, unnatural deaths, premature aging, low birth rates, abortions, late marriages, sexual deprivation because of stress and lack of privacy, and reduced conception resulting from reduced desire.

"The lack of basic necessities in the camps has caused a havoc in the whole mental make-up of KPs and it has indeed threatened their basic existence as a community,"

adding that even Afghan refugees must certainly be living in better conditions with other countries and the United Nations helping out.

"We have around 500 children in these camps but not a single playground," says Ashok Kumar, a health department employee who hails from Lolab Valley in the border district of Kupwara, close to the Line of Control in North Kashmir.

Camp conditions are the same everywhere, be it Nagrota, Mishriwalla or Purkhoo. Growing up in filth, squalor and deprivation, the plight of the little children is pathetic. Youths are discriminated against in education and employment and have lapsed into depression and despair. Surrender, Leelawati's son, living in Mishriwalla camp, had gone to Delhi after his graduation for further studies but could not go ahead since he had no money. His mother Leelawati has aged prematurely. Most women in the camps are under tremendous stress and are the worst sufferers. The communal carnage, the forced exodus, the changed milieu, alien and hostile environment, along with a torn social fabric, poor shelter, lack of

says Dr Choudhary, adding that the population of Kashmiri Pandits is declining fast and the community is facing extinction. A startling revelation.

Dr Agnishekher feels that since they are a small community, their shouts and cries don't really matter to either the Union or the state government. Kashmiri Pandits who are entering their 12th year in exile and living as refugees in their own country are a blot on the face of the largest democracy in the world. Had they comprised a considerable votebank, the government would have done a lot more for them, says Dr Choudhary. That apart, he feels the media too has failed to project their cause and sided with pseudo-secularists. "These refugee camps are the blisters on the face of Indian secularism", says Dr Agnishekher.

What pains them most is that despite repeated requests of granting them refugee status or Internally Displaced People status, their pleas have fallen on deaf ears. The United Nations had passed the IDP Act in 1994. Ironically, India too is one of its signatories. The IDP status entitles the displaced community to international humanitarian aid. But they have been denied even that.

The KP leaders see a deep-rooted conspiracy in their exodus from Kashmir. Their repeated demands for announcing a probe has not been met so far. The distress sale of migrant property has continued unabated despite the Act against it. Their status continues to be undefined. Their demand for declaring them a religious minority in Kashmir has also drawn a blank.

Regarding their return to the Valley, while most yearn to go back to their home and hearth, they feel the situation is not conducive. Real initiative needs to be taken for their return and rehabilitation.

task. "You come to our refugee camps, click pictures, shoot videos and sell them to lucrative channels and newspapers. You are only bothered about making money and not our cause," shout many at us.

Repeated denials of requests for redressal of their problems have made them desperate. But nobody cares for them. Rendered into a ter-

ritoryless minority within their own country has hurt their psyche, says Agnishekher, convener of Panun Kashmir, the frontline organisation of displaced Kashmiri Pandits which has been fighting for their rights apart from demanding a separate homeland within South Kashmir for Kashmiri Pandits.

Following their exodus from

Kashmir Valley in the early 1990s, KPs scattered all over the country have become extremely bitter. Their homes have been burnt down and no confidence-building measures have been initiated to facilitate their return to the Valley. The past decade has been a long dark saga of their nomadic existence; a life of travails and deprivation and

■ Over 3,50,000 Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave the Valley in 1990.

■ Over 1200 KPs, including a few Sikhs, were killed by terrorists, most of them after being maimed and tortured in the most inhuman ways.

■ Over 800 KPs died of sunstroke, snakebites, etc, in refugee camps.

■ Over 8000 KP refugees met unnatural deaths while living in subhuman conditions in exile.

■ More than 10,000 KPs are still living in subhuman conditions in camps for want of better accommodation.

■ Over 1,20,000 jobs have been provided to Kashmiri

Muslims but not a single development scheme has been launched for Kashmiri Pandit youths.

■ Over 27,000 residential houses, business establishments, shops, small-scale industries, educational institutions belonging to KPs have been razed to the ground.

A total of 110 shops out of 143 shops have been illegally occupied in Srinagar city alone.

A total of 145 Hindu shrines and temples, including Uma Nagri (Brari Angan), Kathleshwan Mandir, Raghunath Mandir, Bhairav Mandir have been burnt down by terrorists in Kashmir.

FAST FILE

Chakmas: the nowhwere people

By JB Lama

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Following the 1995 Supreme Court order restraining the Arunachal Pradesh government from allowing the use of coercive steps to forcibly evict Chakma and Hajong refugees, except in accordance with law, the anti-Chakma agitation by the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union has remained subdued. But for how much longer? Judging by Aapsu's vehemence, it seems a showdown is inevitable, sooner or later, judicial intervention notwithstanding.

