

Bangladeshis defend influx into India

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From Our Special Correspondent

GUWAHATI, Oct. 28.

There is increasing evidence that public opinion in Bangladesh is becoming assertive about the presence of a large number of nationals of that country, 'illegally' in India. Whatever be the official perceptions about such presence in this country, or even in Bangladesh, at the people's level it is now treated as a matter of normal human traffic and indeed as the natural right of the people of that country to find living space and a means of livelihood, wherever they can find.

Formally, Bangladesh does not admit that any of its nationals is illegally staying outside the country, certainly not in India. In two interviews with this correspondent, one conducted in the context of the anti foreigner agitation before the Assam accord was signed (July 1990) and the other during the AGP regime (May 1986) the former President, Gen. H. M. Ershad, flatly denied that any Bangladeshi national was illegally residing in this country.

This continues to be the formal perception even now. Authorities in Bangladesh only concede, rather reluctantly, that some Chakmas have crossed over to India. Even in this case, they deny that the Chakmas have fled from religious and political persecution and rather blame the exodus (of a much smaller number of persons than is claimed by the authorities in Delhi and Agartala) on the depredations of the Shanti Bahini and "forces instigating them" — meaning India.

'Historic injustice' However, the popular perception that what is now Bangladesh was "cheated" at the time of partition of the Indian sub-continent of the whole of the present northeast India, which has always been viewed as its natural expanding space, its so-called Lebensraum, is very strong and widespread. This perception as well as a self-confident expectation that this "his-

toric injustice" was bound to be corrected eventually, and perhaps continually with the anticipated failure of the quite unviable Indian experiment itself of forging a multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-nationality nation, also came through, as this correspondent realised in the course of three visits in the last seven years, during sustained, but informal conversations with politically-informed persons in that country. Interestingly such resentments and expectations were not voiced with regard to the "other Bengal".

Such perceptions, not formally and publicly adopted as State policy, are increasingly coming out of the closet. [The newsweekly *Dhaka Courier* (in the issue dated September 6-12, 1991), carried as a centrespread feature an account, with names and photographs, of "more than 1,50,000" Bangladeshis who have found a home in Delhi.] It was written by two staffers, one of whom is its assistant editor, and can therefore be presumed to be accurate and not 'motivated'.

An even more significant contribution to this debate over what is increasingly becoming a 'non-issue' — illegal presence of Bangladeshis in India — has been an article, "The question of Lebensraum" by Mr. Sadiq Khan which appeared in the October 18 issue of *Holiday* another weekly newspaper from Dhaka. (This is the second instalment of a longer article, 'State-bound Nationalism and Development Efforts'.) The author, an intellectual belonging to an illustrious and politically-active family, notes that till now "the question of Lebensraum or living space for the people of Bangladesh had not been raised as a moot issue".

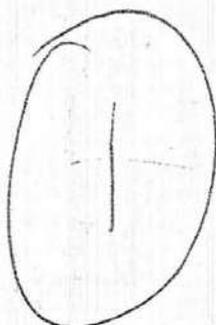
However, the time is now ripe to raise this question, Mr. Sadiq Khan says and argues that along with the new international economic order that is being promoted, there should be a new "world demographic order", a suggestion apparently made at a recent seminar by Prof. Shai-

duzzaman of the Dhaka University. Conceived as an integral part of this new "world demographic order" is a "globalised manpower market". "There is no reason why regional and international cooperation could not be worked out to plan and execute population movements and settlements to avoid critical demographic pressures in pockets of high concentration", Mr. Sadiq Khan writes.

The continuity between such 'radical' thinking and ambitions and expectations of an atavistic kind becomes evident in a crucial passage. Acknowledging that this "globalised manpower market" depends on "international co-operation" and "accommodation from the developed world" which in reality Bangladesh cannot expect ("In reality, Bangladesh may expect little external relief in the short run on the issue of Lebensraum"), Mr. Sadiq Khan notes: "A natural overflow of population pressure (in Bangladesh) is very much on the cards and will not be restrainable by barbed wire or border patrol measures. The natural trend of population overflow from Bangladesh is towards the sparsely-populated lands of the South East in the Arakan side and of the north east in the Seven Sisters side of the Indian sub-continent".

