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BHUTAN SUPPORT GROUP IN IRELAND APPEALS TO INDIAN GOVERNMENT

The Bhutan Support Group in Ireland has been making constant efforts to highlight the problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Recently, through the Indian Embassy in Ireland, the group appealed to the Government of India to assist in the process of finding a lasting solution to the Bhutanese refugee problem. Reproduced below is the full text of the appeal:

We have followed as closely as we can recent events in West Bengal connected with the cycle rally and peaceful demonstration organised by the Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Reforms. We are delighted to hear that all those who were arrested in India and detained under section 144 of the Indian Penal Code have now been released unconditionally.

Since the setting up of a joint ministerial commission in 1993, it seems that despite regular rounds of meetings held between representatives from the Bhutanese and Nepalese governments up to April 1995, little progress has been made towards a resolution of the problem of 100,000 people claiming to be Bhutanese refugees, of whom 88,000 are living in UNHCR-funded refugee camps in Nepal. The refugee community is increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress towards a just settlement.

The rally and demonstration organised by the BCDM, and the peace rally organised by the AMCC (Appeal Movement Coordinating Council), have sought to draw the attention, both in India and internationally, peacefully for the right to return to their own country.

It is our hope that the 150 people who set out on January 14 from Damak in south eastern Nepal to walk to the Bhutanese border and thence to Thimphu will be allowed to proceed safely and without harassment.

Through the Embassy of India in Ireland, we would like to appeal to the Indian government to do all in its power to facilitate the safe repatriation of Bhutanese refugees to their country in the context of lasting solution of the problem

APPEAL MOVEMENT ARRESTED MARCHERS RELEASED, MARCH TO CONTINUE

The first batch of 150 Bhutanese refugees arrested on January 17 in West Bengal, India, while on their way to Bhutan from Nepal were released after Sub Divisional Judicial Magistrate in Siliguri, Bimalendu Biswas, declared their detention illegal and ordered their unconditional release. The second batch of 273 marchers arrested at the Mechi bridge on the Indo-Nepalese border on February 14 for violating Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Penal Code

(ban on assembly of more than three persons) imposed by the State administration was similarly released. The third group of 343 marchers that courted arrest at the Mechi bridge is currently detained in Behrampur Jail, near Calcutta.

Organized by the Appeal Movement Coordination Council (AMCC), the programme began on September 7 last year with the despatch of an appeal to His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck petitioning for

reconciliation and repatriation of Bhutanese refugees. In the absence of a response, 150 refugees began a march on foot from Damak in eastern Nepal to the Bhutanese capital Thimphu on January 14.

The 150 marchers reached the Indo-Nepalese border on January 17. They were picked up by the Indian authorities for violating Sec 144 IPC, in force throughout most of north Bengal since January 1. The second batch of 300 refugees which staged a three-week-long

'sit-in' at the Mechi bridge protesting the detention of the 150 marchers defied the ban and 273 courted arrest on February 14. They were followed by another 343 refugees at the end of the month.

According to the organizers of the programme, the appeal march to Thimphu will go ahead as planned, and will continue once the released refugees, 74 of whom staged a hunger strike while in prison, recuperate and regain their strength.

IN THE "VOLUNTARY" SERVICE OF THE REGIME

Dzongdag (District Administrator): "Why have you people gathered here?"

Village "volunteer": "We were informed that *Dasho* (respectful title) had issued strict orders for us to come. We were warned not to be absent."

"No, no. You are volunteers.

You have come willingly."

"Yes, *Dasho*, we are volunteers. We have come willingly because you have ordered us to do so."

"Why are you carrying sticks and *khukries*?"

"Because we were told that *Dasho* has ordered every volunteer to come with a stick and a knife."

As 1996 approached and government-inspired rumours of an invasion by refugees began floating in the Kingdom, the regime in Bhutan once again managed to make a mockery of patriotism. Yet again, the Royal Government drew upon the people's apparently limitless reserve for willingly and uncomplainingly coming forward at the beck and call of the authorities.

If official reports are to be believed, Bhutanese have an abiding passion for volunteering, whether it is to renounce their citizenship and emigrate, to work without or for minimum wages for the government while their own fields lie fallow, to join the militia or, in this last instance, to patrol the neighbourhood.

No doubt, in time to come, unidentified "overzealous officials" will shoulder the blame. But in the meanwhile, tired and sleepy farmers, civil servants, and business people forced, nay "volunteering", to move around aimlessly in groups every night hardly find the situation amusing. There is no shift system and every individual

must report each evening for duty that extends through the night. "Volunteers" are subject to unannounced roll-calls and penalized for being absent. If they are government officials, volunteers must still report for work the next day. It is not surprising, therefore - especially in view of the fact that there is a general consensus among the public that the whole exercise is pointless - that "volunteers" see the situation changing from the comical to oppressive.

