



CONFIDENTIAL

020/1

BRITISH EMBASSY

RANGOON

3 July 1979

REFUGEES, BURMESE STYLE

SUMMARY

1. 170,000 out of 200,000 Muslim refugees have returned to Burma from Bangladesh, a remarkable success story.

(Paragraph 1)

2. The Arakanese frontier has always seen large scale migration in both directions and the Muslim presence in Arakan has sharply increased in recent years. The uneasy Muslim/Buddhist relationship.

(Paragraphs 2 and 3)

3. The exodus of 1978 and the reasons for it described (paragraphs 4 to 7). Successful bilateral negotiations (paragraphs 8 and 9) resulted in the Hintha Project, a determined Burmese effort to repatriate the refugees (paragraphs 10 to 13). The long term problem of resettlement was also tackled with UN aid.

(Paragraphs 14 and 15)

4. Ne Win's motives in agreeing to the repatriation examined. A lesson to South-East Asia and the world.

(Paragraphs 16 and 17)

CONFIDENTIAL



020/1

CONFIDENTIAL

BRITISH EMBASSY
RANGOON

3 July 1979

The Rt Hon Lord Carrington
LONDON

My Lord,

REFUGEES, BURMESE STYLE

1. It is not often nowadays that an Ambassador can report a success story about the repatriation of refugees. This is happily my duty. 170,000 Muslim refugees have returned freely and willingly to their Burmese homes in the past eight months after fleeing to Bangladesh during the first half of 1978. Effective and speedy action by the Burmese and Bangladesh Governments, logistically backed by the High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international relief organisations, achieved this. All concerned thereby averted a potentially explosive situation which, if mishandled, could have been exploited by troublemakers from the Islamic world and which would have poisoned Burmese/Bangladesh relations indefinitely. They have also provided a lesson to the rest of South-East Asia.

Background


2. Movement of population in both directions across the Bangladesh/^{State} Burma border, formed by the Naf River between the Arakan ~~Division~~ of Burma and the Chittagong region of Bangladesh, has been a characteristic feature for centuries particularly when there have been political or economic troubles. The two areas are geographically linked and much more accessible, as the 200,000 refugees found, than the Arakan is with the rest of Burma. An independent Arakanese kingdom ruled over both sides of the Naf River for three centuries prior to 1785 until it was annexed by the Burmese. Arakanese Muslims then fled to Chittagong and conducted cross-border raids on Burma until the British annexed the Arakan in 1826, following which many Muslims from British India moved back into the Arakan. After Burma's independence in 1948 Muslim rebels attempted to set up an autonomous state in the Arakan but the rebellion was stamped out in the early 1950s and the Rangoon Government regained control. As a result about 30,000 Muslims fled to what was then East Pakistan. Leading up to the formation of Bangladesh in

/1971-72

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

 1973 some 100,000 Bengali Muslims moved illegally into Burma. By 1973 when the last census was taken, Muslims formed 30% of the total Arakan ^{State} ~~Division~~ population of 1.7 millions.

3. This illegal flow has stepped up in the last few years. Muslims now predominate in the border areas of two townships (Maungdaw and Buthidaung), each of which is equivalent in size to an English county. They comprise 90% of the 400,000 population, compared with only 35% ten years ago. The few remaining Buddhist Arakanese are officials or traders with the Muslims doing the 'coolie' work or engaged in agriculture and fishing. The rest of the Buddhists have been forced to move further south by pressure of numbers. Although a majority the Muslims are the underdog in the North of Arakan and are treated with suspicion and often rough handling further South where they still represent a small minority. Not surprisingly uneasy relations exist between the two races and religions. They are competing for their livelihood in a poor and neglected part of Burma. As the influx of Bengalis has intensified so has the fear that if unchecked Burmese territorial integrity could be threatened in the long term. On the other hand there is no actual religious discrimination. Mosques abound in the Arakan just as pagodas are to be found on the Bangladesh side of the Naf River.

The Exodus of 1978

4. With such an atmosphere of mistrust between Muslims and Buddhists a comparatively minor incident can easily escalate into serious trouble. This is what happened in February 1978 when the Arakan Immigration authorities backed up by police and army support embarked on a ~~Division~~ ^{State} wide check of registration cards issued to all legal residents, whether nationals or foreigners, as part of a programme covering the whole of Burma. The check started in Akyab Township. About 1,000 arrests took place on grounds of illegal entry. Similar checks in the Buthidaung Township yielded about 600 arrests. This clumsily handled exercise swiftly led to allegations of mass ejection of the Arakanese Muslims, genocide, rape & pillage by State officials, the military and Arakanese Buddhist thugs. Alarmist rumours spread like wildfire to the Muslim villages north of Akyab. Led by their headmen the population fled in panic across the Bangladesh border which is virtually unpoliced. A fortunate few joined relations living on the Bangladesh side. The vast majority had to be housed and fed in refugee camps hastily constructed

/by

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

by the Bangladesh government. The trickle became a flood. By April 1978 the Bangladesh authorities reported an influx of 30,000 refugees. By May it reached 100,000 and when the exodus finally ended in August nearly 200,000 refugees had crossed into Bangladesh.