On humanitarian grounds in 1964, about 28,000 Chakmas and Hajong refugees were settled in the North East Frontier Agency, as Arunachal Pradesh was then known. The figure varies. Some reports put it at 60,000. The Aapsu claims the present Chakma population is 130,000.

On 8 December 1964, the Union government told Parliament that it had approved a scheme to send 7,000 migrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to NEFA, and that 2,984 Chakmas had already been settled there. The Chakmas belonged to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and those settled in Arunachal Pradesh were part of about 100,000 persons rendered homeless by the Kapitai hydro-electric project. They left for a variety of reasons, including lack of compensation. Some Chakmas were also settled in Mizoram, then the Lushai Hills.

The Centre probably selected Arunachal Pradesh for its low population density, 4.1 per sq km against the national average of 134 sq km. The then Assam governor Vishnu Sahay and chief minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha were satisfied that the refugees would find the terrain and climate of Tirap, Lohit and Subansiri congenial as they were similar to that of the CHT. What defies logic is how a policy decision of such great significance was taken on mere assumptions.

The governor overlooked the fact that NEFA, which he was administrating as an agent of the President, was a specially protected region. If there was no opposition from the local communities, it was because they were too simple at the time to understand the future implications.

The Aapsu is using this to buttress its demand for the refugees' ouster. It intensified the agitation after Gauhati High Court declared the Chakmas and Hajongs foreigners in 1992 and the Supreme Court upheld this the following year. Yet, under the Indira Gandhi-Mujibur Rahman accord of 1972, those who came to India before 25 March 1971 were granted citizenship. On this count, many could sympathise with the Chakmas and Hajongs. The Centre's decision to confer citizenship on them even stimulated anti-refugee activists, including encouraging them to launch an economic blockade some years ago of the districts inhabited by the refugees.

The Supreme Court has also directed the state government to accept citizenship registration applications from the refugees, but curiously these forms have not been made available to them.

For the Chakmas and Hajongs, there is little possibility of Bangladesh ever taking them back. They cannot leave voluntarily as they have nowhere to go. Displacing them again after 38 years will amount to a betrayal of trust. The

Centre is duty bound to find a possible way out since the refugees cannot continue to live with a Sword of Damocles hanging over them. A United Nations official said in Chennai some years ago that "mere survival" in refugee camps could not be a solution as it degraded human beings and was an insult to human dignity. Forcible eviction will be against the apex court's verdict. As will be the

denial of citizenship. The Aapsu and the Centre are both in a predicament. Perhaps a solution lies in all parties, including the Chakma leadership and the state government, sitting together in a spirit of mutual trust and accommodation to hammer out a workable and realistic settlement. That appears to be the only approach which could work.

(The author was on the staff of *The Statesman* for 42 years and specialises in North East issues.)



BEATING THE HEAT: Despite the continuing floods and high water devastation elsewhere in the Brahmaputra Valley, this queue of men take a break from the sun near the waterfront in Guwahati, Assam. — Eastern Projections

Repatriating refugees

By V. Suryanarayan

THE NINE-DAY visit of Jayawardenath Jayawardena, Sri Lankan Minister for Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Refugees, to Tamil Nadu and his discussions with the Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, and the officials concerned has brought into sharp focus the current and future status of thousands of Sri Lankan refugees and nationals in the State. This is the first official visit of a Sri Lankan Minister in-charge of a refugees to the State. Dr. Jayawardena said conditions were being created in the island so that the refugees could return to their homeland and lead a life of dignity and security.

Sri Lankan refugees came to Tamil Nadu in three waves. There were also two reverse flows of refugees to the island. The first inflow began on July 24, 1983, soon after ethnic riots began and continued till July 29, 1987, when the India-Sri Lanka Accord was signed. During this period 1,34,053 Sri Lankan Tamils came to the State. Following the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Accord, they began returning to Sri Lanka. Between December 24, 1987, and August 31, 1989, 25,589 refugees and non-camp Sri Lankan nationals returned to the island. The remaining Tamils either returned to Sri Lanka without Government assistance or continued to stay in Tamil Nadu. According to Sri Lanka watchers, the period witnessed a large-scale movement of Sri Lankan Tamils, on their own, to different parts of Europe and Canada.

