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**NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
The Internally Displaced Persons in Bangladesh:
Towards Developing Research and Policy Agenda**

Plight of the people forcibly displaced, whether within the borders or across, has become a major focus of international concern. Such concern was expressed during a two-day conference arranged by the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) held on 15-16 February 1999. This was the first conference on the theme to be held in Bangladesh.

RMMRU conference on *The Internally Displaced Persons in Bangladesh: Towards Developing Research and Policy Agenda* was held at the BISS Auditorium in Dhaka. The *Inaugural Session* of the conference was chaired by Prof. A. K. Azad Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor of the University of Dhaka and was addressed by Dr. Q K Ahmad of Bangladesh Unnyon Parishad, Mr. Wilbert van Hovell of UNHCR, and Dr. Simon Kay of the British Council.

Dr. Q K Ahmad emphasized the need for easing of restrictions on global population movement as a possible measure through which population burden can be mitigated for the overpopulated third world countries. He also stressed that global capital movement should be matched by population movement. But this is absent in the current doctrine that guide the globalization process. Mr. Wilbert van Hovell highlighted the human rights and humanitarian dimensions of refugee movements. He stated that conditions must be ensured so that the IDPs do not become refugees and suggested that the right not to be arbitrarily displaced should be recognized by the international community, the states, at the

national level. The UNHCR official was also of the opinion that the forcibly displaced should receive more attention and adequate humanitarian relief on a non-discriminatory basis. Dr. Simon Kay stated that in order to phase out dependency of the developing countries on the developed world, skill transfer is important. Such transfer brings institutional capacity to a level that help tackle problems of poverty, marginalisation, displacement etc. and ensures ability of the developing countries to face real problems in the field with proper expertise. Prof. A K Azad Chowdhury stated that forced migration and internal displacement should be considered as a serious problem of the day. But unfortunately, governments and donor agencies do not give due attention to this issue. Freedom of movement of people at the global level is warranted, but not forced movement, he observed.

Participants of the conference stressed the need for better protection of the IDPs worldwide affected directly by armed conflict and persecution, whose number currently stand **at 25 million**. They observed that this figure exceeds the total refugee population of the world (14 million). The conference underscored the need for an even economic growth throughout the country to strike the problems at their roots as pressure of population and unemployment, river bank erosion and degradation of the environment contribute to migration of people from the countryside to the urban areas

In the *first working session*, Dr. David Turton, Director of the Refugee Studies Programme,

University of Oxford, presented a paper on *Some Conceptual and Methodological Problems in the Study of Refugees and Forced Migrants*. The paper points out that given the enormous importance of population movements as refugees in the world today it seems odd that refugee studies has not shown a greater capacity for institutional development and theoretical growth as a 'field' of academic inquiry. This, according to Dr. Turton, is because of two problems: the problem of defining its subject matter and the problem of resolving the tension that exists within it between activism and academic inquiry. He approaches the first problem by distinguishing *refugee* from *ordinary people*. The second problem is usually debated through the question 'how can we make academic research relevant to the real world?' To him this is not a real question. Distinction should be made not between academics and practitioners, but between two kinds of knowledge: *scientific*, which is necessarily reflective and conscious, and *practical*, that is necessarily unreflective and unselfconscious. So the best way to make scientific knowledge relevant to practice is to use it to scrutinize and problematize what practical knowledge takes for granted, not to answer practical question. Afsan Chowdhury of the Disaster Forum, Dhaka, argued in his paper, titled *The Refugees and the Internally Displaced People: The Political Dimension*, that the terms 'refugee' and 'internally displaced people' (IDPs) are determined by those most often responsible for their migration itself rather than the migrants. The right of people to move to safe areas or economically better off area is not recognized by the international community. In the existing process of increased globalization only capital is allowed unfettered migration rights. This process of alienation between the people and the wealth is determined by the positions taken by the nation-states. Thus, refugee and IDP are Statist definitions overwhelmed by the state in being. The space between what is called IDP and refugee is also artificial since they are devised according to political expediency. Thus the reception to migrants are not dependent upon a standard policy or the state of the migrants but what host states decide is convenient to them.