5. By any standards this was a massive exodus with serious implications for poverty stricken Bangladesh. My former Bangladesh colleague last year blamed the authorities for ruthlessly carrying out the arrests referred to above while conditions in the gaols rapidly deteriorated. There were complaints of serious maltreatment. I think this was true, although without condoning the treatment of those found illegally in the country toughness towards the poor and simple in detention or under investigation is an Asiatic and not merely a Burmese characteristic. Similar investigations were undertaken in the Shan State in 1977 and in the Kachin State at the same time as that of the Arakan without repercussion from the Chinese minorities involved. But they are not so organised or concentrated as the Bengali communities in the Arakan. The Burmese maintain that those who fled were afraid to submit themselves to the check. This may be true in some cases although the eventual figure of holders of National and Foreign Registration cards with their families agreed to by the two governments amounted to at least 65% of the total who fled. Certainly with a few exceptions, the long established Muslim community in the town centres of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and areas further south stayed put. It was the simple and ignorant villagers who fled. The Burmese officialdom took time to realise what was happening. When they did they appealed to the fleeing Muslims to return promising to investigate any incident of brutality or ill behaviour by government officials. But this had no effect.

6. The picture was confused by stories in the Burmese press of gangs of Muslim rebels and other dacoits looting and destroying the abandoned villages. When journalists were eventually allowed to visit the area they certainly saw huts burning. Some refugees accused the Burmese army of doing this. Subsequent comment by International Red Cross observers attributes the burnings to the refugees themselves or to neighbours wishing to take over abandoned plots of land. More serious were allegations of incidents in which Bangladesh forces were said to have opened fire across the border on Burmese troops and frontier police. Foreign press correspondents reported the Burmese military as firing on the refugees and the Bangladesh border forces. Neither

/government

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

government took these stories too tragically and they can I think be attributed to nervous trigger-happy border guards on both sides.

7. My impression, which my Head of Chancery, Mr Farrar, endorsed following a visit to the border area in February this year, is that there was in fact no concerted official move on the Burmese part to push out the Muslims. But as the officials were mainly Arakanese Buddhists they would not have shed tears to see the refugees go. "Good riddance" sums up the Burmese feeling before they became aware of the massive nature of the exodus and the condemnation which ensued in the international press.

Bilateral agreement

8. The non-committal attitude of the Burmese was evident in the initial stage of the bilateral negotiations initiated by the Bangladesh government. They took the cautious line that they would accept the return of those "absconders" (the Burmese name for the refugees at that stage) with a legitimate claim to residence in Burma. Their number was estimated at about 100,000. The complexities involved in investigating individual claims would have severely taxed the government machinery of a sophisticated nation, much less two developing countries without proper records. In common with other observers I feared that negotiations would drag on for months with the refugee camps in Bangladesh becoming a permanent feature as in Jordan. But suddenly at the negotiating table at Dacca the Burmese delegation led by the then newly appointed Deputy Foreign Minister, U Tin Ohn, adopted a liberal and humanitarian attitude to the whole issue, untypical of their previous stance, which led to a dramatically swift agreement. This was undoubtedly due to the intervention of President Ne Win himself. I examine his motives later in this despatch.

9. According to the terms of the agreement of 11 July repatriation was to take place in three stages, first of those holding National Registration Cards, then the Foreign Registration Card holders, and finally those without documentation but with some proof of links with their Burmese village - totalling in all about 150,000 - 170,000. All of course with their families, which with three or four wives added up to an average of twenty-seven in a family unit. The Burmese set up ten reception camps along the Naf River to receive the refugees. In another unprecedented and uncharacteristic step Burma also asked for

/UN

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

UN help in rehabilitating and resettling the refugees.

Hintha Project

10. So was born the "Hintha Project". (The Hintha is a mythical bird famous in Burmese legend for its beauty and faithfulness to its spouse. The legend has it that the male and female were separated momentarily during a storm, and that on being united they embraced each other and wept for seven years). The Burmese followed the legend by making sure that the refugees would be given a good reception. A special task force of 400 officials including immigration, police and medical personnel was sent from Rangoon to organise ten reception camps set up along the Naf River. In doing so the Government bypassed the normal chain of Immigration command in the Arakan ^{State} ~~Division~~ evidently intending to avoid any hitch or mishandling. The top officials were specially selected from all parts of Burma. At the same time the UNHCR set up a relief operation in Rangoon to provide food, clothing and medical supplies. UNHCR officials inspected the camps in August and confirmed that the Burmese had the makings of a smooth running operation. All was set to receive the refugees but, apart from fifty-eight refugees who returned on 31 August, they did not come.