Back in the villages, people cowering under one *Dasho* or another are also beginning to wonder whether there are ulterior motives for the discontinuation of *goongda woola* (compulsory labour contribution of 15 mandays per year per house) in December last year. Forced labour requirements may have eased, but the demands on their "voluntary" services have risen many-fold. The day and night patrols are taking their physical toll on "volunteers", one from every household; but, more significantly, the local economy is being severely effected as "volunteers" are involuntarily compelled to overlook their own chores and businesses to serve the regime's interests.

Only a few years since the compulsory dress code was enforced, the national dress has been desecrated and turned into a joke by many who now carry a handy piece of cloth, representing the bottom half of the *gho*, to be casually wrapped around whenever a dress check is on. In now forcibly enlisting "volunteers" for what is undeniably a meaningless operation, but nonetheless arduous and painful for the "volunteers" themselves, the Royal Government is demeaning nationalism and patriotism itself. When will the regime realize that loyalty is earned, not enforced.

BASU WRITES TO PRIME MINISTER RAO

In the wake of a flurry of activity by Bhutanese dissidents on West Bengal soil since the beginning of this year (cycle rally, mass meetings, and appeal march) Jyoti Basu, Communist Party of India (Marxists) Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, wrote to Indian Prime Minister P.V.Narasimha Rao on the issue of Bhutanese refugees recently. The following is the full text of the letter written by the veteran CPI(M) leader.

Calcutta,

January 30, 1996

Shri P.V.Narasimha Rao,

Prime Minister of India,

New Delhi.

Dear Prime Minister,

You are aware of the problems being faced in the northern districts of West Bengal as a consequence of the displacement of persons of Nepali origin living in Bhutan. Apart from a number of refugee camps established in Nepal by the displaced persons from Bhutan, West Bengal also has a sizeable population of such persons living in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. You would appreciate that as a result of this large migrant population social tensions in these two districts have increased sharply seriously affecting the law and order situation. Simultaneously, as attempts are being made by persons from these refugee camps in Nepal to move towards the Bhutan border via these two districts the situation has further deteriorated.

I had the occasion to speak to Shri Pranab Mukherjee, the External Affairs Minister in this regard. Since West Bengal is sandwiched between Nepal and Bhutan and would have to face the consequences of any agitation directly, the Government of India should take up with the Governments of these two countries so that the problems of persons of Nepali origin displaced from Bhutan are settled bilaterally. I would request that the Government of India intervenes in the matter urgently before the situation goes out of hand.

With regards,

Yours sincerely,

Jyoti Basu

For western Bhutanese only

During the third week of January, a meeting of senior government officials was called at the Banquet Hall in Thimphu. It was to be attended by ministers and secretaries to the Royal Government. When His Royal Highness Namgyel Wangchuck, Representative of His Majesty in the Ministry of Social Services, arrived at the venue, he found some key officials missing.

His Royal Highness enquired about, among others, Chief Justice Sonam Tobgye, Agriculture Secretary Dr. Kunzang Dorji and the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) Secretary Thinley Gyamtsho. The organizers informed him that the meeting was only for officials from western Bhutan and that eastern as well as southern Bhutanese officials had not been invited. Whereupon HRH Namgyel Wangchuck reportedly walked out of the meeting hall reminding them that he was also originally from eastern Bhutan.

Though the exact reason for organizing such a gathering could not be confirmed, observers in the capital believe the meeting was called to draw up a strategy to deal with the increasing level of dissidence in the east.

The Bhutan REVIEW

VENGEANCE!

On May 28 last year, posters criticizing the Royal Government and demanding reforms and fundamental freedoms in the country appeared simultaneously in all parts of the Kingdom. Carried out by the Druk National Congress (DNC), the programme, by successfully covering all twenty districts, served notice to the authorities that public resentment and the call for political change could not be taken lightly.

The absence of arrests by the administration in the immediate aftermath of this dissident move surprised many, but the calculated restraint was not lost on those familiar with Thimphu's ways.

With the administration already under close scrutiny for human rights violations, gone are the days when the regime could simply make people disappear by throwing them into dungeons and forgetting about them, or tying up dissidents in leather bags and dumping them in the river. The administration seemingly chose to 'ignore' the event and refrained from a witch-hunt and heavy-handed reprisals. Was this challenge then forgotten? Hardly.

The regime has clearly learnt to adapt its ways to suit changing circumstances. The Chief of Police, Colonel Tandin Dorji, brother-in-law of the Chairman of DNC, is currently in prison serving a three-year sentence. Immediately following the poster campaign by DNC, Dorji was placed under house arrest and court-martialled in August by a military tribunal on trumped-up charges relating to the escape of two prisoners from Chemgang prison near Thimphu and, for good measure, alleged misuse of government funds.

