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**THE CAMP-BASED URDU-SPEAKING YOUTH DEMAND
BANGLADESHI CITIZENSHIP**

A section of the Urdu speaking youth of different camps of Mohammadpur, Dhaka has demanded citizenship of Bangladesh. They said they were born in independent Bangladesh and hence there is no reason to deny them the citizenship of the country and thus deprive them of their fundamental civil rights. They demanded that measures be taken for their political, social and economic rehabilitation in Bangladesh.

These demands were made during an inter-community dialogue on the *Future of the Bihari Youth in Bangladesh* held at the seminar of the Centre for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Sciences of Dhaka University on 17 April 2000. The programme was arranged by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU). Four papers were presented by the student representatives of the Urdu speaking community.

Md. Hasan in his presentation observed that the decision of the older generation to go to Pakistan had severely handicapped the younger generation in respect to their education and it is illiteracy that has contributed to their ignorance. He added that poor economic condition is compelling students to quit their studies. Hasan also claimed that Urdu-speaking children are not admitted in the government schools if they give their camp address. He said some initiatives at the non-governmental level have been taken up, which are inadequate compared to the need, and education at the secondary level can not be ensured for these disadvantageous groups. Hasan alleged that receiving local Commissioner's certificate has been a major problem. Such certificates are needed for getting jobs and for other reasons. He referred to a case where a 12-13 year old child could not be admitted to an orphanage due to lack of such a document.

While discussing the conditions of women in the camps, S. Shabana highlighted their lack of opportunities for education. She stated that though women are skilled in handicrafts, they do not receive fair wage for their labour. In addition, due to pervasive illiteracy and ignorance the incidence of early marriage is rampant in the camps. This results in conditions where the girl-child is to shoulder the responsibility of a family at an age when she is expected to pass time in studies and games. In the process, she has to forsake all opportunities before harnessing her own potentials. Shabana further reported that marriage prospects become dim for women residing in camps and in this respect their families are subjected to demands of exorbitant dowry. Lack of water and sewerage facilities contribute to conditions in which women cannot take adequate care for their health and hygiene, and thus, are faced with various health problems. Cramped camp conditions also compromise their privacy. The speaker appealed to eminent intellectuals, women's, human rights and non-governmental organisations to extend support to their cause.

In his presentation, Nurul Islam blamed the leadership of their community for the plight of the young generation. He stated that his generation is paying a heavy price for the wrong decisions taken by the previous generation. Islam viewed that though the leaders knew that repatriation to Pakistan was never a viable option, even then for their own petty interest they pursued such a policy. Islam

informed that at different times tolls are collected from unsuspecting camp dwellers by selling “census forms for repatriation” to different countries including Pakistan. He further stated that lack of education and able leadership have been the principal weakness of the community.

Khalid Hossain called upon the younger generation not to pay heed to the advice of older folks about repatriation, rather concentrate on raising demands for integration in Bangladesh, their motherland. A lively discussion followed the formal presentations and this was participated by students and teachers of different departments of Dhaka University and representatives of human rights and non-governmental organisations. Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui of the Department of Political Science highlighted various problems faced by this community in their search for identity and underscored the need for providing them with access to credit.

Human rights activist Advocate Nizamul Huq Nasim called upon the government and civil society to consider and support the demands of the Urdu speaking community to obtain citizenship. Eminent lawyer Hassan Ariff welcomed the change in attitude of the Urdu-speaking youth of the camps. He stated that citizenship is a complex issue, but if the government decides in favour of conferring citizenship on certain category of people, there is no legal bar. Dr. C R Abrar in his concluding statement appealed that the problems of the Urdu-speaking camp residents be taken up for discussion at the national level. He also criticised the stance of subsequent regimes of Pakistan with regard to repatriation. Dr. Abrar stated that right to nationality and citizenship are inherent rights of every individual, recognised by the international community. He appealed to the government to grant citizenship to those residents of camps who wish to attain it.

UPDATE

ROHINGYA REFUGEES

Present Situation

According to a newspaper report, the Bangladesh office of the UNHCR is currently running short of funds. The organisation has urged for international support in order to continue the repatriation process as well as the protection of the Rohingya refugees in the camps. Due to the prolonged nature of repatriation, the UNHCR has been facing the difficulty. At one stage, the UN body proposed to Bangladesh government for temporary integration of the 20,000 Rohingya refugees. Since Bangladesh government rejected the proposal firmly, UNHCR has continued their operations, although they limited their set up and manpower, and faced fund constraints. A section of newspapers reported that a group of Rohingya extremists has been active in creating obstructions in the repatriation process. This group has been fomenting a movement involving the refugees to prevent repatriation to Myanmar (*Sangbad*, 22 March).

In June 2000, a total 19,362 refugees of 4,461 families were waiting repatriation in the two refugee camps at Ukhia, Cox’s Bazaar. In 31 March, 34 individual refugees of seven families went back to Myanmar, raising the total number of repatriated refugees to 2,31,549 (*Independent*, 1 June).

