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The Bhutan REVIEW

Monthly

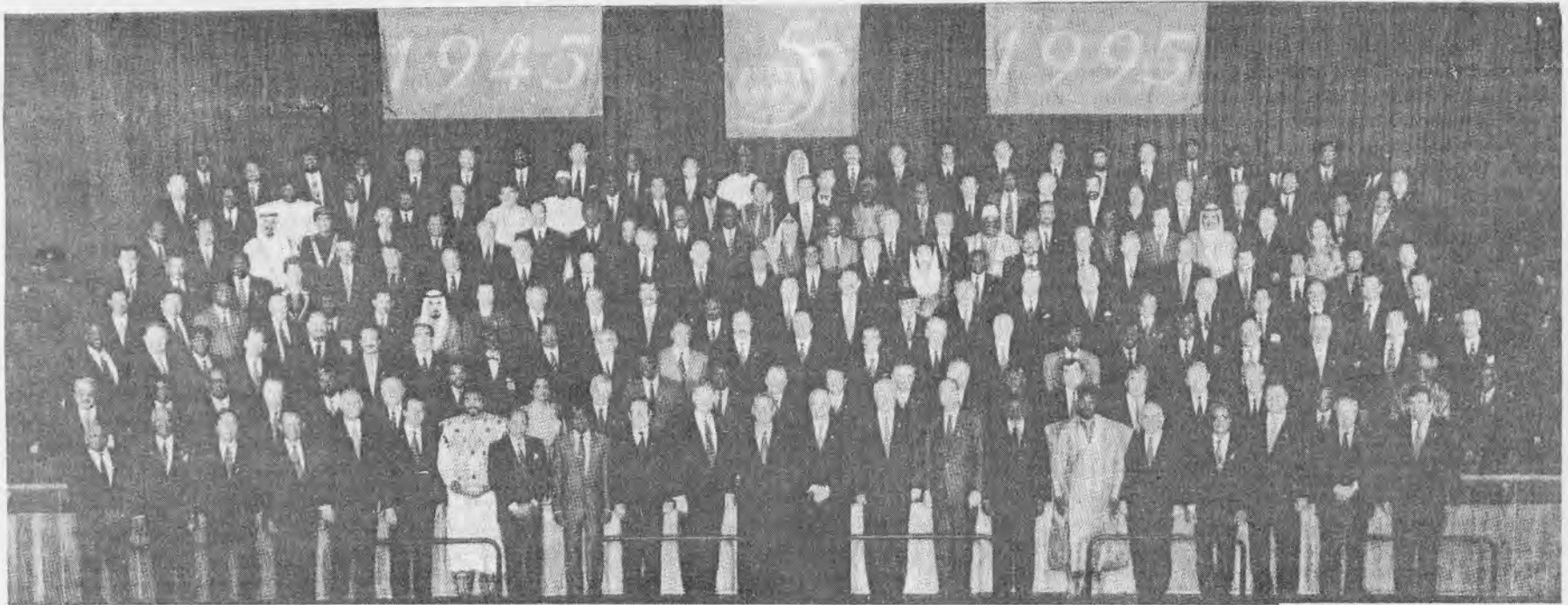
News, Views and Reviews

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THE UNITED NATIONS - 50 YEARS



The United Nations celebrated its first 50 years this year. On October 24, world leaders posed for a special birthday photo in New York.

The Charter of the United Nations was drawn up in San Francisco on June 25, 1945. Membership was "open to all peace-loving nations that accept its obligations and are willing and able to carry out these obligations." Bhutan joined the organization in September 1971 as the 128th member.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly on December 10, 1948. It is said that Eleanor Roosevelt, who served on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights from 1946 to 1953, was responsible for the use of the term "Human Rights" rather than "The Rights of Man."

COALITION GOVT. IN NEPAL

Following a Supreme Court decision which reinstated the dissolved Nepalese Parliament and the subsequent ouster of the minority government of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-UML) in a vote of no-confidence, a coalition government under Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress took over on September 12. The other partners in the coalition are the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and the Nepal Sadhbhavana Party (NSP).

As Home Minister in the Koirala cabinet, Prime Minister Deuba led the Nepalese delegation in the first four rounds of talks with Bhutan to resolve the issue of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.



BHUTANESE REFUGEE DELEGATES DEMONSTRATE IN BEIJING

While delegates to the Women's Conference in Beijing locked horns on various topical issues and the wording in the **Platform for Action** to be adopted at the end of the Conference, for the Bhutanese refugee delegates the issue was much more fundamental - the right to nationality, the right to live in one's own country, and the problem of living the life of a refugee. To draw the attention of the delegates present at the conference, the refugee participants organized a rally. The rally drew a large crowd of sympathizers and supporters who carried banners and placards calling the attention of the Royal Government and the international community. Summing up the purpose of the rally a banner read, "All Bhutanese Refugee Women's Association Seeks Support and Solidarity from the International Community for the early Repatriation of Bhutanese Refugees".

