

# 3 Rupture in South Asia

While the 1950s had seen UNHCR preoccupied with events in Europe and the 1960s with events in Africa following decolonization, the 1970s saw a further expansion of UNHCR's activities as refugee problems arose in the newly independent states. Although UNHCR had briefly been engaged in assisting Chinese refugees in Hong Kong in the 1950s, it was not until the 1970s that UNHCR became involved in a large-scale relief operation in Asia.

In the quarter of a century after the end of the Second World War, virtually all the previously colonized countries of Asia obtained independence. In some states this occurred peacefully, but for others—including Indonesia and to a lesser extent Malaysia and the Philippines—the struggle for independence involved violence. The most dramatic upheaval, however, was on the Indian sub-continent where communal violence resulted in partition and the creation of two separate states—India and Pakistan—in 1947. An estimated 14 million people were displaced at the time, as Muslims in India fled to Pakistan and Hindus in Pakistan fled to India. Similar movements took place on a smaller scale in succeeding years. Inevitably, such a momentous process produced strains and stresses in the newly decolonized states. Many newly independent countries found it difficult to maintain democratic political systems, given the economic problems which they faced, political challenges from the left and the right, and the overarching pressures of the Cold War.

In several countries in Asia, the army seized political power in a wave of coups which began a decade or so after independence. Beginning in Pakistan in 1958 and spreading to Burma in 1962 and Indonesia in 1965, military regimes replaced democratic governments. The new regimes, with rare exceptions, suppressed democratic political parties. In many cases, they were harsh in their treatment of ethnic minorities. In some instances, the seizure of political power by the military was accompanied by considerable bloodshed, as in Indonesia in 1965–66, when more than 500,000 people are estimated to have been killed. In this case, many of the victims of the coup came from the ethnic Chinese minority. Similarly, in Burma, minority groups were subjected to harsh military repression.

In Pakistan, the drift to militarism had calamitous effects and resulted in civil war, the dismemberment of Pakistan as a state, war between India and Pakistan and a massive refugee exodus, the likes of which the world had not seen since the 1947 partition of India. With an estimated 10 million people leaving what was then East Pakistan for India between April and December 1971, this became the largest single displacement of refugees in the second half of the century. Remarkably, traumatic though these events were, the vast majority of these people returned within a year to what became the independent state of Bangladesh, in the largest repatriation operation of the post-Second World War era. In a further large-scale repatriation

operation in 1973–74, UNHCR was instrumental in organizing an airlift of large numbers of displaced people between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

## The birth of the state of Bangladesh

When Pakistan gained independence in 1947, it was not only an ethnically mixed—though predominantly Muslim—country, but was physically separated by India into eastern and western wings. Politically, the new country was dominated by West Pakistan, which caused resentment in the Bengali East. After the military regime of General Ayub Khan took power in 1958, relations between the two halves of the country steadily worsened and East Pakistan had limited representation in Pakistani politics, despite containing the majority of the population. In the civil service, Bengalis held a small fraction of positions and the representation of Bengalis in the army was believed to be less than 10 per cent. In addition, the economic interests of East Pakistan were subordinated to those of West Pakistan.

Bengali demands for autonomy increased in the 1960s and coincided with unrest in West Pakistan, culminating in demonstrations and strikes which led to the fall of General Ayub Khan's government in 1969. The subsequent military administration headed by General Yahya Khan announced early on that it was to be a transitional government that would endeavour to transfer power to civilian authority. In January 1970 the ban on political parties and political activity was lifted. Elections for a new National Assembly were duly held on 7 December that year. To the surprise of virtually all observers, the regionally based Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was elected with an absolute majority of seats nationally, all its seats being in East Pakistan. In West Pakistan, the majority of seats were won by the Pakistan People's Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Initially, the Awami League sought autonomy for the East, in a loose union with the West. It proved impossible, however, to reach a political consensus between the Awami League, the Pakistan People's Party and the army.<sup>1</sup>

As discontent rose in the east, negotiations on a constitutional compromise collapsed. President Yahya Khan postponed indefinitely the inauguration of the National Assembly, scheduled for 3 March 1971, prompting violent protests in East Pakistan. On 26 March, following a crackdown by the Pakistani armed forces and the imposition of military rule, the independence of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was declared. The Awami League was outlawed and the Pakistani army launched a massive counterinsurgency operation. Wholesale attacks on those suspected of supporting the Awami League and widespread repression, accompanied by severe human rights violations, resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and soon led to a refugee exodus on a colossal scale.<sup>2</sup>

