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BGD41287.E

09 April 2003

Bangladesh: Update to BGD23489.E of 2 April 1996 on the treatment of Biharis in Bangladesh

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Between 240,000 (USCR 2002; IPS 25 July 2002) and 300,000 (USCR 2002) Biharis, living in some 66 (IPS 25 July 2002; *New York Times* 13 May 2000; *Daily Excelsior* 24 Nov. 2001) to 81 (IJRL 2000, 66) camps, are presently living in Bangladesh. Alternatively, the *Daily Excelsior* in a November 2001 article stated that, while Bangladeshi officials place the number of Biharis at 400,000, the Biharis themselves estimate their numbers at 238,000 (24 Nov. 2001).

For a complete list of the camps and their locations, please consult Sumit Sen's article entitled "Stateless Refugees and the Right to Return: The Bihari Refugees of South Asia - Part 2," published in Volume 12, Number 1, of the 2000 *International Journal of Refugee Law* and available in all Regional Documentation Centres.

Although the Bangladesh government provides the camps with free electricity, water and provides a ration of wheat (*New York Times* 13 May 2000), conditions are poor (IJRL 2000, 64; USCR 1998; *Asia Times* 21 Mar. 2000). Most Biharis live either in one-room dwellings built by the Bangladeshi government in 1971 or in apartment buildings taken over by the government (USCR 1998). Despite the fact that the population has more than doubled in many of the camps, housing has not similarly increased (*ibid.*). Water is scarce and sanitation inadequate (*Asia Times* 21 Mar. 2000).

In Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka, for example, ten to twelve people per family live in shacks measuring some eight by ten feet (IPS 25 July 2002). Additionally, the camp only has 240 toilets and 36 bathing facilities to service a population of 18,000 to 20,000 people (*ibid.*).

Many Bihari children do not attend school (USCR 1998). Schools outside the camps tend to be beyond the financial means of many Biharis and those schools available in some of the camps require students' families to pay the teachers' salaries and buy all the school materials (USCR 1998).

Because Bangladesh does not consider the Biharis citizens, access to both "official and semi-official institutions, including schools are closed to them" (IJRL 2000, 65). Many younger Biharis have been able to find jobs as rickshaw drivers, shoe shiners and barbers (*Daily Excelsior* 24 Nov. 2001) or in the garment industry, "handicraft units" and other small establishments (*Asia Times* 21 Mar. 2000).

The United States Committee for Refugees 2002 country report for Bangladesh further stated that crime in the camps poses a further problem (USCR 2002). Young Bihari women are reportedly targeted by sex traffickers (ibid.) and pimps (*Asia Times* 21 Mar. 2000); although there is an indication that girls may be entering the sex trade voluntarily in order to leave the camps (ibid.). While also noting the high prevalence of crime, a July 2002 AFP article identified drug trading as a particular concern (28 July 2002).

Although Biharis are not mandated to live in the camps, a lack of resources means many cannot afford to live anywhere else (*New York Times* 13 May 2000; USCR 1998). Some also remain in the camps because they "feel more secure living among other Biharis" (ibid.).

While the Pakistani president assured the Bangladeshi prime minister in a 2002 visit to Bangladesh that the Biharis would be repatriated, Pakistan insists that this cannot happen until it has dealt with its three million Afghan refugees (*The Daily Star* 31 July; ibid. 30 Aug. 2002).

Although the Rabita Trust (Pakistan 17 Oct. 2001), a trust fund holding an estimated \$US 400 million (*The Statesman* 21 Jan. 2003), was established by an "international Islamic agency" to help repatriate the Biharis that money was never used (ibid.; *New York Times* 13 May 2000; Pakistan 17 Oct. 2001). The trust was added on 12 October 2001 to the United States' "Comprehensive List of Terrorists and Groups Identified Under Executive Order 13224," which "blocks the assets of organizations and individuals linked to terrorism" (United States 31 Dec. 2001). According to a press release issued by the United States Treasury Department, the Rabita Trust has been designated as an NGO that "provided logistical and financial support to al-Qa'ida" (6 Sept. 2002).

A November 2002 *Asian Affairs* article stated that "top leaders of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC) are allegedly involved in sending people, both Bangalis and Biharis, abroad by issuing falsified documents that certify them as stranded Pakistanis. According to the article, SPGRC leaders were taking money in exchange for the false identification certificates, which were then used by people "posing" as stranded Pakistanis to seek asylum in such countries as Sweden, France, Germany, Italy and the United States (ibid.). Research Directorate attempts to corroborate this information were unsuccessful within the constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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