The repatriation has not been completed yet, and new refugees and many returnees have continued to trickle back into Bangladesh. But these have not been allowed to settle in the camps and have to survive in extreme poverty in forest areas or in the slums around Cox’s Bazaar, facing deportation by the Bangladesh authorities. Currently an outflow although less significant of Rohingyas fleeing military harassment and economic oppression in Arakan still ongoing. Newspaper reports claimed that trafficking to Pakistan continues unabated (*Independent*, 21 July).

A newspaper report stated that apart from the refugees residing in the camps, another 70,000 Rohingyas are waiting for enrollment as voters. The report cited sources stating that at least 200,000 Rohingyas of 40,000 families are living in Cox’s Bazaar and Bandarban districts. Among them, around 100,000 were refugees who had fled the camps during the census before the start of their

repatriation in 1992. Others entered Bangladesh illegally and either have built houses or have taken shelter in the relatives' houses who had arrived before 1990. The report further alleged that nearly 30,000 Rohingyas were enrolled in the 1990 voter list with the support provided by local political leaders (*Independent*, 15 May).

Efforts for Political Solution

Early this year, authorities at Yangon seemed virtually uninterested to take back the remaining refugees residing in Bangladesh. Although a decision was taken by senior officials of Bangladesh and Burma at a meeting at Yangon in January 2000 for the repatriation of at least 50 refugees per week, the repatriation had been stalled with Yangon showing some baseless and unreasonable grounds (*Independent*, 3 March).

The refugee problem was expected to be resolved during Burmese Prime Minister General Uthan Shwe's ensuing visit to Bangladesh. Gen. Shwe, also the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council of Burma, was supposed to arrive on May 29 for a three day visit at the invitation of Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. The stalemate now prevailing in the repatriation of refugees was expected to be removed after the summit talks between the two Prime Ministers. It would not only address the refugee problem but also set a long-term framework to resolve other outstanding problems, which include demarcation of maritime boundary and promotion of trade (*Independent*, 24 May). To achieve the goal of a peaceful border of 197 miles, the two countries have been negotiating a package of proposals for the last ten years. The proposals include steps to stem the influx of refugees, and curb trans-border crimes and smuggling (*Independent*, 18 May). But later the visit was postponed without citing any reason.

In the first week of July at a meeting between the Burmese Ambassador and the Bangladesh Home Minister Mohammad Nasim, the latter requested to take the 485 refugees back who had been kept in different jails of Bangladesh. The ambassador agreed to repatriate only 68 of them. Earlier the scheduled visit of the Burmese Prime Minister to Bangladesh had been suddenly postponed which resulted into the uncertainty of the repatriation of the refugees (*Sangbad*, 7 July). The ambassador, in a previous talk with UNB, urged for a coordinated effort among Bangladesh, UNHCR and Myanmar to accelerate the repatriation process, informing that his country has already taken back more than 2,30,000 refugees (*Sangbad*, 11 June).

A Bangladesh government official was reported to have stated that repatriation of the Rohingya refugees is an endless story; it will never be completed. This situation has emerged due to the high rate of birth in the refugee camps. While Burma took back 27 refugees in the last month, 70 babies were born in two camps during that time. Among the 20,000 refugees there are around five thousand children born in Bangladesh. But the rate of repatriation has been decreased significantly. The official further added that Bangladesh proposed for high level meeting between the two countries for faster repatriation process but there has not been any favourable response from Burma (*Sangbad*, 1 August). Recently the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, Md. Burhaniddin alleged that the Burmese authorities are not implementing the decisions of the 22nd senior officer level meeting held early this year. He also added that Burma is not receiving split families along with some other refugees left behind (*Independent*, 23 September).

Refugees from Burma in other Countries

An estimated 5,000 Rohingyas are now living in Malaysia, most of whom have no documents, and therefore suffering as they are not recognised as refugees. The New York based Human Rights Watch said that Malaysia's treatment of the group 'is bad and getting worse'. It further reported that after fleeing "systematic discrimination, forced labour and other abuses in Burma, ethnic Rohingya in Malaysia face a whole new set of abuses. These include beating, extortion and arbitrary detention." The report added that Malaysia's treatment of the Rohingya is part of a larger failure to protect refugees, no matter where they come from. Irene Fernandez, Director of the human rights group Tenaganita, said that Malaysia has no asylum system and treats refugees as illegal immigrants. She further said that her organisation has not received reports of officially sanctioned abuses of the

Rohingyas. “But Malaysia does not recognise refugees – that itself is a problem”, she added. As a result of the absence of official refugee status, access to hospitals and schools is difficult. According to information provided by her, syndicates are using these people, partly to supply illegal labour, many end up begging (*Independent*, 3 August). Thailand is equally suffering from the over one hundred thousand refugees from Burma. Although it has been alleged that Thailand has forcibly sent some refugees back to Burma, it urged the international community to help repatriate the refugees (*Sangbad*, 4 July).