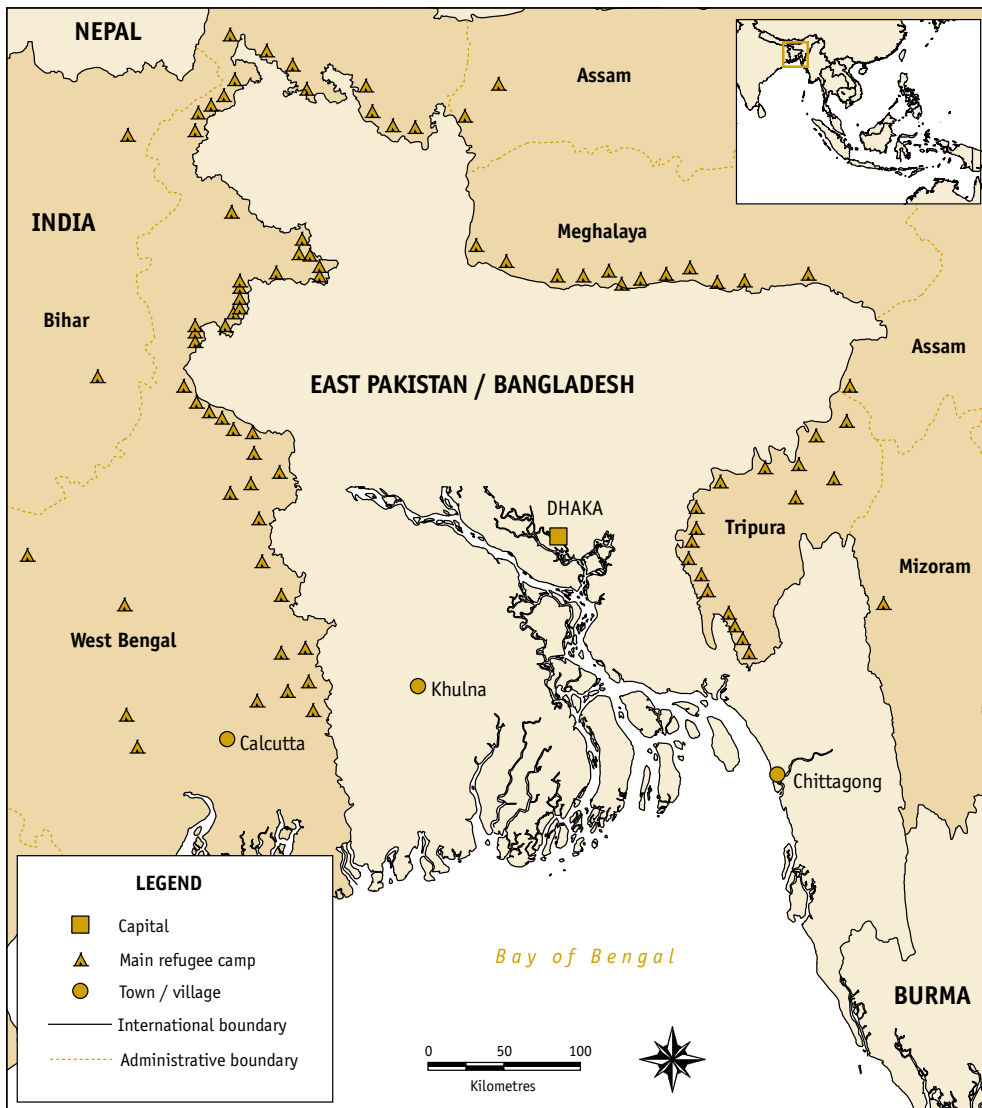
## The exodus of 10 million refugees

On 29 March 1971, the UNHCR Representative in India, F.L. Pijnacker Hordijk, warned the High Commissioner of an impending refugee influx into India.<sup>3</sup> As with so many

other refugee crises, however, the scale of the exodus was underestimated. Within a month, nearly a million refugees had entered India, fleeing the military repression in East Pakistan. By the end of May, the average daily influx into India was over 100,000 and had reached a total of almost four million. By the end of 1971, figures provided by the Indian government to the United Nations indicated that this total had reached 10 million.

Such an exodus of refugees inevitably produced extraordinary problems for the host country, India. From the beginning, the Indian government made it clear that there were no circumstances under which it would allow the refugees to settle in India.

### Location of main refugee camps in India, November 1971 Map 3.1



Sources: UNHCR; Global Insight Digital Mapping ©1998, Europa Technologies Ltd; UNHCR, *A Story of Anguish and Actions*, Geneva, 1972, p. 43.



*The millions of Bengali refugees who fled to India in 1971 were accommodated in some 800 camps. There were serious outbreaks of cholera in some camps due to the crowded conditions. (WFP/T. PAGE/1971)*

Increasingly, the government realized that it would need international assistance to cope with the massive refugee influx. On 23 April 1971, the Permanent Representative of India at the United Nations, Samar Sen, in a meeting with the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, requested international aid.<sup>4</sup> With growing international demands for assistance for the refugees, High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan met with Secretary-General U Thant in the Swiss capital, Bern, on 26–27 April to discuss the situation. Two days later, the Secretary-General decided that UNHCR should act as the ‘Focal Point’ for the coordination of all UN assistance. For the first time in a humanitarian crisis, UNHCR was entrusted with the role of general coordinator.

The Focal Point was an innovative concept. It was distinct from the traditional responsibilities of the Office of the High Commissioner. It involved mobilization of international support and funds, procurement and delivery of relief supplies to India, and coordination with the Indian government, which organized the distribution of these supplies. In early May, High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan sent a high-level UNHCR mission to India which consisted of the Deputy High Commissioner, Charles Mace, the Director of Operations, Thomas Jamieson, and Legal Consultant, Paul Weis. The mission was required to make a direct assessment of the situation, to achieve a measure of coordination among the UN agencies seeking to help the refugees and to discuss with the Indian authorities the ways and means to provide international assistance.<sup>5</sup>

## Box 3.1

## The Tibetan refugee community in India

The Tibetan refugees who have lived in India since the late 1950s are often overlooked. This is largely due to the fact that they have survived with relatively little international assistance. Large numbers of Tibetan refugees first arrived in India in March 1959 after the Chinese suppression of an uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people. Most of the tens of thousands of Tibetans who have fled Chinese rule since that time have escaped on foot on a perilous weeks-long journey across the Himalayas. Although the Chinese side of the border was sealed in 1960, Tibetans have continued to flee since then. Most arrive via Nepal, where there is a reception centre in the capital Kathmandu. More than 40 years after the exodus from Tibet began, the refugee community in India now numbers around 100,000.

When the refugees first began arriving in India, they were accommodated in transit camps at Missamari in Assam, and Buxa in West Bengal. An unofficial 'central relief committee' supervised their affairs. It received some assistance from abroad but international organizations, including UNHCR, were not involved at this stage. The 1962 Sino-Indian border war marked a turning point. It was then that it was recognized that the Tibetans would not soon be returning to their homeland.

It was also at this time that the Indian authorities first requested international help for the refugees. UNHCR began providing assistance to the Tibetans in India from 1964, even though it did not formally establish a presence in the Indian capital, New Delhi, until 1969. Official international assistance remained limited, however. Since the 1960s, most international assistance for Tibetan refugees has been channelled through the Tibet Bureau of

the Dalai Lama. Both governments and international organizations have been wary of providing assistance to the Tibetans, aware that such action would be viewed by the Chinese authorities as interference in their domestic affairs.

Since 1962, assistance programmes for the refugees have included the establishment of agricultural settlements and vocational training schemes. State governments in India have allocated refugee families an average of three acres of land each and have assisted them in constructing houses. They have also given Tibetan communities assistance in establishing water supplies, civic amenities, handicraft centres and schools. There are currently some 85 Tibetan schools across India catering for some 25,000 students.

