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### **Potential for Militancy among Bhutanese Refugee Youth**

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## **Abstract**

It is likely that the unemployed Bhutanese refugee youth in Nepal will shortly become potential recruits for militant forces that currently destabilise northeast India, southern Bhutan and eastern Nepal. Frustration with a legal process between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal that appears to be going nowhere, a splintered refugee leadership, a seemingly uncompromising Bhutanese monarchy, and the lack of future options may push these refugee youth to turn to militancy.

The Bhutanese youth are emerging from the refugee camps to a militarised job market. The past decade has seen a surge of Maoist insurgency activity in Nepal, and across the border, in Northeastern India, rebel and separatist forces like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) continue their guerilla activities against the Government of India. Increasing frustration amongst the refugee youth and the existing militarisation in the surrounding region could lead to potential matches between the Bhutanese youth and insurgent groups. This paper explores the potential of the Bhutanese refugee youth to turn to militancy.

Since the early 1990s, when the Lhotshampa refugees fled to Nepal from Bhutan, power relations between the refugee leadership in the Jhapa camps, His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG/N) and the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) have been complex.<sup>1</sup> The intricate power plays continue to draw attention away from the fact that more than a 100,000 people, allegedly disowned by their government and expelled from Bhutan, have been waiting for a solution to their problems for a decade.

Reportedly, due to a process of government intimidation, approximately a third of the Lhotshampa fled Bhutan for refugee camps in southern Nepal. Since the first refugees fled Bhutan in 1990, the percentage of adolescent youth has grown to approximately 50 per cent of the total population of the camps, from 26 per cent a decade ago. The standard of education in Bhutan is relatively high, compared with that of Nepal, and the refugees have continued to place high emphasis on education for their children. This has increased the refugee youth's expectations, and may correspondingly increase their frustrations when faced with little or no employment opportunities. The refugee youth have also been exposed to mass media after moving to Nepal, which has contributed to changed perceptions, and a greater awareness of democracy.

Interviews with refugee youth leaders, their teachers and the elder refugee leadership, indicate that there is a clear divide between what the elder leadership expects of the youth, and how the youth see the future. The elder refugee leadership has been advocating the process of peaceful dialogue for the past decade, while the refugee youth feel that it has produced few results, and that a change of strategy is necessary. Many of the refugee youth verbally express a latent militancy, but are waiting for peaceful options to be exhausted before taking up arms in the near future. The refugee youth feel that the peaceful repatriation that their elders are striving for may in any case be inadequate. It is felt that the bilateral talks may at most result in a token repatriation of a fraction of the refugees to Bhutan. It is possible that the RGOB believes that in

the current context, the Lhotshampa refugees present no significant threat to Bhutan's stability. The refugee youth understand this, and seem determined to change this perception in the near future.

In this paper we examine the events that led the 100,000 strong refugee population to leave Bhutan and seek refuge in Nepal. We then undertake an analysis of the bilateral talks held between HMG/N and the RGOB thus far, which shows that for a multitude of reasons, a political solution is not imminent. A discussion of the theoretical aspects of militarisation and the formation of refugee warrior communities is followed by interviews with the refugee leadership and refugee youth, which demonstrate the existence of a latent militancy.

This paper attempts, in the current context of the refugee leadership, and other options available to the refugees, to examine the potential for militancy among the Lhotshampa refugee youth, the effect that this might have on the future of their people, and the related security concerns for the region.

## **Chapter 1 : Exodus of the Lhotshampa from Bhutan**

This chapter, examines the case of the Lhotshampa refugees in detail. This enables us to understand better the roots of the events that caused the Lhotshampa to leave Bhutan, which in turn helps us to see what the future may hold for this community.

The exodus of a seventh of Bhutan's total population can be viewed in several ways. It could perhaps be considered a manifestation of the Government of Bhutan's "ethnic cleansing policy." Another view might classify this as the voluntary emigration of a population that had been subjected to virtual martial law. To understand more fully the nature of the current crisis facing Bhutan, Nepal and India, in her role as official guardian of Bhutan's external defence policy, it is imperative to examine the events that led up to the exodus of a third of the Lhotshampa population from Bhutan.

The Lhotshampa are believed to have lived in Southern Bhutan for approximately a hundred years. Although there are frequent references to the migration of Nepali artisans to Bhutan during the reign of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in the 17th century, no Lhotshampa family can trace its roots that far.<sup>2</sup> By 1909, John Claude White, British India's Political Officer for Sikkim and Bhutan, had noted with reference to Bhutan's Lhotshampa population that, "The remaining inhabitants are Paharias, the same as those in Sikkim, who are creeping along the foothills and now form a considerable community extending the whole length of Bhutan where the outer hills join the plains of India. With the exception of the Hindu Paharias, Buddhism is the religion professed throughout Bhutan."<sup>3</sup>

How did this group of Nepali speakers settle in Southern Bhutan in the first place? In a regional context this is not hard to understand. At the turn of the century, the strict boundaries of the nation state were blurred enough that a farmer could move from overfarmed lands to thick jungle that needed to be cleared so that cultivation could begin – and not know that he had crossed a border or moved to a different country. Since the nation state itself had scant knowledge of its own borders, there were no formal immigration procedures; the farmers simply settled down and began to farm the land. There is evidence that a Bhutanese warlord Kazi Ugyen Dorji, around 1898 or 1900 was given authority by the 5th Shabdrung Jigme Choegyal to administer Southern Bhutan, and the Lhotshampa settlers.

What was the official status of Lhotshampa at this time? Were they immigrant labour or were they Bhutanese citizens? In the early part of the 20th century, like many other developing nations, Bhutan had no formal citizenship procedures, so in as much as any of the other people who settled and lived in Bhutan, the Lhotshampa settlers were Bhutanese citizens. They had no contracts that stipulated a return-by-date to their home countries, and they paid taxes to the Bhutanese regime in cash and kind. However, in the decades that followed, the status of the Lhotshampa remained formally undefined.

How did the Bhutanese authorities view the growing population of Lhotshampa in the South? Bhutan opened its doors to the outside world in the 1950s, and in general, pretended that this ethnic group in the southern part of the country simply did not exist. The majority of school

textbooks referred neither to the people nor to the culture of Southern Bhutan. The ambivalent status that had been accorded to the Lhotshampa came to an end in the early 1950s with the denial of property rights to this ethnic group. This sparked the formation of a political movement in southern Bhutan. The Bhutan State Congress was formed in exile, in 1952 by D.B. Gurung, and an encounter between protesters and government forces took place at Sarbhang, Bhutan in 1954. Although some of the leaders were arrested, later to be granted amnesty by King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck in 1969, the Bhutanese government decided to grant citizenship to all ethnic Nepalese residing in the country effective December 1, 1958. This was a step that assured the Lhotshampa community's future security in Bhutan, as only Bhutanese citizens are permitted to be members of the Tshogdu (National Assembly). Unfortunately, the granting of citizenship was not backed up with formal certification.

The Royal Edict on Lhotshampa citizenship led to enactment of the 1958 Citizenship Act and resolutions in the 11th (Fall 1958) and 13th (Fall 1959) sessions of the National Assembly. Correspondingly, the Lhotshampa were embraced as fellow-citizens and simultaneously conscripted, along with other ethnic groups to participate in the construction of the national highway that would link Thimphu, the capital city, with Phuentsholing, on the Indian border. At the Spring session of the National Assembly in 1961, a statement was issued which confirmed that the Lhotshampa were now official citizens. It read, "In the event that any country attempted to create violence in the kingdom, the citizens of the country would unitedly combat the threat in a spirit of brotherhood. In the meantime, while the northern border would be manned by the Drukpas, the Bhutanese Nepalese would be engaged in road construction, as they were not trained in handling firearms. However, if suddenly the security of the country required the deployment of an additional security force, the Nepalese would also be deputed for the purpose. Therefore it was proposed to train them in handling guns during their leisure time."<sup>4</sup>

After Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan in 1958, development in Bhutan, funded mostly by Indian aid, began in earnest. Roads, an international airport, a national airline, schools, and a degree college were all in place within 30 years. Largely due to the road building activity, which meant that most male Lhotshampa between 15 and 60 were dispersed throughout the country for the better part of the year, the three decades between 1958 and 1988 saw the Lhotshampa slowly make links with northern Bhutan.