The incarceration of the former Police Chief is clear evidence that the regime will neither forgive nor forget. And, it is clear at least for as long as power continues to remain in the same hands - that anyone who dares defy the system will be hounded, albeit with a shade of discretion. The cunning manner in which the administrative and legal framework was used to frame Dorji, and punishment inflicted upon him for being related to a dissident leader, it must be admitted, is most impressive. Obviously, it's no longer a case of "Off with his head!" - in the matter of exacting revenge there is a great deal more subtlety and finesse.

The case of the former Police Chief will not have escaped the attention of most Bhutanese. Less known, but no less heart-rending is the fate of Tashi Norbu, a scrap dealer in Phuntsholing. If Colonel Dorji had the misfortune to fall afoul of the regime simply on account of his kinship with a dissident, Tashi Norbu's only crime was that dissident literature was allegedly found on his premises. Norbu was picked up for questioning a week after the May 28 poster campaign. When he was unconditionally released, Norbu thought his troubles were over but his problems apparently had only begun.

Originally from Tashigang in eastern Bhutan, Norbu has been doing business in Phuntsholing since 1978, dealing in scrap items. In 1980, the then *dzongdag* of Samchi district, Chhewang Penjore, verbally authorized the use of a plot of land by Norbu as a scrap yard. This was subsequently regularized and the plot temporarily allotted to Norbu on January 15, 1982. Since then, through the years Norbu repeatedly sought to have this land permanently registered in his name, writing to the authorities in 1985, 1989, 1992 and 1993. There was no response. Meanwhile he invested huge sums towards river protection, land reclamation, land development and construction.

On November 11, 1995, Tashi Norbu received an eviction notice from the City Corporation, Phuntsholing, citing order No.29/UPU/CC/95/288 dated November 6, 1995, of the Secretary Public Works Division, Thimphu. In less than a week, on November 17, citing non-compliance by Norbu of the earlier directive, the eviction order was repeated and ten days notice issued. Norbu's request for consideration was met with a reiteration of the vacation order on December 4, 1995.

Meanwhile, Norbu was also being attacked on a second front. In 1986, Norbu took a loan of Nu 400,000.00 (Loan a/c 8040) from the Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan (RICB). In May 1993, in a business deal adjustment approved by the RICB, this loan amount was apparently transferred to one Gatay Dorji. Accordingly, as per letter No. RIB/CIP/93/R/581 dated May 3, 1993, the loan account of Tashi Norbu was closed after the balance of Nu 515,495.16 was paid through the transfer of this amount from a/c 3039 of Gatay Dorji.

But in October 1995, RIB mysteriously laid a claim for Nu 456,544.68 on this closed account. The Corporation issued a seizure notice on 21.10.95 and took over Norbu's stocks on the same day. On 23.10.95 his vehicle, a Toyota Hilux pick-up, was also confiscated. Norbu protested these actions reminding them that his loan account with RIB was closed since 1993. He cited their own correspondence to prove his point. To no avail.

The Bhutan Review has obtained an original computer hard-copy printout of RIB's complete loan account records, including all active accounts and a list of old bad debts, for Chukha Dzongkhag. The printout has a run date of September 27, 1995. Interestingly, there is neither a loan account for any Tashi Norbu nor a record of outstanding dues against this name!

The final nail in the coffin: on December 12, 1995, through order No. MTI/D-11/95/2423 of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, allegedly finding him "guilty of prohibited business practice", the Royal Government cancelled all three business licences issued to Tashi Norbu.

CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

In 1996, UNICEF marks its 50th anniversary. The organization was founded in 1946 in the aftermath of World War II, as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. Times have changed - and they have not changed. In 1996, the world's children again face the carnage of war. Millions live with shattered innocence, daily terror and stifled hopes. Children thrown into mass graves. Children wandering without their parents or wasting away in refugee camps. Children brutalized into being killers themselves...

If children are loved and valued, why are they still being used as cannon-fodder? A weary response might lay the blame on innate human cruelty and duplicity. A cynic would also argue that incessant television coverage has done little more than stun our sensibilities, and that all conventions and declarations will inevitably crumple before the barrel of a gun.

UNICEF takes a different view. It believes that this gap between rhetoric and reality represents a historic challenge. In response to so much destruction and pain, there have also been unprecedented efforts at peacemaking and caring for victims. The urgency now is to vastly enhance the means both to prevent future conflicts and to better support victims.

UNICEF argues that concern for children is one of those means. We believe that love and respect for children are key to humanitarian and political progress. Many of

today's intractable disputes, for all the ethnic or religious character they acquire, are at heart struggles for resources and for survival. Today's problems of poverty and violence will never subside unless we invest in the physical, mental and emotional development of the next generation.

