

# Victims of geography, Chakma people face forced repatriation to Bangladesh

John Rettie in New Delhi

**C**AUGHT up in a power play between India, Bangladesh and Burma over drugs, insurgents and efforts to limit Chinese influence, some 56,000 hapless Chakma refugees are being harried into an unwilling return to Bangladesh this month from their camps in north-east India.

Under an agreement last month between a Bangladeshi delegation and refugee leaders in the Indian state of Tripura, the first batch of 2,000 people are due to return to their homes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts on February 15.

The governments of Bangladesh and Tripura say repatriation of the rest will follow, and insist their return is voluntary.

Refugee leaders, however, tell a different tale. Bhagya Chandra Chakma, chairman of the Humanity Protection Forum in Tripura, said that, despite pressure, the refugees were unwilling to go back because their lands were still controlled by the Bangladeshi army and Muslim settlers.

According to Upendralal Chakma, a refugee leader who was once an MP in Bangladesh, the most that had been agreed was that after the first 400 families had gone back an inspection would be made of their conditions, and only after that would the bulk of the refugees decide what to do.

India has promised not to repatriate the refugees forcibly. But one form of pressure was described by Ravi Nair, director of the South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre in Delhi: "A small segment of the camps' population has been put into a corner over the past year by the Tripura government, which has reduced the food and other supplies to a trickle and made conditions in the camps untenable."

The refugees are forbidden to work or cultivate land — though some do — and some receive an inadequate supply of rice and salt, and nothing else. Many children are reported to

be seriously undernourished and getting no education.

The worst off are a newer group of some 3,500 who fled after a massacre in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in April 1992, but who have never been registered as refugees. Despite their terror of returning to a land where they thrown out of their homes, "they now feel they have no alternative but to go back," said Suhas Chakma of the Documentation Centre.

The foreign secretary of Bangladesh, M. R. Osmany, promised that every refugee family would be given their original homes back and be provided with full security, as well as a lump sum worth about £80 and a free weekly ration of 21 kilos of rice for six months. But most refugees remain suspicious.

## The Chakmas became helpless pawns on the border of the two hostile neighbours

With other indigenous peoples, about half a million Buddhist Chakmas are native to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in eastern Bangladesh, though some also live in Tripura.

A further 100,000 fled to the nearby state of Arunachal Pradesh nearly 30 years ago, after being ejected from their lands in Bangladesh to make way for a hydroelectric scheme.

When British India was partitioned in 1947 the Chakmas, racially Mongoloid but speaking a language — like Bengali — derived from Sanskrit, wanted to stay in India. But Britain felt Pakistan deserved compensation for the loss of Calcutta and allocated the Chittagong area to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

That turned the Chakmas into helpless pawns on the remote border of the two hostile, and sometimes warring, neighbours.



As the population of Bangladesh exploded, more and more Muslim settlers from the plains moved into the Hill Tracts, usually with the backing of the army and police. Now the Chakmas and others fear they are a minority in their own land.

Under this pressure, some Chakmas formed the Shanti Vahini (Peace Force) and took up arms. Bangladesh has in the past accused India of helping the Chakmas, while India has made counter-allegations that Bangladesh is helping Naga insurgents against India.

In talks with the Bangladeshi authorities, the Hill Chittagong People's Solidarity Union (PCJSS), roughly the Peace Force's political wing, has been demanding the withdrawal of the army and removal of pre-1947 settlers, as well as the Hill Tracts' full autonomy.

The refugees in Tripura also have a list of conditions, some of which coincide with those of the PCJSS. Twice before a deal seemed to have been made for their return, but they refused to go. Their caution appeared justified after another massacre of Chakmas last November.

But the pressure on them from all sides is mounting. India is worried about Naga and other insurgencies in the north-east, fighting for control of drug trafficking from the Golden Triangle. It would like Bangladesh to agree to free passage for military as well as commercial goods to the region from the port of Chittagong, rather than send them along the tortuous route round its narrow corridor between Bangladesh and Nepal. This has produced a coincidence of interests, in which both sides agree not to help the other's insurgents.

At the same time, India's prime minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, appears to have been convinced during his visit to Thailand in December that India should mend its fences with the Burmese government if it wants to contain Chinese influence there. Cool relations have since become notably warmer in an exchange of visits by senior officials.

In these circumstances, India and Bangladesh are keen to resolve their Chakma irritant, and the Chakmas are being given little choice but to agree.