In 1980, the national integration programme was formulated. Her Royal Highness Ashi Pem Pem Wangchuk was given the mandate of ensuring that the National Council for Social and Cultural Promotion fostered harmony and mutual understanding between the different ethnic communities. The National Council faded away in 1986, without any explanation from the RGOB. However, one had only to look around at what was happening just below the Indo-Bhutan border to understand what had provoked the sudden shift in policy. The spectre of Gorkhaland, (the demand for a separate state for Indians of Nepali ethnicity in India), was beginning to rear its head, and the RGOB was beginning to wonder whether their own citizens would begin to make similar demands.

A revised Citizenship Act with more stringent requirements was introduced in 1985, and the Government of Bhutan (RGOB) also trimmed the expatriate work force in the country, which consisted in the majority of Indian and Nepali labourers.<sup>5</sup> The RGOB's fear of ethnic

domination by the Lhotshampa spiralled into a census exercise in 1988 that was conducted specifically for the southern districts. The Bhutanese Nepalese were asked to show a 30-year-old land tax receipt as proof of nationality. Considering that payment of taxes in cash was mandated throughout the country only in 1964, this was an onerous requirement.<sup>6</sup> Those who were unable to show that they were paying taxes in 1958, the year that the King had granted the Lhotshampa citizenship status, were classified as non-nationals. These were not a handful of families, but the vast majority of the 300,000 plus southern Bhutanese citizens. The government of Bhutan later said, "Preoccupied with the implementation of its five-year development plans, it took almost three decades for the Royal Government to become fully aware of the dangers of large numbers of illegal immigrants flooding the country."<sup>7</sup> This was a far cry from the earlier, "There were two ethnic groups in the Kingdom under the rule of His Majesty the King. Since the Nepalese inhabiting Southern Bhutan as bona fide citizens of this country had submitted a bond agreement affirming their allegiance to the King and Country, the Assembly resolved that from this date the Nepalese would enjoy equal rights in the National Assembly, as well as in the country like other bona fide citizens."<sup>8</sup>

It is unlikely that the government of Bhutan could have earlier not noticed or failed to uncover such a large number of illegal immigrants in a country of approximately 700,000 people. The National Assembly of Fall 1973 indicates that strong vigilance was enforced to make sure that such an event could not occur. The records state that "Earlier, on the understanding that the presence of undesirable foreigners within the country would be detrimental to the security of the country, certain rules and regulations were framed by the National Assembly. In the current session it was decided that Assembly members would check villages in their areas for the presence of foreigners and ascertain whether they possessed required documents." In early 1989, post census, the RGOB continued to maintain that at minimum, 100,000 illegal immigrants had been detected in Southern Bhutan.

On the heels of the census followed the Drighlam Namzha, an ancient code of social etiquette, which among other dictates, mandated that all Bhutanese should wear national dress, at all times. This essentially imposed a dress foreign to Nepali culture on the Lhotshampa population, which had to be worn at all times, even while farming. Around the same time it was decreed that Nepali would no longer be used in schools in Southern Bhutan. The reason given for the latter policy, was that since students had a detailed curriculum, they therefore could not be expected to learn Nepali as well as the other subjects. The Green Belt policy was also drafted in late 1988; it mandated that for environmental reasons no human habitation would be allowed for 1 kilometre along the Indian border. If this had been implemented, it would have resulted in approximately a third of the Lhotshampa having to give up their lands and homesteads.

The reaction of the Lhotshampa to this visible persecution and suddenly uncertain future, varied amongst the ethnic group. The handful of the Lhotshampa elite who had been taken into the civil administration and were then serving in high government positions in Thimphu, joined forces to submit petitions on behalf of their people. The submission of a particularly strong-worded petition drafted by himself and a group of seven other high ranking officials, resulted in Royal Advisory Councillor T.N. Rizal being jailed for three days on the grounds of "treason". He was then freed with the caveat that he should be seen with no more than two others at one time. This

warning signal caused T.N. Rizal to flee first to Assam, India and then to Southern Nepal, where he pledged to fight for the rights of the Lhotshampa people in exile.

The farmer population, which accounted for the vast majority of the Lhotshampa, continued to till the fields in the south, hoping that they would be able to continue to earn their livelihood in peace. However, several of the younger generation of Lhotshampa, who were then studying at the newly created colleges in Southern Bhutan – Dewthang Polytechnic and the Teachers Training Institute became dissatisfied with the situation. There had already been rumours of a nascent democratic movement, but the sudden crack-down from the Bhutanese authorities provoked a group of about 15 student activists to flee, at various stages, across the border to Gurganda, West Bengal where sympathetic Indian leftist groups gave them support.

The activists' plan was to stage a peaceful march back into Bhutan and to use peoples' power to submit their demand to the Government of Bhutan. According to the Peoples' Forum For Human Rights, Bhutan (PFHRB), which was formed in exile, the protesters demanded human rights and democracy in place of the existing partyless and absolute monarchy.<sup>9</sup> At present there is a disagreement within the refugee leadership in exile, where some of the refugee leaders maintain that contrary to the report above, the activists were not demanding that democracy be installed in Bhutan. Their view is that the students were simply requesting equal treatment for all citizens under Bhutanese law, as had been promised earlier by the government of Bhutan.

The modus operandi of the students was to simultaneously picket government offices in all the southern districts. By means of encouragement, and (in some cases) coercion, the youth managed to convince their apprehensive fellow citizens in the south to participate. Their first attempt was turned back by the Indian government, but in September 1990 they reached all the district headquarters, where the officials surrendered and allowed them to conduct a peaceful demonstration. In Samchi district, the demonstrators were fired on by government troops, who claimed that it was the demonstrators that took up arms against them. After this, martial law was imposed in Southern Bhutan with the army pillaging and razing to the ground schools, hospitals and other community buildings that served the Lhotshampa. This was the beginning of the physical violence against the Southern Bhutanese by the government. This was also to mark the start of violent activities by the Lhotshampa.

By late 1989, the RGOB was increasingly worried about the undercurrent of dissident activity among the Lhotshampa which they felt was fuelled by T.N. Rizal in exile. In November 1989, T.N. Rizal was picked up in Birtamod, Nepal with the cooperation of the Nepali government, taken to Kathmandu and then flown to Paro, Bhutan where he was sentenced to life imprisonment. The situation for the remaining Lhotshampa government officials grew steadily more unstable and they in turn began to flee from Bhutan to Nepal. Their departure was followed by a steady flow of Lhotshampa peasants who had by then lost all sense of security. At the time not only were they being subjected to harsh treatment from the Bhutanese Army, but the refugees give evidence that ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and Bodo militants from nearby Assam were allegedly used by the authorities to carry out intimidatory tactics regularly against the remaining population.

The literature published by the refugee leadership in exile states that “The policy of Driglam Namsha [Drighlam Namzha] was implemented most ruthlessly in the south through fines, imprisonment and beatings.”<sup>10</sup> Photographic evidence shows that between 1990 and 1994 numerous houses were razed to the ground, as were schools and hospitals in the Southern Bhutanese districts of Samchi, Chirang and Sarbhang. There is also evidence of letters of expulsion that order the relatives of those who have already left the country to sell their lands and leave immediately.