Philip Gain of Society for Environment and Human Development, while reflecting on the

underlying causes of internal displacement and relocation in Bangladesh in his paper titled *Underlying Causes of Internal Displacement and Economic Dispossession in Bangladesh* points out that the internally displaced persons, as in the case of Kaptai Dam or Jamuna Bridge, sometimes suffer the same trauma and trepidation as those of refugees. He also examines how the internal displacement contributes to the economic defeat of the marginal people. He identifies investment strategies and the policies of the multilateral development banks (MDBs) and donor / industrialized countries as some of the major causes of displacement. Gain further argues that afforestation in the name of social/community forestry in the Madhupur forests, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Teknaf belt, have made severe impacts not only on the ecology but also on the customary rights of the ethnic communities who have been displaced from their homes, livelihood and land. The ever-growing prawn industry in the coastal belt since the mid-1980s has seriously disturbed the local economy and sent marginal people to the labour markets in the cities. In some instances, people's rights to typical common property has shrunk to such an extent that they have lost much of their livelihood. Many of these categories of displaced people will eventually migrate to the cities and end up as rickshaw-puller, workers in the beauty parlours (the case of Garos) or commercial sex workers or be trafficked out to other countries.

During floor discussion the impact of the Vested Property Act on the Hindu population of Bangladesh was highlighted. Julian Francis of the International Federation of Red Cross Societies pointed to the naive attitude of the government of Bangladesh in bringing in North American experts who know little about the nature of forestry in Bangladesh.

In the *second working session on Displacement due to Natural Factors*, two papers on disaster related displacement were presented by the Young Researchers Forum of RMMRU. The first paper dealt with the *Displaced in the Magurcherra Explosion in June 1997*. This explosion instantly displaced 40 local ethnic Khasia families. 87.5 acres of land and forest was damaged. Many species of bird and other animals suffered. Productivity of the soil was lost because of the heat and

burn. The local community suffered because the betel-groves they used to plant was severely damaged along with the trees. They had to go through much hardship as no government agency came to check the safety level of water in the tube-well. The other paper of Young Researchers Forum of RMMRU was titled *Flood Related Displacement in Jamalpur '98*. A detailed survey of 100 interviewees in this previously identified most vulnerable and disaster pocket showed that the government failed to come into assistance of the people at appropriate time. In cases, only 7 out of 700/800 people got the VGF card. A large number of people lost their property completely and most others had to live on others' mercy. The main problem was that they could not find any job. Cases of mass migration towards the cities were also reported.

Dr. Muhammad Z Mamun of the Institute of Business Administration, Dhaka University, spoke on *Impacts of Riverbank Erosion on Migration*. He stated that erosion takes away land, the main source of their income, from the rural people of Bangladesh, which is their main source of income. Endemic in nature, it affects one million people on an average every year. Out of 491 sub-districts thanas, 100 are affected by riverbank erosion. Every year the monetary loss comes around US \$50 million. One area study showed that each household was affected at least 10 times by riverbank erosion. The range of being affected is on an average 2.24 times all over the country. In Rajshahi, 32 out of 94 households were affected during 1983-84. Presenting this gloomy picture Dr. Mamun concluded that in several research it was found that people even after being affected for 5-6 times, do not want to move from their land until they lose all to the river. Subsequently they become destitute and some migrate to the city in search of job. It has been found that families dependent solely on agriculture, with no education and skill, gradually become poorer.

Professor K B Sajjadur Rashid, of the Department of Geography, Dhaka University, made a presentation on *Climate Change and Sea Level Rise: Implications for Population Displacement from the Coastal Regions of Bangladesh*. While identifying climate change as a serious problem for mankind and for

