

## Biharis

### Profile

The term 'Biharis' refers to the 250,000-300,000 non-Bengali citizens of the former East Pakistan who remain stranded in camps in Bangladesh (many others have assimilated into the Bengali population). Most of these people originated from the north Indian state of Bihar. Today many Biharis also live in Pakistan and India. Like the majority of Bengalis, Biharis are generally Sunni Muslims. Neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh has agreed to grant citizenship to the Biharis (also called stranded Pakistanis) which has resulted in their stateless for the past 35 years. In addition to denial of citizenship rights, Biharis also remain deprived of civil and political rights, as well as social, economic and cultural rights. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has not been able to address the situation of the Biharis. Currently Biharis live in 70 camps in 13 regions across Bangladesh.

### Historical context

During the British colonial times, segments of the Urdu speaking communities moved and settled in Bihar. After the partition in 1947 there was a mass movement of peoples between India and Pakistan. Although transfers of population took place largely across the Punjab, an exchange of population of 1.3 million people took place between East and West Bengal. The partition of India also forced one Million Muslims from Bihar into migration into East Bengal. Members of these communities, came to be known collectively as Biharis in East Pakistan.

Biharis, as staunch supporters of Pakistan, belonged to skilled working class primarily employed as craftsmen on the railways. On arrival in East Pakistan, Biharis found work as small traders, clerks, civil service officials, skilled railway and mill workers, and doctors. Many were appointed by Pakistani officials to replace educated Hindus in administrative jobs and in the mills. The Urdu-speaking Biharis became increasingly unpopular and were seen by Bengalis as symbols of West Pakistani domination, which created a climate of hostility against Biharis. In the December 1970 elections most Biharis supported the pro-Pakistan Muslim League rather than the Awami League, which was largely a Bengali nationalist movement. When the independent state of Bangladesh was formed in December 1971 several thousand Biharis were arrested as alleged collaborators, and there were many cases of retaliation against Biharis.

By mid-1972 the number of Biharis in Bangladesh was approximately 750,000. Some 278,000 were living in camps on the outskirts of Dhaka, another 250,000 were living around Saidpur in the north-west. Reconciliation programmes were initiated, and Urdu-speakers were taught Bengali in an effort to overcome the most obvious obstacle to their acceptance by Bengalis. However, there were, and remain, deep psychological barriers to overcome, and most Biharis feared further retaliation. The majority of Biharis in Bangladesh have consequently expressed a wish to be repatriated to Pakistan. The Pakistani government initially agreed to take 83,000 Biharis; the number was later increased. By 1974 108,000 had been transferred to Pakistan, and by 1981 163,000.

During the 1980s there were new initiatives to resettle Biharis in Pakistan but these have resulted in few concrete results. In July 1988, President Zia-ul-Haq, partly in the inertia of his rhetoric of Islamization and partly because of his own Mohajir background (see Pakistan) and genuine sympathy for the plight of Biharis, signed an agreement with the World Muslim League which provided for the resettlement of the Biharis. His assassination in August 1988 left the matter in limbo. The outcome of Pakistan's national elections in 1988 provided the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM), which has been the most enthusiastic supporter of Bihari settlement in Pakistan, with an opportunity to extract concessions from the two main contenders for the government. A deal was struck with the Pakistan People's Party in which the PPP promised that 'all Pakistanis living abroad by choice or by compulsion had the same rights as citizens of Pakistan'. The terms of the agreement were ambiguous, and its realization seemed impossible in so far as the Biharis were concerned. The first air flight of Biharis from Bangladesh to Pakistan was cancelled in January 1989 after protests by the Sindhi National Alliance and Punjabi-Pakhtun Itihad. The Bihari issue contributed immensely to the straining of relations between the MQM and the PPP in Pakistan, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the coalition. A new agreement stated that 'all stranded Biharis in Bangladesh shall be issued Pakistan passports and in the meantime arrangements shall be made to repatriate them to Pakistan immediately'.

Entering into such an ambitious programme of action was one thing, its implementation was quite another. Although settlement procedures for Biharis were initiated, with the first batch of 323 Biharis arriving in Lahore in January 1993 and being housed near Okara in Punjab, further settlements had to be stalled, due largely to opposition both from within the ranks of the governments and from the local population. The political, economic and cultural ramifications of a group of such numerical strength, as well as distinct ideological and political convictions, would, it is feared, generate tensions in Punjab while at the same time exacerbating already existing divisions in the urban Sindh.

The camps in Bangladesh still faced difficulties and discrimination. Their past allegiance to the West Pakistan army were not forgotten and led to attempts to try some Biharis on charges of war crimes during the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971. Biharis in Bangladesh generally described themselves as 'stranded Pakistanis', and some organized themselves into the Pakistani General Repatriation Committee, which advocated militant action to achieve repatriation. Camp conditions were in many cases appalling. The Bihari community as a whole felt humiliated and betrayed by successive Pakistan governments. Yet, existing political divisions in Pakistan made the prospect of their resettlement a forlorn hope. In a test-case during 2002 before the Bangladesh high courts, the petitioners (on behalf of the Biharis) were successful in obtaining the right to vote. This right was granted to limited number of Biharis in 2003.

## **Current issues**

Biharis continue to survive in abysmal and degrading living condition. An ever growing population with meagre resources, poor sanitation, poor level of hygiene and lack of education or schooling form the major every day concerns for the Biharis. Although on the whole facing bleak prospects, there have been developments to generate some improvements in the living conditions of the Biharis. During 2005-2006, there has been the establishment of a local cooperative, an increase in infra-structure for sanitation and relatively easier access to fresh water. The electoral Commission of Bangladesh has allowed Biharis (amongst the ages of 18-33) to register for the 2007 elections, thereby providing an opportunity to the younger generation of Biharis to participate in a democratic reform of their political and social reform.