International Response

Two international reports, one by the UN at Geneva, and the other by Amnesty International, condemned Burma for widespread violation of human rights and large-scale displacement and mistreatment of some ethnic groups. The report stated that Burma’s ethnic and religious minorities such as the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Rohingyas continue to suffer severe abuses including arbitrary arrest, killings, forced labour in the army and trafficking in women. The policy of large-scale displacement of certain ethnic groups, the continued practice of forced labour for military camp work and portering and related human rights violations remain the main causes of refugee movements (*Independent*, 16 March). The Amnesty International Report identified physical assault including torture and killing, which the refugees were subjected to in 1997. The report added that the refugees from 1999 reported a massive and systematic violation of human rights, and there was nothing to suggest that the situation had improved during the two intervening years.

Reporter: Shahzada M Akram

UPDATE

CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Following the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord of 1997, some developmental activities have been undertaken in order to ensure the establishment of peace, settlement of the hills people and the implementation of the peace treaty. Though a number of controversies about the treaty still exist, some development initiatives in the CHT region have begun.

Perceptions on the Implementation of the Accord

Even after two and a half years of signing the accord, mistrust prevails among the former insurgent group, one of the two parties of the accord. Shantu Larma, Chairman of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council (CHTRC), the newly formed regional political party, termed the present situation of the CHT as volatile and accused certain quarters in the government of trying to prevent the implementation of the peace accord. He demanded constitutional guarantee for the peace accord and amendment of the existing law in accordance with the accord. The basic provisions of the accord were yet to be implemented while the anti-peace forces were engaged in terrorist activities in the hills. He referred to the pending issues like tribesmen’s rights over land and the rehabilitation of the tribal returnees from India and the internally displaced tribesmen. Larma asserted that the military rule enforced in the hills in 1972 was still in force and the Bengalee settlers were not removed from the region where camps have been closed so far. He identified the Hill Tracts Affairs Minister Kalparanjan Chakma and the Task Force Chairman Dipankar Talukdar, MP, as ‘betrayers’ accusing them of delaying the process of implementing the accord (*Independent*, 21 May). He also alleged that a few known NGOs have been trying to convert the ethnic people into Christians (*Bangladesh Observer*, 23 May). Later, while delivering a speech, Shantu Larma stressed the need for the local people to remove mistrust and differences among them for their peace and development (*Independent*, 14 July).

Meanwhile, the State Minister for Foreign affairs, Mr. Abul Hassan Chowdhury, stated that the peace accord had brought tremendous changes in the life-style of the tribal people. He claimed that peace had been established in the region after two decades and massive development work has begun in the CHT following the accord. Referring to the implementation process, he said that the government had

already rehabilitated the tribal refugees who returned from the Indian State of Tripura, and had been providing with ration and shelter to them. He further added that, as part of the rehabilitation process, the government had also recruited about 8,000 tribal youths into the police force, many others have been recruited in different departments. The Land Commission, formed after the signing of the accord, is going to function soon to settle the disputes over land. The Minister added that the civil administration has been fully established in the region after the signing of the accord (*Independent*, 11 July).

However, in a day-long workshop organised by Centre for Alternatives at the BISS on 10 July, observers emphasised on an integrated approach to be initiated to make the accord sustainable. Criticising the role of the government, Professor Moniruzzaman Mia suggested that the government had to arrange a national dialogue in this regard involving all political parties before signing the accord. He added that the government could arrange a referendum to make the accord durable and ensure sustainability. Hasanul Huq Inu expressed that it would be very difficult to implement the peace accord if we fail to ensure self-rule for the tribal people and development in the region (*Independent*, 11 July).

Present Situation in the Region

The present situation in the CHT still remains tense as a PCJSS member was kidnapped and few anti-peace accord activists attacked in Ghilachori Union of Rangamati leaving three people injured (*Sangbad*, 11 July). The PCJSS protested the inclusion of the Bengali settlers in the voter-list (*Sangbad*, 22 March, and *Independent*, 26 July). The last meeting of the Task Force on CHT was held without the participation of the PCJSS and TRRC (Tribal Refugee Rehabilitation Committee). Both the representatives from PCJSS and TRRC boycotted the meeting alleging that the Bengalee settlers had been settled in the name of tribals (*Independent*, 15 March).

The Director General of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), Maj. Gen. ALM Fazlur Rahman has expressed concern over 449 km unprotected borders of CHT. He said the border of the CHT remained unprotected following the signing of peace accord. The BDR chief expressed concern that armed rebels and international drug traffickers might intrude into the deep forests of the CHT through the unprotected borders and set up camps there (*Independent*, 4 July).

Developments on the Accord

On 6 April 2000, the government formed a nine-member Land Commission in order to resolve land disputes in the CHT. The Commission consists of a retired High Court judge, Justice Abdul Karim as its Chairman. The government did not mention the names of other members of the Commission but appointed Justice Karim for a three-year term (*Independent*, 7 April).