Bangladesh in particular, he said we are absolutely unprepared in terms of data, computer simulations and other technology to face any such consequences arising from the prospect of climate change in the coming century. Giving an example of possible adverse effect of climate change on agriculture in the long run, Prof. Rashid stated that an increase in 1 degree Celsius in temperature does have significant impact on crop. It will also change the flood scenario by increasing it by 10%. This will also affect eastern parts of India. If 50-cm rise of sea level occurs by 2070-80, 11% of the coastal area of Bangladesh will be inundated which is 2/3 of the Sundarban, whole of Patuakhali and one half of Barisal districts, parts of Noakhali and all the offshore islands and also the Chittagong port. Territorially it will affect about 16,000 sq. kms. and 5% of the population will be affected. At the present rate of population growth in Bangladesh by the year 2070, 12 million people will be displaced because of the inundation. In any liberal estimate this inundation will devour 21% of the area that is about 1/5 of Bangladesh. Professor Rashid also had some good news to share. Firstly, this rise of sea level will not occur in a single day, rather will take place very slowly and the population growth in the coastal region is also at its minimum. Increasing frequency of cyclone in the Bay due to rising temperature, will presumably cause large-scale population movements in the form of displacement. He stated that the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate (IPCC), a body of the world meteorological organizations, identified three strategies for countries affected by the sea level rise. First is *Retreat*, which is not feasible for Bangladesh as we have less inland to adopt that strategy. Secondly, *Adaptation*, which involves change in crop pattern, housing and other commensurate measures. But this is also inapplicable for 20 million people. The third measure is *Protection* in the form of intervention by construction of dam or like. It is absolutely impractical to think of constructing a dam stretching from Teknaf to Hiron Point, he observed. As against these Professor Rashid proposed a fourth solution which he called *demographic-globalization* where people will move to other communities or countries according to the need of the host population and through mutual understanding.

He called for skill development in attaining this goal.

In the *third working session on Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, discussion on the Chittagong Hill Tracts featured prominently. Ina Hume in her paper: *IDPs of the Sajek Union in CHT*, stated that the IDPs of the CHT are facing severe hardships, with no land, no money, no assets and no access to social infrastructure. Many have moved several times in order to escape conflict with the settlers. Ms. Hume suggested that it is vital that IDP families are rehabilitated on suitable land. It is only by taking long-term development initiatives to improve the socio-economic situation of the IDPs that their problems can be minimized. This may include facilitating their return to their original homelands, overcoming the worsening food crisis by phase on a yearly basis; health care, especially for the children; education; income generating and employment opportunities (which was only based on *Jhum* cultivation, timber and bamboo cutting) and sanitation; withdrawal of false cases etc. There are false cases filed by the forest department, by which people are harassed and financial losses are sustained. At present, Hume added, a Rangamati based local NGO is collecting data for helping these people.

In the *fourth working session on Development and Displacement* held on the second day of the conference, Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui of the Department of Political Science of the Dhaka University presented her research findings on *Development Induced Internal Displacement: The Jamuna Bridge Case*. She observed that in most cases large-scale development projects lead to involuntary population displacement. This displacement is treated as necessary ill effect of greater development goals. Worldwide experiences demonstrate that unplanned development induced involuntary population displacement have the potential of creating political instability, social disharmony and impoverishment. The Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Project also resulted in involuntary displacement of a large number of people. However, this has been the first project in Bangladesh to incorporate a comprehensive resettlement of the affected people. Her paper concludes that implementation of the resettlement programme is a complex process

and preexisting laws, method of choosing implementing partners, unholy alliance between the local government functionaries, middlemen, and development of vested interest groups among a section of the affected people, work as major hindrances in the process of meaningful resource transfer to the displaced people.

Among the discussants Mr. Shahid Alam, Project Director of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Authority (JMBA), Mr. Shahjahan Siraj, MP, Dr. David Turton, discussed the nature of difficulties in implementing such a large scale project and stressed the need for long-term strategic planning, developed through exchange of ideas, information, sharing of experiences in mitigating the suffering of the displaced and also to scale down the bureaucratic impediments that usually hinders such projects.

In the *fifth working session on Settling the Displaced*, Ms. S. Rizwana Hasan, of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association, shared her *Experiences in Dealing with Displacement Related Cases*. She first explained how legal regime covers the whole issue of disruption that ultimately leads to displacement. Even though the legal documents do not cover the 'displaced persons' with precise terminology, the process of displacement is covered by different legal measures employed for the poor, destitute, disadvantaged, etc. She further argued that any displacement scenario may be divided into three phases: first, the reasons of displacement when the law suggests preventive measures; secondly, displacement as it happens when resettlement components comes up and law ensures basic rights and right to property and so on; thirdly, the post-displacement scenario when the displaced takes the identity of the poor, destitute, disadvantaged. She observed that laws are adequate on the issue of disruption not in the issue of mitigating sufferings that is compensation and resettlement or rehabilitation. Hassan stated that the Constitution of Bangladesh ensures our rights to livelihood, right to a dignified life as citizens of the land. Under the provision of the Constitution the government is bound to ensure that no citizen is deprived of his/her fundamental right. But state policies must be distinguished from the fundamental rights, she