Concern for children is also a way of addressing today's violence. War are not going to disappear overnight, but we can at least mitigate their effects and ensure that they do not target children and women. To that end, this report sets out UNICEF's Anti-War Agenda - a series of steps that we believe are both realistic and effective and that would dramatically improve the well-being of children in situations of conflict. Vital measures here include removing child soldiers from the battlefields, and banning the manufacture of weapons such as anti-personnel land-mines that target civilians. Better information can also play a part: we can publicly recognize and systematically document genocide and instances of torture and rape to warn potential perpetrators that the world is watching - that there will be no impunity.

Beyond defending children, we should also use child protection as a means to opening up a dialogue. The idea of children as 'zones of peace' has already proved its worth with temporary cease-fires to allow children in war zones to be vaccinated, or to allow food

supplies to pass through enemy lines.

At the same time, we need to address rehabilitation. Many children have immediate needs for food or shelter. They also require psychosocial support - to help them to recover from emotional wounds. Communities, too, require social rehabilitation. In many of today's chronic disputes violence does not cease, it merely subsides - sustained partly by the persistence of weapons and the pervasive military ethos. Avoiding future conflicts will require not just caring for the youngest victims of war, but also educating them for peace.

The Anti-War Agenda rests on the proposition that much of the tragedy befalling children is preventable. The evil deeds that this report documents are, after all, driven by human behaviour. Children are suffering as a direct and immediate consequence of the decisions of adults. If conflict seems, at time, to be inevitable, there is nothing inevitable about children bearing the brunt of its consequences. Brutality, violence, rape and torture all would stop tomorrow if the will to stop them existed, or if the rest of us devised means to compel them to be stopped.

In so doing, the world would be living up to the fundamental purpose of the United Nations Charter: "...to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

How Sri Lanka Educates Children for Peace

Sri Lanka has suffered from a civil war for the past 11 years. This is a struggle that has permeated the life of the whole country, including the education system: most schools are now segregated along language lines, except for a few in urban areas.

To help children learn non-violent ways of resolving disputes, the Government, with UNICEF's help, launched a programme called 'Education for Conflict Resolution' (ECR). Initially, a core group of resource persons were trained at the National Institute of Education in some of the different forms of conflict resolution being used in other countries. They subsequently adapted these and developed their own methods appropriate to Sri Lanka - producing 10 different training manuals aimed at principals, teacher trainers, teachers and pupils.

Although some of the techniques were innovative, many of the ideas of conflict resolution struck similar chords in Sri Lankan culture. For example, the methods of conflict resolution present aggression and passivity as two extremes and suggest that a better, middle, way is assertiveness. Buddhism, one of the major religions in Sri Lanka, is very much in sympathy with this: it, too, emphasizes the importance of taking the middle

path. And Sri Lankan village life has traditionally operated on cooperative principles, so when the trainers suggest cooperative behaviour, it is more a question of helping people reinforce old skills, rather than teaching them new ones. The Buddhist and Hindu emphasis on harmony with the natural environment is also in tune with this approach.

Similarly, Hinduism and Buddhism make extensive use of meditation. ECR has incorporated meditation, though not for religious purposes; its aim, rather, is to calm and concentrate the mind to create a sense of inner peace. A typical lesson for primary schoolchildren, for example, would start with meditation, and then cover issues such as decision-making and conflict resolution. Role-playing is an important part of this approach, and children are encouraged to express emotions through stories, songs and poetry.

The focal point for training teachers in these principles is the Nilwala College of Education. Here, student teachers learn to integrate ideas and methods of conflict resolution into all subject areas. For example, a social studies lesson might focus on how different groups need to work together for a community to function. Within that lesson, students would be encouraged

to act out a traditional story with a theme of peace and cooperation. In one such story, students pretend to be birds that have been captured by a boy with a net. When the boy goes home to find a sack in which to put the birds, they twitter with alarm at the prospect of being eaten and wonder what to do. Then one bird suggests that maybe they could fly away if they all worked together. The children then flap their arms like birds in flight and lift the net above their heads until everyone is free. Teachers learn to discuss the message of stories with their students and help them draw parallels between them and their own lives.

In 1992-94, the ECR project trained 3,500 principals, 500 master teachers, 3,000 teachers and 7,500 student leaders, who in turn have reached approximately 420,000 of Sri Lanka's 4.5 million schoolchildren.

ECR is not limited to particular lessons on 'conflict resolution'; rather, it is integrated into the entire curriculum. Nor will ECR be confined to schools. In 1995, ECR began a media campaign to extend these ideas to parents and to the community as a whole.