The Bhutanese authorities succeeded to a large extent in their efforts to force out the Lhotshampa – at present, a third of the Lhotshampa are now in refugee camps in Jhapa district, Nepal, and this number accounts for a seventh of Bhutan’s total population. The 1980 government census data shows that the total population of Bhutan was then 1,165,000, and was projected to reach 1,461,853 by 1990.<sup>11</sup> However, in 1990, the King of Bhutan announced a revision of Bhutan’s population to 600,000.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, the Lhotshampa have lived in Bhutan for at least a century, perhaps more. They were granted citizenship in 1958, yet made to prove their citizenship to the government of Bhutan in 1988. A group of student activists protested against the unfairness to their community, and this triggered off brutal repression against the Lhotshampa by the Bhutanese authorities and army. The protest was put down, and the activists fled first to India and then to southern Nepal to seek refuge. Lhotshampa government officials in Thimphu also fled the country and were followed by 120,000 refugees. 15,000 - 20,000 settled in the Duars area of West Bengal; the others continue to live in refugee camps in Jhapa district, Nepal up until the time of the writing of this paper. Between 1990-1994 military repercussions towards the remaining Lhotshampa in Southern Bhutan continued, and then plateaued as international opinion strengthened against the human rights offences that were being perpetrated by the RGOB.

At first, the RGOB denied all allegations of brutality against the Lhotshampa, and, in fact denied their very existence. Subsequently, the RGOB acknowledged the existence of the refugees, but took the position that they had repeatedly encouraged the Lhotshampa not to engage in “voluntary migration”. However, they claimed that since the dissidents already resident in the refugee camps were holding out promises of free food and accommodation, the exodus continued. The Bhutanese government’s version of events during this time differs substantially from that of the refugees.<sup>13</sup> The RGOB believes that after 1958, due to the prosperous economic conditions in the southern districts, Nepalis from Nepal, and Northeast India crossed the ill-defined southern borders and settled in Bhutan. Further, Nepali labourers who served as guest workers in Bhutan for specific development projects and road construction, stayed on illegally after their contracts were over. The RGOB states that due to the lack of communication between the south and the north, the authorities were unaware that such a large number of illegal immigrants lived in the southern districts. A northern Bhutanese who had lived in a southern district during the late eighties stated that between his arrival and departure, the local population of Lhotshampa increased by 5 or 6 times.<sup>14</sup> In the RGOB’s view, only Lhotshampa who were already resident by 1958 in Bhutan are entitled to citizenship, the others are illegal immigrants who were rightly expelled by the establishment. The Bhutanese regime has now revised population estimates, and ethnic demographics are now more to the regime’s liking. Nonetheless, to this date, there has been no acknowledgement made of the forced signing of

“voluntary” emigration forms, nor of the brutal actions that resulted in the Lhotshampa fleeing the country.

In August 1992, the Government of Bhutan published a detailed account of anti-national terrorist activities in Southern Bhutan. It claimed that among the Lhotshampa there were bonafide terrorists. Photographic evidence dating from 1990 shows amateur bombs, and decapitated bodies, mostly Lhotshampa themselves, lying in bushes with their entrails ripped out. The report stated that terrorists had reportedly moved south of the Bhutanese border, to West Bengal, India and were said to be carrying out operations on two fronts.<sup>15</sup>

Their first aim was said to be that of attracting more Lhotshampa to the refugee camps that had been set up for them in Jhapa district, Nepal. The second was to systematically continue to harass those left behind in Southern Bhutan who had not openly agreed with their aims. What were the real aims of these terrorists?

According to the government report, “A careful analysis of the pronouncements and the activities of the anti-national organisations confirms that their two main objectives are: (a) The eventual domination of Bhutan by a majority Nepali population through the constant influx of Nepali immigrants. To this end, they are agitating to repeal the existing laws on citizenship and immigration.

(b) To carve out a Nepali state in Bhutan through armed struggle if the first objective cannot be attained through political means.”<sup>16</sup>

It has been nearly eight years since the publication of this report. The Government of Bhutan claims that the anti-nationals burnt down schools and public health units in the southern Bhutanese districts. However, the refugee leadership now resident in Kathmandu, Nepal claims that although these persons did not burn down any government-built service organisations, several of the anti-national activities such as the robberies and murders described in the report did indeed take place.<sup>17</sup> Until 1992, the anti-national elements continued to launch sorties against the remaining Lhotshampa for financial gain. During the intervening period there has not been a similar outbreak of terrorist activity reported.

The Lhotshampa who participated in these terrorist activities were clearly interested in mere financial gain, as they targeted Lhotshampa households instead of government installations. There was no further talk of turning Bhutan into a democracy, nor was there any plan to do so. Although the anti-nationals mentioned in this report initially carried out their activities from Gurganda, West Bengal, they continued to conduct minor terrorist operations from the refugee camps in Jhapa, Nepal for a short time afterwards. The Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB) assisted in law enforcement procedures by making a list of those known to have indulged in such activities available to the UNHCR official, but no further action was taken against the anti-nationals.<sup>18</sup> Incidents involving the criminals were regularly reviewed in Kuensel, Bhutan’s national newspaper, which carried constant reports of violent incidents carried out by anti-nationals with their base in the refugee camps. The anti-national groups stopped their activities in the mid-nineties because it became increasingly difficult for them to cross the border into Bhutan. The lack of continued activity by the anti nationals suggests that the Government of

Bhutan was incorrect in its initial assumption that they planned to dominate Bhutan by increasing the number of Nepali citizens, or carve out a separate state for the Lhotshampa through armed conflict. However, the activities of these Lhotshampa provided the RGOB with the justification for the continued crackdown and suppression of the Lhotshampa still resident in Bhutan's Southern districts.

As past events show, although the earlier terrorist activities were mainly for small financial gain, there is an underlying potential for violence among the refugee population. The refugees in exile were disappointed by this realisation, as we see in the *Bhutan Review*, a monthly newsletter published in Kathmandu by refugees in exile between 1993 and 1996. The January 1993 issue stated that "it is a matter of deep regret and shame that subsequent investigations in the camps have confirmed the truth in these stories. The despicable actions of these depraved people is all the more abhorrent since the targets of their nefarious activities were innocent villagers. That persons who themselves survive on the charity and kindness of other fellow human beings could prey on their own brethren seems hardly believable. Yet, as it happens, it is true."<sup>19</sup>

The Bhutanese government's fears were sparked by the Gorkhaland movement for a separate land for Nepali speakers in India. How justified were their fears that the Lhotshampa would become involved in the controversy and begin to make their own demands? By some accounts, the Lhotshampa movement was very well organised, and prior to the outbreak of violence, dissidents had distributed pamphlets foretelling a mass invasion of Bhutan by the Nepali diaspora. One apparently stated: "It would be well to remember that we, the Gurkhas of southern Bhutan, are not only the majority but we also have 17 million brothers and sisters in Nepal, and over ten million living in India. Unless the minority Drukpas come to their senses and immediately undo the damage and great harm they have done to themselves, there is every possibility that the borders of the Gurkha state of Sikkim and adjoining areas of Kalimpong and Darjeeling can be very easily extended across the whole of southern Bhutan."<sup>20</sup>

Bhutan has long felt threatened by the looming presence of a potential Greater Nepal. The Gorkhaland movement for a Greater Nepal was a threat without much rational bias, that was used as a threat against New Delhi by Subhas Ghising, then Chairman of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. Most of the Lhotshampa are of Indo-Aryan stock, and in Nepal or India, are rarely found serving in the Gurkha regiments. It is unusual for Lhotshampa to describe themselves as "Gurkhas of southern Bhutan", or think themselves to be an extension of the "martial race" that consists usually of Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais who are of Indo-Tibetan stock. The state of Sikkim, India is often cited as an example of how Nepali speakers now dominate a state where the Bhutia/Lepcha minority had originally held power. However, it should be noted that the idea that Sikkim should become part of India, did not originate in Nepal, but was rather a decision made by the Indian government. Greater Nepal has not come to pass as yet, and will, in all likelihood probably not happen, because "While it is language that binds the Nepali speakers of South Asia, it is a weak thread. The feeling of 'Nepaliness' in the Nepali diaspora is culturally charged, but not politically so."<sup>21</sup> The remaining Lhotshampa in Bhutan, are, by all accounts, still far removed from politics and related activities, but the Lhotshampa refugees are now politically far more aware than they were when they lived inside Bhutan. As late as 1992, the Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Dawa Tshering still believed that the Lhotshampa were supported by the proponents of Greater Nepal. However, the refugee leadership remains aware that

participation in any advocacy for a Greater Nepal would not favourably improve their chances of repatriation, and are therefore more interested in sharing power within Bhutan.<sup>22</sup>