added. Sharing the experience of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) in the Flood Action Plan 20 undertaken in the Tangail district, she expressed her disappointment that the people, not to mention that even the local MP, was not aware about the massive project before it was actually implemented. The project documents did not contain any clause with respect to its possible failure and subsequent package of compensation for the affected local people, she observed. The government also overlooked the legal requirements prescribed in the Embankment and Drainage Act 1952 of compensating the affected people. She shared BELA's experience in creating a situation that later resulted in incorporation of the issue of compensation. But this remained as a matter of theory because the ministries denied compensating some 3000 claims on the ground that there was no rule for compensation. Under the circumstances, BELA is now preparing a model law/compensation manual that could be used to compensate these and other displaced people in any future projects.

Dr. Shahdeen Malik of the Bangladesh Legal Aid Service Trust and RMMRU argued in his paper *Housing Rights of the Urban Poor: Towards a Human Rights Agenda* that urban poor were one of the most right-less and vulnerable inhabitants of Dhaka. In the backdrop of anti-poor economic policy (privatization, marketization, foreign direct investment etc.) the condition of this marginalized group is becoming even more untenable and as such the issue of their housing rights need to be included in the national agenda. His paper assesses the initial cases against the eviction and legislative initiatives that may provide pointers for advocacy and rights campaign for the urban poor. Dr. Malik also argued for the recourse to the High Court Division as one of the means to protect housing rights of the urban poor and offered suggestions for legislative measures to protect the urban poor from arbitrary eviction.

In the *final working session on IDPs: Regional and International Dimensions* Dr. Mahendra Lama, Reader in International Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University of New Delhi, presented a paper on the *Internally Displaced in India*. Dr. Lama argued that India has been one of the violence prone countries in

South Asia and the centre stage of the refugee movements. This has been so due to political upheavals, human rights violations, social discrimination, poverty and landlessness, religious persecutions, deforestation, desertification, natural disaster and environmental dislocation. Despite all these, he observed, there has been no major exodus of people in any of the neighboring countries from India. An important reason for this, is the large size of the country accommodating people of diverse cultures, communal and ethnic compositions. This enables the country not only to accommodate the fleeing people but also remain unaffected by the violence. In a way, India produces hordes of internally displaced people who are scattered in many corners of the country. Dr. Lama contended they are refugees in every respect, apart from the fact that they do not or cannot cross international boundary. So, that makes India more of a 'minefield of IDPs'.

Chris Dehoy, a researcher of Images Asia, an NGO based in Thailand, presented the paper *IDPs in Burma: the Role of the Burmese Military in Causing Internal Displacement through Forced Relocation*. Dehoy stated that in the course of a 50-year civil war between the Burmese military and the non-Burmese ethnic groups, which make up approximately half of the total population of 46 million, various forms of forced relocations have been practiced. These techniques, originating in the military sphere, are increasingly applied to 'development' projects, and make Burma a world leader in demographic engineering. The different forms of forced relocation practiced in Burma includes strategic hamletting meaning removal and concentration of a community in a military controlled area, removal by terror or economic sabotage meaning removal without any specific destination to go, expulsion for economic and military purposes and eviction from urban centers for 'beautification'. The military regime refuses to recognize the existence of the IDPs. But the growing number of the IDPs in the border areas may soon create regional instability, Dehoy observed.

Dr. Omprakash Mishra, Coordinator of the Centre for Refugee Studies of Jadavpur University, Calcutta, observed in his paper *Protecting the Displaced: International*

Response and Institutional Arrangements that the international community had shown an increasing readiness in recent years to address the plight of the IDPs. He argued that in the absence of specific institutional responsibility for the IDPs international response has been ad-hoc, varied and inadequate. His paper explored the institutional arrangements for meeting the assistance and protection needs of the IDPs in the light of the mandates of UNHCR, UNDP, ICRC and other international organizations and agencies.