After hostilities broke out again in June 1990, the second wave of the refugees started coming in. After August 25, 1989, 1,22,000 Sri Lankan Tamils came to the State. Of these, 1,15,680 were destitute and were accommodated in refugee camps. The repatriation of refugees, an offshoot of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide squad, commenced on January 20, 1992. According to the UNHCR, 54,188 refugees were voluntarily repatriated to Sri Lanka by chartered ships and flights between January 20, 1992, and

March 20, 1995. The third outbreak of hostilities was in April 1995 and the refugees again started coming to Tamil Nadu. According to the State Government's Policy Note for 2001-2002, as on March 31, 2002, 22,356 refugees had come to the State. They trekked long distances, paid huge amounts to boat operators and reached Rameswaram. The refugee flow has become a trickle; the number who came to Tamil Nadu in September 2001 was 26; in October, 78; No-

vellore, Chengalpattu and Melur. According to informed sources, the Government of Tamil Nadu wants these militants repatriated to Sri Lanka at the earliest. 4) Sri Lankan nationals: Their exact number is not known, but according to informed sources, around 80,000 Sri Lankan nationals are estimated to be in the State. They come to India with valid travel documents, but overstay even after the expiry of the visa period. A few others make use of India as a

was undertaken in January 1992, there was an outburst of criticism that the repatriation was involuntary and that the refugees were being forced to leave Tamil Nadu's shores. Unfortunately, the application forms circulated were in English. What is more, the refugees had no "reliable means" to find out the actual conditions in their native villages. In fact, a few refugee families repatriated to Sri Lanka returned after the third Eelam war began in 1995.

The presence of the UNHCR in Chennai, though with a limited mandate, has enhanced India's credibility in international fora. The Madras High Court in the case of P. Nedumaran and S. Ramdoss v the Union of India and State of Tamil Nadu upheld the voluntariness of repatriation because of the verification done by the UNHCR. According to UNHCR sources, the agency has received 700 applications from the refugees to return to Sri Lanka. It would be a good idea if exit permits are issued to these applicants by New Delhi and Colombo repatriates them at the earliest.

The repatriation of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees would depend on the return of peace and security to the island nation. Dr. Jayawardena echoed the innermost feelings of the refugees when he said Sri Lanka "does not want the refugees to move from one refugee camp to another". The Minister is optimistic about the recent developments in the island; he feels, given goodwill and sincerity on both sides, the Tigers would give up the demand for a separate state and co-exist with other ethnic groups within a united Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lanka watchers in India do not share Dr. Jayawardena's optimism. Given the track record of the LTTE and V. Prabakaran's fanatical commitment to the cause of a Tamil Eelam, they feel the present uneasy truce will not last long.

(The writer is former Director, Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras, Chennai.)

The repatriation of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees will depend on the return of peace and security to the island nation.

vember, 11; December, 6; January 2002, 25; February, 4 and March, 6. It should be highlighted that most Sri Lankan Tamils, who had the financial means, have left for greener pastures in Europe and Canada. Equally important has been the vigilance of the Sri Lankan Navy, which controls the outer islands and the stepped up vigil of the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard in the Palk Straits.

The Sri Lankan Tamils in Tamil Nadu can be divided into four categories. 1) Refugees in camps. As on March 31, 2002, there were 17, 386 families comprising 64,413 refugees in 116 camps spread over the State. 2) Recognised refugees outside camps. Some Sri Lankan Tamils, who came by boat to Rameswaram, informed Rehabilitation Department officials that they did not want to stay in refugee camps as they could fend for themselves economically. They were asked to register themselves in the police station adjacent to their place of residence and also get a refugee certificate from the District Collector's office. These people, numbering 20,184, are termed non-camp refugees. 3) Sri Lankan nationals and refugees identified as militants. There are 128 Sri Lankan

When the repatriation of refugees

Afghan refugees do not want to leave Pakistan

By Muhammad Najeeb

ISLAMABAD: Afghan refugees seem reluctant to leave Pakistan.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has opened an office in a border town to help Afghan refugees return home. But until Saturday morning, only 315 Afghans turned up to return, a UNHCR official said. Pakistan and Iran host an estimated 3.5 million Afghans who have fled their homeland ever since Soviet troops invaded their country two decades ago.

"The UNHCR expects about a million Afghan refugees to return to their country this year, but the initial response shows that the target would be difficult to meet," said an expert. He attributed the dismal response to the continuing insecurity in Afghanistan. "Unless there is durable peace in Afghanistan, these refugees will prefer to stay back (in Pakistan)."

Under the U.N. plan, Afghans get incentives like food and money if they return to Afghanistan. The refugees who reported at the border received documents that they exchanged for cash in the eastern

Afghan city of Jalalabad. The papers will allow them to receive a month-long supply of food and plastic sheets, and kitchen and hygiene kits on their arrival in their homeland.

The centre is the first of seven that UNHCR plans to set up in Pakistan. Similar facilities are being drawn up in Iran. The U.N. agency is only helping refugees who want to return voluntarily.