The State of the World's Children 1996, UNICEF

THE LARSEN IMBROGLIO

The remarkably brief visit of current UNHCR Executive Committee Chairman Jakob Esper Larsen to Nepal in January caused consternation in Kathmandu's diplomatic circle. Ambassador Larsen, the Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations office in Geneva, reportedly left Geneva with the express purpose of observing, first hand, the situation of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Unfortunately, last minute changes in itinerary, foul weather, ill-health and acclaimed Bhutanese hospitality together came in the way of Larsen's stated primary objective. Bhutanese refugees in eastern Nepal, ostensibly his main concern and reportedly the reason for his tour of this part of the world, suddenly moved worlds away. Larsen expressed his inability to make the trip to Jhapa (less than an hour by air) and, pressed for time, the hurried ExCom Chairman only deigned to meet officials in Kathmandu before rushing to keep appointments in India. Understandably everyone was taken aback by the abruptness, and in the days that followed, Larsen's strange behaviour remained the talk of the town.

The sordid Larsen affair was covered in *The Kathmandu Post*, a national daily on February 1, under the title **UNmoved by the plight of Bhutanese refugees**. It is evident from the story that annoyed Kathmandu diplomats and government officials unsparingly provided the correspondent with insight and inside information.

Not surprisingly, the front page story drew Larsen's atten-

tion. He chose to exercise his right of reply and his *explanation* was duly carried by the *Post* on February 6.

We reproduce in full both the article and Larsen's rejoinder, as they appeared in the *Post*.

While one can most certainly sympathize with a certifiably ill diplomat on assignment, Larsen's reply does nothing to clear the air regarding the most contentious issue: why could he not visit the refugees, the only reason he made the long and arduous trip in the first instance. Thanks to the speed and convenience of modern air travel, others have been able to visit the camps with even less time at their disposal. In any case, briefing diplomats in New Delhi is hardly likely to stand out as an impeccable excuse for his refusal to accommodate a field trip - he might have extended his visit if necessary - especially as the all important brief could be considered *prima facie* worthless without a visit to the refugee camps. On the other hand, Larsen's contention that "UNHCR decided to cancel the planned trip to the refugee camps..." is unlikely to amuse some individuals in Kathmandu who had no part in such decision making.

Larsen also takes pains to justify his decision to visit Bhutan first. But, as the *Post* story emphasizes, he cannot be faulted for failing to match Thimphu's ingenuity - Bhutan wanted him first, and they got him. Larsen need not have been quite so apologetic on that account.

KATHMANDU, Jan 31 - Bhutanese are good. Good in diplomacy, that is. In fact, they are so good at it that earlier this month, they quietly managed to derail Nepal's plans to take a top UNHCR official on a tour of the refugee camps.

The story begins in Geneva where the Executive Committee of UNHCR is based. Earlier this month, chairman of the executive committee Jakob Esper Larson (*sic*) was scheduled to visit South Asia to observe, first hand, the plight of Bhutanese refugees. Larson's travel plans included trips to Nepal and Bhutan, in that order.

Both Nepal and Bhutan are members of the UNHCR executive committee. While the Nepalese envoy sat smugly - comfortable in the knowledge that Larson would get to see the refugee camps after all - the Bhutanese envoy Jigme Thinley got to work on changing travel plans. Thinley, who is considered in the diplomatic circle as Bhutan's ablest diplomat, somehow convinced Larson to visit Thimphu first or King Jigme Singhe Wangchuk's (*sic*) appointments would be full otherwise. The Bhutanese must have reasoned that the fabled and extra-savvy Thimphu hospitality would take care of the rest. If that was what was hoped for, they seem to have got it right.

From what is known from diplomatic and Nepalese government sources, Larson was unable to go on a planned trip to southern Bhutan (from where most of the refugees come) because he felt "unwell" after a dinner the previous evening at the Royal Palace in Thimphu. Moreover, the chairman who was originally supposed to arrive in Kathmandu on January 15, got an extended dose of Bhutanese hospitality because Druk Air cancelled the flight to Nepal due to bad weather. He flew out only on January 18.

When he arrived in Nepal, Larson apparently changed his mind about visiting the refugee camps in Jhapa. Nepalese officials who had planned for the trip could only wring their hands in despair when the chairman, citing pressing appointments, scuttled his trips to the camps. According to diplomatic sources, the chairman was so enamoured by Bhutanese hospitality in Thimphu that "he let it be known that he was highly impressed with Bhutan, its pristine environment, and its able bureaucracy."

According to Nepalese government officials, planes and choppers were already on stand-by to take the chairman to the camps on January 19. Even the weather was fine that day, but for some reason they could not interest Larson who ultimately departed for Delhi that night after barely a day's visit to Nepal. Western diplomats in the capital said that they had reports that Larson had gone on vacation in India.

