



Q10621. Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 14 August 2009

Information on ethnic Nepalese from Bhutan in Nepal: Living conditions in Refugee camps, access to work, education, health case, etc.

A *Human Rights Watch* report refers to Bhutanese refugees in Nepal as follows:

“Joy is in short supply in the refugee camps of Nepal. Its inhabitants are ethnic Nepalis from neighboring Bhutan, a tiny Buddhist country that just this March made the transition from an absolute monarchy to a democracy. But the refugees — and tens of thousands of the ethnic Nepalis still living in Bhutan — have been excluded from the democratic experiment. In the early 1990s, the Bhutanese government stripped tens of thousands of mostly ethnic Nepali Hindus of their citizenship and expelled them from the country. Ganga was 13 years old when she became a stateless refugee. Now numbering about 108,000, the Bhutanese refugees have been stuck in these camps for more than 16 years. They are prohibited from working, even inside the camps. As the years have dragged on, services and aid have dwindled. A thick cloud of smoke envelops the camps from the cheap coal used for cooking and heat. Many suffer from respiratory and skin problems; women, in particular, are plagued by depression and far too many have been the victims of domestic and sexual violence.” (Human Rights Watch (22 June 2009) *Bhutanese refugees begin new life in Arizona* Frelick, Bill)

In a section titled “Refugees in Nepal” a report published by the *Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children* states:

“In the late 1980s the Government of Bhutan, a small kingdom located between China and India, enacted discriminatory citizenship laws that stripped nearly one-sixth of the population of their citizenship and led to the expulsion of tens of thousands of ethnic Nepali Bhutanese who had lived in Bhutan for generations. Today 104,500 of these Bhutanese live in seven refugee camps in southeastern Nepal, where they have been in exile for 17 years. The Government of Bhutan refuses to allow the refugees back to their long-since confiscated lands and Nepal, which has no national legislation on refugees and considers them illegal immigrants, refuses to allow them to integrate locally.” (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children (May 2008) *Don’t Call It Shangri-La – Economic Programs for Displaced Populations in Nepal*, p.3)

In a section titled “Refugees Living in Camps Face Limited Economic Options” this report comments on access to work for refugees as follows:

“While limitations imposed by the Government of Nepal on refugee rights legally restrict refugees’ freedom of movement and their right to work, camp borders are porous and a few livelihood opportunities exist. Refugees take advantage of some of these opportunities, without any agency support, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its implementing partners take advantage of others. Further opportunities exist, however, that are not capitalized on.” (ibid, p.10)

A section of this report titled “Vocational Training Is Often Insufficient” refers to the available training for refugees, stating:

“A number of vocational training programs are offered for refugees both inside and outside the camps. The majority of the in-camp trainings, implemented by nongovernmental organizations, are short, covering only basic information, and are, according to the refugees, insufficient in terms of both depth and length for students to develop competence in the sector. Course offerings include driving, computer literacy, knitting, weaving, tailoring, electrical wiring, mechanics, hairstyling, necklace making, carpentry and bamboo handicrafts. Additionally, some of the vocational training programs only target youth who are not in school, which puts those young people who do stay in school at a disadvantage in terms of non-academic skill development.” (ibid, p.10)

A section titled “Work Is Available Outside the Camps” adds:

“According to interviews with UN and NGO staff, about one-third of all refugees work outside the camps on a fairly regular basis. The majority work in the construction industry in the nearby town of Damak, which is experiencing a construction boom. Other refugees, including young women, leave the camps to harvest tea leaves and plant rice for local farmers. While technically forbidden by the Government of Nepal’s policies on refugees, leaving the camps to work in the local labor market is a known, and apparently tolerated, reality.” (ibid, p.12)

In a section titled “Protection of Refugees” the *US Department of State* country report for Nepal states:

“The government is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 protocol, and the laws do not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status. The government, however, has in place ad hoc administrative policies that provide some protection for Bhutanese and Tibetan refugees. Since 1991 the government has provided asylum to approximately 108,000 persons who claimed Bhutanese citizenship. Almost all of these refugees lived in camps in the southeastern part of the country. The UNHCR administered the camps and monitored the condition of the refugees, and international organizations and NGOs provided for their basic needs, including education and healthcare. The government continued to accept the refugees’ presence on humanitarian grounds. Lutheran World Federation provided the infrastructure for the camps, and the World Food Program provided food assistance; the Association of Medical Doctors of Asia provided medical care, and Caritas provided education assistance and coordination. The government officially restricted the refugees’ freedom of movement and work, but those restrictions were largely unenforced.” (US