Officials said most returnees were non-Pushtoon and crossed the border in 17 trucks. "They belonged to Uzbek, Tajik and other nationalities," he said.

Reports said Pushtoons are reluctant to go back to their homes because they fear possible hostilities by the forces of the Northern Alliance-dominated interim government in Kabul.

Aid workers were expecting a large turnout of Afghans but found the response disappointing on the first two days. The repatriation started Friday.

But Ivet Nomon, UNHCR's associate programme officer based in Islamabad, did not agree that the figures were discouraging. (IANS)

More Afghan refugees return home

KABUL, APRIL 16. A quarter-million Afghan refugees have returned home in the past seven weeks, the United Nations announced on Tuesday. Millions more remain in camps in Pakistan and Iran, too afraid to return home.

Yusuf Hassan, a spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, said 241,000 people had returned from camps in Pakistan, 5,000 from Iran and 4,000 from Tajikistan. "The repatriation programme appears to be in full swing," he said.

Bringing home some four million refugees from neighbouring countries has been a top priority both for U.N. officials and for Afghanistan's interim Government, which took office in December and will rule until June when a grand council appoints a new, transitional government.

Included in those who began returning to Afghanistan on Tuesday were around 100 people who had been living in Islamabad, including many teachers, several engineers and an economist, according to the United Nations.

Many quit their jobs in Pakistan so that they could return to Kabul and help their country rebuild.

But after 23 years of war in Afghanistan, many

refugees remain afraid to return home. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, is in Afghanistan talking with officials about ways to minimise the fears of those wanting to come home. "Security is indispensable to repatriation, but more importantly, successful reintegration would lead to stability," Mr. Lubbers told the interim Prime Minister, Hamid Karzai, during a meeting Monday.

However, returning refugees are having trouble finding places to live, especially in the capital, Kabul, where there is a severe housing crisis. In the countryside, many refugees are arriving to find their houses burned or bombed.

Mr. Hassan said 40 per cent of those returning are moving into urban centres. Kabul alone has seen 80,000 refugees return, and there is little place for them to live.

"The majority of people who left this country left as rural people, but in Pakistan they became urbanized," Mr. Hassan said. "There is a major demographic shift going on."

Meanwhile, Mr. Karzai left Kabul today on his way to Rome to escort the former king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, back to Afghanistan after 29 years in exile, officials said. — AFP

Bangla settlers held in Orissa

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

BHUBANESWAR, April 20. — Police on Thursday arrested 27 Bangladeshi settlers, who had illegally infiltrated to various parts of Nawarangpur district in the state.

According to reports, the district administration served notice to about 54 Bangladeshi for submission of valid documents related to their stay in India a few weeks back.

The arrested persons, identified as illegal settlers, had failed to provide necessary documents. They settled in Raighar, Umerkote and Chandahandi. They will be handed over to the external affairs ministry for further action.

In another development, the Koraput revenue department also launched a verification drive to identify the illegal settlers. The issue of infiltrators had come into focus in June last, when Raighar and other areas of undivided Koraput district had witnessed clashes between tribals and the settlers. The tribals alleged that the Bangladeshi settlers had encroached upon their land and were exploiting them.

With law-and-order situation getting out of hand, the state reinforced police deployment in troubled areas. The government admitted that land disputes were the cause of conflict and said it intended to identify illegal settlers.

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THE STATESMAN

Australia asked to end detention of refugees

By Amit Baruah

SINGAPORE, MARCH. 12. Amnesty International has called on the Australian Government to end its policy of mandatory detention for asylum-seekers. The Amnesty Secretary-General, Irene Khan, said in Melbourne that Australia's policy was wrong and should stop.

"Australia has been very active and vocal in supporting the refugee cause around the world....Australia has been vocal in promoting human rights institutions....and there for we expect Australia to practice what it preaches," Ms. Khan was quoted as saying.

The Amnesty functionary said that detention centres, where asylum-seekers were held, should come under the same scrutiny as prisons.

"It would be an improvement if the Government's decisions to detain were reviewed — at the moment the Government is judge and jury," she said.

Referring to a recent injury suffered by an inmate at the Woomera detention centre after he threw himself at razor wire on Friday night, Ms. Khan said: "It just shows the situation is going from bad to worse and something has to be done before more people take this kind

of desperate action."

She used strong words for the Australian Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, who has led the propaganda charge against defenceless refugee-seekers. The Minister's Amnesty membership was at odds with the Government's mandatory detention policy, Ms. Khan said.

"I think he should be asking himself whether it is right to punish people who have already faced oppression in their own country....all they're seeking is safety for very good refugee reasons....reasons which the Australian Government recognises because most of these

people are recognised as refugees," she said.