Eminent jurist, Dr. Kamal Hossain chaired the **Concluding Session** of the conference. Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui presented the recommendations that were made during the two-day deliberations. Mr. David Whittlesey of International Organization for Migration (IOM) taking note of the varied nature and causes of the IDP problematique stressed the need for cooperation among the UN agencies that can ensure the safety of the IDPs. He stated that the question of mandate comes after the practical need of the field are met and only after assisting the distressed. Eminent water resources expert, Professor Hamidur Rahman Khan, shared his experience of how the farmers feel helpless in the face of land acquisition for the implementation of government projects which often take away every thing from them. He noted that the bureaucratic process will always deprive the poor of their rights for compensation. Identifying river erosion as another serious problem creating IDPs Dr. Khan informed that a study found that in 10 years over a million people were displaced in Bangladesh. Dr. Khan also identified landlessness and deteriorating law and order situation as major causes of displacement. He stressed the need for identifying the causes of displacement and then to prioritize them.

Dr. Kamal Hossain in his concluding remarks stated that people affected by river erosion should be given priority in resettling in the *char* lands and though there is no specific law to this effect, there is a broad policy in this regard. Discussing the background of the Vested Property Act he observed that it should be abolished as it has a direct bearing on the IDPs. Dr. Hameeda Hossain of *Ain O Shalish Kendra* observed that shrimp cultivation in the south of the country is creating IDPs. She also

suggested that the participants should take a good look at the political and social consequences of repealing the Vested Property Act before advocating the same. Participants emphasized the need for a database on the IDPs. Dr. Kamal Hossain advised the organizers to look for ways in which social and economic rights are threatened by displacement and to think of systematic response in the form of awareness building, strategic planning, and mitigating measures along with other segments of the civil society. Dr. Abrar in his final statement thanked the participants for their contributions, which he thought would help draw up an agenda for research and policy advocacy, that has been the goal of the conference.

Conference Recommendations

- There is a general lack of information on different types of internally displaced persons, such as, development induced, conflict induced or environmental degradation induced. A central data-base on IDPs of Bangladesh may be established that would gather information on the extent of displacement, duration and causes.
- Efforts must be made to provide relief assistance and all kinds of protection to different categories of IDPs.
- The international agencies need to clarify their stand and mandates on the IDPs. This is necessary for developing a concrete plan of action for their support.
- There should be a national policy with regard to the IDPs. The policy should reflect the commitment of the state to look after the interests of the IDPs. For framing a timely and feasible policy draft, the Deng principles and international conventions related to economic and social rights may be looked into.
- Research activities should be initiated to independently assess the impact of internal displacement on people, environment and the economy.
- Experiences on displacement related issues should be shared with the neighbouring countries. This will help develop strategies for mitigating the plight of different categories of the displaced.
- Climate change or other environment-related displacement has regional and international dimensions. A regional

approach is needed to address the problem of environment related displacement. Issues such as sea-level rise should be brought in international fora to make the international community accountable and take responsibility for impacts of climate change.

- A comprehensive economic, social and environmental impact assessment should be conducted before implementing any major development project.
- Ethnic and religious minorities should be provided with adequate protection. Actions should be taken for the abolition of discriminatory laws such as the Vested Property Act .
- Local government institutions should be strengthened for the rehabilitation of the IDPs.
- Adequate attention should be given for the creation of employment opportunities for the IDPs. These measures are likely to ease pressure for migration from rural to urban areas.
- A systematic database on government *khas* land may be developed and be made available to the organizations working with the IDPs.
- Impact of different kinds of displacement on women also needs to be examined. Such studies are essential for developing gender specific strategies for women.

Legal Measures

- Measures should be taken for proper enforcement of legal provisions already available under existing laws for the protection of the IDPs.
- There is a need for the development of a standard policy guideline regarding compensating the involuntarily displaced people.
- The government should undertake legal reform regarding land transfer and other related matters.
- Legislative measure should be taken to ensure that the displaced of the adjoining areas and other IDPs would get priority in the distribution of newly emerging land in the *char* areas.

THE STATE OF THE BURMESE REFUGEES IN THAILAND AND THE ROLE OF MILITARY

Chris Dehoy, Images Asia, Thailand

The current situation of the refugees in Burma was discussed at a seminar organised by RMMRU in March. Chris Dehoy, a field researcher working with Images Asia – a NGO based in Thailand was the principal speaker of the seminar that was attended by students and teachers of the University.

