

REPATRIATION OF STRANDED PAKISTANIS IN BANGLADESH

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One of the burning issues agitating the minds of the people all over Pakistan, is the sad plight of two and a half lacs "stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh" who are leading semi-human lives in squalor and filth in the camps all over Bangladesh. Our colleague and leader of the House Senator Mohammad Ali Khan Hoti, some years back, has had the personal experience of visiting these camps and has seen for himself what misery these Pakistani brethren of ours are living in. I will request him later to give details of his visit and his impressions to us, so that those who say that these unfortunate Pakistani brethren of ours should not be brought back, may know and appreciate that this is a question involving not only the right of these people but also involves a humanitarian issue.

Now, who are these two and a half lacs people about who so much is being said by both those who want them to be brought to Pakistan and those who are opposing this.

In 1947 when what was then known as India, was divided into sovereign states namely, "INDIA" AND "PAKISTAN", the Muslims living all over the sub-continent, under an agreement between the British Government, the All-India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress were given the option, the free choice to decide for themselves whether they wanted to remain nationals of India or Pakistan. Similarly, the Hindus were also given the same option.

As a result of this, thousands and thousands of Hindus crossed over to India while lacs of Muslims came to Pakistan as refugees. Those who lived in the territories of India which were near West Pakistan settled down in those areas of Pakistan which were near their original homeland. Similarly, the Muslims of Bihar fled to what was then East Pakistan which was near their province. They opted to be Pakistanis, they did not opt to be Bengalis, and they exercised the right, the option given to them under the Agreement to become Pakistanis. They became citizens of this sovereign state. Throughout their stay in East Pakistan, they proved to be patriotic Pakistanis and struggled for the retention of East Pakistan within this sovereign state, even during the tragic days of 1970-1971, they fought shoulder to shoulder with the Pakistan army against those who wanted to separate East Pakistan and create Bangladesh, Due to no fault of theirs, we lost more than half of Pakistan i.e. East Pakistan and 'Bangladesh' was created. Along with 92,000 Pakistan Jawans who were fighting there, these loyal Pakistanis suddenly found themselves stranded in a state which was not theirs and to which they owed no loyalty. Being Pakistanis, it is their right to come to whichever part of Pakistan they wish to travel to. However, the India-cum-Bangladesh Pakistan politics were such that they could not come immediately.

On 19th March, 1972, Mrs. Indra Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, visited Bangladesh. At Dacca she was asked by the foreign correspondents whether India would take back the Biharis living in

Bangladesh. She quickly replied "the question does not arise. They are not Indians. They are not our nationals; they have been Pakistani citizens for over 20 years".

From the above it is clear that there is no ambiguity about their nationality. They have been Pakistani nationals, they are Pakistani nationals, and they continue to be Pakistani nationals. Today, even though 17 years have passed since the creation of Bangladesh, in the camps where these stranded Pakistanis live in Dacca; you will see only the flag of 'Pakistan' and no other flag. This is their loyalty to Pakistan. This is their dedication to the country whose nationality they accepted in 1947, they are as much Pakistanis as anyone of us, and there can be no genuine? And acceptable reason for not letting them comes to Pakistan.

On 17th April, 1973, Bangladesh and india made a joint declaration to delink humanitarian problems from the political ones in regard to the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh and stranded Bengalis in Pakistan and also the Prisoners-of-War. The joint declaration proposed simultaneous repatriation of all those stranded in the two countries.

The entire free world including the friends of Pakistan appreciated and welcomed the announcement of this agreement. This forced the heads of the then Government of Pakistan to negotiate on this subject and meetings were held between Mr. P.N. Haskar, Special Representative of the Prime Minister of India and Mr. Aziz Ahmed, the then Minister of State for Defence Foreign Affairs in Rawalpindi from 24.7.73 to 31.7.73 and in New Delhi from 18.8.73 to 28.8.73, They were assisted by top executives of both the Governments. Looking to the manner in which the international community had accepted and acclaimed the Indo- Bangladesh declaration of 17th April, 1973, Pakistan could not avoid accepting it, and on the last day a 10-point agreement was signed between the two countries. Clause (iii) of the said agreement says:

(iii) "Simultaneously, the repatriation of all Bengalis in Pakistan and all Pakistanis in Bangladesh to their respective countries will commence".

From the above it is clear that even the first Peoples Party Government accepted the fact that those stranded in Bangladesh are Pakistan nationals. Today, those of you who claim to be loyal to the Peoples Party, those of you who claim to be followers of Z.A, Bhutto whom you call Quaid-e-Awam, do you want to undo the agreement which was signed by his minister with his approval and which was subsequently ratified next year in the form of tripartite agreement between PAKISTAN, INDIA BANGLADESH.

I know, a lot of misgivings are being felt in the interior of Sind on this matter. This is all due to some misunderstanding and a deliberate campaign to distort the situation. The people of Sind are being made to believe that the original Sindhis will become the minority in Sind with the arrival of these people from Bangladesh. Now, the latest census shows that the population of Sind is 567% rural and 44% urban. The original Sindhis are in overwhelming majority in rural areas, and even in the urban areas they are not in a minority. What difference will the arrival of these two and a half

lacs unfortunate brethren make? Is it not a fact that even today over five lacs Bengalis and Burmis who have come illegally in Pakistan living in Karachi has National Identity Cards and exercise the right of vote? If you did not object to that, if you did not object to over three lacs people who come annually to Karachi from other provinces of Pakistan in order to earn their livelihood, why are you prejudice against the two and a half lacs of people who are also Pakistanis.

I would like to assure my brethrens in the interior of Sind that there is no conspiracy against them. Nobody is trying to snatch away anything from them. Only 40 years back, the people of Sind were the first to welcome and give shelter to those Pakistanis who exercised their option to come and live in Pakistan. Where? Has that feeling for Islamic brotherhood has gone? Where has traditional and international acclaim, feeling of hospitality which the people of Sind have always enjoyed disappeared.

It has also been wrongly stated that these two and a half lacs are a rowdy lot who would create problem of law and order if they were brought to Pakistan. This is a figment of someone's imagination. Most of them are craftsmen, technicians or small businessmen, the vast majority of them are educated. Believe me, in a very short time if they are brought to Pakistan, they will find their own bearings, earn their own livings and be useful citizens of Pakistan.

Even today there are settlements of these people all over Pakistan - in the Punjab, in Sarhad and even some in Baluchistan. I do not say settling all two and a half lacs in Sind. If the people of Sind are so touchy about them let us settle them in other provinces also, but it is the right of these people to come to Pakistan and no one should be allowed to stop them.