The Immigration Minister, however, said that 1,700 people were being held across Australia — of which 700 had no claims and were to be deported and another 700 had had their claims rejected.

This just left about 300 people, who were still to be given security clearance.

Speaking at the National Press Club earlier in the week, Ms. Khan said that in a world reeling from the effects of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the need to uphold human rights and humanitarian principles had never been greater.

THE HINDU

Israel raids refugee camps, eight killed

Jerusalem, March 4

HR 11 573

ISRAELI TROOPS raided two Palestinian refugee camps on Monday, hours after Israel's Cabinet decided to step up military pressure on the Palestinians in reprisal for weekend attacks that claimed 22 Israeli lives. Fifteen Palestinians were killed in the same period, including five in Monday's fighting.

In the Gaza Strip, Israeli troops entered the Rafah refugee camp on the border with Egypt and demolished three buildings, witnesses said. Troops exchanged fire with local gunmen, killing two armed Palestinians and a civilian and wounding seven people, doctors said.

The Israeli military said troops searched for tunnels used to smuggle arms under the border from Egypt. In the West Bank, more than a dozen Israeli tanks and troops entered the Jenin refugee camp early on Monday, the second raid in four days. Palestinians and Israeli soldiers exchanged fire, and

camp residents set off explosives next to Israeli tanks. A Palestinian militiaman who was shooting at an Israeli tank from an alley was killed by machine gun fire from the tank, Palestinian doctors said.

The camp is a stronghold of Palestinian militants, including from the Islamic militant Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups and from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement. Also on Monday, Israeli troops shot and killed a Palestinian man who ran toward an Israeli army checkpoint near Nablus, the army said.

6 die in West Bank car blast

A car carrying a Hamas activist exploded in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Monday, killing at least six people including his wife and two sons, sources said. The activist, Hussein Abu Kwaik, survived the blast, whose cause was not immediately known, Reuters reports.

AP

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1,000 refugees land in Sicily

ROME, MARCH 19. Italian navy gunboats escorted a stricken ship carrying nearly 1,000 illegal immigrants, mainly Kurds, into port in Sicily after desperate asylum seekers threatened to throw their children into the sea.

The arrival of the *Monica*, a 75-metre cargo ship, in Catania on Monday, prompted the Government to call a state of emergency in Sicily to cope with a rising tide of illegal immigration.

The dilapidated ship was towed into port flanked by navy and coastguard vessels after the eight-strong crew destroyed its engines and tried to hide among the immigrants. Five suspected crew members were later detained.

The authorities set up an emergency plan to house the 28 immigrants, including 361 children and close to 400 women, in a local sports stadium.

The immigrants, believed to be mostly Syrian Kurds hoping to join relatives in Germany, were to be transferred to a reception centre in Apulia on the southern Italian mainland. The immigrants said they each paid \$2,000 to \$4,000 for the passage. Some of them will be able to ob-



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A baby is carried by an Italian policeman off the merchant ship *Monica* in Catania, southeast Sicily, on Monday. — Reuters

tain political refugee status. Sources in Beirut said the vessel left Lebanon last week and the incident is just the latest in a series of large-scale attempts by illegal immigrants from the east to enter Europe through Italy. And Italian judicial authorities said the ship stopped briefly in Cyprus before heading on to Italian waters. The ship was intercepted overnight off the southern coast of

Sicily by Italian coastguards following a tip-off from their French counterparts.

According to Italian news reports, many of the immigrants said they were from Iraq as they were getting off the ship. The Interior Minister, Claudio Scajola, on a visit to the United States, responded by calling for a state of emergency in Sicily — a move that would give authorities more power to fight illegal

immigration. Among the refugees was a woman who gave birth overnight with the help of an Italian doctor who came on board by helicopter. Both the mother and her daughter were in good condition, said Maria Teresa Meli, a doctor at the Catania hospital where the two were taken by helicopter before the ship reached land. The immigrants were to be transferred to a detention centre in Puglia, a southern region that sees thousands of arrivals every year, the Interior Ministry said.

The Ministry, which is in charge of domestic security, said a French military vessel had followed the ship on Saturday but did not board it. The Italian Government ordered its navy to board the vessel just outside Italy's waters to prevent it from slipping in unseen, the Ministry said in a statement. Several people suspected of being members of the crew were detained. Each year, thousands of illegal immigrants slip into Italy by boat. Many of them travel on to other European countries, such as Germany. Meanwhile, coast guards detained 19 illegal Afghan immigrants off the Aegean Sea island of Simi in Greece. — PTI, AP

RSS seeks Bangla refugees' state

FROM MONOBINA GUPTA

Bangalore, March 17: The RSS has taken up cudgels on behalf of those who have fled Bangladesh since Khaleda Zia's party came to power, demanding that the Centre set up a "separate homeland for the Hindu refugees to live in honour and dignity" in that country.

