

The tribal turmoil

Bangladeshi Buddhist refugees flee to India

By Mohan Ram in New Delhi

The ethnic turmoil in the Bangladeshi district of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) often spills over into India's Tripura and Mizoram states in the form of refugees. The latest wave of more than 10,000 tribes-people — mainly from the Buddhist Chakma tribe — began on 30 April.

Unlike in the past, India's Border Security Force (BSF) had strict instructions not to let them in and so the refugees had to seek unguarded parts of the border from where they could enter Tripura. Thousands more are known to be waiting in makeshift camps nearby.

Since the 1970s, Dhaka's forces have been faced with an armed movement in the once-predominantly tribal CHT. When Shanti Bahini guerillas, the armed wing of the tribal movement, intensify their activities, security forces carry out reprisal raids against civilians who seek refuge in neighbouring India. Tens of thousands of Buddhist Chakma tribesmen fled in three separate waves during 1979-81.

Guerilla activity had decreased in recent years because of factional differences in the movement. But a reorganised Shanti Bahini force carried out its biggest coordinated attack on 29 April as it simultaneously raided several Bangladeshi army camps and the outposts of paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles, and followed it up with swoops on new settlements of immigrant Bengali Muslims.

In turn, the Muslim settlers and government forces carried out reprisals on tribal villages forcing the tribes-people to flee to India on 30 April. On 10 May, the guerillas claimed in a document released in Agartala, the capital of Tripura, that 53 tribal villagers had died, five were injured and 90 were missing as a result of the reprisal raids.

At the root of the problem, according to the guerilla spokesmen, is Dhaka's design to change the demographic composition of the district by settling Muslim immigrants from other parts of the country. Sagatranjan Chakma, who was working for the Bangladesh Government until he fled to India last month, said it was a deliberate official policy to "colonise" the traditional home of the tribes-people, by displacing them from their ancestral land. "It is against this the Shanti Bahini has been fighting. And every time the Shanti Bahini attacks, the government, along with the Muslims, strikes back in large numbers. But the Shanti Bahini has to do this, otherwise, we will be outnumbered in our own land," he said.

Taking advantage of a rift in the Shanti Bahini during 1984-85, the Bangladesh Government stepped up the settlement process, it is alleged. After patching up their internal differences, the guerillas initiated talks with the government in an effort to ensure that there would be no further settlements and that immigrants already there would be repatriated.

The first talks took place in October



Chakma mother and child: threatened homeland.

1985. According to the guerillas, the government admitted that it was a political problem calling for a political solution, but the second meeting scheduled for December was cancelled unilaterally by the government while settlement was stepped up under various guises and preparations for a military solution went apace. The tribes-people fear that Dhaka's policies could lead to their total extermination and the ultimate Islamisation of the CHT.

India has to treat the CHT refugees rather carefully as it is also saddled with a similar problem in Tripura. The state's tribal population has been reduced from 70% of the total in 1947 to the present less than 30% due to an influx from the plains, many of them Bengalis. Tripura tribesmen are also fighting for their share of land in the state, which has resulted in yet another insurgency.

India's immediate concern is to send the refugees back. Bangladesh is willing but the refugees are reluctant because some of those who went back after the 1981 influx found themselves fleeing again last month.

► S. Kamaluddin writes from Dhaka: The upsurge in armed clashes in the CHT has come in the wake of India strengthening its paramilitary forces along the borders with Bangladesh and Dhaka's extension of an amnesty to the Chakma rebels. The current amnesty, extended until 25 June, is the third since October 1983, and offered land and cash grants to the surrendering rebels.

The first amnesty granted by President H. M. Ershad, lasted until April 1984 and a second one was offered in April last year. Government sources told the REVIEW that during 1984-85 more than 2,500 insurgents had surrendered with their weapons and most of them had been rehabilitated. While the government reiterated its hope that the "misguided persons [insurgents] would take the opportunity of the amnesty and return to normal life," tribal refugees are still sheltering in Tripura and Mizoram.

At a recent meeting between the area commanders of the Indian and Bangladeshi paramilitary border forces, Dhaka's representative repeated his complaint that the insurgents were continuing to operate from Indian territory — returning to their Indian sanctuaries after carrying out raids in CHT. The Indian side refuted these claims as it has done in the past.

On the other hand, India countered that the exodus of Bangladeshi nationals into Tripura and Mizoram had continued and asked Dhaka to take back the refugees. India maintained that the refugees numbered 6-10,000. Bangladesh, while disputing the figure, agreed to accept all its nationals who had documentary evidence of their citizenship. Unofficial estimates by Dhaka have it that 379 families comprising about 2,000 men, women and child-

ren had fled to India since 30 April. Sources in Dhaka think Indian forces along the joint border are actively involved in preventing the return of rebels and tribal civilians alike who might want to take advantage of the amnesty — an allegation New Delhi continues to reject. The very increase in BSF personnel has added to the tension in CHT and along the borders.