Interviews with officials from the Foreign Ministry of Nepal, which has primary responsibility for the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, reveal that HMG/N is concerned about the possibility of links between the Maoist groups and those willing to engage in militant activity in the Jhapa camps.<sup>23</sup> The Maoist war in Nepal refers to a “people’s war” against the Nepali government, which has been underway since February 1996. It aims to “bring an end to the rule of vengeful regime and to establish a people’s New Democracy” and constitutes a “historical revolt against feudalism, imperialism and so-called reformists.”<sup>24</sup> The Maoists, who have modelled themselves on the Shining Path guerillas of Peru, began their violence with traditional khukri knives and home-made guns, but now field about 1,300 armed fighters. They are fast posing a serious threat to the tourism dependent local economy, and Maoist activity threatens to plunge Nepal into serious economic turmoil in the future. The Maoists, at the time of the writing of this paper, have recently been active primarily in Nepal’s western districts, but have also been seen in the vicinity of the Jhapa refugee camps.<sup>25</sup>

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Bodo, two organisations seeking secession from the state of Assam, North India, operate out of the jungles of Southern Bhutan, relatively close to the refugees. They are accused of several bank robberies in Birtamod, and other small towns close to the Indo-Nepal border. Should the refugees seek to militarise in any form, there are several violent elements at hand to ably assist them.

## Chapter 2: Political Resolution or Assimilation?

If the Lhotshampa refugee youth are not to turn to militancy in the near future to achieve their objectives, there must be either the hope of a political solution reached through bilateral discussions, or alternatively, avenues of assimilation into the host population.

Power plays between HMG/N and the RGOB have been intricate. Initially, in the early nineties, Bhutan repeatedly denied any knowledge of the refugees, but due to pressure from international agencies, and HMG/N, finally invited a Nepalese delegation to Thimphu in July 1993 for bilateral talks on the refugee issue. These talks yielded the formation of a six-member Joint Ministerial Level Committee (JMLC), which consisted of three members from each country. This committee was entrusted with the following:

- a) To categorise the persons claiming to have come from Bhutan who were now resident in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal in the following manner:
  1. Bonafide Bhutanese if they have been evicted forcefully
  2. Bhutanese who emigrated
  3. Non-Bhutanese people
  4. Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts
- b) To specify the positions of the two governments on each of these categories
- c) To arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement on each of the above categories

It was assumed that the above would provide a basis for the resolution of the problem. In actual fact, up until the time of the writing of this paper, the above categorisation has only served to delay any possible verification and potential repatriation of the refugees. Bhim Subba writes in his paper “Nepal-Bhutan talks: The Categorization Farce”, “Yielding to Bhutanese persuasion, Nepal essentially agreed to provide a stamp of approval to validate a procedure in which the Royal Government of Bhutan sought to classify its own citizens into various categories. The process is a brainchild of Bhutanese ingenuity and central to Bhutan’s strategy for calculated procrastination in dealing with the refugee issue.”<sup>26</sup>

In brief, Mr. Subba points out that Nepal should not have agreed to participate in classifying citizens of another country into sub-categories like Category 4 which encompasses Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts. Even if the joint team were able to identify Category 3 persons – Non Bhutanese, if there are any in the camp, it would be a near impossibility to place individuals in the camps into any of the three remaining categories. If a Nepalese delegation is to impartially identify persons who have been forcibly evicted, emigrated or committed criminal acts, it must necessarily have access to records that are held by Bhutanese authorities. “But will Nepalese officials be allowed to visit Bhutan to investigate alleged crimes, question victims and witnesses in Bhutan, check Bhutanese government records and interrogate Bhutanese government officials?”<sup>27</sup>

Under Bhutanese law, any citizen who voluntarily emigrates loses his or her citizenship. In this context, refugees who fall into Category 2, are unlikely to be repatriated to Bhutan. It is

imperative that when categorising the refugees, the JMLC takes into account the definition of “voluntary emigration” that Bhutan currently uses. Refugees have given evidence that they were forced to sign voluntary emigration forms, and to hand over their citizenship cards before leaving Bhutan. “Bulk of the refugees (estimated 60-70 per cent) fall in the second category of voluntary emigrants who back in Bhutan were forced to sign voluntary migration forms.”<sup>28</sup> We must also consider the complicated case of those refugees who did indeed voluntarily emigrate, but only because they were too scared to stay. Many refugees left not only because they were scared of future persecution, but because neighbouring farmers had left, leaving too far a distance between themselves and any recourse to help, should they be attacked. Some refugees voluntarily left because their leaders or their elders had fled, and they saw no way that they could stay on, with any reasonable degree of security. In spite of the fact that the King of Bhutan visited the southern districts at this time, and urged people to stay, it is evident that those who left, did so because in the light of the violence that was taking place against their community, they did not feel safe. By these accounts, the concept of “voluntary emigrants” needs to be carefully analysed. It is a matter of regret that at present, there is no legal framework in South Asia to address the status of displaced persons and refugees.

In October 1993, the first bilateral talks were held, where the categorisation discussed above was proposed by the Bhutanese side and agreed to by the Nepalese. In February 1994, the second bilateral talks were held in Thimphu, where the mechanism for verification was agreed. At this stage, Nepal proposed the involvement of a third party, however, this suggestion was rejected by Bhutan. The mechanism for verification has yet to be determined and has resulted in a stalemate at the third (April 1994), fourth (June 1994), fifth (February 1995) and sixth (April 1995) bilateral talks held under the auspices of the JMLC. The seventh bilateral talk was held at the Foreign Ministers’ level in Kathmandu in April 1996, but also ended in a stalemate.

The next bilateral talks were held three and a half years later, in September 1999. These talks concluded with a disagreement on the verification process. This time, the Bhutanese side was ready to begin verification on a list of 3000 refugees that had reportedly been prepared by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) some years ago. Numerous accusations surrounded this list that was purportedly submitted to the Bhutanese authorities; chief among them was that the majority of the refugees on the list belonged to the Buddhist religion, and would therefore have a better chance of being accepted back into Bhutan as “bona-fide Bhutanese.” At the eighth bilateral talks, the Nepalese delegation insisted that verification should not begin with this list, but instead with a sample of refugees from one of the camps, and on this point the talks broke down once again. The ninth bilateral talks, held in February 2000 in Thimphu, also resulted in no progress on the issue of refugee resettlement.