Dehoy gave an overview of the refugee situation in Burma while elucidating various factors contributing to the refugee flow. This was preceded by a discussion on the geopolitical setting of Myanmar.

The speaker identified the constitutional arrangement of opting for secession by the states from the central government after a 10-year period as one of the prime reasons for the current dilemma. With insurgency on the rise that started in the second year of independence of the country, military was called in later by the government to maintain law and order. The country never really recovered from the legacy of the successive regimes as the military took over in the guise *State Law and Order Restoration Council*. The military regime undertook a homogenizing scheme, better known as the **Burmanization** process, aimed at maintaining a tight control over the different ethnic groups. Under this scheme, cultural and religious plurality was denied and control over resources by the different groups until now like the Karen's hold over the teak and water, was effectively put to an end. In the meantime the refugee movement began, Karens crossing the border to Thailand in big numbers. However, from 1995 onwards, as the military took over the headquarters of the Karen and other ethnic groups and especially after 1997 the situation of the Karen refugee camps changed significantly. There is religious and ethnic tension in the camps. Others like the Shan people are mostly economic migrants. Kachin community is less affected by the crisis. Chins are very poor and they are always forced to work for the military. In this scenario, the speaker noted, the military use

cease-fire as a tactic to bring the situation under its effective control.

While assessing the role of outside powers Ms Dehoy observed that China helped the Burmese army by selling arms to them instead of helping the Shan communists. The Thai government, always fearful of the Burmese, welcomed the Karens and placed them in a buffer zone. The Western Front with India was relatively normal because of the difficult terrain, which does not allow much travelling. But its border with Bangladesh in the West remains very tense. Rohingyas are treated as illegal Bangladeshi in Myanmar and the authorities allege that the presence of these “Bangladeshis” have a negative impact on the local labour market resulting in declining wage. The Rohingyas do not receive ration in Myanmar and the government of Bangladesh is also not very keen to keep them here for long.

Summing up the presentation the speaker identified a fact sheet of a few type of forced relocation like strategic hamletting; removals by terror or economic sabotage which includes burning of rice stores, destruction of crops, killing of animals, extortion and looting, as well as the economic dimension of forced labour; expulsion for economic and military purposes; eviction from urban centers for ‘beautification’; etc. Following the presentation an open floor discussion took place. The weaknesses of the Burmese student movement, economic progress and multilateral aid, cross border insurgency and the possibility of a return to a democratic rule under the leadership of Su Kyi led National League for Democracy were some of the issues that were addressed during this part of the session.

Reporter: S Nurullah Azad

IDPS IN NORTH EAST INDIA **Dr. Omprakash Mishra, Centre for Refugee Studies, Jadavpur University**

At a recent discussion on the Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in North East India, participants observed that there is a general lack of information on the IDPs in the region. The discussion was arranged by the Refugee and Migratory and Migratory Movements

Research Unit (RMMRU), at the University of Dhaka. Dr. Omprakash Mishra of the Centre for Refugee Studies in Calcutta, India, discussed on the displacement scenario in the seven states of North-east India or the ‘seven sisters’ as is often called, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur and Nagaland. Dr. Mishra stated it was more than apparent that the region has a significant number of IDPs and refugee populations.

He stressed the link between inter-tribe and government vs. separatists’ violence and resultant internal displacement. Severe ethnic strife between the Nagas and Kukis continued for about 5 years from 1992 to ’97. This resulted in large-scale relocation of population. In the tribal communities such relocation often occurred within the boundary of a certain community like the Kukis to areas dominated by members of their own community. Nagas did the same in the hill districts of Manipur. A unique case is the professionals moving out of Meghalaya where they had been living for about a century. This minority non-tribal people are facing persecution by the majority tribal people. A slow exodus of people is reshaping the character of the society. Bengalis and especially the Nepalese are being ousted from parts of Tripura. Moreover, among the tribal groups some want separate state, some limit their aspirations to autonomy. In the Bodo areas the government of India and the Bodo militants signed an agreement which paved the way for Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC). Unfortunately, the speaker observed, yet the BAC has not been formed. According to the estimation carried out prior to the agreement the villages having a Bodo majority would fall under the jurisdiction of BAC. But after the agreement it was found that most of the villages do not qualify this criteria. Now it is alleged that the Bodos are trying to engineer displacement to gain more villages. The Bodos had problem with the Assamese, later with the Muslims, and the Rajbongshis, and had a major clash in 1996 with the Santhals, and yet again with the Nepalese. Bodos claim all land, even those inhabited by non-Bodos but falls within the Bodo dominated region. Consequently in the last seven and half years most of the people have been displaced. The adivashi Santhals are in worst condition.

