

The Refugees Who Won't Go Home

BY JOHN NEEDHAM

COX's BAZAR, Bangladesh (UPI) — Nearly 200,000 refugees who fled Burma this summer, bringing tales of rape, arson and torture, are refusing to return home.

They live now in long, partitioned huts of thatched bamboo and vegetable fiber, in one of the world's poorest nations, a place where few would seek asylum.

Of the 193,000 who walked for days from the Burmese state of Arakan to cross the Naf River and enter Bangladesh, 4,300 have died.

The health of most of the refugees has since improved, but in special feeding centers there are still children under 5 years old whose matchstick-like legs and skeleton-like ribs make one

turn away. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees received nearly \$30 million in an emergency appeal for help and is coordinating assistance to the refugees in 13 camps along the 60-mile road south of Cox's Bazar.

The commission is also trying to get those who fled to return.

"Once I'm assured that my life isn't in danger, that my property is secure and my homeland is no longer under a reign of terror, I will go back," refugee Ulla Meah, 45, said in an interview.

In a typical tale, Ulla Meah said Burmese officials took away a son and a daughter when he couldn't produce identity cards for them. He then fled with his wife, mother, an-

other son and three daughters.

He walked three days to reach the border, walked two more days to get to where the camps would be built and arrived with only the clothes he wore and a little cash which is now gone.

Many of the refugees claim their wives or daughters were raped, their houses burned, their bodies tortured.

The refugees are Moslems from a group called Rohingyas, for decades a minority in an Arakan dominated by the Buddhist Mogh group.

One of the world's lesser-known "liberation" organizations, the Rohingya Patriotic Front, has circulated a 10-page pamphlet accusing Burma of conducting "Operation Dragon" in order "to annihilate the remaining Moslem population of the region."

The Burmese deny it and say many of those who fled have no identity cards and are illegal residents.

After protracted negotiations, Burma agreed to take back those who could show they had lived in Arakan for any length of time, which most relief officials here think will come to almost all of the refugees.

But of 400 people to be repatriated Aug. 31, only 58 were willing to go. Quarrels broke out in the relief camps over whether it was safe to return.

At one camp, police opened fire on a group of refugees heatedly arguing repatriation and killed 11 of them.

Officials of Burma, Bangladesh and international agencies escorted the first repatriates into Burma and brought back word it was safe for everyone to go. Yet on Sept. 15, with 200 scheduled to return, only one 10-member family left.

"The reasons we left — if they're stopped, we'll go back," refugee Ezharul Haq, 45, said in the Katupalong camp, 18 miles south of here. He spoke an Arakanese dialect, which was translated.

"I hear the situation there (in Arakan) hasn't changed much. We have certain communications because news filters across the border."

Bangladesh, which gets more than \$1 billion a year in foreign aid and has to import food and

nearly everything else, would dearly love to see the refugees go back where they came from.

"The refugees are tying up the relief and home ministries and the police," says a foreigner who has been deeply involved in helping the Moslem Rohingyas.

One bright spot has been the work of the Bangladesh Red Cross, for years riddled by corruption and inefficiency. It has helped build and run the refugee camps, provided food and given medical treatment.

"It's the first time ever they've done something substantial and well," said one official who's seen the Red Cross in action here. "Their feeding has saved many lives."

A U.N. specialist involved in past refugee aid programs in the Sahara, India and Bangladesh said the plight of the Moslems from Arakan when they first arrived in large numbers last April was "the worst I've ever seen."

"There was no shelter. They were healthy when they arrived, but many quickly became malnourished and died. Others died from dysentery, fevers, pneumonia."

Now, the worst of the summer heat and monsoon rains are over. The refugees have roofs over their heads. Their living quarters — about 10 feet

by 10 feet for a family — are about as good as those of the Bangladesh residents living nearby.

Bangladesh doesn't want the refugees to become too happy here. For their part, all the Rohingyas interviewed said they want to return home, but they're still afraid of what may await them.

"This refugee influx is costing \$30 million a year," said an official of one international agency. "Bangladesh can't afford it and it remains to be seen if the international community will continue to pay for it."

Deaths Claimed; Hospitals Stressed

with disturbing regularity in recent studies of hospital care of the injured," it said.

The panel of doctors reported its findings in this week's issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association.

It said studies have shown injury victims have a better chance of survival if they are transported to a hospital better

The AMA, the American College of Surgeons and the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals have been working since 1970 to establish regional hospitals equipped to care for victims of major injuries, the panel said. However, most hospitals have been reluctant to cooperate.

"There is concern that large

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NASHUA WALLPAPER

Moslem Refugees From Burma Mean More Mouths To Feed

DACCA, Bangladesh (UPI) — The 200,000 Moslems who have spilled across the border from Burma into this already overpopulated and hungry nation say Bangladesh can expect more refugees.

They say other "Rohingya" — Moslems of Indo-Arakan stock — will soon leave Burma, since it appears the Rangoon government has ordered their total eviction. The Rohingya form Burma's largest ethnic minority, 1.5 million of the country's 29 million people.

Some believe they also will be joined soon by another minority, the Chinese, as phase two of President Ne Win's "Burmanization" campaign.

More than 600 people, including at least 120 children, have died of fever and dysentery in the refugee camps where the Rohingya depend on whatever food relief organizations can supply.

The camps house more women, children and old people than young men, a fact nobody seems able to explain.

Some hint the men have joined insurgents training in the hills to fight beside Communist guerrillas against Burmese government troops in Asia's most obscure battle. Others have a different theory.

One Rohingya, 25-year-old Abu Taher, escaped earlier this month to tell of several weeks of forced labor with other Moslem men in the northeastern border area.

Taher said he saw troops distributing rifles to work camp supervisors and to new troops who had been moved into the border area while he worked there.

A recent meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries produced no solution to the problem and it is still unclear which of the rival version of the issues at stake is true.

The Burmese say the Rohingya are illegal residents and cannot stay. Bangladesh says

the expulsion is a movement to "purify" Burmese stock.

The refugees claim the major causes of the Moslem flight are discrimination and persecution.

The Burmese are of Mongolian blood, Buddhist and extremely nationalistic. But the Rohingya are more enterprising and pose an economic threat to their indigenous compatriots, who consider foreign ancestry a stigma.

Another sore point is that the Rohingya pressured the government to turn Arakan, their home state, into an autonomous region.

Taher's troop movements were confirmed by reports from Rangoon, the Burmese

capital, that said two army divisions had moved into Arakan State.

Taher also reported canal and river routes, the most viable means of transport along the border, were being repaired to make them navigable after years of neglect.

Most Burmese Rohingya originally came from Bangladesh in the days of the British rule, when the entire Indian subcontinent was a colonial unit and former national borders meant little.

Others fled to Burma during

the Indo-Pakistani war, which gave birth to Bangladesh in 1971.

Refugee camp officials say there are 180,000 Rohingya crammed into the squalid quarters now awash with mud in the monsoon rains.

But the refugees say they number closer to 240,000, counting the luckier ones who slipped across the border to join family and friends.

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