Nepali authorities are becoming increasingly restive regarding progress on the refugee resettlement. For example, Nepal’s foreign minister Ram Sharan Mahat stated in a January 2000 newspaper interview that he believed the refugee issue would be solved within a month. This comment was sparked by the release of T.N. Rizal in December 1999, a political prisoner, who had been held by the RGOB for ten years. After T.N. Rizal was abducted from Nepali territory in 1989, he spent four years in solitary confinement, and was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment. The Bhutan Review once wrote “In a strange development, the Royal Government announced that Tek Nath Rizal had been granted conditional clemency by the King

on 19 November. In this amazing ‘pardon’, the King has ‘magnanimously’ issued a kasho (edict) decreeing that Rizal shall be released as soon as the southern problem is resolved.”<sup>29</sup> Many factions therefore saw Rizal’s release as hope that the refugee issue would be soon addressed, or that the RGOB planned to soften its policy. Just after Rizal’s release, several refugee parties marked the occasion by distributing candles to refugees to light outside their huts on a particular night. A priest who works closely with the refugees, remarked “It is not easy to tell the mood of those in the camps. There were very few candles lit in celebration. The refugees are tired, and feel that there is no reason to hope that this news will bring any new developments.”<sup>30</sup>

International organisations like the UNHCR, have (apart from providing humanitarian assistance) thus far failed to attempt a resolution of the situation. A May 2000 visit by High Commissioner Madame Sadako Ogata to the refugee camps resulted in confusing signals for the refugees. Despite first having met with the RGOB in Thimphu; a meeting which had yielded nothing substantial, Madame Ogata did the refugees grave injustice during her camp visit, by firmly stating that they should begin preparations to return to Bhutan. The Association of Human Rights Activists, Bhutan (AHURA) had presented the High Commissioner (April 2000, Geneva) with a compact disc containing a database of family, property and documentary evidence details of 50 per cent of the refugees. However, as of May 3, 2000 the High Commissioner claimed that she had no knowledge of the existence of such a database. Such handling of the situation by an organisation like UNHCR does not bode well for future negotiation or resolution.

Refugee leaders in Kathmandu and in the camps in Jhapa are losing faith in the political process that appears to be going nowhere. The refugees have never been formally a part of the talks, and the Nepalese side is not politically savvy enough to have learnt from their early mistakes in the game of negotiation, and has now allowed the verification process to be extended at will by Bhutan. “The objective of the categorisation proposal which Bhutan had been advocating well ahead of the first bilateral meeting was patently obvious; the political barricade which had been brought down by international censure was to be replaced by a purpose-built bureaucratic and administrative mechanism that could serve as an insurmountable hurdle.”<sup>31</sup> The talks have shown that Bhutan is clearly seeking the assimilation of the refugees outside Bhutan. By postponing decision making, by refusing to address key issues and by diplomatic stonewalling, the RGOB expects that the refugees themselves will become less insistent on their right to return, and instead begin to explore the other option - that of assimilation.

This brings us to the other potential solution – that of assimilation. What potential is there for resettlement in Nepal for the Lhotshampa refugees? Two issues must be addressed here; one of economic capability, the other of Nepal’s cultural capacity to absorb the additional 100,000 persons. In terms of economic resources, Nepal, with her own economic worries, is not an ideal refugee hosting nation. Nonetheless, economically challenged countries have been known to shelter refugees – for example Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria all host a substantial Kurdish population. If Nepal were to absorb the Bhutanese refugees now living in the Jhapa camps, they would account for about 1/11th the population of Kathmandu. The Tibetan refugees, now resident in Nepal for decades, have injected a multiplier of wealth into the local economy by creating jobs for the local population in the sweater and carpet making industries, and have justified any initial economic burden that they may initially have placed on the state. This does not suggest that the Bhutanese Lhotshampa would necessarily do the same - this is a group with

a different skill set - however, it does suggest that assimilation, from an economic point of view, is not a complete impossibility.

We must bear in mind, however, that the Lhotshampa are peasant farmers, whose chief skill lies in tilling land and harvesting crops. Although it might have been expected that due to the RGOB's lack of interest in a political solution, and HMG/N's inept handling of the situation, refugees might have dispersed into the surrounding area, by and large most of them have not. It is possible that this might have been the Bhutanese government's initial aim, to create a situation where the Lhotshampa refugees virtually disappeared into the foothills of Nepal and Assam, India. However, the refugees have remained refugees, in the camps. In an interview with Himal magazine, it was pointed out that "The history of en masse Nepali migration is only to areas where land is available. These hill peasants know only how to till the soil, and we know no one is going to provide land in India and Nepal. These villagers have nowhere to go but back to where they came from. Even if it is living hell, they will stay in the camps."<sup>32</sup> However, more recently, the Lhotshampa have begun to seek blue collar work outside the camps, to earn additional income. It is estimated that at present, more than 10,000 (around a tenth) of the Lhotshampa seek temporary work as bricklayers and plumbers. This is beginning to cause tension within the host population, since the Lhotshampa offer their services at a reduced cost to potential employers, thereby undercutting the local labourers.<sup>33</sup> The Lhotshampa cannot be easily differentiated from the Nepali host population, and fears that the Lhotshampa may attempt to assimilate into the local population are rising. However, the fact that most of the Lhotshampa who do work outside the camps are employed on road construction projects throughout the country means that their families continue to stay on in the camps. The workers are employed only for the project duration, and would not in any case be able to support their families if the entire family lived outside the camps.

With reference to cultural capacity for assimilation, we note that historically, groups of persons have tended to move across borders to be with others who have similar ethnic and linguistic characteristics. Refugees tend to migrate across borders to places where they feel that they will be a "fit". In South Asia, we have the example of the Afghanis seeking refuge in northern Pakistan, and the Sri Lankan Tamils seeking refuge in southern India. The Bhutanese Lhotshampa, being of Nepali ethnicity, came to Nepal. They could as easily have chosen to move into parts of Nepali speaking India where they had many cultural links and connections. Some did indeed make this choice. However, under the 1949 Indo-Bhutan friendship treaty, Bhutanese are legally entitled to work and reside in India, so the Bhutanese who seek refuge in India, cannot be classified as refugees. This means that they would have had to live as refugees without any aid or benefits, as do the 20-30,000 refugees currently living in Jalpaiguri Dooars and Darjeeling Hill council areas in West Bengal, and in Kokrajhar and Doring Districts in Assam. Left with few other options, they came instead to Nepal, where they were a "technical" fit. Some accounts of their flight as refugees indicate, however, that the decision to cross Indian territory, and enter Nepal to seek refuge may not have been entirely voluntary. Many who attempted to take shelter in India were not permitted to do so. This was illegal under the 1949 Indo-Bhutan friendship treaty that entitles Bhutanese nationals free passage and the right to work in India. Several refugees speak of Indian security forces pushing them into trucks, and directing the drivers to go towards Nepal, saying "That is your home, go there."<sup>34</sup> It is not certain that Indian security forces played a key role in bringing the Lhotshampa refugees from Bhutan to

Nepal. However, it is known that there were “anti-foreigner” policies at the time in Assam, and other parts of northeast India. Refugees who first entered Assam, India were picked up by the Assam Police and forcibly taken to the Assam-West Bengal border, as the state of Assam wanted no responsibility for them. From Srirampur, India, the border point where they were dropped off, the refugees had little choice but to proceed onwards to Nepal.

Are the Lhotshampa culturally “connected” enough with the host Nepali population to assimilate? To analyse this further we examine the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils who took refuge from army harassment in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Like the Bhutanese Lhotshampa, the Sri Lankan Tamils in Tamil Nadu have more in common with the Indian Tamils than with the Sri Lankan Sinhalese. They share language and customs, and historically both groups are known to have originally migrated from their new host country – the Lhotshampa from Nepal and the Sri Lankan Tamils from Tamil Nadu. Both groups feel culturally at home in Bhutan, and Sri Lanka respectively, while at the same time feeling part of a greater diaspora – for the Lhotshampa, one that stretches from far west Nepal to northeast India; for the Sri Lankan Tamils, one from Johannesburg to Malacca.

Both the Lhotshampa and the Sri Lankan Tamils fled government repression to seek refuge among people of a similar ethnicity. However, the links between the Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils have historically been stronger than those between the Nepalis and the Bhutanese Lhotshampa. Although the Lhotshampa speak a common language (Nepali), and were known to have migrated from the eastern mid-hills of Nepal to Bhutan about a century ago, the links since then have been few. Lhotshampa in Bhutan tended to go to India for education and medical treatment, but not to Nepal, whereas Sri Lankan Tamils continued to have many links with Tamil Nadu – for example, education and medical treatment. Basic trading continues to take place between southern Tamil Nadu and northern Sri Lanka, since they are each other’s closest neighbours, whereas Indian territory lies between Bhutan and Nepal.