The Sangh also found in the issue an opportunity to lash out at its ideological foe, the CPM, and the party-led West Bengal government.

"The West Bengal government's refusal to grant permission to non-governmental organisations such as the Bastuhara Sahayata Samiti to open relief camps has added insult to injury," a resolution passed

by the RSS said.

"The unfortunate Hindus who have been forced to leave their homes are entitled to be recognised as refugees," the resolution added.

Sangh spokesperson M.G. Vaidya had yesterday dwelt at length on the plight of the Bangladeshi refugees, which has emerged as one of the key themes at the RSS annual meeting.

The organisation has also found fault with the media, not just on how it covered the Godhra train attack but also the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh.

"The media has not projected the horrors suffered by these refugees," said the RSS' national joint secretary Madan Das.

"It is much worse than what happened in Gujarat. Not a line has been written. And that is why we are angry," the RSS leader added.

The organisation's resolution demanded that the Hindus who have come to "Bharat be treated as refugees and get all the facilities accorded to them in the UN charter".

The Sangh recommended economic sanctions against the Khaleda Zia government to "bring it to heel".

"Tough measures like stopping the export of rice, potato, onion and meat from our country and temporarily stopping the flow of water from the Farakka Barrage should be taken to make the Bangladeshi government see some reason,"

the resolution said.

The basic message sent out by the organisation was that the Hindus, basically tolerant, are being pushed to the margins in various states and it is time to "fight back".

"Look how the Hindu population is being driven out from places like Bangladesh and Assam," exhorted the RSS leader.

Vaidya had said yesterday that Hindus are peaceful and wherever they are a majority there is no trouble.

"Why is the Kashmir valley seething and not Jammu and Ladakh?" asked the RSS spokesperson.

"We are tolerant but intolerant of intolerance," the RSS leader added.

THE TELEGRAPH

The Afghan refugees

By Mahendra P. Lama

10-8 5/2

SOUTH ASIA has been one of most protracted theatres of refugee movements. Since the exodus of over 8 million Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India and about 6-7 million Muslims from India to Pakistan, about 35-40 million people have moved across national boundaries in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was followed by a massive supply of U.S. arms (roughly \$630 million annually) to the Afghan Mujahideen. What followed was indiscriminate shelling of civilians, laying of over 10 million landmines and years of violent civil war. All these uprooted almost 6 million Afghans (1/3rd of the country's population) in the 1980s. Most of the refugees were absorbed in Pakistan (besides Iran and India) because of easy physical accessibility, cultural and linguistic affinity and political support of the host Government. International humanitarian and aid agencies led by the UNHCR intervened in the management of refugees. This was despite the fact that like other South Asian countries, Pakistan had not signed international refugee instruments viz., the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and also had not enacted a domestic law or norms for managing refugees.

Repatriation which began after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 and the fall of the Najibullah Government in 1992 was abruptly halted with the capture of Kabul and two-thirds of Afghanistan by the Taliban in September 1996. The September 11 World Trade Center terrorist attack and the subsequent retaliatory attacks on Afghanistan have again brought the refugee question to the forefront. Amidst a fresh exodus from Afghanistan, it is essential to ponder over the events of the last two decades. The story of how the power games triggered by extra-regional forces viz., the U.S. and the

former Soviet Union, made Afghanistan a bastion of terrorism is both fascinating and devastating.

Refugee management has been a tightrope walk for Pakistan as it has had to constantly strike a balance among economic, national security and humanitarian interests. More seriously, despite the existence of full-fledged camps set up by Pakistan Government, a significant number of refugees has been living outside them.

Handling the refugee situation demands a very comprehensive policy and neutral stands. The politico-military goals should be marginalised.

Long before the latest crisis, the way the camps were managed in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan brought about conflicts within and outside the refugee community. Saba Gul Khattak, a Pakistani scholar on Refugee Studies, found that every registered household in a refugee camp needed a political affiliation with a *tanzim* (political party) for food, shelter and security (gun, shoes and training to fight in Afghanistan). Pakistan supported seven major political parties (led by four fundamentalist leaders — Hekmatyar, Khalis, Rabbani and Sayaf — and three moderate leaders — Nabi, Gailani and Mujadaddi) of the Mujahideen.

Therefore, the extension of relief and other support measures was literally aimed at raising a fighting force and not exactly based on humanitarian principles. This made it possible to have a covert chain of control whereby camp operations were directly juxtaposed with the political and military moves in Afghanistan by the host Pakistan. In the span of a decade, this practice of attaching protection and aid with the politico-strategic operations injected distrust among the refugees mainly emanating from political, ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. The aid agencies did try to redress the situation. But the

motives of major aid donors were so militarily oriented that strategic considerations far outweighed the humanitarian aspects. This was the most critical turning point in the management of Afghan refugees and eventually led to the rise of the Taliban.