1,53,000 people were displaced and they had to be put in fifty-eight relief camps.

The *refugee situation* was also described to be precarious. As a matter of policy the Government of India allows UNHCR to accord refugee status only to those who can come to their New Delhi office. Of the total 40,000 Chins the only recognized 500 were accorded refugee status. The Chakma refugee situation has improved after the signing of the December 2nd treaty. Dr. Mishra stated that India applied pressure on the refugees to come back to Bangladesh. He defended it saying it was aimed at developing relationship with Bangladesh and to relieve India of the burden of the refugees. He further observed that the local wage level was coming down at an alarming rate. This was off course in the backdrop of sustained migration from other parts of India especially from Bengal that was ultimately changing the demographic pattern of the region of Tripura. Majority of the local people felt threatened. As a result of those 50,000 refugees from Bangladesh the local people tried to engineer displacement. He claimed, Tibetans living in India have been rehabilitated and integrated while Bhutanese and Nepalese live in Bengal and in Northeast India.

In his concluding remarks Dr. Mishra underscored the need of a consistent policy on the refugees and the internally displaced people especially for India as it has a formidable number of IDPs. He observed that most of these population groups of North East India is likely to qualify for the refugee status and lack of determination process has contributed to deprivation of their refugee rights. The session was attended by teachers and students of various departments of the University of Dhaka and was moderated by Dr. C R Abrar, Coordinator RMMRU.

Reporter: S. Nurullah Azad

ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIT – January-March, 1999.

Conference: A two-day national conference on *The Internally Displaced Persons in Bangladesh: Towards Developing Research and Policy Agenda* was organized on 15-16 February, 1999, at the BIISS Auditorium.

Refugee Law Course: A two day short course on *International Refugee Law* was organized on 9-10 January, 1999, for the students of the Department of Political Science. Over thirty students participated in the course. Mr. M. M. Sunnah, Legal Officer of UNHCR, Dhaka, Dr. Shahdeen Malik of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, and Dr. C. R. Abrar of Dhaka University conducted the course

Seminars: During the reporting period several talks were organised at the Seminar Room of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Dhaka. Dr. David Turton, Director, Refugee Studies Programme, Oxford, gave a talk on *the Effect of History on the Morsee Tribe of Ethiopia*, organized by the Unit on 17 February, 1999.

A representative of the American Center for International Labour Solidarity, gave a talk on *Condition of the Female Migrant Workers of Sri Lanka* on 4 March, 1999.

Dr. Omprakash Mishra of Jadavpur University gave a talk on *Population Displacement in the North East of India* on 18 March, 1999.

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Slide Show: A slide show on *Travels Along the Tsanppo-Brahmaputra: from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal* was organized at the Centre for Higher Research in Social Sciences. Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi made the presentation.

Monthly Meeting: Monthly meetings of Student Associates were held regularly. In these meetings progress of current research projects was discussed.

Visitors: Dr. David Turton, Director, RSP, Oxford, came to Dhaka for a short visit under the Higher Education Link Programme, managed by the British Council. He called on the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Dhaka. Dr. Turton also had a meeting with the Executive Committee members of RMMRU.

Mr. David G Whittlesey, the Regional Representative of IOM, paid a visit to the Unit office on 14 February 1999.

Mr. Caren De Boer of Karen Human Rights Group of Thailand paid a visit to the Unit on 2nd February, 1999. He had a discussion with

the Unit Coordinator and some of the Associates on the Burmese refugees in Thailand, their contribution in Thai development process, the internal politics and conflicts among the refugees in Thailand, and Bangladeshi stand regarding Rohingya refugees.