REFUGEE CRISIS FORUM: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

As part of the activities marking the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, a conference **Refugee Crisis Forum: Reporting on the Refugee Migrations of the Post-Cold War Era** was organized at the Columbia University in New York on September 28 by the Graduate School of Journalism and the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America. The objective of the Forum was "directed at heightening public awareness of refugee concerns worldwide and to discuss means of curbing forced migrations that are incited largely by ethnic and regional conflicts."

The Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights in Nepal raised the issue of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, and expressed concern over media apathy in the case of the Bhutanese crisis. A paper, "Media Apathy: 87,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal", circulated among the many media representatives attending the conference provided a synopsis of the causes leading to the current crisis in Bhutan, and expressed concern over lack of equitable coverage of different refugee issues by the media as a result of reporting only about select refugee groups about which influential groups evince interest.

Speakers at the conference included Elie Weisel, Nobel Peace Laureate; Phyllis Oakley, Assistant Secretary for Populations, Refugees and Migration in the U.S. State Department; Brian Urquhart, former Under Secretary-General in the United Nations; and Soren Jensen-Petersen of the UNHCR. Refugees from Burma, Bosnia and Liberia also recounted their personal experiences.

EYE CARE IN REFUGEE CAMPS

Fuji/Japan and Lions Eye Care Centre (LECC) of the Kathmandu Lions Club jointly organized a 5-day mobile Eye Camp from 27 to 31 October in the eight Bhutanese refugee camps in Jhapa and Morong.

During the five days, the team screened 1572 refugees and distributed 1175 pairs of spectacles. Eye surgery was performed on 91 persons.

PEACE MARCH

Under the aegis of the recently established Appeal Movement Coordinating Council (AMCC), some Bhutanese refugees are reportedly planning to march into Bhutan from Nepal. The AMCC, which has appealed to the Bhutanese monarch for National Reconciliation, expects the march to put pressure on the Royal Government.

WE REGRET THAT OWING TO CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND OUR CONTROL THE OCTOBER ISSUE OF THE REVIEW COULD NOT BE BROUGHT OUT. -EDS

The Bhutan REVIEW

FOOL'S PARADISE

In Bhutan, all law abiding citizens are content. Each and every Bhutanese is happy with the present system of government. The only people unhappy with the present state of affairs are criminals. At least that is what the Royal Government would like the world to believe.

It is based on this self-assuring claim - and worse, the delusion that the world believes this fairy tale - that the regime continues to handle the current crisis. One example: calls for extradition of "criminal" Rongthong Kunley, Chairman of the Druk National Congress (DNC), during the 73rd National Assembly session.

Rongthong Kunley was arrested in May 1991 for his alleged links with southern Bhutanese "anti-nationals". He was severely tortured in detention. He was forced to sign a confession and released on July 6, 1991. Fearing for his life he fled the country in August that year.

When he left the country four years ago there was no public outcry or reports in the Bhutanese media. The Royal Government was aware that Rongthong Kunley had sought shelter in Nepal. But until he came out publicly against the government, the authorities remained silent. Neither were criminal proceedings initiated against him nor were there any attempts to extradite him for his alleged financial wrongdoing.

On June 21, 1994, Rongthong Kunley formally announced the formation of the Druk National Congress, a political organization committed to fighting for the introduction of reforms in Bhutan. Overnight the dissident earned a disreputable past. The government now alleges that he fled the country to avoid repaying "huge debts" that had "swelled to Nu.10,115,345.35". Accusing him of misusing large loans taken from financial institutions and even misappropriating money contributed by people for the maintenance of the temple in Samdrup Jongkhar, the Home Minister reported to the National Assembly that he was "a habitual gambler". The Home Minister also said that "Rongthong Kunley falls under Category 4, 'Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts', of the four agreed categories of people in Nepal as accepted by the Ministerial Joint Committee during the on-going Bhutan-Nepal talks."

The attack on Rongthong Kunley's character is not surprising. Nearly five years ago, when the first group of senior civil servants left the country, the allegations and charges fabricated to malign their character and integrity were no less vicious. But the Royal Government, it appears, will not learn: it takes more than government insistence to make something believable - it has, first, to have some element of truth.

The practice of fabricating criminal charges against political opponents and individuals challenging the establishment is not new. But even the most authoritarian regimes with the ultimate power and means to falsify entire records and fabricate wholesale evidence seldom have attempted to create the impression that all dissension is only the result of criminal minds with previous criminal records. Because the act of dissenting may constitute a crime, especially in countries with repressive governments where democratic freedom is a rarity, most or even all dissidents may become criminals, but surely there aren't many nations where every dissident is a criminal to start with.

