

# The end of Bihari statelessness

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**Approximately 160,000 stateless Biharis live in 116 makeshift settlements in Bangladesh. Despite recent developments in voter and ID registration, they continue to live in slum-like conditions, facing regular discrimination.**

The people known in Bangladesh as 'Biharis' or 'stranded Pakistanis' are the Urdu-speaking descendants of Muslims who lived in different Indian provinces but mostly in Bihar and who, at India's partition in 1947,

education and health-care facilities hampers community development.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the camp residents, particularly the younger ones, have been struggling for years to be

for Bangladeshi citizens – giving access to 22 basic services.

A three-member delegation from the camps, including a member of the Association of Young Generation of Urdu-Speaking Community, Geneva Camp, met the Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh in July 2007 and submitted a petition for the inclusion of camp residents in the new list of voters. On 6 September 2007, the government agreed to give citizenship to those Urdu-speaking Biharis born after 1971 or who were under 18 years at the date of the creation of Bangladesh. In November 2007, twenty-three eminent academics, journalists, lawyers and human rights activists, in a joint statement, urged the government to offer citizenship rights, in line with the country's constitution, to all Urdu-speaking people in camps in Bangladesh.

In August 2008, the Election Commission began a drive to register the Urdu-speaking communities in the settlements around Bangladesh. This was an important first step towards integrating these minority communities into Bangladeshi society. Over several days, the Commission employed enumerators to take forms from door to door, registering hundreds of people each day. Now all camp residents are Bangladeshi citizens and all of them have National ID cards.

## Unmet needs

Despite recent progress in voter and ID registration, however, 37 years of non-recognition have left the Biharis living in abject poverty and vulnerable to discrimination. They are still denied access to a Bangladeshi passport. Mustakin, a resident of Geneva Camp, explained: "Last September, I paid 2000 Taka [US\$29] for a passport but I wasn't given it, even after showing my national ID card."<sup>2</sup> In response, Abdur Rab Hawlader, director general of the Department of Immigration and Passports, said that his department "did not receive any instruction from the



The lack of basic services, such as toilets, washing facilities and garbage disposal and drainage systems, contribute to the appalling conditions faced by Biharis living in the Dhaka settlements.

moved to what became East Pakistan. Following the war between West Pakistan and East Pakistan, when East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971 the Biharis were left behind. As many of them were thought to have supported West Pakistan in the war, they were unwelcome in Bangladesh, were treated as stateless and have faced discrimination ever since.

The Bihari camps are mainly in urban areas and are beset by severe overcrowding, poor sanitation and lack of basic facilities. The slum-like conditions in these settlements have worsened over the years as the population has grown. With inadequate provision for clean water, waste disposal and sewage systems, there are chronic hygiene problems. Camp residents face discrimination in the job market and a severe lack of

recognised as Bangladeshi citizens. Over the last eight years they have filed two petitions with the High Court demanding voting rights. Ten young residents of Geneva Camp filed the first petition in 2001. The High Court declared them to be Bangladeshi citizens and directed the national Election Commission to include their names in the list of voters. Subsequently, the Election Commission included not only the names of the original ten on the list but also the names of residents of other camps. After 1 January 2007, when a new caretaker government was formed in Bangladesh, that list was declared null and void and a newly reconstituted Election Commission was given responsibility for preparing a fresh list of those eligible to vote and for issuing national identity cards –

authorities on issuing passport to Biharis.” Living conditions remain overcrowded, with five to 15 people sharing one or two rooms. The threat of eviction and the need for education, skills training and employment are our chief concerns.

The government has initiated various development programmes for poverty reduction in accordance with its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) but these do not address the needs of the Urdu-speaking community. How and when will the poverty-related challenges of this community be incorporated into the PRSP?

No NGOs or UN agencies have taken the initiative to collect comprehensive baseline data from which to develop both short- and long-term programmes for the social and economic rehabilitation of this community. Some argue that rehabilitating 160,000 camp dwellers would require a huge amount of funds and a range of well-planned strategies that Bangladesh, a poor country, is ill-equipped to provide without support from the UN and other international donor agencies.

We propose that the government of Bangladesh establish a rehabilitation trust fund to mobilise funding from

international Islamic organisations, bilateral donors and other national and international donor agencies in order to ensure a safe and secure future for future generations of Urdu-speakers in Bangladesh.

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1. See Policy Brief by the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMR) [http://rmmru.net/Policy\\_Brief/Policy\\_brief\\_ISSUE\\_2.pdf](http://rmmru.net/Policy_Brief/Policy_brief_ISSUE_2.pdf)
2. See *The Daily Star*, 26 January 2009: <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=72960>