Refugees in the Jhapa camps, and in Kathmandu feel culturally distanced from the local Nepali population. Although in appearance they are indistinguishable from their Nepali hosts, the Lhotshampa feel that their value systems and customs have survived unchanged, in isolated Bhutan, whereas those of the Nepalis have become modified through the years. They cite examples of the dowry system and different ways of food preparation as support for this argument – which implies that they will not assimilate easily.<sup>35</sup> The Lhotshampa were once accused, in Bhutan, of paying homage to the Nepali King and Queen, whose portraits were said to be found in every Lhotshampa home. According to the refugees interviewed, this is untrue – back then, they knew far more about India’s politicians than about Nepal’s King, who then seemed unimportant and irrelevant.

Whether the Lhotshampa are a “technical” or “natural” cultural fit is a debatable point. It must be noted, however, that communities like the Tibetan refugees, whose cultural background differs from that of the Indo-Aryan Nepalis, have successfully assimilated into Nepal - largely because of their business acumen, partly because of their cultural affiliation with the Indo-Tibetan ethnic groups of Nepal. The Lhotshampa population has endured the camps for 10 years now, and has shown that it will not disperse into the host population easily. Himal Magazine, in an in-depth article on the Lhotshampa refugee problem once asked “Do these refugees have the staying

power to wait out 40 years like the Palestinians in the refugee camps in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.”<sup>36</sup> Although we cannot be certain that the refugee youth have the patience of the Palestinians, thus far their elders seem to – in the main part because they have few other options.

Our analysis shows that the potential for a political resolution is slim, and assimilation with the host population, after 10 years spent in the refugee camps is unlikely. Due to lack of other options, there is a significant potential for the refugee youth to turn to militancy in some form

### **Chapter 3: Refugees, Ethnicity and Refugee Warrior Communities**

This chapter explores definitions of refugees and ethnicity, which help us to better understand the case of the Lhotshampa. There is also an attempt to understand the development of a refugee-warrior community.

The most widely recognised legal formulation of the definition of the refugee, is included in the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It states that a refugee is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable, or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”<sup>37</sup> The subsequent Organisation of African Unity’s 1969 Convention on Refugee Problems in Africa added to this definition, by including, as refugees, persons who had been forced to flee their countries “owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order.”<sup>38</sup> Most recently, in 1984, the Cartagena Declaration, adopted by Central American nations, Mexico and Panama, expanded the above definitions to include the criteria of “massive violation of human rights.”<sup>39</sup>

The definition of a refugee is important because it separates those who qualify for access to scarce resources from those who do not. There are several problems with this legal definition, and chief among them is that as yet, the narrow definition of a refugee does not cover groups of people who have not crossed an international border to escape whatever persecution they are subjected to. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have indeed been assisted within the territory of their own states, for example, in Sri Lanka and Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, legal changes need to be made to a 50-year-old definition, to ensure that the vast numbers of IDPs, who, incidentally now outnumber refugees, have recourse to the privileges and entitlements accorded to those qualifying as refugees.

This is important in the case of the Bhutanese Lhotshampa. Although approximately 33 per cent have fled to India and Nepal, over two thirds of the Lhotshampa population still live inside Bhutan’s southern districts. Many of the Lhotshampa have become internally displaced because of government policies. Since Nepal is no longer accepting Bhutanese refugee families, these IDPs have no recourse to assistance, and are subject to considerable marginalisation within Bhutan.<sup>40</sup> Although a few of the Lhotshampa do hold positions in the government and in the National Assembly, the majority live as farmers, and face difficulties in such basic things as admitting their children to schools. To admit a child to school, Lhotshampa are required to produce No Objection Certificate (NOC) which functions as a de-facto confirmation of citizenship status. Representatives from a human rights organisation, Amnesty International, who visited Bhutan in both 1991, and 1998, were “shocked at the level of marginalisation of the Nepali speaking population.” They have recently urged Bhutan to open up a dialogue with the Lhotshampa inside the country, to avoid further complicating the refugee issue.<sup>41</sup>

In their work, *Escape from Violence*, which addresses conflict and the refugee crisis in the developing world, Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo identify three groups of persons who are likely

to become refugees: dissidents, target minorities, and victims of violence and human rights abuses. All three groups are subject to violence. However, none of the three can rely on the protection of their own governments. This causes them to become refugees. The Lhotshampa are a target minority in Bhutan. Although, until expelled, they consisted, in some estimates of about 45 per cent of Bhutan's total population, they were marginalised both economically and socially. They belong, by accident of birth, to a group that functioned as an ethnic minority or peripheral community and that did not play a part in determining either the components or the direction of national development. They were subject to violence, from their own government, which consisted, in the vast majority, of other ethnic groups. In 1990, 90 per cent of the members of the National Assembly were from the Ngalong and Sarchchop ethnic groups, and only 10 per cent from the Lhotshampa ethnic group.

Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo define refugees as "persons whose presence abroad is attributed to a well-founded fear of violence, as might be established by impartial experts with adequate information."<sup>42</sup> This definition, it might be suggested, includes exceptional cases where impartial judgement is virtually non-existent, as in the case of Bhutan. Bhutan is a relatively closed monarchy, with no press freedom, which allows visitors only on a strictly controlled and monitored basis. Although the present King has made substantial attempts at power devolution, Bhutan cannot be described as a democratic regime. Topographically, Bhutan can be divided into mountainous regions, and foothills. Until ethnic tensions came to the fore, there was little interaction between the three major ethnic groups, the Ngalong (who lived mainly in the north), the Sarchchop (who lived in the east), and the Lhotshampa (who lived in the southern foothill districts). At one level, the conflict, or "southern problem" as it is referred to within Bhutan, is essentially between the Ngalong government, and the Lhotshampa. On another level, all ethnic groups live under an ethnocratic monarchy, and opportunities for practical power sharing are few.

After the Lhotshampa fled, the Bhutanese government maintained that it had no knowledge of the refugees, and that they were not Bhutanese, rather they were Nepalis from northeast India, who had over the years encroached into Bhutanese territory. Hence, impartial observers were only able to reach a conclusion about refugee status outside of Bhutan. They had to use as adequate information, stories given by refugees of the ethnic cleansing methods that the RGOB was using to drive them out. These stories cannot be verified impartially, because there are no facilities for this within Bhutan. In any case since the RGOB denied all knowledge of the refugees, it was unlikely to allow any independent verification by, for example, the 35 or so aid agencies based in Bhutan. Nonetheless, because there was no other explanation for the sudden influx of 100,000 persons, who claimed, and in some cases clearly showed physically, that they had been subjected to gross human rights violations, they were granted refugee status.

### **Refugees and Ethnic Violence**

Refugee movements, and ethnic violence are often closely related. Since the inception of the concept of the nation state, attempts have been made by states to "unmix" their nationalities. This has resulted in the identification of minorities, as obstacles to be eliminated, and was evident in the post World War 1 reconfigurations of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.<sup>43</sup> Ethnicity, although a somewhat ambiguous concept, is important, as it is often used to define who is entitled to nationality, and thereby, who is entitled to the protection of the state.

Rudolfo Stavenhagen identifies ethnicity as being a “political and economic resource, a major factor in the distribution of power and wealth. A group may emphasize its ethnicity when it is useful, and downplay it when it is seen as a handicap. Ethnic conflict is usually defensive or opportunistic, a tool for political mobilization aimed at preserving or capturing resources.”<sup>44</sup> Certain states attach immense importance to common ethnicity, and do not regard ethnic compatriots fleeing to their country as refugees. Israel, for example, offers citizenship to all Jews, as does Germany to all ethnic Germans.