The Bhutanese situation, and the basking of a regime in its own self-created myth of a perfectly happy people under a perfect government, has only one clear parallel, but no one is likely to envy this comparison; Iraq. The unanimous nomination of Saddam Hussein as the only Presidential candidate by the Ruling Revolutionary Council, the unanimous endorsement of his candidacy by the Iraqi National Assembly, and his consequent win with 99.96% of the votes in a referendum described by Baghdad as "an exercise in democracy" by people who "express their opinion on the functioning of the government and its institutions," surely represents the only other place on earth where citizens are so blissfully happy with their lot.

For how long will the Royal Government keep up this pretense? How many other dissidents will be brushed away with allegations that they, like all those belonging to DNC, "had stolen government funds and absconded"? As the situation inevitably worsens and there are more instances of individuals willing to risk their freedom to question the merits of the system, it will become increasingly more difficult for the government to manufacture false charges and evidence.

Instead of attempting to convey the unbelievable, the Royal Government would do better to concede that even the best administration must suffer dissenting voices. To accept the fact that there are shortcomings in the current political institutions and system of government, that this government has been less than fair to some citizens, and that the growing dissent is real, may be difficult and painful, but is necessary. Truth, it is often said, is a bitter pill to swallow. But the sooner reality is met head on, the better it will be for Bhutan.

WITHOUT SHELTER IN INDIA

Arun Kumar Singh looks at the changing stand of the Indian Government on the issue of refugees.

Since independence, India has faced three major influx of trans-border refugees. The first caravan of refugees arrived in India after China partially occupied Tibet in 1951 and when China completed its control over Tibet in 1953, fresh masses of refugees took shelter. There are 100,000 Tibetan refugees in India which constitute more than 95 per cent of the total refugees from that country.

This avalanche was the first acid test of a nascent democratic India, and indeed the country passed with flying colours. Every refugee family from Tibet was given at least one acre of land and they were allowed to preach their religion, culture, faith, practices and other social norms in line with democratic principle of peaceful co-existence. Today, the Tibetan refugees are settled in 127 centres spread throughout India where they have been living since last 40 years.

The next round of refugees started to trickle in India in 1969, when after the general elections held in Pakistan, the National Awami League of the then East Pakistan was denied office even after getting clear majority, leading to widespread unrest. India became host to 90 lakh (9 million) refugees from East Pakistan who remained here for almost three long years. Only after Bangladesh came into existence, these refugees returned to their homeland.

In case of the refugees from East Pakistan, the Government of India advocated their cause throughout the world, gained crucial public support, political, financial and otherwise, and finally ensured the safe return of 90 lakh refugees. Thus it is evident that the treatment provided to the refugees by India from 1947 to 1970, has been broadly congruent with the International Convention and Protocol on Refugees and overall a humanitarian approach was followed.

However, the current crop of refugees from Bhutan has not been that fortunate as India has made a 180 degree about-turn on the policy of dealing with refugees.

The problem in Bhutan started when a large number of demonstrations were taken out in major towns of southern Bhutan in September 1990, demanding establishment of democracy in the country. Since then, the Royal Government of Bhutan has come down heavily on the citizens of southern Bhutan, predominantly inhabited by Nepali-speaking Bhutanese. Thousands have been imprisoned, tortured and released, only to find that citizenship of the whole family has been nullified, forcing them to flee the country.

Since southern Bhutan shares the border with India, the refugees naturally entered this

country and were shocked to find a hostile administration awaiting them. The police took many of the refugees under their control and sent them back to Bhutan after loading them on trucks. Some of the refugees stayed with Indian friends, but no sooner the police learnt of this, the Indian citizens too were harassed by the Indian police. Unable to cope with such hostile environment anymore, these refugees were forced to proceed to Nepal. Today there are about 100,000 Bhutanese refugees camping in Nepal and 30,000 in India.

The Bhutanese refugees in India are living under constant terror as the Royal Army and Police of Bhutan enter India at will, arrest any number of persons and take them back to Bhutan. These refugees do not get any assistance from UNHCR as India has continuously refused them the status of refugees, which is a prerequisite for obtaining any financial assistance from international agencies. In such a scenario they are virtually living in abject poverty. The stand of the Indian Government is that India has an open border with Bhutan and hence there is no question of any Bhutanese refugees living in India.

How fair have been the different stands adopted by India in the case of the Tibetan, East Pakistani and Bhutanese refugees? Let us look at some of the provisions enshrined in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) which came into force on April 21, 1954; its subsequent modification, Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1966), which became applicable from October 4, 1967 and some later developments in this field.

It should be made very clear that refugee law is an inseparable part of human rights law as follows from the article 14 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution, except persecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the principles of the United Nations." As we all must be aware that the methods of persecution change with time as do the concepts of human rights. Thus, the asylum constitutes the leading principle of international refugee law.

Unfortunately, the term refugee, as defined in Article 1 of the protocol, mainly deals with the refugees of World War II and leaves other areas undefined. But this grave omission too, was rectified after a decade. The 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa confirmed the 1951 refugee definition of the

protocol, and then added in article 1.2: "The term refugee shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality." This African definition of the de facto refugee has won widespread acceptance.

