BHUTAN

# Stateless in Shangri-la

## Refugee problem still dogs the Himalayan kingdom

By Bertil Lintner in Thimphu

Both sides use powerful analogies to describe their positions. Spokesmen for the ethnic Nepalese who have been driven out of southern Bhutan claim they are victims of ethnic cleansing. "This is government policy and it's not right. We have the right to return home," says Bishnu Pradhan, a spokesman for the Kathmandu-based Human Rights and Environmental Network Bhutan.

The Bhutanese authorities, on the other hand, assert they are just trying to maintain the independence of a small country surrounded by bigger, more populous and powerful neighbours. Says Foreign Minister Lyonpo Dawa Tsering: "If we were spotted owls, the world would care about us. Can't you see that we're an endangered species, too?"

At issue is the status of the more than 100,000 ethnic Nepalese who live in refugee camps in southern Nepal. The decades-old debate about their citizenship took on a new dimension in March, when the European Parliament passed a resolution expressing concern at Thimphu's "campaign of suppression of Nepali cultural expression in Bhutan." Now, groups like Pradhan's plan to present their case to an international body against racial discrimination under the United Nations' commission on human rights, which convenes in Geneva in August.

Thimphu has ignored the European Parliament resolution, and Tsering dismisses it out of hand. He says a large number of the refugees in Nepal were never bona-fide Bhutanese citizens, but illegal immigrants who had been living for years in southern Bhutan, often without the knowledge of local authorities.

That argument has some merit. With Nepal's population crossing the 20-million mark—and much of the country comprising barren, uninhabitable mountains—an increasing number of Nepalese have been seeking greener pastures in neighbouring countries. UN sources say some 10 million Nepalese are scattered across the Subcontinent.

They aren't always welcome. In northeast India, nationalistic locals have launched campaigns against the influx of foreigners; according to the *Assam Tribune*, 87,432 illegal immigrants from Nepal have been deported from the Indian state of Assam, just south of Bhutan, over the past 10 years. Ethnic Nepalese who have lived in Burma for several generations are still regarded as foreigners.

It's easy, therefore, to see why Bhutan is attractive to Nepalese migrants. With a population of less than a million—most of whom are relatively prosperous farmers—the picturesque Himalayan kingdom appears a relatively safe haven. It's also easily accessible. Slipping across India's 720-kilometre, virtually unguarded border with Bhutan has always been simple, says Leo Rose, professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley and an expert on the Himalayan region.

To many Nepalese, Bhutan resembles their own country. And, for many generations, Bhutan has had an ethnic-Nepalese minority in its narrow strip of lowland below the Himalayas. There, newcomers could easily mingle with old-time residents.

Bhutanese authorities could do little to stop this influx, mainly because Thimphu has very poor access to the lowlands. The eastern district of Samchi, for instance, can be reached by car only from India; there is no road connecting it with the rest of Bhutan. Western-aid sources say the Nepalese population of Samchi more than doubled in the 1980s.

The central government in Thimphu did not discover this until a census was held in 1988, the complete results of which have never been published. Bhutanese sources say it showed that migrants from neighbouring countries threatened to outnumber the indigenous Bhutanese. This was a frightening prospect: Many Bhutanese remember the fate of Sikkim—once a Buddhist kingdom like Bhutan—where ethnic Nepalese became a majority and in 1975 overthrew the monarchy and opted to become an Indian state.



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An endangered species?

In Thimphu, the government nearly panicked at the results of the 1988 census. To strengthen national identity, they launched a policy known as *Driglam Namzha*. Among other things, it obliged citizens of all ethnic groups to wear the traditional Bhutanese dress—or face hefty fines. It also promoted the national language, Dzongkha, which uses the Tibetan script.

The king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who old classmates from his schooldays in Darjeeling remember as "a carefree young man who loved basketball," became the upholder of Bhutanese identity, an almost conservative symbol of ancient traditions.

But the Driglam Namzha policy was greeted with apprehension by many ethnic Nepalese in the south, who saw it as an attempt by Thimphu to suppress their own culture. The Nepalese-dominated Bhutan People's Party, set up in 1990, has resisted the policy.

The BPP and human-rights groups such as Pradhan's network claim the Bhutanese gov-

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ernment has arrested, tortured and murdered many Nepalese suspected of indulging in anti-royal activities. In turn, the Bhutanese authorities allege that the BPP's armed units have burned schools, assassinated village headmen and police officers. Regardless of which side is right, the violence has led to the exodus of ethnic Nepalese—mainly to the refugee camps in Nepal.

Some of those in the camps appear to be genuine Bhutanese—a recent survey by a Bangkok-based refugee organization shows many possess proper Bhutanese identity cards. Others have Bhutanese tax receipts and health certificates; Thimphu says these aren't adequate proof of citizenship.

Kathmandu is keen to send the refugees back, and has held seven rounds of talks with Thimphu—most recently in April. The two sides have agreed to jointly verify the citizenship of the refugees, with technical assistance from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. However, Bhutan wants the citizenship laws of the two countries to be the basis for the verification—a proposition Nepal has described as "unacceptable." Under Bhutanese law, migrants automatically lose their citizenship. By that definition, Kathmandu says, the refugees would all be stateless. ■

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# Parasites in Paradise

A secret raid by Indian troops into southern Bhutan earlier this year showed that the ethnic issue in the Himalayan kingdom was no longer just a domestic concern for Thimphu. On January 7, Indian soldiers crossed the border and wiped out a camp belonging to the United Liberation Front of Assam, a separatist group behind a campaign of violence in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. "But we still have a limited presence there," confirmed ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa in a recent interview in a Southeast Asian capital.

Assamese separatists have maintained sanctuaries in Bhutan for years. They may have been as unwelcome in Bhutan as the Nepalese migrants, but their presence is a severe dilemma for India.

New Delhi maintains an extensive military presence in the Ha valley in southwestern Bhutan. Small detachments of Indian army units also occasionally patrol Bhutan's northern border with China.

Any civil unrest in this sensitive area could prove disastrous for New Delhi. This may be why India—the first country of asylum—sent Nepalese refugees from Bhutan on to Nepal. And this may also be the reason why Indian diplomatic sources are expressing concern over reports about a new military camp close to civilian refugee camps in southern Nepal.

The recruits are said to be young refugees who were in their early teens when they left Bhutan—and now have reached a more mature age after several frustrating years in refugee camps. The instructors are reported to be retired Gurkhas who have gained military experience while serving with foreign armies.

No major incidents have taken place so far, but *Kuensel*, Thimphu's official weekly newspaper, reported in April that refugees from Nepal had returned to the south of Bhutan to carry out armed robberies. These may be isolated incidents, but they suggest more violence is to come. ■ **Bertil Lintner**