In her work, *Ethnicity and Nation Building: Approaches and Issues*, Urmila Phadnis discusses the concept of the “amalgamative process”, where minority groups assimilate to enable incorporation within a society. A variant of this process enables groups of different ethnicities to live within a society, under a “canopy identity”, which finds its ethnonym in the country of origin.<sup>45</sup> In the case of the Lhotshampa in Bhutan, this group was perceived as “the other”; the ethnic group that was growing, and politicizing, and who looked as though they would have better access to economic resources in the future. In the early nineties, when the cataclysmic events began, the Ngalong highlanders experienced what might be termed a surge of ethnicity. Their expulsion of a third of the Lhotshampa population was both defensive, in order to preserve existing resources, and opportunistic in a bid to capture further resources. Their bid has succeeded, as the segment of the Lhotshampa who could have become politicized and begun to make greater demands of the monarchy are now out of the country, declared “non-nationals.” Those who remain, are for the most part illiterate farmers, who, at present pose no threat to those in power.

Bhutan’s Lhotshampa are the “classic” refugee case. This term was originally used in the context of European history, and refers to an unwanted minority in an ethnocratic state. In such an environment, “members of groups other than the dominant one are exposed to discrimination at best, and to forced assimilation, persecution, expulsion or violence at worst. In these situations, the state may not acknowledge a responsibility to protect those whom it defines as nonnationals.”<sup>46</sup> Bhutan’s actions are uncharacteristic among South Asian states, as most have, at least formally committed to accepting ethnic pluralism as part of the nation.

### **Political Change, Ethnic Conflict and Target Minorities**

Political change often becomes a catalyst for such ethnic conflict, since after colonial rule ends, or federations of states fall apart, exclusionary ethnic identities tend to surface. It is common for minority and majority groups to live peaceably for centuries, and then suddenly erupt into conflict. For example, the Tamils and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka lived in relative harmony, as did many minorities in the former Soviet Union, until the “umbrella” of power over them was removed. Target minorities may be seen as an obstacle to nation-building, and incapable of being part of a newly constructed, unitary, national identity.<sup>47</sup> This proved to be the case with groups like the gypsies in Nazi Europe, and also the Arakanese Burmese who took refuge in Bangladesh.

Further, events taking place outside the borders of a country, that involve ethnic groups with links to target minorities within the country can spark the insecurity that one’s own minorities may become part of these events. This is what perhaps happened in Bhutan, when in the late eighties, the Ngalong ruling group looked across to neighbouring India, and watched the ethnic

Nepalese of Darjeeling, India discuss the potential for a separate homeland, Gorkhaland. Early 1990 brought the transition of Nepal, the only other Himalayan kingdom, from an absolute monarchy to democracy and a constitutional monarchy. It is possible that the then Bhutanese government's fear was that the Lhotshampa, having closer ethnic links with their Nepali counterparts across the border in India, than with themselves, might demand a separate state of their own, within Bhutan, or at the very least, a greater say in Bhutan's affairs. Their fears were not without basis, since most of the Lhotshampa elite had been educated in India. Further, their relative proximity to the Indian border meant that they gained exposure to the ways of democracy earlier than did the northern or eastern Bhutanese. However, there is no clear evidence that any desire for separatism did exist among the Lhotshampa in the late eighties.

When the central power is perceived to be working against the interest of a minority group, ethnic conflict has been known to lead to attempts to secede. Southern Sudan, Northern Sri Lanka and Eritrea are examples of this. "If the central government is insensitive to the grievances of a regional ethnic grouping, and resistant to the idea of mediation and redress, armed conflict often results."<sup>48</sup> Although there is no evidence of any separatist inclinations amongst the Lhotshampa, the repression discussed earlier that followed the suspicions of the Bhutanese regime, may well have enhanced any such desires that may have existed within this community at the time.

### **Militarisation**

Militarisation is the accumulation of a capacity for organised violence. Contrary to popular expectation, the capacity for militarisation, and conflict, has increased, on average throughout the world in the last two decades. As boundaries between nation states became less defined, and modernisation and development continued to filter through the world, it was expected that perhaps ethnic nationalism would weaken and that the potential for ethnic conflict would diminish. With this belief also came the idea that there would be less militarisation. This has proven to be untrue, as the passions awakened by ethnic nationalism, which sometimes lead to militarisation, as in the case of the Palestinian Intifada have proven to be more resilient than once thought. Militarised conflicts have in fact increased in the past decade.

There are several factors that may cause a population to use violence to achieve desired objectives. Democracy is often a catalyst for conflict, since the process of democratisation itself begins new conflicts within countries. States in the process of acquiring or demanding democracy often have no tradition of conflict management, which leads to rapid militarisation. Ethnic wars also determine violence, as they have characteristics that distinguish them from other types of conflict. Parties and actors are somewhat differently defined, and usually neither the government nor the leaders of the ethnic group that is struggling against the state system, recognise each other as legitimate players in the game. Leadership from within the ethnic group takes a while to emerge, as there are many rival groups who feel that they alone can represent the best interests of the people. Ethnic wars usually last relatively longer than other conflicts, as reasonable solutions are harder to arrive at. A main feature of ethnic war is the geographical distribution of ethnic groups. When major ethnic groups of a nation belong to regions where they are the dominant ethnic group, it helps to foster development of ethnic identities. For example, the comparatively late evolution of the nationalistic surge of Tamil identity in Sri Lanka, can be attributed to the pre-independence (before 1948) isolation of the Jaffna peninsula, which is

populated by 97.5 per cent Tamils.

If an ethnic group has been historically isolated, and perceives itself to have little or no bargaining power, this insularity has the potential to be an additional input in the group demand for greater autonomy or self determination.<sup>49</sup>

Until Bhutan's first roads were built in the sixties, the Lhotshampa, who lived in the southern districts, were geographically isolated from the rest of Bhutan. This necessitated the Lhotshampa community's need to look towards more accessible India for education and medical treatment. It is still commonplace to find Lhotshampa who have been to Calcutta, India, but not to the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu.

This isolation has contributed to strengthening Lhotshampa ethno-consciousness, which by and large began to emerge in the late eighties. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the fear of a Gorkhaland demand for a separate land across the border in India may have triggered the Ngalong repression of their Nepali speaking population. The expulsion of a third of the Lhotshampa population in the early nineties has only strengthened their feelings of ethnic identity. Deprivation, and the need to fight a common persecutor often triggers further nationalism, which then triggers further militarisation, in a vicious circle. For instance, when the Palestinian refugee youth plunged into the Intifada, the Palestinian refugees were given a sense of national cohesion that they had not experienced before, which in turn reinforced their desire to support the refugee youth who had taken up arms.

One of our main aims in this paper is to determine whether the Lhotshampa have the potential and capacity to become a refugee warrior community. To that end we look closely at the formation of refugee warrior movements.

Refugee warrior movements may be defined as a sub group of refugees, usually young and male, who while domiciled and receiving refugee status in a host country, engage in activities against the government of their nation of origin. These activities may be either violent or non-violent; the former are more common, giving rise to the appellation "warrior". The existence of refugee warriors presents tremendous dilemmas for host countries, refugee generating countries and organisations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). It is difficult to assist a refugee population, some of whom, at the same time are engaging in activities that may prolong the conflict that has caused their flight. Host countries are put in the difficult position of having to extend their generosity to refugees who use their territory as a base for violent activities, while refugee generating countries may have to deal with the consequences of fighting an insurgency war.

In this section we attempt a classification of refugee warrior movements, with the caveat that several of the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

1. Separatism: Refugees often become involved with separatist movements fought in exile. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) began as a bonafide separatist movement in Sri Lanka, in the early seventies. Fighting between Sri Lankan government troops and the guerillas intensified in the eighties, producing a stream of refugees that fled to south India. Many of the

refugees became involved in the movement, living in the refugee camps by day and training in secret training camps by night.