On close scrutiny of the two differing stands taken by India in case of the Tibetan and East Pakistani refugees on the one hand and the Bhutanese refugees on the other, one cannot escape the conclusion that there are grave problems with the Indian stand on the issue of Bhutanese refugees. While Tibetan and East Pakistani refugees were almost instantly granted refugee status, the Bhutanese refugees, even after five years, have been denied the same.

The very first count on which India has failed is in protecting the rights of refugees provided in article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which India is legally bound as a signatory. The second count which totally exposes the hollowness of the Government's stand is in declining refugee status to the Bhutanese on the pretext of an open Indo-Bhutanese border. In the light of inclusion and recognition of the African definition of refugees by the UN and the UNHCR, India can no longer take any shelter under the pretext that India-Bhutan Treaty of Peace and Friendship does not allow India to interfere in the internal matters of Bhutan. Clearly, a situation where thousands of Bhutanese are forced to flee Bhutan, can no longer be considered as an internal issue of Bhutan.

This hardline stand of India is indeed intriguing. Perhaps, the Government does not find itself competent enough to face the long-term repercussions after granting the status of refugees to the Bhutanese now living in India, as it will then be bound to protect their rights and initiate many programmes for their well-being. Or the Government of India may be of the view that one person (the King) is always easy to handle than the elected representatives, as the latter are answerable to Parliament.

Whatever may be the reason, but a sharp increase in the mental bankruptcy of political leaders, like corruption, is a universal phenomenon and the developing world is no exception.

The Pioneer, New Delhi

The 73rd National Assembly

The *Tshogdu* or the National Assembly of Bhutan purportedly is the the kingdom's "legislative" organ, the establishment of which "transformed the country into a constitutional monarchy" according to textbooks in use in Bhutanese schools [*The History of Bhutan*, Hásrat]. But, from the nature of its composition to the manner in which issues are resolved, there is little evidence that this institution has ever managed to hold its own against the government. True, the late king who set up this 150-member body in 1953 introduced some revolutionary ideas in the late sixties by requiring the monarch himself to seek a vote of confidence from the Assembly at regular intervals, and empowered the Assembly to approve the monarch's nomination of ministers every five years and also gave it the power to remove ministers by majority vote at any time. But the Assembly waived its authority to question and vet the king in 1972, and the members have conveniently "forgotten" about its other authority with regard to Ministerial appointment and removal. Under the circumstances, it is little wonder that the body only meets when called upon to do so by the King and his Government. No one questions why rules are contravened, regular sessions skipped, or announced sessions mysteriously postponed.

The government ensures that much is made of the deliberations of the National Assembly and portrays the decisions adopted by the body as being the views of the public and representative of the choice of the people. But Bhutanese, aware of the qualities and calibre of members "elected" to represent them, are quite clear about the actual role and functions of the *Tshogdu*. They recognize the theatrics. Outsiders, however, permitted only a superficial view, can often be misled into believing that "democracy" is truly at work.

The 73rd session which took place after over a gap of more than two years concluded on September 2. Since the last six years, Bhutan's only newspaper, the official weekly *Kuensel*, has been providing the proceedings of the sessions in the form of a supplement. A cursory look at the 26-page report shows the level of government control of the proceedings.

The session was postponed last year, the Speaker explained, on the Command of His Majesty in view of the on-going bilateral talks with Nepal. While recognizing the priority which the Royal Government has attached to the southern problem, it is still inconceivable that the most important institution of the country should not meet on such an account. Indeed, it is precisely during such grave occasions that the body should have been called for additional extraordinary sessions. In any case, it is clearly evident who actually calls the shots, and why attempts to view the Bhutanese National Assembly with any degree of seriousness would be absurd.

The members may have deliberated at length on each and every agenda item, but to what end. Regardless of the level of debates and exchange of views, according to the record of the proceedings, invariably all decisions taken have been as **commanded by His Majesty the**

King.

If all decisions made by the National Assembly were taken as a result of being commanded by the King, need the Assembly have met at all? The Royal Government could just as easily have promulgated these decisions as Royal Decrees. But the sham of "people's participation" and "democratic governance" needed to be exhibited for the world to see. Indeed, lately this forum has taken on the added responsibility of confirming the people's loyalty and pledging support for the system. Consequently, the recurring theme in the past few sessions is the members' desire to reaffirm the people's support for the present system and pledges of loyalty for the regime in the form of *genjas* (signed agreements) and emotional speeches.