Regarding the issue of army camps, orders have been issued for the closure of all remaining army camps in the CHT as quickly as possible. Under the article 17 (a) of the accord, all the temporary camps of the army, the Ansars and Village Defence Force except the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and permanent army establishments (three in the three district headquarters in Ali Kadam, Ruma and Dighinala) shall be rolled back in phases from the CHT to permanent cantonments. Meanwhile, after the signing of the agreement, some army camps from various areas of the hill regions had been withdrawn. According to the latest orders, the remaining army camps will be replaced by BDR outposts, which are supposed to look after the maintenance of law and order in the entire hill region besides discharging their normal responsibilities of safeguarding the border as well as curbing trans-border crimes (*Independent*, 19 July). According to a report, over 60 army camps had been closed and about 2,000 troops withdrawn from the CHT by October 1999 (*Daily Star*, 2 November 1999).

On the other hand, Bangladesh Army in cooperation with the Health Department has launched a massive immunisation campaign in the most inaccessible areas in Bandarban. The army personnel provided polio vaccine to 2,064 children and TT injection to 91 pregnant women at three bordering thanas. They also rendered medical assistance to 1,158 people from different ailments (*Independent*, 6 July). The Hill Tracts Development Board (HTDB) has been running four residential schools with 700

students in the hill districts of Rangamati and Bandarban at a cost of Tk 1 crore annually to spread education among the ethnic minorities (*Independent*, 1 August).

Action plans to protect environment in CHT region were finalised by the National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP), in a three-day workshop. Government officials, local journalists, people's representatives, farmers, women's groups, teachers and traditional tribal leaders including headmen participated at 15 workshops at thana levels in the CHT, and identified the environmental areas. The issues identified in the earlier 14 workshops at thana levels in the CHT included deforestation, extinction of wildlife, "unplanned" *jhoom* (slash and burn) cultivation, scarcity of safe water and sanitation, malaria and other health hazards, agricultural and employment problems caused by high water level in Kaptai Lake, hill cutting and land erosion. The countrywide environmental action plan was formulated in 1995 with the participation of people at the grassroots level, but the CHT region could not be incorporated in the plan because of security concern due to insurgency (*Independent*, 4 April).

Role of NGOs, Government and International Agencies

Various development projects have been undertaken by different NGOs and development institutions. Asian Development Bank (ADB) expressed keen interest to assist the government in the overall development of the CHT. The Bank took up a plan to implement multi-purpose development projects in the area at a cost of Tk 250 crore (*Daily Star*, 26 November 1999). Germany declared a grant of US\$ 500,000 for the socio-economic development of the CHT (*Daily Star*, 30 November 1999).

The Water Development Board (WDB) has undertaken 15 projects in area with an estimated cost of Tk 84.24 crore (*Daily Star*, 2 December 1999). The International Development Agency and World Bank agencies have declared that they will implement 48 projects in the hill region (*Independent*, 6 July). Moreover, the HTDB took up three special projects at the cost of 129 crore. The projects include rehabilitation of 8,000 landless and marginal farmers including 1500 women, and land distribution. In this connection 19,000 acres of hill land would be allotted for rubber plantation (*Daily Star*, 11 November 1999). The Rangamati Hill Districts Council (RHDC) has implemented 116 projects under 11 sectors with priorities on education, communication network, religious, and social welfare, within the district. These projects cost Tk 4.23 crore (*Independent*, 1 August).

However, a newspaper reported on allegations brought by the farmers of Naikhnangchari of Bandarban against the local administrative officials. It was reported that the district administration had allotted thousands of acres land as 40-year lease in the name of close relatives of the government officers (*Sangbad*, 28 August).

Amnesty International expressed deep concern over the non-fulfillment of some provisions of the peace agreement including proper rehabilitation of all returned refugees, settlement of land confiscated from the tribal people, and withdrawal of non-permanent military camps from the hill area. Amnesty, in its review report on the CHT, observed that these promises still remain partially fulfilled even two years after the signing of the peace agreement. It urged the National Human Rights Commission to function on a priority basis and demanded inquiries on all incidents of past human rights violation. The report said that laws in CHT should be revised. The aim should be to identify perpetrators – be they in the military, in the police force or in the former armed opposition – so that they could be brought to justice (*Independent*, 1 March).

Reporter: Arifur Rahman

UPDATE

THE RIVER EROSION-INDUCED INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Internal displacement induced by riverbank erosion has been a natural phenomenon in Bangladesh. But over the last few decades the situation has turned very serious since population density on the riverbank areas has increased. As a result population displaced by riverbank erosion has also increased alarmingly. This year has been no exception. Thousands of families have been displaced in all corners of the country over the last seven months.