With due respect to the UNHCR which has so far done an outstanding job of managing the Bhutanese refugee crisis, it must be said that Bhutan had always sought to get the UN agency out of its way lest it interfere with the Dragon Kingdom's plans to forcibly evict a seventh of its population. UNHCR's arrival ruined that plan, and for the last four years, a Shangri-Laesque Bhutan had to contend with its image being splattered with mud by national and international activists. For this reason, Bhutan has been implacably opposed to any attempts to involve UNHCR as mediator in the Nepal-Bhutan dialogue, though it is the most obvious institution to involve in any move towards genuine repatriation.

Larsen's trip leads a Bhutan-watcher to comment, "What Bhutan has therefore managed to do by so impressing the chairman of UNHCR executive committee is to get an ally whose value could be immense."

NOT UNmoved

Sir,
Having returned from my visits to India, Bhutan and Nepal as chairman of the Executive Committee of UNHCR, I was shown a copy of a front page article of January 31 in your newspaper, written by Suman Pradhan in the form of a commentary, under the heading "UNmoved by the plight of Bhutanese refugees."

The article contains serious inaccuracies and unjustified accusations concerning the outcome of my visits to Bhutan and Nepal. It particularly criticises me for not having visited the refugee camps in Jhapa. I feel obliged to put things right with the following comments:

According to plan, I should have visited Nepal first and thereafter Bhutan. The plan was altered only because I would otherwise not have had the opportunity to meet King Jigme Singhe Wangchuk (*sic*), which I deemed an important part of my visit. Let me assure you that, contrary to what is implied in the article, the reception and hospitality I received in Kathmandu was no less moving and friendly than the one I got in Thimphu.

The article mentions "Larsen was unable to go on a planned trip to Southern Bhutan (from where most of the refugees come) because he felt "unwell" after a dinner the previous evening at the Royal Palace in Thimphu." This is misleading and unjust. I was running a temperature of 40 degrees with severe diarrhoea on January 13 and therefore had to cancel the trip to Southern Bhutan.

I took off as planned with Druk Air from Paro on January 15. It was scheduled to arrive in Kathmandu via New Delhi the same afternoon. Because of fog and bad weather in Kathmandu the plane had to return to Paro.

Heavy snowfall in Bhutan the following day made flying impossible. The departure for Kathmandu had to be further postponed until late morning of January 17. Because of this postponement of two days, UNHCR decided to cancel the planned trip to the refugee camps in order to give priority to the scheduled meetings with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other important engagements in the following two days.

Due to previously accepted engagements in New Delhi on the evening of January 19 (I had promised to brief a number of ambassadors, including the ones from Nepal and Bhutan on my trips). I had to leave Kathmandu late in the afternoon that day.

I regret very much that due to unforeseen circumstances I could not visit the refugee camps and personally observe the plight of refugees. I had, however, an extensive meeting in Kathmandu on January 18 with the World Food Programme representative and heads of non-governmental organizations participating in the Bhutanese refugees assistance programme. The detailed information received from these representatives who are active in the camps left me in no doubt about the plight of refugees, the unacceptability of continuing the present situation and the necessity for an early durable solution to the problem.

Let me add that, despite the unavoidable shortcomings of my visit to the two countries, I left the region with the hope and expectation that serious efforts will be undertaken to reach a durable solution. I was impressed by the views expressed by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister at our meetings in Kathmandu and I am convinced that also the Government of Bhutan is ready to work for a solution acceptable to both countries.

Jakob Esper Larsen,
Ambassador of Denmark to the United Nations, Geneva,
Chairman of the Executive Committee of UNHCR.

"IN QUOTES"

"As democracy spreads across the globe, it is clear that aspirations of people to be free to choose their own leaders is a universal principle, not a Western construct as some repressive governments argue."

Bette Bao Lord, Chairman of Freedom House, New York.

"The police have not stepped up patrolling and are doing their usual duties, except they are more alert, but the drop in crime rate in the last few days is the result of the patrolling by local volunteers."

Spokesman, Royal Bhutan Police, Phuntsholing, quoted in Kuensel, January 20, 1996.

[see front-page story on "volunteers"]

MEDIA SCAN

The New Delhi correspondent of The Los Angeles Times (LAT), John Thor Dahlburg, in a recent piece (published in Karachi's Dawn newspaper recently) has disputed that ethnic cleansing ever took place in Bhutan. In an article entitled, "Did 'ethnic cleansing' take place in Bhutan?", Dahlburg mentions that there are 86,000 "ethnic Nepalis hunkered in UN refugee camps in southeastern Nepal" but challenges their claim "that they were expelled from Bhutan or terrorised into fleeing by Bhutan's army and police."

He refers to the US State Department's 1995 Human Rights Report "compiled from interviews outside the country" and seeks to undermine it by saying (a) "the country's leaders deny the claims", (b) "independent proof of the most serious charges is scanty or non-existent" and (c) draws pointed attention to the fact that "the United States has no embassy (in) or diplomatic relations" with Bhutan.

