

# 175,000 Refugees Crowd Squalid Bangladesh Camps



These Moslem refugees from Burma are fleeing to camps in Bangladesh.

By Simon Winchester  
Special to The Washington Post

COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh—Nearly 175,000 Moslem refugees from Burma's Arakan province have poured across the border into the jungles of southern Bangladesh in the past five weeks, claiming they have been forcibly expelled by the Burmese army.

An additional 5,000 to 6,000 continue to cross the border daily. Many of them bear scars that they blame on encounters with Burmese soldiers.

The refugees are jammed into squalid camps. Frightened people crouching in their huts, they cook tasteless mixtures of flour and water handed out by government officials.

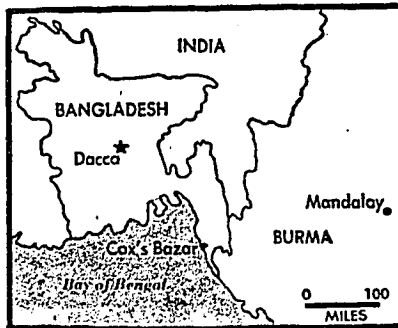
I watched a hastily constructed relief camp spring up within hours in what had been a clearing in the jungle. By mid-morning, more than 7,000 people were living there and by the end of the week the number was expected to have reached capacity, or 25,000.

"I've seen refugees all over Asia," said one American official, "but I've never seen the hopelessness of these people. It's one thing to take refuge in a fairly developed place like India or Thailand. But to come to Bangladesh with all its own problems—that must show how hopeless things have become."

Burma says that the Moslems are being expelled because they are illegal aliens discovered during a census operation last winter. Observers in Rangoon say that the exodus began after it was discovered that Moslems, as well as the more numerous Buddhist tribesmen in the region, were participating in a movement to win autonomy for the hilly Arakan region.

A Bangladesh diplomat was expelled from Rangoon earlier this year after he allegedly became involved peripherally with some of the secessionist leaders.

"Then the army went right in and started throwing the Moslems out,"



By Dave Cook—The Washington Post

said a Western diplomat who was recently in Rangoon. The view in Rangoon was that since these people are ethnically non-Burmese and do not practice Buddhism they are suspect and dangerous to the integrity of Burma.

So far as Rangoon saw things, they had to be sent to what was considered to be their home—Bengal, and Bangladesh.

There are more than a million Moslems in the remote Arakan region in southwestern Burma.

[Sources in Washington said these people have lived unsettled lives, large numbers of them have migrated to Burma from Bangladesh during the past 5 to 10 years, especially at times when there was war or famine in Bangladesh.

[Rangoon in April of this year sent 200 immigration officials to the region to begin a systematic check of citizenship papers, sources said. This came in the wake of a coup attempt last year to which members of an Arakanese independence movement were linked.

[The systematic checks resulted in 700 arrests, and this in turn led to panic, sources said. While the sources said that there is probably no systematic brutality by the Burmese, there are Burmese troops stationed in the region.

[Refugees in the camps told of Burmese soldiers coming into their villages and beating them with rifle butts and

sticks, raping women and selecting some men for execution, AP reported.

"You have no right to be in Burma," refugee Saidur Rahman quoted Burmese authorities as saying. Rahman said his sister and his wife, who is expecting a child in two or three months, were raped.

[Some refugees said the persecution is a religious matter of Buddhists against Moslems, according to the AP report. More explain the uprooting in economic terms, however. Underprivileged and resentful Buddhists, they say, especially an ethnic group called the Moghs, are using the government crackdown to take over land and businesses owned by the Moslems. Though generally not wealthy, the Moslems have dominated the economic life of Arakan.]

The situation for the refugees in the 10 camps set up for them by the government of President Ziaur Rahman in a lush, little developed 60-mile stretch between Cox's Bazar and the Burmese border is appalling.

The crudely built camps, with their plastic-roofed longhouses, have an almost total lack of proper sanitation and potable water. They are fast becoming overcrowded slums.

Some of the people wear ludicrously colorful Western dresses and suits, handed out by a British aid organization. Most of them simply squat, looking lost and bewildered. They talk to visitors about the lands they once had in Burma, begging to be allowed to go "home," waiting for sons and husbands and children left behind to the mercy of the soldiery.

Refugees are still pouring over the border and local authorities say that between 5,000 and 6,000 cross the Naf River and its tributaries at the border every night.

It is clear to Bangladesh government officials and to Western aid missions working in this country that the burden would be unworkable if all 1 million Moslems in Arakan Province were forced to flee.

A Bangladesh government mission

is due to visit Rangoon next week to discuss the problem, which now threatens to assume crisis proportions. Already saber-rattling soldiers here have talked openly of the possible need to use force to repatriate the displaced thousands to Burma, though this is probably far from the minds of officials in Dacca as of now.

It is not clear whether the Bangladesh government expects the Rangoon talks to bring an end to the problem. Yesterday's presidential election means that President Zia, busy campaigning, has not had time to deal properly with the refugee problem.

Earlier this week, after some bureaucratic tussling, the government agreed to allow the U.N. high commissioner for refugees to appeal for \$15.5 million in aid from the international community.

[AP reported that relief groups have begun to funnel aid through the government in Bangladesh, itself in need of \$850 million a year in aid. In Washington, sources said U.S. food will be made available to the refugees, although there has been no official announcement of this yet.]

The international Islamic community has begun to act to stop the flow of refugees. A high-level delegation from the Jeddah-based Islamic Conference visited the camps last week and denounced Burmese repression of Moslems as "akin to Nazi practices."

The delegation publicly warned the Rangoon government that the Islamic world would "take up the challenge posed by this threat to our co-religionists."

The conference, which represents all the Arab countries and Moslem nations from Morocco to Indonesia, also offered \$500,000 in emergency aid for the refugees.

"This is only a modest amount," said a spokesman, "but we pledge we will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to help these people and solve this appalling problem."

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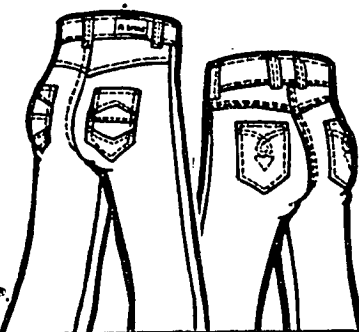
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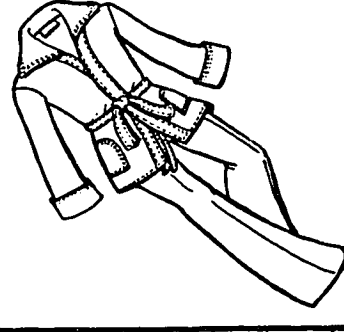
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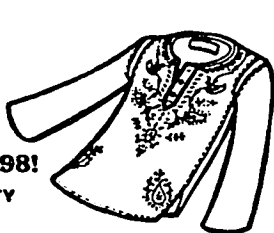


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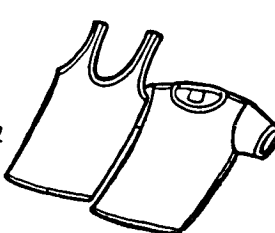
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