Rivers Causing Erosion

Usually erosions take serious turn with the advent of the rainy season. But even during the lean season there were reports of erosion by some rivers rendering hundreds homeless. So far, around fifty rivers have been reported to be active in eroding the banks. Mainly the big rivers along with their tributaries have been responsible for such continued disaster. In Dhaka Division the rivers Meghna, Dhaleshwari, Kapotaksho, Brahmaputra, Ghaghot, Dharla, Fulkumar, Shitalakkha; Kumar, Kirtinasha, Arialkhan, Modhumati, Chandana, Palardi on the south of the Padma in Greater Faridpur; Teesta, Ganges, Gorai, Dudhkumar, Jamuna, Padma, Karotoa, Sonabhari, Jinjiram, and Pagla of Rajshahi Division; Lata, Maskata, Sugandha, Tetulia, Kacha, Baleshwar, Ilisha, Paira, Bishkhali, Kirtankhola, Sandha, Amua, Agunmukhi, Ranabad, Tiakhali, Andhermanik, and Bonatola of Barisal Division; Surma, Kushiara, Jadukata, and Dalura in Sylhet Division; Baghkhali, Matamuhuri, Kaiarbil, Lakyarchar, Rezo, Dhorongkhali, and Eadgon of Cox's Bazaar, and Kakri of Comilla in Chittagong Division have so far been reported to be the rivers causing serious erosions. In all the six Divisions of the country, people are made displaced.

Over 5,000 families of eight villages in Netrokona are under serious threat due to erosion by the *haor* (extensive marsh) waves in the rainy season. Already a few villages have been engulfed by the *haor*. Two years ago Concern Bangladesh constructed embankment on both sides of a village which is now safe from erosion. The total cost would be Tk 30 million to build protection embankments (*Sangbad*, 6 August).

Districts Affected

So far around 30 districts have been affected by river erosions, among which the districts located on both sides of the river Jamuna, Padma and Meghna have been seriously affected. The affected districts are Netrokona, Munshiganj, Tangail, Manikganj, Rajbari, Narayanganj, Narshingdi and Madaripur in Dhaka Division; Khulna, and Kushtia in Khulna Division; Patuakhali, Bhola, and Barisal in Barisal Division; Nawabganj, Nilfamari, Rangpur, Pabna, Sirajganj, Kurigram, Nougaoon, Bogra, and Gaibandha in Rajshahi Division; Luxmipur, Cox's Bazaar, Noakhali, Comilla and Chandpur in Chittagong Division and Sylhet, and Sunamganj in Sylhet Division.

Displaced Families and Population

The number of total uprooted families due to river erosion is estimated at around 95,000 with a population of more than 2,00,000 during the period from January to August this year. But the actual number of either the families or population may be much higher because not all the information of evicted families was reported in the newspapers. The reports published in the dailies do not always have the information on total land eroded, total number of people and families affected or displaced, and other impacts. Only a few reports contain complete information.

Economic Losses

There have been other impacts and losses caused due to river erosions. Among the damages, loss of arable land is significant. More than fifty thousand acres of land has been engulfed by the above mentioned rivers. The land includes homestead land also. More than 2,000 houses have been washed away, and hundreds of villages. Along with the land valuable crops and trees have also gone into the rivers. In some areas people have not been able to cut down the trees which were going to be eroded with land. According to one estimate by Dr. M A Sattar Mandal, Member of the Planning Commission, about 1 million hectares of cultivable land was lost during 1984 to 1996, due to excessive pressure of human settlement, construction of physical infrastructure and river erosion (*Independent*, 13 July). According to another report on a study on rivers, in the last five years a total

number of 1,35,600 families, along with 21 towns and cities have been affected by erosions of 12 major rivers (*Sangbad*, 23 August).

Structures of educational institutions like high schools, degree colleges, more than 60 primary schools, and *madradas* have been devoured by eroding rivers. A number of weekly market places, bazaars, post office, mosques, temples, culverts, sawmills, factories, auto rice mills in Sunamgonj, handloom industries in Kushtia fell victims to erosions. A number of flood protection embankments have also been washed away. These include the 3,000-ft. Ganges Kobadak (GK) Project at Kushtia, Flood Protection embankment of Chandpur town, and 'Beri Bandh' at Bhola. River erosions also hindered communication through destruction of roads and highways including the Bhuanpur – Tarakandi Road and ferry service between Pakshey and Bheramara by the Padma.

Current condition of the homeless

The uprooted families are going through tremendous hardships in the affected areas. No food, cash or kind has been supplied to the erosion victims. The affected families have been suffering from severe lack of fresh water. They have taken shelter on flood protection embankments, highlands and highways, and more 5,500 families in Sunamgonj at no man's land on the border (*Independent*, 26 August). Some have been living under open sky in temporary sheds or makeshift shanties vulnerable to rain and storm. Some have moved to the nearest towns and cities. The uprooted people at Cox's Bazaar have moved into the forest areas. A large number have been living in the open spaces inside other people's houses. 50,000 families made homeless in last three years in greater Faridpur are now living on the flood protection embankments and highways (*Independent*, 19 July). Taking shelter on the flood protection embankments threatens the durability of the embankment. Such incidence occurred in the Meghna – Dhangoda Irrigation Project, where thousands of homeless people had taken shelter and erected shops (*Sangbad*, 23 March). There were reports that supply of flood relief to the affected people at Roumari, Kurigram was already of poor quality (Editorial, *Sangbad*, 10 August).