Whether those listening to the orators add a pinch of salt to all the wordy and flowery sentiments expressed by the people's representatives is unclear, but not everyone could have missed out on the irony in the Home Minister's labelling of Rongthong Kinley as "a two-faced person." Accepted and required "traditional" behaviour calls on individuals to act - literally - in a certain manner before royalty. Indeed, it is not enough to be afraid, one must show fear; and it is not enough to be loyal, one must display signs of loyalty. This calls for unabashed sycophancy with the attendant problem: when is anything real? When are people only behaving according to required norms, and when are they driven by real emotions? When the Home Minister recalled that earlier "Rongthong Kinley had praised His Majesty and the previous kings at great length" but had now displayed his "false and treacherous character", many members may have squirmed: would their own songs of praise and pledges be believed? If Rongthong embarrassed the King with his flattery in Samdrup Jongkhar, could His Majesty now trust the equally verbose and emotional display of support?

As members tried to outdo one another in expressing their support for the government, as always, the National Assembly resounded with maxims and saws. Since eloquence in Dzongkha is largely dependent on judicious use of appropriate maxims, traditional sayings litter the Assembly floor. "Big objectives take time to fulfil"; "a tiger's stripes are on the outside while the true intentions of a person are inside," etc. Unfortunately, sometimes the same saying is sometimes used to lend support to completely opposite situations. During the 73rd session, the Dzongdag of Sarbhang maintained that all relatives of ngolops must be removed from the midst of loyal citizens and thrown out of the country because "milk should not be diluted with water." Only a week later, on September 9, expressing his concern over alleged attempts by some to bring differences between people from the east and west on account of religion, His Majesty the King said that Kagyu and Nyingma were as "harmonious as milk and water."

While on the topic of religion, the Foreign Minister reported to the Assembly that one of the main reasons that some organizations assisted the refugees was to enable them to convert refugees to Christianity in

exchange for handouts and facilities. While this is itself news to many, the Foreign Minister went on to confirm that more than 3,000 in the camps had already been converted. The ability of the Royal Government to produce statistics and data from, in this case, literally nowhere is astounding! This figure may now have become another "true fact" in the Government's repository, but the rest of the world still awaits the most significant "true fact" - the actual population figures for the country.

The Home Minister's task was made easy by excellent choreography. Having ensured that members spoke as coached, he was then able to add that "there was much substance to the points raised by the people's representative." He also made public an excellent observation while exhorting the people to be vigilant against the entry into the country of outsiders and "emigrants", reminding the members that any outsider or villager who had left the country can be easily detected in their village by the villagers. The same Home Minister had earlier claimed on the BBC that 100,000 illegal immigrants surreptitiously settled down in the country and remained undetected in southern Bhutan. Because of the small population almost everyone does know everyone else, so the latest admission is true, but his earlier claim is just one of the many "true facts" concocted by the regime.

Still another agenda item of interest was related to the problem of Bodo militant activity along the Indo-Bhutan border. The surprising thing about this debate was that the Bhutanese press carried no reports about Bodo attacks. If there were no attacks, why the big fuss; and if there were frequent attacks why were they not reported. Instead, all criminal activities along the southern belt have either been directly or indirectly attributed to "anti-national terrorists". Only the dumb Bhutanese, therefore, would fail to find it odd that without a single report of criminal activities by Bodos in Bhutanese territory there should be a National Assembly debate and a National Assembly resolution calling on the government to "take into consideration the difficulties and *Kidu* faced by the people due to the Bodo problem" and initiate dialogue with the Government of India. Will the criminal activities of Bodo militants still remain within the National Assembly walls and the *Kuensel* supplement, or will the truth about the "true facts" regarding "terrorist attacks" be disclosed, and discredit apportioned where it is really due?

Besides featuring in the separate agenda item, the Bodos were also in focus during the deliberations on the Dungsam Cement Project. "If it were not for the Bodo problem, the Dungsam Cement Project would have been implemented long ago," His Majesty said. Besides the security of project personnel, Bodo militants would hamper movement of goods and disrupt power and communication lines, the Minister for Trade and Industry informed members. Strangely, however, if donor assistance could be mobilized the project which has been unable to take off for the last 15 years for various reasons would begin immediately regardless of the security problems His Majesty

declared.

While much of what takes place on the National Assembly floor could be criticized and ridiculed, there is one disturbing issue requiring follow-up by appropriate authorities. The allegations of the Royal Government that people registered in the camps are responsible for many of the criminal activities in southern Bhutan apparently need to be taken more seriously by His Majesty's Government of Nepal and the UNHCR. In the past, Bhutanese Government claims of such "terrorist" activity have been disregarded as propaganda mainly because some early investigations did not substantiate such allegations. However, in view of the large number of alleged criminals supposedly coming from the camps, the authorities must initiate an investigation. Crime directed against innocent civilians, especially those already in dire circumstances, cannot and should not be condoned.

"IN QUOTES"

"The suggestion to extend the permanent membership of the Security Council may result in undermining the role and functions of the other members of the UN."

His Majesty the King, National Assembly, August 31, 1995.

"India's candidature merits serious consideration on the grounds of equitable geographical representation, the large size and enormous potential of the Indian economy, and the fact that one-sixth of mankind live in India."