Such formulations are being made in public and in print. Arakans in Myanmar and the North-east region of India are now being openly identified as the natural living space into which the increasing numbers of Bangladeshi citizens have a right to move.

Could it be that the bold and open manner in which these ideas are being canvassed is not unrelated to the way the uncompromising proponents of the theory of "lakhs and lakhs of Bangladeshis illegally residing in Assam" and their present-day political inheritors have themselves moved, apparently, into an accommodation with the authorities in Bangladesh?



LIFE AWAY FROM HOME

For the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the land of your possession, ye shall grant a redemption for the land. The word of God passed on to Moses.

The thought of huts in idyllic surroundings on the banks of the Jamuna river, conjures up romantic visions of moonlit nights and cozy campfires.

But this is a story which concerns men, women and children who have been uprooted from their homes by implacable nature and hostile circumstances, and thrown into a city whose hospitality has been pushed beyond imagination.

The distant beauty of the posh capital of India faded as we rode the three-wheeler, and we were soon engulfed by an overwhelming stench. Curious eyes watched us as we entered the dirt street. Life moved in slow motion in the blistering sun of July. A lazy dog lay motionless in the water of the open sewer to cool itself. Listless men sat or lay around in shades. Some played cards.

Sanjay Amar Colony is one of the decrepit refugee bustls that have sprung up by the side of the Jumana river in New Delhi to house 1.5 lakh odd Bangladeshis affected by the turbulence of cyclones, land erosion, floods and poverty. The migrants are a motly lot -- petty traders, landless farmers, shopkeepers, etc.

Abu Bakar, couldn't be more than 50 but looked 70. Flat, greasy hair stuck to his scalp, shoulders drooping with the weight of crushed dreams that he had dared to see sometime in the past. But the kindness on his face was the most remarkable. Nothing, not even a life gone wrong, had taken away the compassion.

He lost whatever little land he owned to the mighty river. It was time to take

the most crucial decision -- to starve with his family or leave his homeland in search of work or food. He decided for a life away from home. It was the first time that his wife and children had left their village for so distant a destination, and towards such uncertainty. I was frightened, Abu admitted, frightened of what was in store for us. But we had no other choice.

Like Abu Bakar, thousands of other families, mostly Muslims, have taken the most difficult decision -- to leave their homeland forever. The slums are jam-packed with these people. Crowded, poorly housed, but with enough food to keep them alive. The arrival of these successive waves of destitutes had transformed the bustls around the Jamuna river into an enormous concentration of humanity. They were mainly those who migrated to India from the districts of Khulna, Bagerhat, Faridpur and Barisal. And throughout the years, the total number has sprung up to more than 1,50,000 since they started pouring in during the early seventies. The first concentration of refugees was observed around the holy Mazar of Hazrat Nizamuddin (R) which later spread into slums in different parts of Delhi, including Simapuri, Jahangirpur, Jay Jay Colony, Mintoo Road, Kalkeyajee, Saket and Anderimore. They are part of the larger exodus which continued their journey and crossed over to Pakistan in search of a better living.

"Not only on account of the adverse situation at home, but having slipped the 'sweetness' of the new land, a good 'reconnaissance' report went to their brethren back home, leading to a stream of refugees making their home here," said Moqbul (40). Back home, he had to sell off his only means of income, the small dngy for ferrying people on the

Chalna-Patighata route as it was outclassed by larger and faster engine boats. Moqbul and his three sons and two daughters have been living in the Simapuri slum for the last 10 years and, unlike many, works as a painter. He does not even think of coming back to his ancestral home. However, he has visited his home thrice since he left just to see his brothers and sister still living in, what he said, worse conditions than here. Most of them earn their bread pulling cycle-rickshaws, while some sell vegetables in the nearby markets. The womenfolk of the community work as housemaids which in Delhi is much in demand and make a monthly income of not less than rupees 1,000.

Asiya, who left her Gojendrapur village of Dumuria Upazilla in the Khulna district with her husband, now lives in one of the 20,000 shanties in Sanjay Amar Colony, named after Indira Gandhi's second son who died in a plane crash. She works in as many as a dozen houses everyday from 6 am till late in the evening and earns about rupees 900 a month.

