

Repatriation plan postponed as the Moslems who fled Burmese army persecution refuse to leave their camps

Bangladesh refugee emergency worsens

From Atiqul Alam
in Dacca

HUNDREDS of thousands of Moslem refugees who fled to Bangladesh from Burma earlier this year to escape persecution by the Burmese army, have refused to leave their squalid refugee camps and return home.

In July the governments in Rangoon and Dacca agreed on a repatriation programme, but widespread resistance from the refugees has rendered it more or less ineffective. On the day the repatriation officially began, August 31, only 58 refugees from nine families crossed the border to Burma. The camps accommodate more than 250,000. They have all been declared restricted areas, and strict press censorship has been imposed on information concerning the repatriation programme.

The 58 refugees who crossed into Burma were escorted to the checkpoint at Tangbu by Mr Roman Kohaut, the chief field coordinator in Bangladesh for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Mr Kohaut said that they had crossed of their free will, but he declined to comment on why the complement of 200, who had been expected to cross that day, had failed to do so.

He described the issue as "sensitive," but admitted that, in view of "the general reluctance" of the refugees to go back, the repatriation programme had been temporarily postponed. There is to be another meeting of officials from both governments. Meanwhile, the refugees are asking for details of the July agreement to be made public.

Both governments, Mr Kohaut said, ought to find ways of convincing the refugees to return to Burma. The refugee camps are maintained by outside aid at the cost of more than £50,000 a day.

The problem is, to some extent, a relic of the colonial era. Before the Second World War, thousands of Moslems from East Bengal, later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, moved into the Burmese border state of Arakan in search of employment. Before Burmese independence in 1948, the Moslems in Burma sought unsuccessfully to have the Arakan merged with Pakistan. The present flood of refugees into Bangladesh began after the Burmese authorities began fresh border checks in March to stop the flow of migrants.

Apart from a guarantee of peace and safety, the refugees are asking the two Governments to ensure complete rehabilitation in Burma and



Squalor at the border: The refugees suffer from malaria, dysentery, and exposure and live in make-shift huts or in the open

restoration of their property. "They want to throw us to the wolves," Gamir Mia, aged 48, said. He is a farmer of the Buthidong area now living in Ledah camp with his family. "Who will ensure that they will not kill us or kidnap our women?"

Bangladesh's attempt to seek such assurances has apparently upset Rangoon. It explained that, while every effort was being made in the Arakan province to rehabilitate the Burmese minorities and that the representatives of UNHCR in the area were

witnesses to those steps. Burma's assurance to a third country of the safety of its nationals would be an infringement of its sovereignty.

Despite the differences, the representatives from the governments are meeting this week in the Bangladesh

border town of Teknaf in an effort to solve the problem. Bangladesh's main task is to convince the Burmese to relax some conditions made on July 9. This defines four categories of refugees.

Should Burma agree to relax these clauses, Bangladesh will be able to send back the refugees in much larger numbers and possibly clear the internationally financed camps within six months. In that case, Bangladesh will use the same method as did the Burmese when their minority nationals were pushed out three months ago.

There are, however, many in the camps who have other reasons for not wanting to return. These are mostly young people — those who have reportedly fled to avoid being used as forced labour to build a highway from Arakan to Rangoon.

These people do not concern themselves much with assurances of safety if they return home. They are making certain demands which are annoying the Bangladesh Government. They want Bangladesh to account for "every penny" it received to deal with the problem from the world's rich countries, especially the Moslem countries. They allege that much of the money Bangladesh received

remained unspent and that this would be expropriated by the government if all the refugees went back straight away.

But a senior Bangladeshi official described this as a "wild accusation" and said that Bangladesh had spent much more than it received from the affluent countries in maintaining the refugees. He said that Dacca would announce the details of how the money was spent and its sources but added that this would "not be done on demands by the refugees."

Another group of young people is still contemplating the prospect of building a movement for the liberation of Arakan and says that Bangladesh should give them sanctuary to promote their cause. Bangladesh has not only refused to help them, but has kept the group under constant watch. Their movements in the camps have been restricted and they may communicate with other refugees only in the presence of security guards.

These stern measures have doubtless created misgivings in the camps. There were violent scenes in the two camps where this group has been confined. Refugees even attacked the Bangladeshi officials who tried to persuade them to return.