The presence of paramilitary forces, essential as it may be to police the porous border between the two countries, merely exacerbates a long-standing problem of ethnic identity and economic autonomy among the tribal population of the northeastern region of the Subcontinent.

The British colonial rulers granted a special status to the tribes-people of CHT. In 1963, Pakistan — of which today's Bangladesh was then a part — amended its constitution revoking the special tribal status of CHT, causing disaffection among the hill-tribes. After the birth of Bangladesh, the country's 1972 constitution did not provide for the special tribal status. This led to tribal insurgency, which gained further momentum in the turbulent mid-1970s in the wake of the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh.

The CHT, with an area of about 5,100 sq. miles, has a population of 750,000 of which some 600,000 are tribes-people. Among the hill-tribes, the largest number are Buddhist Chakmas who comprise 70% of the tribals. In the CHT Bengali Muslims from the plains numbered about 50,000 in the 1930s, but their ranks have swollen since the 1960s, their influx having grown considerably in the past decade or so.

The hill-tribes want their special status to be restored and the CHT declared an exclusive area for them where Bengalis should not be allowed to settle. Bangladesh, with a total population reaching 100 million packed in about 55,000 sq. miles, is desperately short of land and can hardly afford to reserve 11% of its land area to the hill-tribes, who form a small fraction of the total population.

However, realising the ethnic and political nature of the demands by the hill-tribes, the Dhaka regime has tried intermittently to negotiate with the rebel group, just as New Delhi has done with its tribal population in the neighbouring region. In the initial stages, when armed clashes were limited largely to armed rebels and security forces, the talks made some progress. But violence has been on the rise again with hill-tribes attacking Bengali Muslim settlements who in turn have raided the Buddhist tribal villages. With the rebels apparently bent on removing the new settlers from the CHT, negotiations have suffered a major setback. ■

DIPLOMACY

The 'Abe doctrine'

Japan's foreign minister prepares a new initiative on Asean

By Susumu Awanohara in Tokyo

At the expanded Asean foreign ministers meeting to be held in Manila in late June, Japanese Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe — who hopes to replace Yasuhiro Nakasone as prime minister in October — will suggest how Japan intends to assist Asean countries in alleviating their worst economic crisis since the regional organisation was set up in 1967.

The "Abe doctrine" will contain Japan's first implicit admission that it has neglected its Southeast Asian neighbours but is likely to fall far short of Asean expectations, which include negotiations on the repayment of Tokyo's official yen credits after the recent sharp appreciation of the yen.

It was in January that Abe floated his

First, these officials say, major post-war, foreign-policy statements by Japanese prime ministers have repeatedly stressed the importance to Japan of Asia as well as the West. Secondly, they assert, Japan has already done all it can vis-à-vis Asean in reducing tariffs and providing aid, and cannot promise more. Finally, some believe that East-West relations are now the main theatre of diplomacy and that Japan's emphasis should be in this area.

But there are also many influential Japanese, including some in the Foreign Ministry, who believe that Japan-Asean relations need great improvement in substance and feeling. Some of these even fear that relations are deteriorating as generational change proceeds on



Abe: a new focus on Asean.

Ajia jushi gaiko — diplomacy emphasizing, or focusing on, Asia. Direct translation of this Japanese term is tricky and will apparently be avoided, since Abe must not hint at any special relationship that could be seen as clashing with Tokyo's globalist stance.

Abe hit on Asean in his search for a project to crown his tenure as foreign minister. Nakasone, Abe's senior rival in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, has occupied centre stage in diplomacy with the US (establishing the vaunted "Ron-Yasu" relationship), China and South Korea, and in the annual economic summits, while Abe claims to have been "creative" in dealing with the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa. In contrast, since the two toured Asean in early 1983, neither has gone beyond what is routine with Asean.

Some in the Foreign Ministry have expressed scepticism over any new pronouncement by Abe on Asia or Asean.

both sides and old personal links and shared values are lost.

Shortly after Abe mooted his Asia diplomacy, the Foreign Ministry formed four study groups — on trade, investment, development strategy and politics/security — with outside experts, to review Japan-Asean relations. Some of the groups' findings and assessments will no doubt be reflected by Abe in Manila. These are likely to survive Abe's foreign ministership and will be given a boost if Abe becomes prime minister.

Consensus reached by the groups includes the view that while Japan must try to accelerate imports of manufactured products from Asean countries to help them attain sustained economic growth, this cannot be achieved.

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