Undeterred by adversities of staying away from their own homeland and without the minimum certainty of a permanent home, the refugees have not let such drawbacks prevent them



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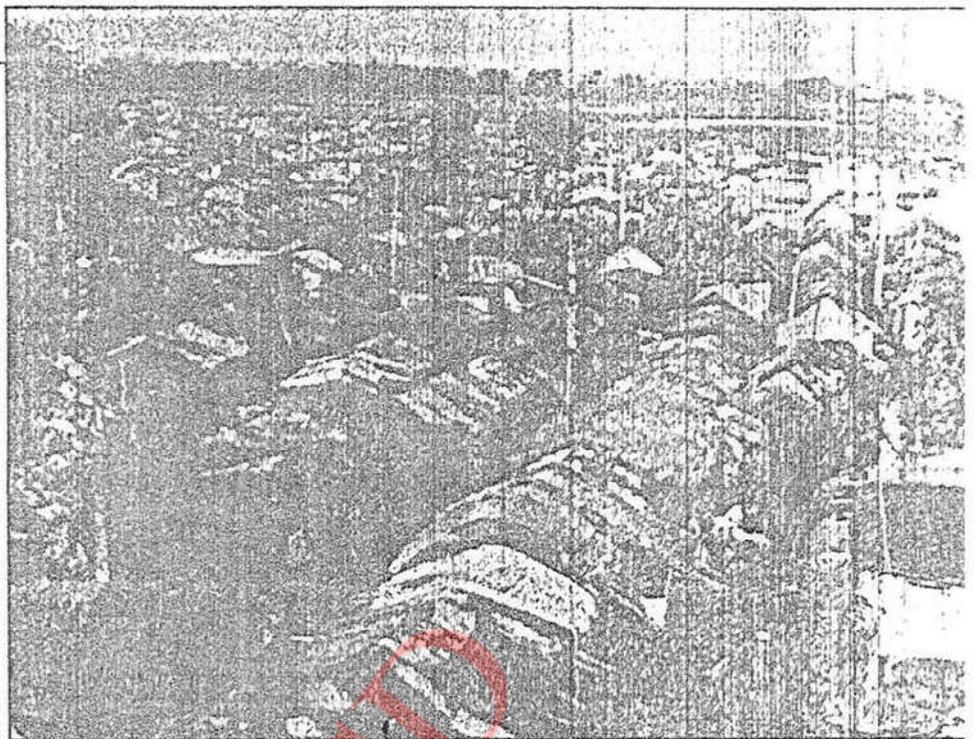
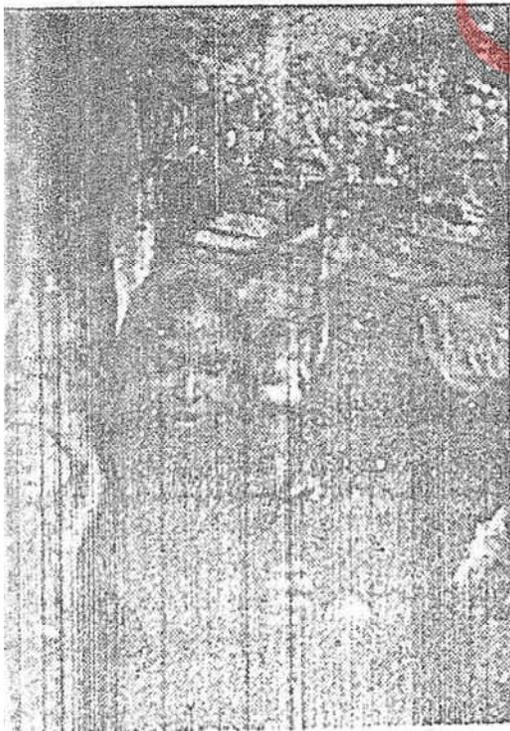
SPREAD

from tying nuptial bonds. Mannan, who as a small boy migrated to India along with his mother in 1974, is now a father of two sons. Mannan married Abu Bakar's daughter and like his father-in-law, pulls a rickshaw and seemed quite satisfied with his refugee life. Moreover, for Mannan there were enough indications that his 'Indianisation' process was almost complete. When he came to see us off, he clasped his hands in the gesture of *Namaste*. When we pointed that out, a shy smile lit up his face. We also found that Rahmat Ali, an Indian, had married a Bangladeshi girl and had settled down happily in the bustle.