In a section titled “Freedom of Movement and Residence” the *US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants* annual report on Nepal states:

“Nepal restricts Bhutanese refugees to seven camps in the Jhapa and Morang districts in the east. Camp rules require Bhutanese refugees to obtain prior permission and passes if leaving the camp for more than 24 hours and generally to return within a week. Refugees can, however, obtain renewable six-month passes for educational purposes. Authorities generally grant requests for passes but temporarily suspend ration cards if refugees are absent without permission for an extended period.” (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (17 June 2009) *World Refugee Survey 2009 – Nepal*)

A section of this report titled “Right to Earn a Livelihood” continues:

“Refugees and asylum seekers do not have the right to work in Nepal and those who worked operated illegally. Camp rules restrict Bhutanese refugees from engaging in almost any income-generating activity aside from small cottage industries, such as making sanitary napkins, chalk, blankets, and jute roofing materials, although in practice authorities tolerate some small enterprises in the camps. Authorities also allow some illegal work where there are shortages, such as teaching in remote schools.” (ibid)

A section titled “Public Relief and Education” adds:

“UNHCR and the World Food Programme provide food and other aid to Bhutanese refugees in the camps, with the Government's cooperation. UNHCR provides monthly financial support to refugees in urban areas, as well as assisting with health care and education costs. UNHCR provides education to Bhutanese refugees in the camps through grade 8. Caritas and other non-governmental organizations extended education through grade 10 for all and partial support for grades 11 and 12. Education is compulsory for Bhutanese children, and counselors visit the parents of any child who misses more than seven consecutive days of school to seek an explanation.” (ibid)

In a section titled “Education” a document published on *Bhutanese Refugees*, a website self-described as collaboration between “PhotoVoice” and the “Bhutanese Refugee Support Group”, reports:

“The refugee community played a central role in setting up their own education system when the camps were first established. Even during the dreadful days at Mai riverbank, before formal camps were set up, Bhutanese teachers, students and parents wanted education for their children. High school students and teachers volunteered to organise classes of over 100 pupils, anxious that the education denied to them in Bhutan should not be lost forever. The English medium education programme is currently run almost wholly by Bhutanese, teachers and staff with a small number of national resource and management staff. Schools in the camps cater for classes through from pre-primary level to Class X. Classes taught range from the

traditional subjects to Dzongkha (the Bhutanese national language). For higher level education (Class 11 and 12 and university) students go to study outside the camps. There is a very limited number of scholarship funds available for further studies and most young people and their families have to find a way of self-funding their higher education, covering the cost of school or university fees, books and living expenses. In the camps schools pass rates have in general been high but recent statistics suggest that the standard has begun to slip. In the year 2004-5 2547 pupils sat their Class X exams with 2402 passing, giving a pass rate of 94%. In 2005-6 1621 out of 2320 pupils passed their exams, a pass rate of 70%. This drop in standards is the result of an increasing lack of quality teaching staff as more and more Bhutanese have felt obliged to seek better paid employment teaching in private Nepali schools.” (Bhutanese Refugees (27 October 2008) *Camp Information*)

A section of this document titled “Work” states:

“The refugees, as per the policies of Government of Nepal, are prohibited from engaging in economic activities outside the camps. Unlike the Tibetan refugees in Nepal who have been granted refugee status that allows them to seek employment, Bhutanese refugees are forbidden from working outside the camps. However, there are various opportunities for employment. Within the camps a number of adult refugees are paid incentive salaries at a fraction of average pay. Due to the high standard of education, many young Bhutanese find teaching work throughout Nepal, although they hide their refugee status. Others find work as labourers in industries such as road-building, stone-breaking and agriculture in order to supplement their families’ meagre income.” (ibid)

References:

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted:

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European Country of Origin Information Network

Google

Human Rights Watch

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

LexisNexis

Minority Rights Group International

Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database

UK Home Office

UNHCR Refworld

US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants