

**THE PROBLEM OF BURMESE MUSLIMS**

**BY**

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## THE PROBLEM OF THE BURMESE MUSLIMS

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The wounds of colonialism still throb in the minds of Asians and the idea of an Asian Community remains a favourite medicine to stifle the pain. The new states are searching for a national identity and domestic coherence. While the stratifications within the communities throughout South and Southeast Asia cut across and largely ignore political frontiers, the outstanding cleavage between the several ethnic groups is to be found in the multinational state of Burma.<sup>1</sup> "The symptoms of disorder in Burma were flagrant and the survival of the Union was in grave doubt for a decade... Indeed, during most of the 1950s, the writ of the Union Government extended only to Rangoon and its immediate surroundings."<sup>2</sup> The Christian Karens, a militant minority of a million, sought an independent state. The other minorities — Chins, Kachins, Mons and Rohingyeas (Arakanese Muslims) — have remained dissatisfied with the Central Government. Ever since independence, the Rangoon administration has faced the problem of 'assimilation' of the ethnic minorities in 'Burman' nationalism of the Buddhist order.

An attempt has been made by the present writer to examine the condition of Burmese Muslims, particularly of the Arakan (which adjoins Bangladesh), who have been subjected to a great deal of difficulties, especially of a discriminatory nature. In recent years, it has been wrongly alleged that they are foreigners, and under this plea they were pushed across the border. Several hundreds have been arrested under Immigration Laws for alleged unauthorized entry into the country; a number of them have been in detention for more than ten or fifteen years or have been killed. They (Burmese Muslims), of course, refuse to leave the country, as they assert that they are Burmese citizens and have no other country to go to. *The Economist* of London wrote: "Yet it is Asia which has produced this year's biggest and strangest refugee movements...the biggest single group are the 170,000 Rohingyeas, the Muslim Bengali people from the Arakan region of Burma, who are still streaming

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1 R. M. M., "The Situation in Burma: Difficulties of Post-war Reconstruction, *The World Today*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 1946, pp. 430-439. See also F. S. V. D., "Burma Since the War: A Testing Time for Government", *ibid.*, October 1948, pp. 437-446.

2 Michael Brecher, *The New States of Asia*, London, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 35.

out of it across the Naaf River into Bangladesh at a rate of about 2,000 a day. There seems little doubt that they were harried out of Burma by the Burmese Army and their Buddhist neighbours, although the Burmese insist that only illegal immigrants uncovered through a census check, were 'asked to leave'”<sup>3</sup>. It further observed: “Any refugee who selects impoverished and authoritarian Bangladesh as a sanctuary to flee to must be desperate indeed. More than 150,000 Muslim Rohingyeas, who have farmed alongside Buddhists in the Arakan province of Western Burma for generations are apparently that desperate.”<sup>4</sup>

Officially known as the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, with a population of 31,742,901 (1976 estimate) occupying an area of over 26,000 square miles, Burma is a neighbour of Bangladesh and India (in the west), the People's Republic of China (in the north) and Laos and Thailand (in the east). The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean lie to the south-east and the south-west of Burma respectively. The country as a whole is cut off by mountain barriers from its neighbours. It was geographically part of Indochina rather than of India and was indeed long known to the French as “Indochina Anglaise.”<sup>5</sup> The present inhabitants of Burma (excluding the Arakan) are descendants of various Mongolian tribes which migrated southwards into the basin of the Irrawaddy River in remote times. More than 2,000 years ago the people accepted Buddhism, and since that time its monastic system had dominated the life of the country.