The settlers drifted from one job to another. Gradually, they lost contact with their own culture and language and adjusted themselves with the new surroundings and customs. They picked up the language of their new homeland which helped in their daily life.

Although they worked through the terrible heat of the Indian summer, they all seemed to be in good spirits. Living in sub-human conditions in the unhealthy slums, the inhabitants expressed their satisfaction compared to the days back in their homeland. "I never dreamt of having *fazli* mangoes before I came here, but

Mannan: Happily married, happily settled



Sanjay Colony: Enormous concentration of humanity

now I can have different fruits with my day's earning", said a rickshaw puller, Rauf.

The children looked gaunt and they smelled bad from the lack of water to wash with. Many had boils on their foreheads and face. But then again, they boasted of free medicare which they get once a week.

The Delhi administration has issued identity cards to the residents of the slums and nearly 25 per cent of them were lucky enough to have been issued ration cards for rice, sugar and oil at cheaper rates.

The ID cards issued by the V P Singh government have saved the refugees from unnecessary harassment by greedy policemen and local *mastans*, Rauf said.

There is no way of checking this exodus as the people just walk across the border and board trains, which bring them straight up to here, a senior official of the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi said. "We don't have the exact figure", the source said on condition of anonymity.

The issue at times do crop up during official discussions between the two countries but the Indian officials also know that there is almost nothing that can be done in this regard, he added.

Irtiza N Ali with Saiful Huda
New Delhi



Asiya: Uprooted

Simapuri: Only source of water for 2,000 people



The question of lebensraum

By SADEQ KHAN

The question of lebensraum or living space for the people of Bangladesh has not yet been raised as a moot issue. All projections, however, clearly indicate that by the next decade, that is to say by the first decade of the 21st century, Bangladesh will face a serious crisis of lebensraum. No possible performance of population planning, actual or hypothetical, significantly alters that prediction.

Will Bangladesh as a small nation-state be able to shoulder this problem alone? The plain answer is no, and Bangladesh need not be ashamed on that account either. The battles for dominion of the seas in the Bay and the impositions of zones of piracy and power in the estuaries by Western maritime intruders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, culminating in the colonial devastation of Bengal in the 18th and 19th centuries, left the region of Bangladesh bereft of the traditional strength of technology and productivity. It was largely reduced to the level of a survival agricultural economy in which an extra hand of an offspring became an asset. Religious bias aside, the culture of poverty, historically devolved from colonial differentiation and neglect, is an infection inducing population explosion that the country may take a long time

yet to be cured of. The predicament of Bangladesh is not entirely of its own making. In the professed new world order, therefore, there should not be any hesitation on the part of Bangladesh to seek equitable sharing of responsibility from the developed world to sort out its problem of overpopulation and lebensraum.

In fact there is no reason why Bangladesh should not raise, in any appropriate UN forum, the question of a world demographic order, as suggested by Shahiduzzaman of Dhaka University in a recent seminar to complement the world economic order sought by free market leaders.

It is said that a borderless world has become the prime requisite for economic growth under the new world order. In fairness, if consumer benefit is considered to be better served by borderless competitive trade of commodities, why not borderless competitive trade of labour? There is no reason why Bangladesh should not insist on a globalised manpower market as consumer markets of nation-states are being progressively globalised under the dictates of monetarists. There is no reason why regional and international cooperation could not be worked out to plan and execute population movements and settlements

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The question of lebensraum

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to avoid critical demographic pressures in pockets of high concentration. There is no reason why under-populated regions in the developed world cannot make room for planned colonies to relieve build-up of demographic disasters in countries like Bangladesh.

We shall hope for the best in international cooperation. We shall hope for the best in accommodation from the developed world. In reality, nevertheless, Bangladesh may expect little external relief in the short run on the issue of lebensraum. It is also doubtful that Bangladesh may develop sufficient sustainable urbanization or can engineer sufficient reclamation of habitable land from its own off-shore potential to settle its projected population growth in the next decade. A natural overflow of population pressure, therefore, very much on the cards and will not be restrainable by border patrol measures. The natural demand for population overflow from Bangladesh is towards the sparsely populated lands of the South East in the Indian side and of the North East in the Seven Sisters of the Indian Subcontinent.