The Indian authorities have also provided ration cards, identity papers, residence permits and travel documents for registered Tibetan refugees, who are officially viewed as having come to India on pilgrimage. Although they are considered as foreigners under the 1946 Foreigners Act, they have been accorded the basic rights of most citizens but are not allowed to contest or vote in Indian elections. Those who migrated to India before March 1959 and who have been ordinarily resident in India since then are considered for Indian citizenship on an individual basis. Those married to Indian nationals may apply for Indian citizenship.

The Indian government has consciously promoted a policy which enables the Tibetan community to maintain its distinct identity and cultural values, together with a political and administrative system of its own. From the start, separate settlements were identified and established in geographically suitable areas so as to provide them with economic, social and religious autonomy. A separate

Tibetan government-in-exile has been established in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh.

In a relatively short period of time, Tibetan refugees settled in communities in Indian states such as Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Maharashtra. In certain areas, such as Darjeeling, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, where cultural practices were not dissimilar to those in Tibet, the Tibetans adjusted quickly. In other places, such as Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh, there was occasionally local resistance to the Tibetans' visible presence and economic success.

Many Tibetans initially experienced problems in moving from what was a strongly traditional and almost closed society to the culturally diverse one of democratic India. In general, however, they have successfully maintained their cultural and religious practices. One author has written that the ability of the Tibetan refugees 'to build and fund in foreign lands numerous monasteries of a remarkably high architectural standard and their success in developing viable monastic communities similar to those of Tibet is one of the miracles of the twentieth century.'<sup>4</sup>

Despite these positive achievements, the majority of the Tibetan refugees in India still want to return to Tibet. While the conditions under which many of these refugees live are relatively good, the unresolved nature of the refugee problem is illustrated by the fact that each year Tibetan refugees not only in India, but also in Nepal and Bhutan, continue to seek asylum in Western countries. More than four decades after the initial flight of this group of refugees, permanent solutions for them still appear to be a long way off.

Between 6 and 19 May, the UNHCR mission visited numerous refugee camps in West Bengal, Tripura and Assam, the Indian states most affected by the refugee influx, and held discussions with high-level Indian officials, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In a cable to the High Commissioner, the mission declared itself 'depressed by situation and reign of terror which is obvious in faces of people which are stunned and in some cases almost expressionless . . . Saw many bullet wounded men, women and children . . . Arson, rape and dispersal is the common topic [of discussion]'.<sup>6</sup> Mace said: 'Words fail me to describe the human plight we have just seen.'<sup>7</sup>

The UNHCR mission coincided with a visit by the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to the same states of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. In some districts in these states, refugees already outnumbered local residents. By mid-May, Indira Gandhi noted in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament, that some 330 camps had been established to accommodate the refugees who by now numbered four million. By the end of that month, there were 900,000 refugees in the hill state of Tripura alone, set against an indigenous population of 1.5 million.<sup>8</sup> As two scholars of the 1971 war have noted, the 'problem for India was not just the "existence" of refugees, but where they existed'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cholera in the camps**

The general sense of crisis created by such an enormous influx of refugees was heightened by severe health problems in the camps. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that children in particular were suffering severely, many of them being considerably under-nourished.<sup>10</sup> Sanitation was extremely rudimentary and dysentery soon became a problem, especially amongst the children. At the end of May, a correspondent for the *Hindustan Standard* reported:

Many of the refugees are suffering from infectious diseases. Some 626 doctors and 60 refugee doctors are trying to cope with this overwhelming situation, aided by some 800 paramedical personnel. Over 2,700 beds have been added to the existing 42 hospitals, but what will the situation be tomorrow? On this day a further 100,000 refugees have arrived in the Nadia district alone.<sup>11</sup>

In May and June, cholera began to spread through the camps. In no time at all, medical stocks in West Bengal were exhausted, leading to an urgent appeal to the World Health Organization for vaccines and dehydration fluid, which were brought from Geneva in an emergency airlift. At the beginning of June, the number of cholera cases was estimated at 9,500. By the end of September, this figure had risen to over 46,000. A British journalist described the scene in one hospital in the London newspaper the *Observer*:

Cholera is a horrible and humiliating way to die. The only mercy is that it is comparatively quick. The cholera wards are two buildings behind the main hospital block. There are no beds. The patients lie on metal sheets covering a concrete floor. The disease produces uncontrollable diarrhoea and vomiting, the results of which are everywhere. Those who still can fan themselves weakly; those who are too far gone to do so are black with flies. There are men and women of all ages.<sup>12</sup>

With the spread of disease amongst the refugees the pressures on the Indian authorities increased. The health crisis could have been far worse were it not for the fact that India had

## Bangladeshi refugees in India as on 1 December 1971

Figure 3.1

State	Number of camps	Refugees in camps	Refugees with host families	Total number of refugees
West Bengal	492	4,849,786	2,386,130	7,235,916
Tripura	276	834,098	547,551	1,381,649
Meghalaya	17	591,520	76,466	667,986
Assam	28	255,642	91,913	347,555
Bihar	8	36,732	–	36,732
Madhya Pradesh	3	219,298	–	219,298
Uttar Pradesh	1	10,169	–	10,169
<b>Total</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>6,797,245</b>	<b>3,102,060</b>	<b>9,899,305</b>

Source: 'Report of the Secretary-General Concerning the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 2790(XXVI) and Security Council Resolution 307(1971)', UN Doc. A/8662/Add.3, 11 Aug. 1972.

sufficient food stocks which the authorities could draw upon to feed the refugees. The history of past famine disasters, like that of 1943 when over 1.5 million people died in Bengal, is sufficiently harrowing to suggest how much worse the calamity of 1971 might have been.

### The relief operation

In spite of India's food reserves, the refugees placed a severe economic burden on the country. The government in New Delhi expected the international community to refund a major part of the expenses it was now incurring in looking after the refugees. In May, a visiting UNHCR mission had to stress that it would be unrealistic for the United Nations to bear full responsibility for the financial burden, given the voluntary nature of contributions to the UN budget. Nevertheless, on 19 May 1971, UN Secretary-General U Thant launched a global appeal for emergency assistance to refugees in India and appealed to the international community to respond generously.<sup>13</sup> U Thant also issued an appeal the following month for humanitarian assistance for the people in East Pakistan. Within weeks of the Secretary-General's initial global appeal on 19 May, some US\$17 million had been pledged.<sup>14</sup> By 22 June, when High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan went to New York to brief the Secretary-General about a 12-day visit to the sub-continent, the total had reached US\$70 million.