Foreign Minister, U.N. General Assembly, October 10, 1995.

"Bhutan believes that, on the basis of any objective criteria, Japan, one of the foremost economic powers of the world today would qualify for membership."

Foreign Minister, U.N. General Assembly, October 24, 1995.

MEDIA SCAN

MOUNTAIN EXODUS AS CULTURES COLLIDE

A policy of what many Nepali officials describe as "Bosnia-style ethnic cleansing" continues to take its toll in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan away from the world gaze. Evictions have been going on since 1990, and there are now about 90,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepalese camps, and another 30,000 living in India.

Hundreds have been jailed and allegedly tortured or even shot. Houses, shops and places of worship have been destroyed. Women and children are suffering indignity and humiliation.

It is a story of culture in collision. The reason for the Bhutan Government's policy of evictions is fear of demographic inundation. Its population consists of three main ethnic groups: the Ngalung Drukpas of West Bhutan, the ruling ethnic group (16 per cent), Sarchops (31 per cent), and Nepali-speaking people (53 per cent).

The ruling minority felt that its identity was about to be overwhelmed by the majority, many of whom, the Government says, are illegal immigrants. The ethnic Nepalis stayed on illegally, say officials, after being brought in to build roads and buildings or to work in privately-owned orange groves and cardamom plantations. The inflow continues, officials say, because southern Bhutan has free education and health services, good wages and land for farming.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck recently told journalists that "in the next 10, 15 or 20 years, Bhutan will no longer be a Bhutanese nation. It will be a Nepali State." He and senior officials have used the term "endangered species" to describe Drukpas.

First move was a new Citizenship Act in 1985, which retroactively introduced new citizenship criteria, declaring previous government policies on the issue null and void. In 1988, a royal decree demanded strict nationwide observance of Driglam Namzha, a code of social etiquette specific to the Drukpas.

The aim of these and other measures, claims Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of the Kathmandu-based magazine, *Himal*, and author of a study of refugees in Kathmandu, is to rid Bhutan of a large number of its legitimate Nepali-speaking citizens until their proportion is reduced to a "manageable level".

The expulsions and departures have excited little international interest because of Bhutan's remoteness, its reticent media, the sympathy of many foreigners for one of the world's last remaining Shangri Las, and the willingness of the country's giant southern neighbour, India, to turn a blind eye.

The number of refugees, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) grew from 5,000 in September 1991 to 50,000 in July 1992.

Says UNHCR official Arun Salangram: "They are actually Bhutanese citizens, as all their documents clearly suggest."

The refugees, like refugees everywhere, have heart-rending stories to tell....

Shortly before he was ousted from power by a parliamentary no-confidence vote in September, Nepalese Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari said that "now Nepal will not allow the influx of refugees. We cannot even bear the burden of the existing ones. We had six rounds of discussions with Bhutan but nothing has come out. We want to continue our talks with Bhutan and India. But first, let Bhutan take back all the Bhutanese in the camps, and then decide who are the citizens."

Bhutan's position is that the question of accepting citizens back should be raised only after the two governments have categorised the refugees and established their authenticity.

Gemini News - New Strait Times, Singapore, September 25, 1995

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HIGHLIGHTS

"The Speaker shall fix the date of sessions of the National Assembly which shall be twice a year. But in emergencies and under extraordinary circumstances, the Speaker, with the Royal Command of His Majesty, may convene a meeting at any time."

Rule No.10, Constitution of the Tshogdu (National Assembly) of Bhutan - 1953.

The National Assembly met for the 73rd session from August 10 to September 2 this year, a full two years after the 72nd meeting (July 8-30, 1993). Rule No.10, like the august institution itself, obviously was never meant to be taken seriously. Considering the crisis in the kingdom, this "democratic" institution of "elected" representatives of the people would have been expected to meet more frequently to respond to the situation. On the contrary, the body ostensibly created to enable consultations and collective decisions [The Administration will be run according to the decisions taken by the National Assembly," the Preamble of the Constitution states] only sits on the sidelines awaiting a call to put up a show.

Despite the two-year hiatus, however, the entire cast comprising representatives of the Government and the people, performed to perfection, and the 73rd session concluded without any untoward incident or awkward moments. True, the Speaker shed light on the reasons behind the postponement of this same session announced last year - it was

postponed on the Command of His Majesty the King so as not to jeopardize delicate negotiations with Nepal, members were told - but neither the Speaker nor the Government explained, and members did not thought it fit to question, the convenient disregard of procedures. The Speaker's explanation, it may be observed, only took care of the missed September 1994 session, but no one dared raise questions about lapses in procedures or why, without discussions in the house, the usual twice-a-year routine had been dispensed with.

In the recent past, in contravention of Rule 10, sessions have been called only once a year. Will this latest gap of two years now become the norm, or is the widening gap between sessions an indication that the institution is being phased out altogether?