What practical neighbourly accommodation the races domiciled in these lands may accord is in a future demographic crisis may depend greatly on the example of how we get along with our own minority races. In our own enlightened medium-term self-interest we must therefore learn to court the hearts of our hilly tribes, and offer them special oppor-

tunities in a progressively integrated polity. We must generate the feeling that, despite their ethnic insignificance in numbers and our religious over-tones of exclusiveness, we care for them and they can belong to the mainstream of our state-bound nation-hood.

These days we sometimes see demonstrations in city streets by families or victims of Shanti Bahini violence, pleading not to show mercy to undertrial Shanti Bahini detainees. While their wrath may be entirely justified and all armed violence in the country must be ruthlessly suppressed, whether in the campuses or in the jungles, sufferers of racial conflicts should be helped to be able to forgive and forget and not whip up bitterness of bad memories.

Murmurs are also sometimes heard about the low cost-benefit ratio of return for the country as a whole from development programmes undertaken or contemplated for the Hill Tracts in supercession of other deserving candidate areas crying for development. Malcontents may well be reminded that perhaps in not-too-distant future it is precisely our development experience in evolving appropriate technology and relevant expertise for the upliftment of our hilly races that may stand us in good stead in the eyes of our immediate neighbours in the south-east and the north-east across the border, and win for us a certain quantum of useful, welcome and necessary emigration opportunities on that score.

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Resist India's 'operation push-back'

By SADEQ KHAN

25 September 1992

The Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao summoned a meeting of Chief Ministers of the 25 states of the Indian Union some ten days back to discuss, according to Reuters, amongst other things the setting up of its own human rights commission. The purpose is to keep *Amnesty International* out and to blunt world criticism by statutory rights surveillance, Indian style, of flagrant violations of human rights in Kashmir, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and eastern states of tribal unrest.

His Home Minister, S.B. Chavan, took advantage of it, to brief nine Chief Ministers including those of West Bengal, Bihar and Assam about "decisive" moves on outstanding disputes with Bangladesh. But at the same time, ironically he created a new dispute by a most inhuman operation push-back of forcible deportation attempts affecting some Bengali-speaking naturalised Indians from New Delhi across Bangladesh borders.

Earlier, the Chief Ministers of Assam and Tripura had publicly proclaimed that there was no truth in the propaganda about the presence of Bangladeshi immigrants either in Assam or in Tripura. West Bengal Government never complained. When Chavan unjustifiably tried to make issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh with our Prime Minister during the Delhi summit, she firmly retorted that there was no evidence of unchecked Bangladeshi immigration into India. Population mobility across the border throughout the Subcontinent remained active on account of religious, cultural and family affinities, and it was never a one-way traffic.

Apparently Chavan, to invent evidence and make a case, has embarked upon an unbelievably crude stratagem of rounding up poor Bengali-speaking residents of New Delhi, and without any regard for their human rights or for the least

semblance of judicial hearing, to pack them off and try push them into Bangladesh from various points along India-Bangladesh border.

A Voice of America report said that 132 such hapless persons have been pushed across the border by Border Security Forces of India into Bangladesh at Benapole. To register the wrath of India, their heads were "partially shaved" and all their belongings burnt before the push-back. A strong protest has been lodged by Bangladesh with the Government of India over the incident. A border alert has been ordered, and Bangladesh is successfully resisting other attempts of operation push-back by India.

If India is adopting such brute tactics to coerce and cajole Bangladesh into acceptance of its demands for transit facilities, gas supplies, as well as link canal from Brahmaputra to Ganges, across Bangladesh connecting its eastern flank, the likely outcome will just be bad blood.

If India is giving notice of pre-emption of possible claims of population pressure of Bangladesh on it in the future, it is premature. In the global village of the twenty-first century, the demands of the population pressure and space-deficit of Bangladesh will certainly be heard by the world community in a spirit of partnership and accommodation to fulfil the promise of "entitlement" of all human beings "to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature". Meanwhile, Bangladesh must not bend to Draconian measures adopted by India.

Diplomatic protests aside, all human rights organisations and political parties of Bangladesh, and in particular the BNP and the Awami League, must unequivocally and strongly come out in public to condemn and resist the inhuman operation push-back of Chavan.

See the book

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