11. There were three main reasons for this. The first was that the Bangladeshis found it administratively too complicated to send batches of refugees according to clearly defined categories as the Burmese wished. They preferred to clear the camps one by one. More important the refugees lacked confidence that they would be welcomed back - as the Hintha legend had it. (In the event the UNHCR presence had much to do with resolving this difficulty). Elements in the Bangladesh camps were also trying to persuade the refugees not to return. Thirdly there was no proper communication system operating between the Bangladesh and Burmese camps.

12. By this time however the Burmese had the bit between their teeth and were sparing no effort to make the operation work smoothly. Ministers were nervous about Ne Win's reaction on his return to Burma from his European trip should the repatriation prove to be only a numerical trickle. The Minister of Home Affairs and Religion toured villages and reception camps and held meetings with the local population to reassure the refugees that they would be received sympathetically. He donated robes to Buddhist monks, Korans to

/Muslims

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 6 -

Muslims and bibles to Christians to underline the absence of religious discrimination. Local authorities were instructed to repair and reconstruct homes for the returning refugees.

13. Following further negotiation an agreement was signed at Maungdaw on 7 October 1978 whereby the Burmese agreed to all the changes sought by the Bangladeshis to speed up procedures. The only fear was whether the agitators in the Bangladeshi camps would hold back the flow. Fortunately they were not allowed to do so. (It was at this stage that the Bangladesh authorities began to apply pressure on the refugees to return. The pressures may not have been ethical but they worked). The turning point was when 532 refugees were repatriated on 30 October. By the end of the year the figure reached 36,000. Once the project was underway and messages getting back to the Bangladesh camps reassured the inmates of the goodwill and tangible help being given on arrival in Burma there was a snowballing effect. The returnees started arriving at the rate of 2,000 every three days. By 13 June 1979 the total had reached more than 162,000. The Hintha Project had succeeded and officially came to an end. At the time of writing 170,000 has been passed. A trickle evidently continues. Eventually almost all 200,000 will return.

Resettlement

14. With so many refugees returning to their former homes their rehabilitation presented a problem. The local authorities did not have the drive, dedication and expertise of the special task force. They thought that once the refugees were given their ration of food (19 days in all) fuel, clothing and basic tools and utensils they could eke out a living until the autumn harvest, supplemented by the raising of vegetables and fishing. There was a danger that neglect could hit the refugees' morale and lead to apathy. The Government however were alive to this danger even if the locals were not. They appointed an army major as a relief coordinator who soon came to grips with the problem helped by the UNHCR and the international food agencies. The latter initially faced a formidable logistical problem in getting food and supplies to the villages by water with few launches available. It is a tribute to them that a steady supply of provisions was eventually organised.

15. The area of the Arakan ^h were most of the refugees have been ₂ resettled has long been neglected by successive governments in Rangoon, /including

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 7 -

including the colonial government of prewar days. Roads for example are almost non existent. The US \$7 million allocated by UNHCR for rehabilitating the refugees has given a much needed boost to the economy of the region. I am grateful that HMG contributed so generously to the UNHCR's appeal for funds, £350,000 of which came to Burma. My only regret is that some of the agricultural equipment bought with this money had to come from Japan instead of Britain because the British firm could not deliver on time.

The Future

16. The Muslim problem in the Arakan will not end with the Hintha project. Already some Arakanese elders have written to Ne Win expressing their concern at the preponderance of Muslim settlers in parts of the ^{State} ~~Division~~. Yet it seems that the Burmese may now have agreed to all the refugees returning however tenuous their links with Burma. For the future the Burmese will certainly want to tighten up their control of the border and stop illegal immigration if they can. This will be difficult because the Arakan is, ironically, now more economically attractive to immigrants. But the Bangladesh and Burmese Governments have shown that with good will they can work out sensible solutions to bilateral problems without involving the intervention of other nations. This augurs well for the future. The President's State visit to Bangladesh at the end of May set the seal on their determination to cooperate.

17. The most interesting question is why Ne Win, always suspicious of foreigners, decided that the refugees should be allowed to return. The bad press Burma got at the worst of the exodus may have had a part in this though I suspect only marginally. (Foreign criticism did not deter the Burmese from expelling the Indian community in large numbers in 1963 and 1964 or from harassing the Chinese community in 1967). He must have been impressed by the way the Bangladesh Government restrained troublemakers in the Islamic world (especially Libya) from creating trouble for him. He likes and respects President Ziaur Rahman. Above all he must have wanted to avoid the possibility of a running sore on yet another of his frontiers, his armed strength already being extended in containing insurgency in the North and East. Whatever the motive the Hintha Project shows the man as imaginative and magnanimous, adjectives seldom if ever

/applied

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 8 -

applied to him during the decades of his rule. It also shows at a time when refugees are the major concern of South-East Asia and beyond that two neighbour states can cooperate in a manner which is an example to the rest of the region.

18. I am sending copies of this despatch to HM Representatives at Dacca, Geneva, New York and Bangkok.

I am Sir
Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script, which appears to be 'C. B. ...'.

CONFIDENTIAL