The agenda which facilitated lengthy 'deliberations' and debates - a literal measure being the number of pages in the *Kuensel* Supplement which is getting thicker over the years, 14 pages for the 70th session in 1991, 16 for the 71st in 1992, 23 for the 72nd in 1993, and 26 for the 73rd - was almost a repeat of the past two sessions. But for the introduction of a new dissident target in the persona of Rongthong Kinley, a rerun of our coverage of the 1993 meeting may have been possible. Highlights of the 73rd session:

BUDGET PRESENTATION

Following the practice established in the recent past, the Finance Minister presented a review of the past fiscal year and the National budget for 1995-96. He disclosed that domestic revenue was able to

cover 98.3% of the current expenditure in 1994-95, and expressed confidence that during the next fiscal year all recurring expenses would be covered by internal revenue. There were no questions raised by the members, nor explanations proffered by the Government, regarding the financial report for the fiscal year 1993-94 which, because the Assembly did not meet during all of 1994, had not been placed before the Assembly.

ISSUES RELATED TO DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

ROADS: The requests by the public for three feeder roads came to the following conclusion:

"The National Assembly decided that, **as commanded by His Majesty the King**, the construction of the Samtse-Dorokha road should be resumed within the Seventh Plan if donor assistance can be mobilised."

"Likewise, **His Majesty was also pleased to command** that the re-alignment of the feeder road from Tashiyangphu to Thrimshing should also be included in the Plan if donor assistance can be mobilised."

"The National Assembly decided that, **as commanded by His Majesty the King**, the Planning Commission must give high priority to finding funds for the Tashithang-Gasa road so that it can be constructed during the 7th Plan."

The House also discussed issues relating to the establishment of industries in the north, the

establishment of a new Rigney school in eastern Bhutan and the problem related to unsafe bus services. But the 2,000 MT per day Dungsam Cement Project must surely stand out for all the perplexing arguments it seems to have generated.

DUNGSAM CEMENT PROJECT: Responding to requests from members from the east to either start the project or to allow owners to cultivate the land - people are still paying taxes for land appropriated for the project by the Government ten years ago - the Trade and Industry Minister blamed Bodo militants for the Government's inability to take up the project. "If it were not for the Bodo problem, the Dungsam Cement Project would have been implemented long ago," His Majesty stated, reminding members of the security risks to personnel, difficulty in movement goods through Bodo territory etc. But, in a surprising twist at the end, "the National Assembly decided that, **as stated by His Majesty the King**, if the cost of the Dungsam Cement Project can be obtained as grant, the project should be started without any further delay." What happened to security concerns and "constant danger to the people working on the project"?

ISSUES RELATED TO NGOLOP PROBLEM

'TRUE' FACTS: The session began with a repeat of the standard Government storyline about free food and fantastic facilities in the camps, villagers having willingly emigrated disregarding the pleas of the King, officials fleeing with government funds, and terrorists

and non-Bhutanese in the camps. In view of these *true facts*, the Assembly demanded: "Outside agencies providing assistance to the ngolops should be given clear information and *true facts* about the ngolops." The Royal Government clearly protests too much, primarily because neither is the regime's version of *truth* a fact nor is the concocted version of their *fact* the truth.

RELATIVES OF NGOLOPS: Repeating the arguments of the past three sessions, members called for the removal of relatives of ngolops from government service and their expulsion from the country. The Deputy Minister, Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC), ably defended his charges, maintaining that RCSC, in keeping with the directives of the King, would not adopt any discriminatory policy. His Majesty intervened to remind members that civil servants must be governed by civil service regulations and that it is a punishable offence to force any Bhutanese citizen to leave the country. It would have helped if such rules were adhered to before a hundred thousand became homeless.

EXTRADITION OF RONGTHONG KINLEY: The tirade directed towards the Chairman of the Druk National Congress (DNC) was not unexpected. In fact, according to reports, notwithstanding the Speaker's explanation, the time required to carefully orchestrate this section of the agenda was the main reason for the postponement

of the session scheduled last year.

While protesting the need for prolonged discussions on "such an insignificant person", the Home Minister at the same time choreographed a lengthy character assassination plot. He distributed a booklet on the background of Rongthong Kinley and his colleagues, and spent considerable time developing the regime's version of the nexus between Rongthong Kinley and the ngolops. Understandably, Rongthong Kinley who fled to Nepal in 1991 became a "criminal" only when he publicly became a dissident.

BAN ON RETURN OF 'EMIGRANTS': The 73rd session again enacted the drama of the past two sessions and insisted that those who had left the country be banned from returning. "Not only must these people never be allowed to return, but all those who have been helping them and are still in the country must be sent out," the members said. Om Pradhan, the only Minister of Nepali-origin, took the opportunity to add: "not even one person from the camps must be allowed to return." Of course both Om Pradhan and the members were aware that these demands did not fit in with the King's magnanimous decision to take back any person found to have been forcibly evicted, and his generous decree that forcibly evicting a Bhutanese citizen is a punishable offence. But what better way to show a semblance of a debate and the considerate mould of the King!