The erosion-hit families have been forced to change their profession. Most of them has turned into day-labourers, while the very old and disabled have chosen begging. A number of families, well off only a few months ago, are now working as day labourers. Some have turned into rickshaw-pullers. There have been reports of famine-like situation in some erosion-hit areas. The prices of staple foods have been risen beyond the affected people's capacity. The children of the affected families are suffering from malnutrition and different diseases. They have been deprived of regular education. There has been a sharp fall in attendance in the schools. The erosion-hit people are also facing other problems like extortion, loot, robbery, and theft. There has been report of such cases on the affected families in Shahzadpur, and Sirajgonj. Water-borne diseases like cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery have broken out in an epidemic form in some areas of Kushtia.

Dying Rivers

As against this scenario of river erosion, there are reports of water-bodies like rivers and *haors* dying in other corners of the country. The Atrai, a major tributary of the Padma, is now gasping for life due to the adverse impacts of the Farakka Barrage of India as well as unplanned constructions of sluice gates by BWDB. In greater Pabna district, the dried up river has resulted in inoperation of shallow pumps affecting *boro* harvest, drying up of rivulets, canals, *beels* and *haors* connected to the river, fallen underground water level, navigation and the overall environment. The rivers in the area have been filled up with soil where farmers are now cultivating crops. Thousands of fishermen have been compelled to give up their fishing profession (*Independent*, 29 March). Another river, the Shitalakhya, was reported to be drying up due to emergence of shoals (*Independent*, 29 April).

Desertification has been occurring due to massive siltation and sand rendering turning arable lands into barren tracts. Some 80,000 acres of land in Greater Sylhet region have turned into desert as those were submerged with sand carried by local rivers flowing from India. This has wrecked the livelihoods of around 50,000 people in the area. Over 20,000 acres of land on the vicinity of Kharachar *haor* in Sunamganj have gone under 5-6 feet sand. The rivers Dholai and Piain on which Companiganj Upzila of Sylhet is entirely dependent, are slowly dying due to siltation. To overcome

the problem the WDB has sent a proposal to Water Resources Ministry for dredging 70,000 cubic feet of silt in ten rivers of the area. The government is yet to respond. Sylhet Water Development Board has also taken up a Tk 41 crore project to dredge the river Piain, but it too remains shelved (*Independent*, 28 July).

Government Initiatives

In order to protect the communities threatened by river erosion, the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) took some initiatives through a number of projects. Some of the projects are the Bhola town Protection Project undertaken in 1992-93, Panka Narayanpur River Protection Project at about Tk 65 crore to save the vast char areas of the affected areas in Nawabganj, disbursement of Tk 44 lakh by BWDB, and the Post Flood Rehabilitation Programme for the flood affected in Kushtia at the cost of Tk 40 million (*Sangbad* 4 April). The Surma and the Kushiara were reported to be eroding on Bangladesh side and creating new lands in the Indian side, thus changing the geographical map of the country (*Independent*, 13 July). To save the country's territory from the erosion BWDB prepared two ambitious projects at a cost of over Tk 790 million awaiting government approval, likely to be completed by 2005, if approved. The District Commissioner of Sirajganj distributed VGF cards to 42 lakh people among the affected people. Relief operations were undertaken by Upzila and District administration officers at Kurigram where the Deputy Commissioner asked the UNOs (local administration officers) to assess the situation. There was a commitment from the government to construct a flood protection embankment, which could not be started due to lack of funds in the district.

The government initiative, *Asrayan* (shelter) Project, has been undertaken by the authorities of Luxmipur district to rehabilitate the erosion-affected people. The proposed project to be set up at the Ramgati Upzila would give shelter to 900 families of that area. Among the proposed nine such projects, so far 5 have been completed, and the rest are due within two months. Along with settlement, the rehabilitated families will be provided with tree saplings, and other essential life supporting measures (*Sangbad*, 26 August).

Allegations against the Authorities

Different allegations have been reported against the government functionaries responsible to deal with issues related to river erosion and support to the affected. There are allegations from the affected people that no officials visited the affected people at Kushtia (*Independent*, 14 July). Some local people have extended help to the erosion victims in Noakhali. They alleged that no action plan has been taken to prevent the erosion during last 20 years (*Independent*, 30 July). The affected population of Shahzadpur, and Sirajganj districts alleged that no inspection was held despite pleadings from the villagers. They reported that the sudden flood could have been avoided if measures were taken in time (*Sangbad*, 6 July).

