

Public Statement

4 October 2000

AI Index ASA 14/002/2000 - News Service Nr. 189

Bhutan: Refugees face further set back

The future of almost 100,000 refugees living in camps in eastern Nepal was dealt another blow this week after the Bhutanese government rejected a UN formula by which their eligibility for inclusion in a future voluntary repatriation program would be determined, Amnesty International said today.

Bhutan and Nepal started negotiations to solve the problem of the people in the refugee camps in November 1992. Since then, nine ministerial-level meetings between both countries have taken place.

At the last meeting in May 2000, both countries reported "substantial progress" towards a solution. The stumbling block was how to verify the documents of the people in the refugee camps. Nepal maintained that verification should be done by heads of family and that the status of the head would automatically determine the status of the rest of the family. Bhutan has insisted that individuals over the age of 18 should be verified individually.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) subsequently put forward a formula aimed at bridging both positions. The UNHCR compromise formula suggested that the unit of verification would be the nuclear family, including unmarried young people up to the age of 25, and elderly relatives. Nepal has accepted this formula. The Bhutan government however has turned it down.

"The Bhutan government's decision will delay a solution to the problem even further. It is imperative that both governments recommit themselves to finding a solution which will uphold the rights of the refugees, including their right to return to their own country," Amnesty International said.

Background

Since late 1990, almost 100,000 Nepali-speaking people have fled or were evicted from southern Bhutan to refugee camps in Nepal, or were born in exile to refugee parents. The causes of exile remain deeply contested.

The refugees claim they are victims of human rights violations and discrimination by the Bhutan government's "one nation, one people" policy introduced in the late 1980s based on the traditions of the northern Bhutanese. The Bhutanese government maintains that the people in the refugee camps are illegal immigrants from Nepal who had overstayed their contracts in Bhutan, or Bhutanese who left the country voluntarily and thus are deemed to have renounced their nationality under Bhutan's citizenship law.

Amnesty International last month published a report "Bhutan: Nationality, Expulsion, Statelessness and the Right to Return" which outlines the application of international human rights standards in relation to these issues and examines various country situations and repatriation programs. The prime aim of this document is to assist in bringing about a solution to the situation of the Bhutanese refugees, but it is hoped that it may also be of use to other governments trying to find solutions to similar protracted refugee crises around the world.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>

Last updated : October 4