The LAT correspondent then goes on to his punch line: that the US authorities "must tone down next year's report" on Bhutan. To buttress his argument on that score, he goes to the extent of claiming that "the Americans had relied for the past four years on outside sources, specially refugees interviewed by staffers from the embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal to draw the right conclusions about Bhutan," quoting an unidentified US official.

To strengthen his case that no ethnic cleansing ever took place in Bhutan, the American newsman has even gone to the extent of suggesting that the abdication of the Chogyal of Sikkim was due to "waves of immigrants from Nepal" in 1974. (Not one word has, revealingly, been mentioned about India's murky political role in Sikkimese affairs of that period or its massive military presence nor, indeed, of the fate of Sikkim's American Gyalmo, or Queen.)

Dahlburg then lets on that Sikkim was subsequently "absorbed" into the Indian Union a year later following a referendum implying thereby: (a) that Sikkim was nearly taken over by Nepal through "waves" of immigrants in 1974 and (b) that Sikkim was saved from such a terrible fate only through the timely merger with India.

Once again, by implication and cunning suggestion, the LAT man-on-the-spot in New Delhi suggests that Bhutan, with only "600,000, only half of whom are literate", was on the verge of a Sikkim-like takeover by Nepal (though Sikkim ended up being part of India) when a popular movement for human rights, spearheaded by Bhutanese of Nepalese origin, took place in 1990-91.

People's Review, Kathmandu, Jan 4, 1996.
FOR THE RECORD...

The New Delhi office of the LA Times contacted HUOR/Review in Kathmandu over telephone at 4.15 p.m. on September 8, 1995, to arrange for Dahlburg - who was by then already in Thimphu - to meet with refugees/dissidents. A meeting was scheduled for 11 a.m. on Monday, September 11 in Siliguri, West Bengal.

At 11 p.m., New Delhi called again to cancel the appointment because Dahlburg had in the meanwhile been granted an audience with His Majesty on Tuesday September 12 at 9 a.m. Of greater significance, the caller disclosed that since the afternoon, Dahlburg's fortunes - and unfortunately of refugees, too - had taken a turn: he had become an official government guest and had been shifted from the private Druk Hotel to Lhendupchholing, the State Guest House in Motithang in the capital. According to the Delhi office, Dahlburg apparently still intended to give the exiles a hearing and promised to call Kathmandu. But after scanning the visitors book in Lhendupchholing - His Majesty King Birendra Bikram Shah Dev, Crown Prince Naruhito, PLO Leader Yasser Arafat, President Mohammed Abdul Gayoom, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi... reporter John-Thor Dahlburg - who can fault the last for being truly overwhelmed. Not surprisingly, Dahlburg never called.

Manas sanctuary in Peril

There is no ebb in Manas's woes – after being devastated by Bodo militants, now it is the Royal Bhutan Government's construction of a road in it which will jeopardise the whole eco-system.

SAGAR BARUA

As explosion of dynamites and screams of bulldozers and heavy earth movers rip apart the pristine environment of Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park paving the way for a motorable route, on Indian side it echos the impending eco-convulsion that the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary is doomed for. It seems the Manas Sanctuary is heading for the worst—after the devastation perpetuated by Bodo militant-turned-poachers and illegal encroachment by the Bangladeshi immigrants, now it is the Bhutan Government's construction of a motorable road right through the sanctuary in their part which according to experts will let loose a trail of eco-destruction in the whole 3000 sq. km. sanctuary area.

The project which holds at ransom the whole bio-diversity of the region is a mule track, now being widened to make a motorable road by the PWD department of the Royal Bhutan Government. The road along with the river Manas, passes through the park covering a distance to 13 kms. from the Indo-Bhutan border, demarcating Indian and Bhutan Manas to Panbung Bungkba, a small town inside Bhutan.

The new road, construction of which is in full swing now, will serve as the approach road to some interior areas in southern Bhutan. It passes through the Indian Manas National Park, a world heritage site of the UNESCO.

The park which stretches over the border areas of the two countries is about 3000 sq. kms. in area. Although the Royal Bhutan Government is maintaining a studied silence as far as the environmental costs of the project, what worries most is that the destructive impact of the project will be felt on the Indian side of the Manas also. The project, involving large scale cutting of trees and cleaning earth will inevitably make fragile the geological environment of Manas park.

Condemning the entire project, the Nature's Beckon, an environmental activist group from the North East has appealed to the environment conscious people of the world to raise voice against this self-destructive activities of the Royal Bhutan Government.

There is already one route to Bhutan which goes through the Park. Even to reach Bhutan Manas Sanctuary one has to go through the Indian Park.