From the outset of the crisis in East Pakistan, Indira Gandhi had made it clear that India would do its utmost to assist the refugees, but that the refugees could not remain on a permanent basis. India's firm position that refugees would have to return to their country of origin had implications for the range of measures taken by Delhi. By mid-April 1971, the Indian Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, which was coordinating the relief operation, decided to establish 50 camps, each equipped to accommodate 50,000 refugees, to be run by officials from the central government.

The Indian authorities registered the refugees on their arrival at the border, where they were given an entry document, a special food ration for their inland journey and anti-cholera and smallpox injections. Those who did not register at the border were presumed to be living with friends, relatives or other host families. At the beginning of December 1971, Indian government figures showed 6.8 million refugees living in camps and a further 3.1 million living with host families [see Figure 3.1].

The complexities arising from this massive population influx required extensive consultations between UNHCR and the numerous branches of the Indian government. A Central Coordinating Committee was therefore established under the aegis of the Indian Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation, with representatives of various other ministries, the Indian Red Cross and UNHCR. From June 1971 until the end of the monsoon, the main worry, apart from adequate health facilities and shelter for the refugees, was the maintenance of the vital supply lines linking Calcutta and the outlying states in northeast India. The monsoon created more operational problems for the administration of relief and the incessant rain caused more disease.

UNHCR, which had recently established an office in New Delhi, played a major role in fundraising and in liaising with governments and NGOs. But it was the Indian government which assumed overall responsibility for handling the crisis on the ground. In Geneva, High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan established and chaired a UN Standing Inter-Agency Consultative Unit to assist communication between the components of the UN system most directly concerned with the refugee problem. This body facilitated inter-agency cooperation and the framing of a common UN position on issues of assistance, and took up offers of assistance by governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations.<sup>15</sup>

### **Growing tensions between India and Pakistan**

At the outset of the crisis, India had taken the position that refugees would have to return within a six-month period and referred to them as 'evacuees' to emphasize their temporary status. This was a major policy constraint in planning the assistance programme, as it meant that there were no formal contingency plans for a longer period. The six-month period was supposed to have begun at the start of the first refugee influx in March 1971, and was therefore supposed to cease in September. While generosity was extended to the millions who came across the border, the Indian government was never disposed to accept the permanent settlement of refugees from East Pakistan in India.

As time went by, it became clear that the refugees would not be able to return within the six-month time frame because of the continuation of the persecution that had caused them to flee to India in the first place. The Indian authorities claimed that Pakistan was attempting to resolve the political impasse in East Pakistan through the mass expulsion of a considerable proportion of its population, most of whom were Bengali Hindus. Increasingly, India considered imposing its own



political solution in East Pakistan. As early as April, the Indian government had effectively sanctioned the functioning of a government-in-exile on Indian soil and the training of Bangladeshi military forces.

For its part, from 21 May Pakistan several times stated its willingness to accept the refugees back. On 28 June, President Yahya Khan even appointed a Bengali, A.M. Malik, as special assistant for displaced persons. But the human rights situation in East Pakistan did not improve and the outflow of refugees to India continued. The Pakistani authorities remained unwilling to remove the ban on the Awami League and were determined to proceed with the trial of Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for sedition.

The Indian government considered the international response to the crisis to be inadequate, and its relations with the United Nations—including UNHCR—became increasingly strained. UN-sponsored efforts to settle the dispute and even to offer humanitarian aid were sometimes viewed with scepticism by the Indian authorities. The Indian government was particularly critical of High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan for making a visit in June to the sub-continent at the invitation of President Yahya Khan of Pakistan, who allowed the High Commissioner to travel extensively in East Pakistan itself. The Indian government viewed the visit as an endorsement of Pakistani efforts to persuade the refugees to return. It also considered the visit to be premature, given the need for a political settlement before the refugees could return safely. At the end of the trip, the High Commissioner went to New Delhi for talks with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. To many in the Indian government, the Delhi leg of the visit looked too much like an afterthought.<sup>16</sup>

Efforts by UNHCR to establish a presence in the refugee camps in India were firmly rebuffed by the Indian government, which also objected to UNHCR's efforts to establish a presence in reception centres in East Pakistan. Even the presence of NGOs in the camps was becoming unacceptable, as New Delhi stepped up its assistance to the Mukhti Bahini, the Bangladeshi guerrilla force which it had tolerated from the start of the crisis. Moreover, as tensions between India and Pakistan and the likelihood of war increased, efforts by the United Nations to mediate in the conflict became increasingly irksome to Delhi. Secretary-General U Thant offered in late September to mediate between India and Pakistan in the midst of the rising tension and mobilization of their respective military forces. While Pakistan responded favourably, India interpreted the move as trying to save the military regime in Pakistan which it saw as responsible for the massive refugee exodus. India urged the Secretary-General to find a political solution, which would take into consideration the wishes of the people of East Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

### **War between India and Pakistan**

India's fundamental objectives from the beginning of the crisis in March 1971 had been, first, the repatriation of all the refugees who had fled East Pakistan and, second, the transfer of political power within East Pakistan itself to the Awami League. Thus, any solution to the crisis which did not include provisions for the return of the

refugees was plainly unacceptable.<sup>18</sup> From the outset, however, it was difficult to see how this could happen without the military defeat of Pakistan and its ousting from East Pakistan.

Direct military intervention was considered by Indian leaders as early as April 1971. However, the Indian Chief of Staff, General Manekshaw, dismissed this proposal as premature, since the Indian Army was not ready for any offensive operation and would require six to seven months to prepare for a conflict on both fronts. When the Indian government later discovered that both the United States and China were providing the Pakistan government with arms to maintain the unity of the country, its position hardened. By late July, the Indian government had reached a consensus on the issue of East Pakistan, which included the direct supervision of the Bangladeshi government-in-exile and military training for the Mukhti Bahini and other Bangladeshi 'liberation forces'. In August 1971, India concluded a 20-year Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union, while Prime Minister Indira Gandhi travelled to Western Europe and the United States to promote the cause of an independent Bangladesh.

Despite efforts by UN Secretary-General U Thant to mediate, the situation continued to deteriorate, with reports of cross-border skirmishes and incursions along the Indian border with East Pakistan. On a visit to India on 6–8 November 1971, High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan expressed his anxiety at the growing tensions and the effects this would have on the delivery of assistance to the refugees. Throughout November the situation deteriorated further along the Indian borders with both East and West Pakistan. On 3 December, Pakistan launched air attacks against Indian bases on India's western front. Indian forces subsequently entered East Pakistan in force. The UN Security Council discussed the issue at length, but was paralysed by the use of the veto by one or other of its permanent members. On 5 December, Indira Gandhi recognized Bangladesh's independence and on 16 December Dhaka fell to the Indian forces.<sup>19</sup> The UNHCR head of office there, John Kelly, played a critical intermediary role in ensuring a ceasefire between the two opposing armies.<sup>20</sup> With the surrender of the Pakistani army, the war ended, paving the way for the independence of Bangladesh.

## Repatriation and population exchanges

The way was now open for the return of the refugees. India quickly announced that all refugees who had entered the country after 25 March 1971 would need to return to Bangladesh by the end of February 1972. This time frame seemed optimistic, and the provision of necessary transportation for most of the 10 million refugees raised huge operational difficulties. Nevertheless, within days of the conclusion of hostilities, the refugees began returning home of their own accord. Indeed, some had even begun returning while the fighting was still going

## Box 3.2

## The expulsion of South Asians from Uganda

The decree in 1972 by Ugandan President Idi Amin ordering the departure of Uganda's population of South Asian origin sparked a mass exodus. As thousands of Ugandan Asians sought to find countries to accept them, UNHCR and other organizations played an important part in assisting those who were expelled.

The South Asians in East Africa were long-settled and of diverse backgrounds. They included Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians from various parts of the Indian sub-continent. Their origins varied from pre-colonial merchants, to labourers and artisans imported by the British to build the railways, small traders, people brought in to staff the colonial civil service, and cotton ginners and traders who later moved into other areas of the economy.

When Uganda became independent in 1962, Asians living there were offered the option of becoming Ugandan citizens. While some did so, many others chose to retain their British passports and the option of future settlement in the United Kingdom. By the early 1970s, there were about 75,000 South Asians in Uganda. About half held British passports, one-third were Ugandan citizens or had applications for citizenship pending, and the rest were Indian, Pakistani or Kenyan nationals. During the colonial period, Asians had been targets of periodic outbursts of hostility, largely because they controlled significant parts of the economy. After independence, this gathered momentum as African nationalism fuelled demands for 'indigenization', an attempt to redress the exclusion of Africans from economic and political power structures. Such moves were seen first in neighbouring Kenya, and coincided with restrictive admission measures introduced in the United Kingdom in 1968 against the background of increasing anxiety about immigration from the former colonies.

In Uganda, efforts in the 1960s by the regime of Amin's predecessor,

Milton Obote, to shift control of trade from Asians to Africans, heightened inter-communal tensions. It was partly in reaction to those efforts that most Asians welcomed Amin's seizure of power early in 1971. However, as the economy lurched from bad to worse, discontent among the urban population and within the armed forces drove Amin to seek a scapegoat for the country's economic ills. Late in 1971, Amin called a meeting of prominent members of the Asian community and berated them for dominating sections of the economy and failing to integrate.

In August 1972, Amin abruptly announced that all non-citizens of South Asian origin should leave the country within three months. He later ordered that all Asians should leave, even if they had Ugandan citizenship. Subsequently he withdrew this edict, but many of those who had applied for citizenship were refused and they became effectively stateless. Various exemptions were made, notably for professionals, but the atmosphere of insecurity and harassment that prevailed provoked a mass exodus as the deadline approached.

More than 50,000 Asians left Uganda between the expulsion order and the November deadline. Others had fled earlier. After the deadline, only about 200 Asian families were left in Uganda. The Departed Asians' Property Custodian Board was established to oversee the disposal of the assets of those expelled. Unless they had managed to transfer money or assets abroad before they left, those who fled Uganda arrived in their new host countries with little to start anew.

As the crisis unfolded, the United Kingdom reluctantly agreed to waive its annual immigration quota, and admitted in all about 29,000 Ugandan Asians, most of whom held British passports. At the same time, the UK government appealed to other countries to accept expelled Asians. Eventually, some 6,000 Ugandan

Asians, many of them holders of British passports, were settled in Canada, and about 1,500, including some of undetermined nationality, were settled in the United States.

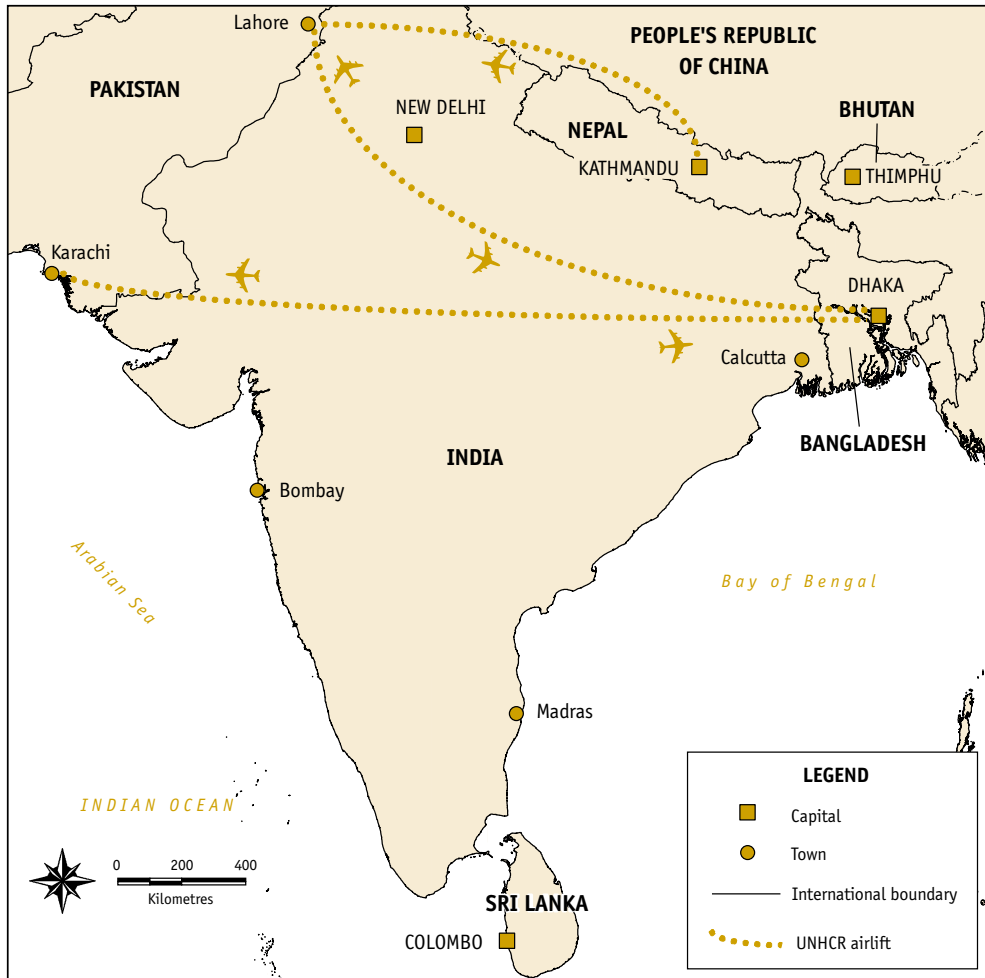
To leave Uganda, Asians needed a valid travel document, a country of temporary or permanent asylum, and the means to travel. For those Asians still lacking any of these necessities when the deadline approached, a UN mission, which included a UNHCR representative, flew to the Ugandan capital Kampala and negotiated an emergency evacuation. The International Committee of the Red Cross agreed to deliver travel documents to those needing them, and the Inter-governmental Committee for European Migration (precursor to the International Organization for Migration) arranged transport to temporary or permanent resettlement countries.

UNHCR appealed to the international community for assistance in the form of offers of permanent resettlement, and funds to transport and assist those in transit. The response was positive and, in less than two weeks, some 3,600 people were flown to transit accommodation in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Malta and Spain. In addition to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, permanent resettlement places were offered by Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. India and Pakistan took some 10,000 of the expellees, though many did not settle there permanently. Governments and non-governmental organizations provided accommodation, food and medical care for people in transit, with UNHCR meeting the costs.

It was not until the 1980s that some redress was won in Uganda itself. This was slow at first, but eventually several thousand Asians went back on a short-or longer-term basis to reclaim or sell many of the properties confiscated in the wake of the expulsion.

## UNHCR airlift operation in South Asia, 1973–74

Map 3.2



Source: UNHCR, 'Airlift: The Sub-Continent Repatriation Operation September 1973–June 1974', Geneva, 1975.

on. On 6 January, UNHCR Director of Operations Thomas Jamieson cabled UNHCR headquarters in Geneva to report that one million refugees had already left India: 'Prodigious and coordinated efforts are made on both sides of the border . . . Special trains are leaving every day and more are planned for the coming weeks.'<sup>21</sup>

By the end of January some six million refugees had returned home. A UNHCR report noted:

Visitors to the camp areas during the same period marvelled at the unending streams of people on the trek, walking, riding bicycles and rickshaws, standing on truck platforms, with the single purpose in mind of reaching as soon as possible their native places in East Bengal. In January, a daily average of 210,000 persons crossed the Bangladesh border.<sup>22</sup>

During the return, refugees were given food for the journey, medical assistance, and two weeks' basic rations. Remarkably, by the end of February 1972, over nine million refugees had gone back to Bangladesh. The desire to return home had outweighed practical problems. On 25 March, the Indian government estimated that only 60,000 refugees remained in the country.

By the end of May 1972, contributions for the repatriation operation, pledged to UNHCR as a result of an appeal launched that January, amounted to US\$14.2 million, of which US\$6.3 million was transferred to the Bangladesh government to finance relief and rehabilitation projects for the returnees. UNHCR endorsed an agreement between the Indian Red Cross and the Bangladesh Red Cross, under which the equipment and supplies of the nutritional centres operating in India would be transferred to the Bangladesh Red Cross. The latter would, in turn, be able to carry out preventive health programmes among the returned refugees. UNHCR also agreed to the Indian proposal of transferring 800 trucks, 300 jeeps and 136 ambulances to Bangladesh, which India had received from UNHCR.

The independence of Bangladesh facilitated conditions for a mass return of the refugees. While there were no major disputes as a result of their return, the refugees had no immediate means of supporting themselves. Once in Bangladesh, refugees could pass through any of the 271 transit camps that were set up. Medical services, food rations and free transport were provided in these camps. The vast majority of the refugees went directly to their communities, however, without calling at the registration offices in Indian camps or at the Bangladeshi transit camps. The UNHCR liaison office in Dhaka had functioned throughout the crisis. It worked closely with the United Nations East Pakistan Relief Operation, which had been established to coordinate international assistance following the disastrous cyclone of November 1970.

Even though the Bangladesh repatriation operation was by far the largest, it was but one of many repatriations which took place during the 1970s. As one UNHCR official noted several years later, earlier predictions that repatriation was 'a minor, even negligible solution' were proven to be wrong. Instead, 'in respect of the political realities of the Third World, the post-war Western emphasis on integration in new communities as the normal solution no longer corresponded with the predominant realities elsewhere'.<sup>23</sup> Among the other repatriations in Asia were some 300,000 refugees who returned to Cambodia mainly from Thailand in 1979, and some 200,000 Rohingyas in Bangladesh who returned to Burma in a more controversial operation in 1978–79 [see Box 3.3]. In Africa, major voluntary repatriations involving nearly two million people in total took place in Nigeria (1970–71), Sudan (1972), Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau (1975–77), and Zaire (1978).

### **The 1973–74 population exchanges**

The break-up of Pakistan, the independence of Bangladesh, and the war between India and Pakistan left thousands of individuals stranded in states of which they no longer wanted to be a part. In March 1973, more than a year after the end of the war, Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman, by then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, wrote to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim requesting UN assistance in what was referred to as a 'repatriation' operation. Some of those repatriated were people who had been stranded in one or other half of the country during the conflict, while others chose to move from Bangladesh to Pakistan or *vice versa* as a result of the changed political circumstances. In April, India and Bangladesh made a joint statement calling for the simultaneous repatriation of prisoners of war and of civilian internees and their families. The statement also called for the repatriation of Bengalis in Pakistan and of Pakistanis in Bangladesh. This proved to be a major step forward in breaking the deadlock resulting from Pakistan's continuing refusal to recognize Bangladesh's independence. The following month, the High Commissioner visited Pakistan and Bangladesh at the request of the Secretary-General to discuss the possibility of a mass repatriation with the governments.