BHUTAN-NEPAL TALKS: The members questioned the intentions of the Government of Nepal to resolve the problem of people in

camps and also noted that the talks were postponed several times because of Nepal. Some members "expressed outrage at the Nepal government's statement that the problem is between the people in the camps and the Royal Government of Bhutan" and called for discontinuation of the bilateral talks. The Assembly, however, in view of the fact that the matter of resolving the problem had been entrusted to the King, agreed with His Majesty that the bilateral talks would be continued.

RBP PATROLLING: The Chief Operations Officer of the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) responding to requests for additional patrolling in the south by the Royal Bhutan Police, stated that the Police force was double its 1991 strength. The area was vast, but the RBP "will continue to do their best to safeguard the security of the people." [There has been no instance of arrest of miscreants or "terrorists" by the police. All criminals apprehended so far have been caught by villagers themselves.]

PRESENCE OF NGOLOPS IN THE NORTH: At the behest of members from Paro and Thimphu districts this agenda was again repeated from previous sessions, but may have taken on added significance since another breed of 'ngolops from the east had emerged. The decision of the two previous sessions, calling for increased vigilance on the part of the *gups* and *chimis* was reiterated.

MILITIA TRAINING: Responding

to requests for militia training for more people, the RBA Chief reported that the militia scheme had been discontinued since January of this year. 9,895 militia volunteers were trained since 1991 and 4,864 deployed in the south on rotation. It is significant that most of the "volunteers" were from the east. With the increased level of dissidence in that region, it is unlikely that the militia scheme will resume in the near future.

FIREARMS FOR VILLAGE VOLUNTEERS: In view of the increased criminal activities, the people from the southern districts have repeatedly requested for firearms to protect themselves. [All registered firearms belonging to villagers in southern Bhutan were collected by the government in 1990, and the regime often displays these as arms captured from 'militants']. While the House, 95 per cent comprising non-southerners, cautioned the Government - "when black is still not fully distinguishable from white and parents cannot trust their children, it would be better not to issue firearms for some time" His Majesty suggested that "the Home Ministry and the Royal Bhutan Army draw up a comprehensive report on the modalities and rules governing the use of firearms" following which Lhotshampa *gups* and *chimis* in high risk areas may be issued firearms.

ROLE OF NEPAL GOVERNMENT: The role of the Nepalese government was discussed in the context of alleged terrorist activities being directed from refugee camps in Nepal. While the Royal Government's propaganda of "terrorists" in the

camps or elsewhere might not interest Nepal or the UNHCR, if there is evidence of criminal gangs operating from the camps, HMG and UNHCR must act. The Royal Government claims to hold 112 registered refugees caught by village volunteers. If they are indeed registered in the camps and were apprehended in the act of committing a crime against helpless villagers, no punishment would be severe enough.

IDENTIFICATION OF PEOPLE: All relatives of ngolops should be exiled and a thorough screening of people having no work or responsibility in Thimphu is necessary, the member from Chapcha said because "there is danger now of full-scale armed insurrection." The Home Minister said the Census and Immigration Division and the Royal Bhutan Police were working hard checking the entry of outsiders to Bhutan.

PLAN BUDGET DIVERSION: The Finance Minister confirmed that no there was no need to divert Plan Budget funds for security needs. The entire cost of training and upkeep of the militia force was met from assistance provided by the Government of India and from the Army Welfare Project fund.

PUNISHMENT OF NGOLOPS: Some members demanded that further amnesties be stopped since from among the more than 1600 released, "not a single person has expressed gratitude." However, it was agreed that His Majesty would decide about the punishment for ngolops along with the

responsibility entrusted to him to resolve the problem.

DISCUSSION WITH INDIA: In response to suggestions that the Government of India be requested to prevent "terrorists" from entering Bhutan, the Home Minister reported to the Assembly that Bhutanese officials met officials of Assam and West Bengal from time to time. However, on the question of controlling "terrorists" on the Indian side he explained the difficulties in identification and problems associated with the long and open border. Since only southern Bhutanese villagers are the targets, the Government, it is clear, would hardly like to lose the propaganda value of criminal activities.

NEW CITIZENSHIP CARDS: The Assembly was informed that new Citizenship Cards would not be issued until the problem of people in the camps in Nepal had been resolved. Meanwhile, to prevent people who have left the country from returning and moving freely past checkpoints using the current Identity Cards, the Home Minister called for greater vigilance on the part of the people since "all the villagers should be able to recognize him if he had left from their village."

PLEDGE OF LOYALTY: If the past few sessions had seen members from southern Bhutan pledging love, devotion and loyalty, in the wake of uncertainty following the activities of the Druk National Congress the 73rd session witnessed members from Tashigang, Mongar and Tongsa pledging their loyalty and support.