The constant presence of refugees also posed new threats to Pakistan. Many a time, they were considered a social and economic burden and sometimes a political threat or securi-

ty risk. They were invariably perceived as a challenge to cultural identity. A study done in the Afghan refugee camps revealed that besides pasture land and employment, collection of firewood was the main source of conflict with the local population. At the height of their exodus, the Afghans came with 3 million heads of livestock and literally exhausted the grazing land in NWFP and Baluchistan. The demographic pressure resulting from the refugee inflow, many a time leading to ethno-demographic imbalances, and the subsequent pressure on the local resources both natural and infrastructural often created a tense atmosphere.

The two most vital fallouts have been the large-scale proliferation of the narcotics trade and the open access to sophisticated weapons leading to "destructured conflicts" or "low intensity wars" in and around the region. A fragile economy like that of Pakistan has seen a sharp rise in drug addicts from a few thousands in 1977 to over 4 million and a sharp jump in the number of people involved in the drugs trade. A significant portion of the weapons the U.S. supplied to the Mujahideen to fight the Soviets made its way to the arms mafia and the Taliban. As a result, Pakistan became infested with open arms bazaars and got

an entirely new profile of criminal and terrorist activities. The Taliban naturally capitalised on this "Kalashnikov culture". Its impact on violence in Karachi in Pakistan, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern States of India is distinctly ugly.

A new set of mercenaries-turned-terrorists came into being in the region. Their trans-national character and flexibility have been the secret of their survival and sustenance. Another offshoot of this military confusion has been the Taliban, a Sunni force which seems to have been crushed at the moment. The genetic linkage between madrassas (religious schools openly promoted by the various Pakistan Governments) and Talibanisation is well established. But it is only after September 11 that Pakistan openly declared Talibanisation to be a threat to its security.

The refugees are reluctant to return home because the future there is bleak. Even though the Taliban rule no more, the pastures and farms have been devastated. And landmines remain a constant danger. Afghanistan is essentially an agrarian economy, but the prolonged fighting had destroyed much of its irrigation capability, prevented a generation of children born in refugee camps from learning agricultural skills, and killed or injured hundreds of thousands of farmers.

The last time around, the U.S. left Afghanistan and also withdrew support to the refugees when they required it most. This time, the challenge itself is complex and the goal not clearly defined. Handling the refugee situation demands a very comprehensive policy and neutral stands. The politico-military goals should be marginalised. Unlike the last two decades when refugees were pawns in power games, this time at least Afghanistan deserves prolonged reconstruction.

(The writer is Professor of South Asian Economics, South Asia Centre, JNU.)

Australians march in support of refugees

HD-10
3/2

SYDNEY, FEB. 2. Critics of the Australian Government's immigration policies today rallied in cities across Australia to press for the release of the mostly West Asian asylum-seekers held in detention.

Over 1,000 marchers staked out Government offices in Sydney and in Melbourne, more than 2,000 protesters took to the streets to call for the end of mandatory detention of those who arrive without a visa. Australia's camps hold around 2,000 asylum-seekers, a quarter of them Afghans, who wait months, even years, for a decision on their asylum claims.

The Melbourne rally organiser, Jody Betzien, said public opinion had switched on an issue that helped deliver the Prime Minister, John Howard, a landslide victory at last November's general election. "Increasingly, people are seeing that these are normal human beings who have escaped persecution and got here by whatever means and deserved to be welcomed here," Mr. Betzien said. "As this campaign grows, there's good potential that the Government will be forced to change its policies on refugees," he said.

For months, the detention camps have been plagued by riots, hunger strikes, incidents of self harm and attempted

break-outs. Mr. Howard is adamant that herding asylum-seekers into camps will remain Government policy so long as neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia turn a blind eye to people-smuggling.

Rather than switch tack, Mr. Howard last week offered Afghans who got to Australia by paying people-smugglers a refund if they agree to give up their asylum claims and go home.

Mr. Howard, who is visiting the United States, announced

the offer of repatriation payments after a meeting in New York with Afghanistan's interim leader, Hamid Karzai.