Allegations of mismanagement and corruption in the process of land acquisition and compensation for the land for the Jamuna riverbank protection embankment at Islampur, Jamalpur have been reported. The embankment is under the Flood Action Programme 22. Corruption includes production of forged documents of land, bribery, and false house construction (*Sangbad*, 6 August). The erosion-affected people on the eastern side of the upper and lower flow of the Jamuna alleged that after the construction of the bridge erosion has taken serious turn (*Sangbad*, 12 August). The local elite in Patuakhali, by using connection with the land office managed leases in the government *khas* land. They alleged that new land has emerged on the other side of the river in Bakerganj, but the locally powerful elite is forcibly grabbing that land (*Sangbad*, 4 August). In order to make the authorities aware of the problem of erosion at Gaibandha, on 28 August, thousands of people gathered in a demonstration in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office, and placed a memorandum (*Sangbad*, 2 September).

In Lieu of a Conclusion

A lower riparian country like Bangladesh will continue to have the problem of riverbank erosion. Considering the cause unavoidable, efforts should be made with the target that the effects are limited

at the minimum level. Greater attention should be given to the rehabilitation of the victims and their re-absorption into the rural locality so they are not forced to migrate to towns. Nature has a compensatory arrangement to make good the losses but there are no prescribed rules for the possession of the newly created 'chars' (shoals) and muscle power often settles the issue. Those who have lost their hearths and homes to river tides may be resettled in these shoals. The central question is income generation in villages and strengthening of rural economy (Editorial, *Independent*, 5 July).

Reporter: Shahzada M Akram

FACTS FROM THE FIELD: RETURNEE MIGRANT WORKERS OF BANGLADESH

Starting from late March to May 2000, a team from RMMRU researchers made extensive visits to different corners of Bangladesh on projects on the recruitment process of the migrant workers and their reintegration after their return. The team visited greater Dhaka, Comilla, Madaripur, and Mirersharai at Chittagong. More than 200 returnee migrants in total, 50 from each area were interviewed. Moreover, officials of BMET, Ministry of Labour and Employment, BAIRA, a few recruiting agencies, and government training centres were also interviewed during this study. The studies were jointly conducted by Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui, Dr. Shahdeen Malik and Dr. C R Abrar.

The recruitment process of the migrant workers was dealt with in one of the studies. A large number of respondents disclosed the fact of multiple migration, often as many as three times over the last two decades. The Middle Eastern countries rank major destination of the workers, followed by Malaysia, Singapore, and other East Asian countries. In most of the cases sub-agents or local agents had been involved in the process of recruitment. Also a large number of the respondents informed that they managed job overseas with the support from close relatives. The expenses of migration, in most cases were met from selling of personal valuables and family properties like land, cattle, gold, and often, house, and from loans with interests, in a few cases not yet repaid. The jobs abroad included skilled jobs like driving, semi-skilled jobs like gardening, and unskilled jobs as household and factory labour. A large number worked in different trades. Before going overseas, a significant proportion had been either students or unemployed.

A large number of respondents reported that they were victims of fraudulent practices. The sub-agents or local agents of the recruiting agencies took money from them without providing with any document and later disappeared. The team found fraudulence cases where the migrant workers working abroad used to get lower wages than they had been promised. In most cases the outgoing migrant workers did not have to make contact with BMET, and had very little information about the country they were going to.

The second study dealt with post-return reintegration of the migrant workers. During overseas stay, most of the migrant workers remitted money to their families in Bangladesh. A large segment of the remittance was spent by the family members in repayment of loans, purchase of land, construction of houses, and in household matters including social ceremonies. Only a small portion of the respondents reported that the remitted money was spent on productive ventures like setting up business. A large number of the returnees, while returning to the country brought money, electronic goods, utensils, and other valuables. It was interesting to find out that a significant number of respondents have invested their earning from foreign jobs into a wide variety of business ventures. This includes small grocery and stationery, trading, poultry farms, transport business, hotel and restaurants, and agricultural activities. But as high as twenty per cent of the returnees interviewed were still unemployed. Some of them were trying to go abroad again or others could not find suitable jobs here. Most of the respondents did not receive any support for their reintegration in the society after their return. Only a few returnees availed loans from banks or NGOs.

On the issue of the impact of migration on their respective families, a section of the interviewees reported that their social status along with economic status had improved. Some had suffered adverse impact, as they could not earn as much as they had anticipated and others failed even to recoup the money invested. A significant number reported that their economic status had deteriorated due to the migration and they were burdened with loans. A large part of the respondents reported that they did not experience any significant change in their livelihoods. RMMRU plans to organise workshops to present the research findings in future.

Reporter: Shahzada M Akram

In Box along with cover

RMMRU OCCASIONAL PAPER 4 PUBLISHED

RMMRU Occasional Paper on *Managing Refugees in South Asia: Protection, Aid, State Behaviour and Regional Approach* by Dr. Mahendra P Lama has been published in April 2000. This is the fourth paper in this series.