Now the Bhutan govern-



Eco-devastation: Signs of Bhutan govt. road construction in Manas.

FIG.: KULAJYOTI LAHKAR

ment is converting this route into a motorable route. Reportedly this road will initially connect to some villages about 17 kms. inside Bhutan. The road traverses mostly along the Manas river in Bhutan. A bridge has already been constructed over Manas river about 12 kms. inside Bhutan, in north of Doimukh, the confluence of Manas and one of its tributaries.

The ongoing construction has already affected the Bhutan Manas Sanctuary and the Manas river. Within half a kilometer from Mathanguri, 13 landslides have taken place. All these slides which fall directly into Manas river, are causing slow siltation as well as damaging the aqua cycle of the river. Many organisations of Assam, including Aranyak, Early Birds, The Green's Movement are up in the arms to pressurise the State Government as well as the Ministry of Environment to take up the matter with the Royal Bhutan Government.

Bibhab Talukdar of the Aranyak says that they are even contemplating to take the case to the UNESCO. What irks the environmentalists is that the project is being undertaken when a horde of NGOs and even the government are trying hard to save the Manas tiger reserve. There is also every possibility after the road is thrown open for traffic, it will lift the floodgates for exotic orchid collectors rare agar wood and timber smugglers, tiger bone collectors, rhino horns and wildlife poachers.

Till the Bodo militants' invasion of the park, the Manas National Park was an example of success of the Reserve Tiger project campaign.

IN 1993, 24 RHINOS WERE KILLED IN BASBARI RANGE ITSELF. EVEN THE HOG DEER POPULATION HAS BEEN ENDANGERED BADLY DUE TO POACHING.

The Royal Government of Bhutan is committed to maintain its current level of forest cover and safeguard its rich natural heritage. Because of this commitment World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is assisting the Royal Government of Bhutan to secure funds for the conservation of environment in Bhutan from multilateral and bilateral government agencies and has already provided the first one million dollar grant. The hope is to attract at least 20 million dollar in support, which the treasury section of the United National Development Program will manage. But evidently the Royal Government of Bhutan has failed to keep its commitment to preserve its forest wealth.

The unique forest meanwhile in Indian side has lan-

guished in obscurity after being plagued for years by violence of Bodo militants and poachers. Nestled in green mountains and fed by the Manas river, the 2837 sq. kms. sanctuary was closed for visitors in 1989 in the wake of the Bodo agitation. And forest authorities have only recently opened it again. Manas 500 sq. kms., of which was declared a national park in 1990 and also chosen for Project Tiger in 1972, is in a sorry state, thanks to the callous attitude of both the State and Central Governments.

There are serious problems in maintaining the tiger project due to lack of funds, manpower and modern weapons. Out of the 58 beat offices, situated at the vital points of the national park, 36 of them were burnt down by Bodo militants



Bulldozer and truck of Bhutan govt.: Will the greenery last?

and till now these are not built. Of the three ranges that constitute the park, the Basbari range is the only one that is functioning while the Bhuyanpara and Panbari ranges are inoperative forest guards refused to stay there fearing the Bodo militants' onslaught.

Though there have been some changes for the better after the sanctuary was included in the Project Tiger, improvement in terms of conducive work atmosphere and living conditions for the employees is still visible.

Under Project Tiger, all capital expenditure is granted by the Centre while recurring expenditure is borne by the both the State and the Central Governments equally. There is an immense paucity of funds due to financial crisis of the State Government which is unable to make provision in the budget for such a grant from the Centre.

A minimum of one crore rupees is required for developing infrastructure in the park areas as well as for improving living conditions of forest guards posted at beat offices in remote areas. The weapons used by the forest guards are obsolete in comparison to the sophisticated weapons used by militants and poachers.

A fear psychosis has gripped the staff and nothing short of providing them with sophisticated weapons and better living conditions would help them in regaining total control of the park. The morale of the staff is at its lowest as a fear psychosis grips them and modern weapons along with certain monetary incentives would motivate them to return to beat offices.

Five forest officials have been killed since 1989 by Bodo militants which included four forest guards and a forester.

Villages and the neighbouring area in Bhutan surrounding the park provide safe sanctuary to the outlawed BDSF, NSCN and ULFA militants. The authorities fear that the tourists can become easy target of the militants if the park is reopened. In 1993, 24 rhinos were killed in Basbari (central) range itself. Interestingly the Basbari range is not much affected by deforestation and chronic destruction and it is almost free from encroachments.

Even the hog deer population has been endangered badly due to poaching. Unfortunately only the Basbari range offices maintain record of poaching and destruction while in the other two ranges things go unrecorded. Unless more protection camps are installed and manned immediately poaching will escalate.

Courtesy: The North East SUN, January 15-31, 1996.