On 1 January 1886 the independent Kingdom of Ava was annexed to British India, after its despotic monarch, Thaibaw, had been deposed. Burma remained a province of the British Indian Empire till 1937, when it became a separate country of the Empire. On 4 January 1948, Burma once again became an independent state and opted for a republican parliamentary democracy, outside the British Commonwealth, with socialism and non-alignment as its political creed. During the pre-independence period, Burma was exposed to various forms of marxist and fascist doctrines. The Japanese occupation of Burma during the Second World War constituted an important unifying influence, but the nationalist awakening was not a Japanese creation, nor can it strictly be

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<sup>3</sup> “A Time of Flight”, *The Economist*, London, 17-23 June 1978, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> “Bangladesh and Burma: Another Ejection of Humanity”, *ibid.*, 10-16 June 1978, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Dudley Stamp, *India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma*, Methuen & Company, London, pp. 381-382. K. M. Panikkar, however, regards “Southeast Asia, as being fundamentally synonymous with Further India”. See W. Gordon East and O.H.K. Spate, *The Changing Map of Asia: A Political Geography*, Methuen & Co., London, 1958, p. 204.

compared with the European nationalism of the last century. In reality, it was a complex reaction to the whole gamut of foreign influences.

Parliamentary democracy in Burma became discredited in spite of the charisma of Prime Minister U Nu, and, in September 1958, the army seized power. Temporarily, the reins of government were transferred to the politicians only to be taken back again in March 1962. In fact, the Burmese Army has been in political ascendancy, in one form or another, since the Japanese War. General Ne Win took over control of the government on 2 March 1962. He had his military training in Japan as a soldier of the Burmese National Army during 1943-1945 and rose to the position of Brigadier in 1948. Later on, he succeeded General Smith as the Commander-in-Chief. Ne Win chose to support the leftist group in the army high command (represented by Brigadier Tin Pe) rather than the moderates led by Brigadier Aung Gyi, and at one point during his military regime the leading civilian politicians and journalists, together with Aung Gyi and other dissenting senior officers, were imprisoned. They were eventually released, and U Nu proclaimed revolt from his exile in Thailand in 1969, but there was no group which was strong enough to challenge the Army. In July 1962, the Government had formed the Burmese Socialist Programme Party, after having abolished all other parties.<sup>6</sup>

On 17 August 1961, Prime Minister U Nu had introduced in the Chamber of Deputies the Constitution (Third) Amendment Bill providing for the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion.<sup>7</sup> General Ne Win, when he came to power, propounded the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. A new party, the 'Burmese Socialist Programme Party,' was formed on 4 July 1962, which was supposed to be a blending of Humanism, Marxism and Buddhism. The first major step the Government took was the *Enterprise Nationalization Law* of February 1963 — a comprehensive measure authorizing wide-scale nationalization of industries. Ne Win's Government in fact nationalized almost all private (and especially foreign) enterprise. It is estimated that not less than 170,000 aliens left the country, badly affecting the Burmese economy. Even educational institutions were nationalized, without compensation to the owners.

The government of General Ne Win is now facing the persistent opposition of ethnic minorities. The minorities demand an autonomous position for their respective regions under the rule of the majority — the Buddhist Burmans — who have continued to repress the minorities'

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<sup>6</sup> Dick Wilson, *Asia Awakes: A Continent in Transition*, Weybright & Talley Inc., New York, 1971 p. 270.

<sup>7</sup> *Asian Recorder*, New Delhi, Vol. VII, 1-7 October 1961, p. 4187.

traditions and culture since Independence in 1948. However, due to ancient tribal jealousies which prevent them from uniting, the minorities have not been able to present a joint front to achieve their goal.

According to official estimates there are about three million Muslims in Burma, who constitute about ten per cent of the Burmese population and form the largest religious minority group. The first Constitution of independent Burma had recognized Islam and Christianity as religions besides according a special status to Buddhism. Muslims are spread all over the country. There are groups of Muslims in towns and villages, particularly in the Shwebo, Kyanko, Kayanksa, Pyinmana, Moulmein and Moulemingyun areas. Burmese Muslims can be roughly divided into two groups: (1) those of South Asian origin, particularly in the Arakan region, who retain some links with South Asian countries; and (2) those who are Burman or have become Burmanized, whose language is Burmese. There is also a small number of Chinese Muslims or their descendants. Burmese Muslims have acquired some proficiency in Urdu, due to their association with Urdu-speaking people of Rangoon, though the state has never encouraged foreign languages such as Urdu.<sup>8</sup>

The largest concentration of Muslims is in the Arakan region (around two million), which borders the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The old name of Arakan is Rohang, Roshang or Oranshin, which is a term attributed to the coastal region along the Bay of Bengal. The 150 or 170 mile long Naaf boundary forms the frontier between Bangladesh and Burma. The Arakan is entirely cut off from the rest of Burma and lies between the Arakan Yoma and the Bay of Bengal.

Etymologically the origin of the term Arakan is Arabic, and the region itself is 14,914 square miles in area. In the 8th and 9th centuries of the Christian Era the Arab merchants flourished in the Arakan and the coast of Bengal; they established extensive relations with the inhabitants of the sea-ports of these regions. The present Muslim population is mostly the direct progeny of the early settlers, Arabs and others from Bengal, Orissa, Madras, and of the converts.

The converted Muslim King Sulaiman Shah (Saw Mwan) established the Marauka dynasty in 1430 AC in the region with the support of the Illeyas Shahi Sultan, Nasiruddin Shah of Gaur, (Gaur was then the capital of Muslim Bengal). Persian was first introduced by Sulaiman Shah as the Court language (as in the Subcontinent) and it remained the Court language till 1836 even after the British conquest of Arakan in 1824-1826. Arabic was adopted as the religious language of the Muslims. The Islamic form of currency, *i.e.*, coinage with Quranic inscriptions on

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<sup>8</sup> See *Dawn*, Karachi, 1 December 1978.



one side remained in circulation for some time. The language of Muslims became known as Rohingya, written in the Arabic or Bengali script, containing words from Arabic, Bengali and Persian. As a spoken language Rohingya was influenced by the Chittagonian Bengali.

The geographical peculiarities of Arakan have influenced the political, social and economic conditions of the Muslim Rohingyeas and the Buddhist Maghs of Arakan. The growing of rice in Arakan became so extensive and successful that the surplus product, till the beginning of the Second World War, used to be exported in huge quantities to Chittagong, Calcutta, Madras, Colombo, Kochin, etc. In the 1930s at Akyab alone, there were about 50 rice mills, most of which remained working round-the-clock the whole year, run by cent per cent skilled and 75 per cent unskilled Rohingyea labourers. The island port of Akyab and the riverine port of Maungdaw were developed by the Arakanese. The relations between the two communities — the Rohingyeas and Maghs — remained harmonious, till the alleged killing of 80,000 Rohingyeas by the 'nationalist' Buddhists in 1942.

The isolation of the Arakan region from the rest of Burma, and its cultural affinity with Bengal, the Japanese occupation of Burma from 1942-1945, and the British war-time promises of semi-autonomy, encouraged a kind of Arakanese nationalism. In 1946, the Northern Arakan Muslim League was formed in Akyab, which demanded union with Muslims across the border. Before the independence of Pakistan and Burma, the Muslim leaders, particularly those from Bengal, seemed to be mildly inclined towards the Arakanese Muslims' demand. But in 1947, the President of the All-India Muslim League, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, asked the Muslims of Arakan to identify themselves with the Burmese, and advised them to settle amicably their grievances, if any, with their countrymen.

In spite of this categorical statement of the Founder of Pakistan, which the successive Pakistani Governments, for their part, faithfully adhered to, Burmese leaders were not quite convinced of Pakistan's non-involvement in the *Mujahid* separatist movement of the Arakan region. In June 1952, a Treaty of Friendship was signed between Burma and Pakistan. The leaders of the *Mujahid* Movement, Cassim (Qasim), was arrested in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in June 1954. However, the problem of the Arakanese Muslims remained a sore point between Pakistan and Burma, though Pakistan Government always tried to keep the issue within the diplomatic parlour, and showed no interest in fostering a 'religious' war.

The most effective section of the Arakanese Muslims, soon after Burma's independence, was the Independent Arakanese Parliamentary Group led by Ba Myaing and Kyaw Min; the latter was formerly an outstanding member of the Indian Civil Service and a Director of the *Nation* newspaper. This group owed its origin to wide-spread dissatisfaction among the Arakanese with the government of the time.<sup>9</sup> The Arakanese Muslims were amongst the first Burmese to realize the power of western education. They were outstanding in the Burmese banking and the civil services and they produced some of the most able public men of the dyarchy days of the British *Raj*. To such as these, Independence brought few benefits.

The unrest and confusion in the Arakan region obliged 5,000 non-political fugitives to escape to East Pakistan by January 1949.<sup>10</sup> The Provincial Government of East Pakistan obtained help from the Centre for their rehabilitation. In January 1950, after serious communal strife in Burma, another 30,000 Muslims, mostly from the Arakan, migrated to Pakistan. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Pakistan stated in the Constituent Assembly (Legislative Session), on 17 January 1950, that a large number of the Arakan refugees had come to Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> This created a law and order and rehabilitation problem for Pakistan. A report published in the *Pakistan Observer* (Dacca), under the caption "Pakistan Foreign Policy Relating to Burma", said: "At one time there were as many as 30,000 Arakan refugees in the East Bengal...we have every confidence that the Burmese Government would do their utmost to create a sense of confidence and security in the minds of the Arakanese Muslims now living in Arakan."<sup>12</sup> It is significant to note that in the 1953 Census Report release No. 3 of Burma, in Buthidaung town, about 60 per cent of the population, and in Maungdaw town, about 45 per cent were classified as Pakistanis.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hugh Tinker, *Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Oxford University Press, London, 1967, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 31 January 1949.

<sup>11</sup> Dr Mahmud Hussain, the Pakistani Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations' statement of 17 January 1950, see *Constituent Assembly Debates*, Karachi, Vol. II, No. 15, pp. 535-536. See also Virginia Thompson and Richard Adolff, *Minority Problems in South-East Asia*, Stanford University Press, California, 1955; Geoffery Fairbarin, "Some Minority Problems in Burma", *Pacific Affairs*, Richmond, Va., December 1957, pp. 299-311; Charles A. Fisher, *South-East Asia: A Social, Economic and Political Geography*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1964, pp. 472-475.

<sup>12</sup> *Pakistan Observer*, Dacca, 29 January 1956.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Tinker, *Union of Burma*, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

The problems of the Burmese Muslims seemed to have subsided by 1956; the Foreign Minister of Pakistan stated in the National Assembly on 26 March 1956 that a large number of the refugees from the Arakan had gone back to Burma.<sup>14</sup> But in 1959 another serious situation arose.<sup>15</sup> Some 17,600 refugees from Buthidaung and Maungdaw were reported by the Pakistan press to have reached Uthai, Gajanio and Teknaf, near Cox's Bazaar in Chittagong. Burma, on the other hand, alleged that 200 Pakistani troops and the border police had raided a village inside the Burmese border on 2 August 1959, and had looted it and burnt down the police station.<sup>16</sup> The Pakistan Foreign Office denied the Burmese Government's allegation, and made a counter allegation about a shooting incident on the Pakistan-Burma border.<sup>17</sup> It was further reported that, in September 1959, 1,300 Muslims had crossed over to East Pakistan. Pakistan's Foreign Minister then disclosed that his Government had proposed to the Burmese Government that an official-level meeting of the two countries should be held to resolve the issue. An earlier agreement between the two states, whereby only those persons whose national status as Pakistanis had been confirmed by Pakistan authorities were to be deported from Burma, had broken down.<sup>18</sup>

The President of Pakistan, General Mohammad Ayub Khan, during his visit to Burma in 1960, discussed this issue with Burmese leaders.<sup>19</sup> But no satisfactory solution of the problem emerged, though U Nu had said that this very minor problem could be solved. The year 1961 was also eventful. Communal riots broke out on 13 November 1961 at a place eight miles north of Rangoon. Some Buddhist monks had occupied a site intended for the construction of a mosque. Led by the monks, the mob destroyed two other mosques, and looted houses and shops in the area. As a result, four persons were killed and thirteen injured.<sup>20</sup> Another significant event, and perhaps, the last act of the U Nu Government, was a Constitution (Amendment) Bill to create an Arakan state, which was scheduled to be introduced in the Parliament on the first of March 1962. This, however, was withdrawn at the last minute from the agenda.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mujtaba Razvi, *The Frontiers of Pakistan*, Karachi, National Publishing House Ltd., 1971, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> *Dawn*, Karachi, 7 July 1959.

<sup>16</sup> *The New York Times*, New York, 30 August 1959.

<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian*, London, 31 August 1959.

<sup>18</sup> *Dawn*, Karachi, 1 and 6 September 1959.

<sup>19</sup> *Asian Recorder*, New Delhi, Vol. VII, 1-7 January 1961, p. 3715. Asked by newsmen in Rangoon if the Pakistan Government countenanced the activities of the *Mujahid* leader Cassim, he (Ayub Khan) replied that his Government "encouraged Cassim to the extent of having him under house arrest for the last eight years".

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-16 December 1961, p. 4307.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 March-1 April 1962, p. 4488.



In 1964, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan expressed the hope that the Burmese Government would look into the problems of the Arakanese Muslims with sympathetic consideration. However, in 1967, once again, there were reports of ill-treatment of the Burmese Muslims. The Government of Pakistan tried to discourage the publicity of these reports for the sake of Pakistan-Burma amity; nevertheless, President Ayub was very much perturbed, and even sent a thinly veiled warning to the Burmese Government by saying: "I hope you do not want our forces to cross the border." In 1968, the Pakistan Government revealed that there were 109 Burmese families in East Pakistan. And, in 1971, the Pakistan Embassy at Rangoon deputed an officer to check the nationality of the persons living on the Pakistan-Burma border. However, with the breakup of Pakistan and the emergence of the new state of Bangladesh in Pakistan's eastern wing, the problem of Burmese Muslims was inherited by the Government of Bangladesh.

During 1974 and 1975, there was an intermittent influx of Burmese Muslims along the Arakan border. During this period, Burma faced a most serious problem of law and order, for there were riots by workers and students, *e.g.*, in June and December 1974. It was reported at that time that hundreds of Burmese Muslims were coming as refugees to Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh drew the attention of the Burmese Government to the matter, and the Bangladesh press made an appeal to the United Nations to solve this great humanitarian problem. The year 1975 was also significant, for the Government of General Ne Win adopted a new Constitution, purportedly made by the people for safeguarding their interest.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, this brought more misfortune for the Muslims of Burma and, for a time, about 500 Muslims came across the border daily as refugees to Bangladesh. They alleged that they had been pushed into Bangladesh by the Burmese authorities and the Maghs. In 1975, President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh brought these facts to the notice of Burmese leaders when he visited Rangoon.

In March 1978, the Burmese Government policy of "Operation Dragon King" (Project *Naga Mun*) was put into operation, which was regarded in certain circles as the genocidal extermination of Muslim citizens of Burma residing in the Arakan province.<sup>23</sup> The Burmese Department of Immigration and Manpower, however, claimed that this policy was simply to examine the illegal entry of Bengali immigrants to Burma. On 30 April 1978, the Ne Win Government issued a lengthy

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<sup>22</sup> See Raja Segaram Arunugam, "Burma : A Political and Economic Background", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1975, pp. 41-42.

<sup>23</sup> "Operation Dragon King", *Impact International*, London, 26 May-8 June 1978, p. 6.

but unsatisfactory statement in connection with the mass exodus of Arakanese Muslims into Bangladesh, and described the policy as a routine immigration check in the border areas. However, to many observers the Burmese Government's action seemed to be the result of the arbitrary application of the Foreigners Act to expel the Rohingyeas, who were citizens of Burma by birth. In this context, the case of Hassan Ali vs. Immigration Department and Mehar Ali vs. Immigration Department (Cri. Misc. applications Nos. 155 and 156 of 1959) may specifically be referred to in which their lordships of the Supreme Court of Rangoon observed: "Thus mere race, appearance of a person, or whether he has a knowledge of any language of the Union, is not the fact as to whether he is a citizen of the Union."<sup>24</sup> As such, it is not comprehensible as to why the Union Government, contrary to the explicit rule of law, was demonstrating a policy of mass expulsion of the Rohingyeas from the country.

The number of Arakanese Muslims who fled to Bangladesh from March to May 1978 seemed to be over one hundred thousand. The *Bangkok Post*, in particular, and the world press in general, carried detailed reports of the refugees and published a number of photographs showing streams of evicted men and women carrying children on their shoulders in the deep mud of the River Naaf. The refugees were victims of torture, looting, arson, rape, and were even evicted by the Burmese troops at gunpoint.<sup>25</sup> By the month of May, the number of Muslim Burmese in various border relief camps in Bangladesh, had crossed the six figures. A spokesman of the Bangladesh Foreign Office observed: "If this flow continues, it will be absurd to think that our relations with Burma are still friendly and normal."<sup>26</sup>

Dacca had been negotiating with Rangoon quietly since the arrival of the refugees in Bangladesh. But the scope of the issue was now widening. Reports about exchange of firing between the Security Forces of Bangladesh and Burma constituted a threat to the peace of the region. The Bangladesh Advisor on Foreign Affairs had to warn the United Nations and other peace agencies about the dangerous consequences of the expulsion policy of the Burmese Government. The Islamic Council expressed concern over the extermination of Burmese Muslims and urged the UN to intervene. The Government of Bangladesh appealed to the United Nations to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced persons, most of whom were lodged in camps in Chittagong and the

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<sup>24</sup> *History of Arakan* (Burma) compiled by the World Muslim Congress, Karachi, October 1978, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Dawn*, Karachi, 4 May 1978; *The Pakistan Times*, Lahore, 8 May 1978.

<sup>26</sup> *The Bangkok Post*, Bangkok, 6 May 1978. See also issues of 28 April and 1 May 1978.

Hill Tracts of Bangladesh bordering Burma. The World Muslim Congress (Pakistan Branch) sent a telegram to the UN Secretary-General, Kurt Waldheim, calling his attention to this tragic issue. And Bangladesh received aid from the UN, the UNICEF and the International Red Cross.

*The Guardian Weekly* wrote on 18 June 1978: "This is not, therefore, just another of Asia's large perennial bouts of shifting misery. It is large enough already to bring crisis to a host country which hangs perilously to survival on an international aid life-line of a billion dollars a year. That automatically makes the Burmese influx a world problem."<sup>27</sup> *The Economist* described it as an ejection of humanity; the latest of Asia's refugee problems; and its combination of sheer size and suddenness "as bad as the exodus from communist Indochina".<sup>28</sup> The journal expressed the apprehension that unless there was a complete turnabout by the Burmese Government, less that a handful of the refugees were likely to be allowed to return to their homes. It further warned: "The authorities (of Burma) have done nothing to reassure them in the face of threats of communal violence, imprisonment and forced labour. If the exodus continues at the present rate, Arakan will be flushed clean of Muslims within six months."<sup>29</sup>

Bangladesh and Burma signed an agreement on 9 July 1978, to settle the problem of the Burmese refugees in Bangladesh. The principle underlining the agreement was that all those refugees who could produce evidence of any kind of their lawful residence in Burma would be accepted by the Burmese Government for settlement. Evidence would include all varieties of certificates, tax receipts, educational papers, rent receipts, residential addresses, etc. The agreement also provided for an early resumption of negotiations on the demarcation of the land boundary between Bangladesh and Burma. The missing markers on the Naaf boundary raised as a result of the Ayub-Ne Win Agreement of 1966, were also to be replaced.