For more than fifty years the South Asian region has been experiencing major movements of population, including refugee flows of large magnitude. The experiences of the countries in the management of refugees have varied. Although in most cases refugees were given asylum, their treatment differed on factors other than humanitarian concerns. *Managing Refugees in South Asia* provides a comprehensive account of the treatment of different groups of refugees by each of the countries of the region. It deals with four major issues: protection, aid, state behaviour and regional approach. The work provides an overview of state practices and emerging regional trends with regard to refugee management. It concludes with a case for regional approach for addressing refugee problems of South Asia.

Dr. Lama is an Associate Professor, South Asian Studies Division, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru Univeristy, New Delhi. The paper has grown out of his research on forced migration issues over the last five years. He has been involved with RMMRU since its inception. We hope the paper will be a handy reference to those interested in refugee issues in South Asia.

In Box along with cover

RMMRU BOOK ON REFUGEES, MIGRANTS AND MINORITIES PUBLISHED

The first book of the Unit titled *On the Margin: Refugees, Migrants and Minorities* has been published in June 2000.

Population movements have been an integral part of the state formation process in South Asia. Bangladesh's own birth as an independent state was marked by the uprooting of millions, ten million of those sought refuge in India. This process has also created more than 238,000 non-Bengalee population dubbed as 'Stranded Pakistanis' who has been living in sixty-six camps scattered all over the country. In the last twenty-nine years Bangladesh experienced many types of movement of people, both forced and voluntary. On two occasions in 1978 and 1991-92 she faced Rohingya refugee influxes from the neighbouring state of Myanmar. Still there are 21,000 of them awaiting repatriation. Bangladesh also produced more than fifty thousand hill people as refugees who fled to India in the 1980s. Since independence, Bangladesh has also witnessed displacements and movements, often cross-border, of different minority groups. Over the last decades a large number of Bangladeshis have sought overseas jobs and become temporary migrant workers. In the last decade trafficking of women and children has become a major concern.

This volume has been prepared with articles dealing with issues stated above. Most of these essays were presented at a National Conference on *Refugees, Migrants and Stateless Persons: In Search of a National Consensus*, organised by RMMRU on 29-30 December 1997. The book is divided into four parts. The first part deals with refugees, the second part on migrant workers, followed by a section on the problems of minorities, and the last part on trafficking issues. The book has been edited by Chowdhury R Abrar, Coordinator, RMMRU, and Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIT April – June 2000

Refugee Law Course: A short course on *International Refugee Law* was organised at the FREPD Auditorium on 17-18 May 2000. The course was participated by more than 20 students from the Departments of Political Science, International Relations, Sociology, Psychology, Bangla, and Law of the University of Dhaka, along with 15 participants from the camp-based Non-Bengali Community of Geneva camps at Mohammadpur, Dhaka. Dr. Shahdeen Malik, Legal Advisor, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, Mr. M M Sunnah, Legal Advisor, UNHCR Dhaka, Dr. C R Abrar, and Mr. Obaidul Haque, Department of International Relations, Mr. Nurullah Azad and Mr. S M Akram, Research Associates, RMMRU conducted the course.

Dialogue: A dialogue on the *Future of the Bihari Youth in Bangladesh* was organised at the seminar room of the Centre for Advanced Research in Social Sciences on 17 April 2000. In the dialogue, young representatives from the Dhaka based non-Bengali camps at Mohammadpur presented four papers on the present conditions and perceptions on their own future. The presentations were followed by a lively discussion in which more than 50 University students took part. Among other participants there were academics from the University of Dhaka and Chittagong, advocates, NGO and human rights activists.

Seminar: A seminar on *Digitisation Project in the Refugee Studies Centre* of Oxford University was organised at the Seminar Room of Centre for Advanced Research in Social Sciences on 3 May 2000. The key-note speaker was Mr. Richard Gartner, Bodleyan Library, University of Oxford.

Publications: Occasional Paper 4 on *Managing Refugees in South Asia* by Mahendra P Lama was published in April 2000.

The first book of the Unit, *On the Margin: Refugees, Migrants and Minorities*, edited by Dr. C R Abrar, was published in June 2000.

Field Work: The field visits of the research projects on the *Process of Recruitment and Returnee Migrant Workers* started in March 2000 and continued till May. With a target group of 200 interviewees, a team of four Associates visited Madaripur and central Dhaka in April and Mirersharai, Chittagong in May. The team interviewed more than 50 returnee migrant workers in each of the field sites. During field visits a number of officials of Labour Ministry, sub-agents of different recruiting agencies and travel agencies, local public representatives, and officials of Training Institutes were interviewed.

Visitor: Mr. Richard Gartner, of Bodleyan Library, University of Oxford, paid a visit from 27 April to 7 May 2000 under the Exchange Visit of the Link with the Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford. During his stay, three seminars were organised by RMMRU. Mr. Gartner helped the Unit to set up its web page.