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First-hand account of Khudunabari incident

- Following instructions of the 15th round Bhutan-Nepal Ministerial Joint Committee, the Joint Verification Team (JVT) finally arrived at the Khudunabari Bhutanese refugee camp on December 22, 2003 to begin briefings to the 12,000 refugees verified in 2001. Their briefing would include the conditions and modalities of repatriation reportedly beginning from February 15, 2004.

Sushil Jung Bahadur Rana and Dr Sonam Tenzing led their respective teams to the briefing session. Upon learning about the briefing representatives of refugee relief agencies and also media present on the occasion in Khudunabari to observe the proceeding, the deputy director of Refugee Coordination Unit, Basant Raj Bhattarai, came with a three dozen strong plainclothes security personnel in tow to provide security and to organize a smooth functioning of the briefing session.

As a host country's team leader Rana, welcoming the verified refugees of Sector A (approximately 400 households) of the Khudunabari camp gathered in the main meeting hall, asked the refugees to listen carefully to what the two teams had to say and understand the terms and conditions drawn by the Bhutan-Nepal joint verification team.

He informed that the briefing would cover both the issues of repatriation to Bhutan and application for citizenship.

The Bhutanese team leader Dr Sonam Tenzing, preferring to give his briefing first, read from his written notes. First, referring to the refugees falling under Category I, he stated that those willing to return to Bhutan can do so 'without any guarantees that they will be eligible for the restitution of their former properties they had owned in Bhutan' upon return, while also acknowledging that he was addressing that group of verified refugees whom the MJC have accepted as those who have been 'forcibly evicted from Bhutan'.

The government would provide alternative land to those who may not have sold at the time of

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eviction. This option would not be given to those who sold their property though. The first ever moments of truth in the last 14 years and also the very first instance when the Bhutanese authority, however grudgingly, faced its victims as a testimony of state terrorism and ethnic cleansing designs that resulted in rendering more than hundred thousands of its population as victims of forced eviction.

The most unacceptable fact for those inside the meeting hall and the large number of people listening from outside was the statements coming from the Bhutanese side on Categories II, III and IV.

The joint verification results put more than 70.55% of Khudunabari camp's refugees in category II as those who "voluntarily migrated" from Bhutan despite having produced ample evidences that they were forcibly evicted and their properties seized and sealed by army, police and civil administrative officials under direct orders from the country's highest authority, His Majesty the King of Bhutan.

The Bhutanese side, instead of feeling guilty, went on to convey that those persons placed under Category II, if they chose to return to Bhutan, will be consider as foreigners at least for the first two years and would be housed in makeshift camps with permission to one person in the family to work as roadside labourer to earn the family's livelihood.

The contents of the Bhutanese guidelines redistributed during the briefing session indicated that the probationary period to acquire citizenship papers could extend much beyond two-year period. Any prospect of property restitution of these groups of people was completely ruled out in the briefing.

This posture of the Bhutanese authorities, especially after accepting the country of origin and the ownership of land and housing properties in Bhutan of those verified jointly by Bhutan and Nepal, amply showed how biased the categorization of Bhutanese refugees had been and how blatantly the Bhutanese authorities intended to continue their anti-human rights policies.

It demonstrated their least concerns about people becoming stateless and homeless. Perhaps this also throws lights on how jealous the Bhutanese authorities had been with its citizens in southern Bhutan and the kind of properties they owned then.

As far as refugees falling in Category IV the Bhutanese team leader said that such people would be escorted by Bhutanese police officials and detained in Bhutan until the court there cleared their cases while other family members will also be housed in makeshift camps. No information was provided as to how the detained person's dependents would sustain their livelihood.

However, the most neglected and unfairly treated group of the verified refugees happened to be those falling under Category III. The JVT has rendered stateless several hundred genuine Bhutanese citizens. One of the few but glaring example is Nar Bahadur Paudel (residing in Khudunabari's Hut # B-19) whose family members have been placed in more than one categories. While the elder Paudel and one of his son has been placed in Category II his 3 other sons have been placed in Category III and the youngest one in

Category IV.

Justifying the terms and conditions for repatriation he had read to the verified refugees of Sector A inmates the Bhutanese JVT leader stated that as a government servant he was "not authorized to increase or decrease a single word" that his government has asked him "to convey to the refugee before filling the repatriation form". Even in the face of instant opposition from his Nepalese counterpart not to do so the Bhutanese team redistributed the two page guidelines on the repatriation of verified Bhutanese refugees.

The Bhutanese team leader went on to reiterate that even if some one is placed in Category I, if that person or his/her family has sold his property either to the government or private parties before leaving Bhutan such people will not be entitled to get back his property upon return. When refugees sought additional information from the Bhutanese side one of the Bhutanese team member began to insult the refugees using vulgar and degrading language, a common practice in Bhutan.

The refugees became highly agitated and asked the Bhutanese team members to put themselves on refugees shoes and imagine how they would feel if they were in refugees position. As the argument on the terms and conditions intensified more and more refugees gathered themselves around the JVT members.

The refugees reiterated to the visitors that they were not asking for anything new and only asking for the reinstatement of citizenship and restitution of their own hard-earned property upon return to Bhutan, which was fully valid and justified. The refugees also asked why they were expected to accept such irrational terms and conditions for return to their own country.

The Bhutanese team leader only cared to say "inconvenient to reply" and rose to leave the meeting hall even before the Nepalese team had laid down their versions of the briefing. The security officials and some of the elderly refugees came forward to escort the team members to the vehicle parked nearby when some from the growing crowd outside the meeting hall were known to have pelted stones which hit several people, including the Bhutanese and Nepalese JVT members.

Next, it was known that the Bhutanese team members left for Bhutan at 4 AM the following morning and that too without informing their Nepali counter part. Unfortunately that was the end of the Joint Verification process that had started with considerable effort particularly from the international community and notably from the United States and European country's governments. For the last 10 years Bhutan had done everything in its dispensation to delay in participating even in the field verification process.

(The author is Bhutan's Former National Assembly Member General Secretary (Org) of Bhutan National Democratic Party)

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