On 28 August 1973, the governments of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan signed the New Delhi Agreement, which included provisions for the simultaneous repatriation of three primary groups. These comprised Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees in India, all Bengalis in Pakistan, and 'a substantial number of non-Bengalis' present in Bangladesh who had 'opted for repatriation to Pakistan'. The 'non-Bengalis' were commonly referred to as Biharis, since a majority of them were Indian Muslims originally from the state of Bihar in India who had come to East Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947. The United Nations was requested to provide assistance to facilitate the repatriation. Given its recent involvement as the Focal Point, the Secretary-General asked UNHCR to coordinate all activities relating to the humanitarian effort. In so doing, UNHCR worked closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Under the terms of the New Delhi Agreement, the return of Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees was to be conducted bilaterally between India and Pakistan. UNHCR was to assist other categories of people in their repatriation. High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan therefore launched another humanitarian appeal for US\$14.3 million on 13 September 1973, stressing 'the role this large-scale repatriation operation may play in creating conditions conducive to peace and stability in the sub-continent'.<sup>24</sup> In November, the High Commissioner visited both Bangladesh and Pakistan again to assess for himself how the operation was proceeding.

By the end of October 1973, a huge air repatriation operation was under way with aircraft loaned by East Germany, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. During November, there were six planes on mission duty, carrying an average of 1,200 people per day. By late January 1974, some 90,000 people had been transported from Pakistan to Bangladesh, and over 44,000 from Bangladesh to Pakistan.<sup>25</sup>

In the absence of diplomatic relations and communications facilities between Bangladesh and Pakistan, the air operation was fraught with difficulties. UNHCR had to negotiate clearances for overflying rights over India and provisions for technical landing.<sup>26</sup> It had to liaise constantly with governments, airlines and other partners to carry out the operation. In effect, UNHCR became the *de facto* implementing agency for the 1973 New Delhi Agreement.

By mid-February 1974, over 200,000 people had been repatriated under the terms of the New Delhi Agreement. The successful implementation of the agreement played no small part in Pakistan's decision on 22 February 1974 to recognize Bangladesh. On 1 July 1974, in agreement with the governments concerned, UNHCR phased out the repatriation operation which had begun the previous September. By that time, some 9,000 people had been transported by sea between Bangladesh and Pakistan, and some 231,000 people had been airlifted across the sub-continent. Those airlifted included some 116,000 Bengalis who went from Pakistan to Bangladesh, some 104,000 non-Bengalis who went from Bangladesh to Pakistan, and some 11,000 Pakistanis who were airlifted from Nepal to Pakistan, having previously fled there overland from Bangladesh.<sup>27</sup> It was, at the time, the largest emergency airlift of civilians ever organized.

### **The Biharis in Bangladesh**

One of the unresolved issues at this time was the status and citizenship of the Biharis, which in many cases still remains unresolved. At the time of partition in 1947, around a million Muslims from the Indian state of Bihar moved to what became East Pakistan. Most spoke Urdu, which bound them to West Pakistan, but they fared relatively well in East Pakistan. As tensions between West and East Pakistan increased, however, the Biharis were perceived as being on the side of West Pakistan. During 1971, many Biharis joined Pakistani militias or collaborated with the Pakistani army. As a result, after the surrender of the Pakistani army in mid-December 1971, the entire Bihari community faced the wrath of Bengali nationalism and Biharis were viewed as collaborators of the Pakistani administration and troops. Many Biharis were killed and much of their property was seized.

Although Biharis were among those accepted by Pakistan under the August 1973 repatriation accord, Pakistan was slow in giving clearances.<sup>28</sup> At a further meeting of the three countries' foreign ministers in New Delhi in April 1974, a new tripartite agreement on a second phase of repatriations was reached. More than 170,000 Biharis moved to Pakistan under the terms of these agreements.<sup>29</sup> But Pakistan interpreted the categories of 'non-Bengalis' set out in the agreement restrictively and did not take back all Biharis. In addition to this earlier movement, between 1977 and 1979 nearly 9,900 Biharis repatriated to Pakistan followed by another 4,800 Biharis in 1982. Finally, in 1993, 53 Bihari families were accepted by Pakistan before protests there stopped the process.

Observers attribute Pakistan's reluctance to accept the Biharis, who have always regarded themselves as Pakistani nationals, to the fear that their presence might exacerbate already existing ethnic and political tensions in Pakistan. In Bangladesh, the Biharis have encountered problems acquiring citizenship, as Bangladeshi citizenship provisions dating from 1972 deny citizenship to someone who 'owes, affirms or acknowledges, expressly or by conduct, allegiance to a foreign state'.<sup>30</sup> Although many Biharis have in practice been accepted in Bangladesh, in 1999 over 200,000 Biharis were still living in 66 camps with poor facilities scattered around Bangladesh. Their

## Box 3.3

## The plight of the Rohingyas

At the end of the 1970s, UNHCR became involved in a complex and controversial repatriation operation on Bangladesh's eastern border. This involved the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority from Arakan state in largely Buddhist Burma, who had taken refuge in Bangladesh.

Burma had a long history of conflict and migration amongst its diverse peoples. Almost immediately after Burma gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, tension increased between the Rohingyas and the local Rakhine population in Arakan. The Burmese government claimed that the Rohingyas were relatively recent migrants from the Indian sub-continent and the Burmese constitution therefore did not include them among the indigenous groups qualifying for citizenship. This marginalized the Rohingyas and made it extremely difficult for them to gain access to basic social, educational and health services.

In March 1978, the Burmese immigration authorities launched operation *Nagamin Sit Sin Yay* (King Dragon Operation), the stated aim of which was to scrutinize systematically the status of individuals living in border areas and to 'take actions against foreigners' who had 'filtered into the country illegally'. The effect was to target the Rohingyas, who were not regarded as citizens. Widespread arrests and expulsions followed and by July 1978, large numbers of Rohingyas had fled into Bangladesh.