Mr. Howard told Mr. Karzai that many of the 4,000 Afghans currently in detention or on temporary stay permits would qualify for the plane tickets and repatriation allowance. There are around 1,000 in the camps and 3,000 on three-year visas that may or may not be extended and do not allow for family members to join them in Australia. — DPA



Demonstrators taking out a protest against the Australian Government's immigration policies including the detention of asylum seekers in Sydney on Thursday. — Reuters

2/2/02



Refugees hurt themselves *89-12/25/11*

SYDNEY: Four Afghan boatpeople deliberately harmed themselves at an Australian detention camp in the latest twist in a nine-day-old protest against a freeze on the processing of their asylum claims, immigration officials said on Thursday. Detainees at the Woomera outback camp have gone on hunger strikes and sewn their lips shut during the protest, shocking many Australians and putting pressure on the government to review its hard line against illegal



immigrants. A spokesman for the Immigration Department told the Australian Associated Press that three adults and a child at the Woomera detention centre in the red heart of the country needed medical treatment overnight but gave no further details. Three teenagers are already in a nearby hospital suffering from dehydration and seven other detainees were rushed there on Tuesday after swallowing shampoo and painkillers. The Woomera unrest has sparked a

sympathy hunger strike in a Melbourne camp housing European and Asian visa violators as well as asylum seekers. Refugee activists have also called snap demonstrations outside immigration offices around the country. Around 64 of some 200 Afghan hunger strikers at Woomera have participated in the mouth-sewing protests by threading a symbolic cotton strand through their lips. *(Two girls shout to the press as they leave a school in Woomera township on a bus that will return them to the Woomera detention centre on Tuesday.)* — Reuters

Health services

THE IDU

New Zealand grants asylum to Tampa refugees

By Amit Baruah 10-15

SINGAPORE, JAN. 6. Not all countries turn away the persecuted. If Australia refused to take in asylum-seekers by turning away the Norwegian ship, the Tampa, which rescued them from certain death in August 2001, New Zealand has displayed that some nations still have a heart.

Of the 131 boat people accepted by New Zealand for processing, as many as 124 have been granted refugee status. Six persons yet to get approval are from family groups while a seventh is an unaccompanied minor.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that New Zealand's immigration service did a thorough job of checking the background of the asylum-seekers by sending audio tapes to Sweden to make sure that they were from Afghanistan.

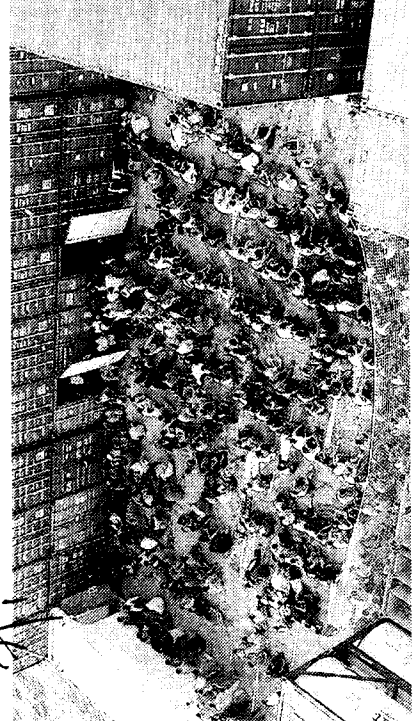
"Many of the accepted families have already left the refugee cen-

438 boat people, the majority were part of 21 family groups of parents and children. There were also 37 unaccompanied boys aged between 14 and 17. Once accepted, they will be found foster homes and can bring over their family," the paper added.

The rigorous verification procedure used by New Zealand to ensure that frauds were disqualified from obtaining refugee status only goes to show that desperate people resorted to using leaky boats to get to Australia. They often took huge loans to book a passage on Indonesian boats.

Last year, the Australian Government made an "example" of the refugees rescued by the Tampa, refusing to let them land on Australian territory. Now, New Zealand has proved that a sizable number of those who languished for weeks on the Tampa were genuine asylum-seekers.

They were classified as "queue



SOLACE AT LAST: Some of the 434 rescued refugees, including pregnant women, children and sick people from a ferry stranded in the Indian Ocean, are seen on board the Norwegian cargo ship Tampa off Australia's remote Christmas Island in this August 27, 2001, file photo.

tre and have been split between Auckland and Christchurch. They have been provided with Government housing. Bedding, furniture and other goods donated by local

communities as each family was given New Zealand \$1,200 to set up home," the report said.

"jumpers" - not quite appreciating the fact that the persecuted don't quite have the ability to wait for a place in the "queue" - and only then be able to process their claims for refugee status.

Here, it may be recalled, that the Tampa rescued the hapless refugees from the sea following a distress call and then the Howard Government said it would not let them land on Australian soil. The ship remained off Christmas Island for several days.

Unfortunately for those on board the Tampa, the ruling Australian coalition used the refugees as what turned out to be an election winning issue by taking a hard-line and refusing them permission to land.

Since then, some of the Tampa refugees have been taken to the Pacific island of Nauru as have some others who, too, were turned away by the Australian Government.