The July Agreement seems to be a diplomatic landmark for the repatriation of the 200,000 refugees from Bangladesh relief camps. The agreement envisaged that repatriation would begin on 31 August 1978, with the first batch of about 200 refugees leaving camps in Bangladesh for Burma. This was to be followed by a regular arrangement, beginning on 15 September 1978, under which 2,000 refugees would cross the border twice a week. The entire repatriation process was to be completed

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<sup>27</sup> *The Guardian Weekly*, London, Vol. 118, 18 June 1978.

<sup>28</sup> *The Economist*, London, 10-16 June, *op. cit.*, 1978, p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-30 June 1978, p. 66.

within six months from the date of departure of the first batch of refugees.<sup>30</sup>

The Burmese Government's statement of 11 July 1978 said that the repatriation would be in three phases; the first phase of the repatriation would cover those who presented Burmese National Registration Cards and Foreigners' Registration documents. The remaining two phases would cover those who were able to produce documents issued in Burma indicating previous residence in the country. It added: "The present immigration problem arose not because of any religious or social discrimination, but because of the instigation of unsavoury elements who were against the collection of data being carried out for the purpose of implementing the socialist system."<sup>31</sup>

According to the 9 July Agreement, more than 6,000 refugees were to be repatriated by the end of September 1978, but by then only 195 had returned to their homes.<sup>32</sup> However, the United Nations' officials later disclosed, on 15 November 1978, that more than 5,000 of the Burmese Muslims who had fled to Bangladesh six months ago had been repatriated.<sup>33</sup> Mr Kohaut, the Chief Field Coordinator for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bangladesh, said that the refugees were now moving back to Burma faster than the 2,000 every day stipulated in the agreement. But 190,000 Muslims refugees (according to UNHCR figures), were still in 13 improvised camps set up by the Bangladesh Government. Kohaut added, that the refugees' initial suspicions about their safety in Burma had been substantially relieved by reports from those who had returned. The Government of Bangladesh, on its part, is keen not to do anything to embarrass the Burmese Government and cause a setback to the repatriation process.

The great Burmese leader, U Nu, once said: "Mistrust begets mistrust ... trust also begets trust, and confidence begets confidence." The relations between the Burmese and other indigenous races and religions, particularly the Muslims, will only become completely satisfactory when this excellent maxim is fully put into practice. "Considered geographically, the purpose of the political organization of a state is to establish coherent unity and a certain degree of homogeneity over areas which without the state organization are more or less separate and heterogeneous. In other

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<sup>30</sup> Letter of the Foreign Secretary, Ministry of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, dated 18 July 1978, to the Secretary, Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, Karachi, who kindly permitted the writer to use it for this article.

<sup>31</sup> *Dawn*, Karachi, 12 July 1978.

<sup>32</sup> Roushan-uz-Zaman, "The Problem of Burmese refugees in Bangladesh", *Dawn*, Karachi, 1 November 1978.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 November 1978.

words, the state seeks to create a region of high degree of functional unity and in certain respects of high degree of uniformity. Only human political agencies can create such regions; they are not given in nature."<sup>34</sup> Few states can claim homogeneous populations in their territories. Nation-states can be built only by giving a sense of participation to their minorities, which in return gives a sense of 'belonging' to the state.<sup>35</sup> It is hoped that the Burmese leadership will take note of the fact that "nationalism is the individual's identification of himself to the 'wee-group' to which he gives supreme loyalty."

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Hartshorne, "Morphology of the State Area: Significance for the State", Charles A. Fisher (Ed.), *Essays in Political Geography*, Methuen, London, 1968, pp. 27-32.

<sup>35</sup> Hans Kohn, quoted by Louis L. Snyder, *The Dynamics of Nationalism: Readings in Its Meaning and Development*, Van Nostrand Co., London, 1964, p. 1.