Estimates as to the actual numbers varied. The Bangladesh government claimed that more than 250,000 Rohingyas had sought refuge, while the Burmese authorities put the figure at less than 150,000. The arrival of so many refugees put considerable pressure on densely populated, impoverished Bangladesh and strained relations between the two countries.

These pressures and other Muslim countries' concerns over the Rohingyas' treatment led the Bangladesh government to appeal to the United Nations for assistance. Many of these refugees lived in pitiful conditions, and the government insisted that the country could not continue to shelter them indefinitely. As a result, a large UN relief programme was launched and coordinated by UNHCR from May 1978. In all, 13 refugee camps were established. As the crisis eased, Burma and Bangladesh sought a permanent solution to the refugee problem. Neither country was at that time (or has since become) party to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

A bilateral agreement between the two countries, to which UNHCR was not a party, was concluded in July 1978, providing for the Rohingyas' repatriation. There was much opposition to return among the refugees, and serious clashes between the refugees and Bangladesh officials were reported, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Deteriorating conditions in the camps, the arrest of a number of Rohingya leaders, and a reduction in food rations were other factors which led refugees to return. By the end of 1979, more than 180,000 had returned to Burma.

In an attempt to improve the conditions of the returnees, UNHCR spent US\$7 million on projects to assist their reintegration. With only a limited presence, UNHCR could not, however, monitor the situation closely or ensure the returning Rohingyas were treated fairly by the authorities. Discrimination against them continued. In 1982, a new citizenship law created three classes of citizenship but it remained extremely difficult for Rohingyas to obtain citizenship.

In 1991–92, Rohingyas fled once more from northern Rakhine state (as Arakan had been renamed). Some

250,000 people were registered and given shelter in 20 camps in Bangladesh. The repatriation of these refugees to Myanmar, as the country was renamed in 1989, was again controversial. Returns in 1992–93 were carried out under another bilateral Bangladesh–Myanmar agreement, from which UNHCR was again excluded. In 1993, the Myanmar government finally agreed to allow UNHCR to have a presence in Rakhine state. In April 1994, once this was established, UNHCR facilitated the voluntary repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh. At the time, human rights organizations strongly criticized UNHCR, questioning whether the repatriation was truly voluntary and arguing that the situation had not improved sufficiently to allow for the Rohingyas' safe return.<sup>ii</sup> While acknowledging the vulnerability of the Rohingyas on both sides of the border, UNHCR's assessment was that in most cases they were better off in their homes in Myanmar than in camps in Bangladesh.

Thousands of Rohingyas again fled to Bangladesh in 1996 and 1997. At first, Bangladeshi forces forcibly repatriated hundreds of them, but this was largely stopped after intervention by UNHCR. Since establishing a presence in northern Rakhine state, UNHCR has carried out a number of projects aimed at facilitating reintegration and improving basic infrastructure. It has established a dialogue with all levels of the Myanmar government, pressing them to address the question of citizenship for the Rohingyas and to put an end to forced labour practices. Of those who fled to Bangladesh in the early 1990s, around 200,000 had returned by December 1999, leaving some 22,000 in Bangladesh. But even though many of the causes which prompted mass departures in earlier years may have diminished, the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar remains a matter of international concern.



unclear citizenship status has created innumerable problems for them. Since neither country is prepared to accept full responsibility for them, the Biharis are potentially stateless. After so many years of a refugee-like existence, there are now indications that some Biharis would prefer to obtain Bangladeshi nationality.<sup>31</sup>

## UNHCR's expanding role in Asia

The relief operation for Bangladeshi refugees exposed UNHCR to many of the problems which the organization was to face with increasing regularity in the following decades. These included the management of sudden mass refugee influxes involving millions of refugees, the use of large and hastily constructed refugee camps, and the difficulties of procuring and distributing food and other basic relief supplies. It also exposed UNHCR to the devastating impact which cholera can have in crowded refugee camps.

UNHCR's assumption of the role of Focal Point was an important element in the handling of the Bangladeshi refugee crisis. Although the term 'Focal Point' was not used again, the concept was considered to be a useful one in emergency situations, where the overall needs exceeded the mandate of any one UN agency. This operation became but the first of many refugee crises in which UNHCR was called upon by the Secretary-General to act as the lead UN agency for the coordination of international humanitarian assistance.

One of the most notable aspects of this relief operation was the highly politicized environment in which it was carried out. The crisis increased awareness within the United Nations that mass movements of refugees do not only result from conflict but can in themselves create serious threats to regional peace and security. The role played by the Head of the UNHCR office in Dhaka, in arranging a ceasefire between the Indian and Pakistani armies in the last hours of the war, illustrates how closely the organization was involved on the ground as the crisis unfolded. Both the Indian and Pakistan governments were often suspicious of UNHCR's motives and, as a result, relations with them were often strained. High Commissioner Sadruddin Aga Khan liaised closely with the UN Secretary-General throughout the crisis.

The solutions which were applied to the upheavals on the Indian sub-continent in the early 1970s had their roots in approaches which predate the Second World War. The repatriation agreements concluded by the governments of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan after 1973 were based on a view that population exchanges were an effective way of resolving problems concerning minority groups within independent states. Given the vast distances between Pakistan and Bangladesh, these repatriations were carried out largely by air, but they were in fact similar to previous population exchanges, such as those which had taken place in Europe in the 1920s between Greece and Turkey and between Greece and Bulgaria.

UNHCR's involvement in South Asia continued after the Bangladeshi refugee crisis was over. By the end of the 1970s, the organization was engaged in the repatriation of

Rohingya Muslim refugees from Bangladesh to Burma. Outside the region, UNHCR was also involved in the early 1970s in assisting South Asians expelled from Uganda by the regime of President Idi Amin [see Box 3.2]. Another refugee population in South Asia, which has often been overlooked, and with which UNHCR has had only minimal involvement, is the Tibetan refugee population in India, which has been there since 1959 [see Box 3.1]. Although UNHCR became involved in assisting various new groups of refugees in South Asia in the years which followed the Bangladeshi refugee crisis, from the mid-1970s the focus of UNHCR's work in Asia moved to Indochina.

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