2. Revolution and Counter Revolution: Afghans in refugee camps in Pakistan became refugee warriors who led the peasant farmers in a successful “counter-revolutionary” uprising in defence of the traditional social order which was being destroyed by Soviet intervention. Aided by external funding, they managed to convert the Afghan peasants and themselves into one of the world’s best-managed refugee warrior communities.

3. Reclamation: Refugee warriors often harbour desires of inflicting the same pain that was inflicted on them, and their families, upon their tormentors. This translates into attempts to completely reverse the trend of migration, return to their homeland and turn their former aggressors into refugees themselves. This was the case in Kampuchea in 1978. The Khmer Rouge who had taken over Kampuchea eliminated thousands of people belonging to minority groups. Groups like the ethnic Vietnamese of Kampuchea fled to Vietnam as refugees, after the Khmer Rouge launched a radio appeal for the “final solution” to the Vietnamese problem. Within a few months, approximately 150,000 refugee warriors from the camps in Vietnam, marched back to take Phnom Penh, “having been simultaneously organised, trained, and readied by the Vietnamese for the invasion of Kampuchea which took place in December that same year (1978).”<sup>50</sup>

4. Protest Against Occupation: The Palestinian refugee warriors fought a protracted resistance known as the Intifada, in the West Bank and Gaza against occupying Israeli forces. Their methods were at first non-violent (economic boycotts, sit-ins, etc.), then semi-violent (stone throwing at occupying forces), and finally violent, with the throwing of Molotov cocktails and the hijackings of airliners in the seventies to draw international attention to their cause.

5. Reaction Against Protracted Official Inaction: When refugees are subjected to an interminable waiting period in camps, with very little international attention paid to their cause, they begin to feel that if they do not take matters into their own hands, no one else will advocate on their behalf. When, rather than languish in a refugee camp, they begin to feel that there are few other options, but to take up arms, refugee warrior communities are created. The Palestinian refugee warriors are the prime example of this, having now waited for over 50 years for a solution to their situation.

6. Protest Against Forced Integration: When faced with the prospect of forced cultural assimilation in their host country, minority groups who have been traditionally semi-autonomous may flee to avoid this. This was the case with the Hmong hill tribes, whom the Lao government wanted to forcibly integrate after the revolutionary struggle to form the Lao Democratic Republic. “The Hmong had formed the mainstay of the CIA-trained “royalist” forces during the war, and had continued their resistance after the revolution.”<sup>51</sup> This refugee warrior community was born in the refugee camps in remote northern Thailand, where the Hmong and their dependants took shelter. As refugee warriors, their mandate was to continuously show active resistance to the new regime in Laos.

7. Conscription: Sometimes, inmates of refugee camps have few choices. The young, male component of the refugee camp may inevitably be conscripted by a guerilla force who use the camps as recruitment and training centres. If they do not agree to join these forces, the guerrillas may kill them, and/or take vengeance on their dependants. For example, Sudanese refugees who had taken shelter in the Itang camp in Ethiopia, 35 miles from the Sudanese border were forced to join the Sudan Popular Liberation Army (SPLA) guerilla force and become refugee warriors against their will.

8. Conflictual Regional Systems: When there is a regional proliferation of national liberation movements of different ideologies, warring for supremacy, conflictual regional systems inevitably generate refugee warriors. For example, the Bodo, Naga and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) warriors whose separatist movement has been further sparked by the instability of the Indian northeast.

9. Self Defence: When the country of first asylum is itself unable to protect refugees, then the refugees themselves have to become responsible for their own defence, and may need to become refugee warriors. An example is the case of Southern Africa, where South Africa generated thousands of refugees in the mid-eighties, who, due to other conflicts between South Africa, Namibia and Angola could not trust any government to protect them, and hence needed to take up arms in self defence.

10. External Support/Diaspora: When refugee communities are offered external assistance and training facilities to become refugee warriors, the propensity for refugees to become refugee warriors is higher. In the case of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, if the state of Tamil Nadu in India had not invested a vast quantity of money in training camps for the separatist movement, there would naturally have been fewer refugee warriors. A large diaspora who can provide funds for weaponry and training also contributes to the creation of refugee warriors. For example, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora who raise funds for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Also, the Sikh diaspora resident in England and Canada who funded the Sikh separatist drive for Khalistan in the 1980s.

In the Lhotshampa context, we see several parallels with characteristics that have either pushed or pulled refugees to engage in conflict, which lead us to surmise that for multiple reasons, a refugee warrior movement may indeed form. A key factor in the push towards forming a refugee warrior movement would be the protracted official inaction that has thus far been the norm. The negotiations between HMG/N and RGOB have not produced much of substance thus far, and patience among the refugees is wearing thin. Lhotshampa refugee youth may be pulled towards forming an active refugee warrior movement by the regional proliferation of national liberation movements surrounding them. The desire to form a separate country for the Lhotshampa people is not yet in evidence, however the desire for reclamation of their territory is strong.

There is very little possibility of external support for the Lhotshampa youth, as there are at present only three Lhotshampa residing outside Nepal, Bhutan and India, working for international development agencies. In recent times, many young Lhotshampa activists seek asylum abroad, and are granted it. These youth are a potential diaspora, who could provide the necessary funding for future militarisation. In any event, grassroots movements like the Maoist

movement in Nepal have shown that militant and anti-national activity can begin with very little weaponry.

## Chapter 4: Lhotshampa Youth as Refugee Warriors

Is there potential for the Lhotshampa to evolve into militarised refugee warriors? The propensity of the Lhotshampa youth to turn to militancy is assessed with the help of a series of interviews with refugee youth leadership, their teachers, camp officials, and the elder refugee leadership.<sup>52</sup>

The Lhotshampa youth between the ages of 10 and 25, number about 50,000. The youth of school going age, are for the most part domiciled in the refugee camps, and live in huts with their families, while attending the Caritas run school. The school provides education, using a parallel syllabus identical to that used by other Nepali schools up to the 10th grade. In addition, the children are taught Dzonghka, the official language of Bhutan, and Bhutanese geography. Caritas offers special scholarships for a select few to study beyond the Nepali School Leaving Certificate (SLC). Students who are unable to study further, may join a vocational centre within the camp for a year, to learn carpentry or basic electrical skills.

Education beyond the 10th grade has to be entirely funded by the refugee families.<sup>53</sup> The children of the relatively well-off Lhotshampa families study in Kalimpong and Darjeeling, and will probably continue in the Indian education system. A small percentage of the other Lhotshampa youth do study further, and fund their studies by working as teachers in the schools in Jhapa and Morang districts, also in Kathmandu and other parts of Nepal. Their work as teachers throughout Nepal is illegal, and in late 1999, between 10-15 refugee teachers were picked up by the Nepali police, and forcibly returned to the camps.<sup>54</sup>

There are about 100 Lhotshampa youth currently in Kathmandu, attached to Tribhuvan University where they attend courses part time. The legal status of their enrolment in Nepali universities is ambiguous, and many must pretend to be from Nepali speaking pockets of India, like West Bengal and Sikkim. If found to be Bhutanese, they would have to pay a foreign student fee of US\$1500, which is far beyond their means. One youth employed at the Caritas project office in Damak, Jhapa, mentioned that there was talk of Lhotshampa youth working in India on road construction projects and even as porters during the recent Kargil war in Kashmir. Many of the Lhotshampa youth also work on road construction projects in remote districts in Nepal, as labourers, however, most have very few options once they finish their education in the camps, at age 16.

Many of the refugee youth help out in the many splinter organisations/parties that have formed among the refugees during the past ten years, and some have formed their own youth wings or independent youth organisations. Most of the youth interviewed are from these key youth organisations, based in Jhapa district. Their average age is between 19-25, and most of them have spent approximately eight to nine years in the camps. They are from varying socio-economic backgrounds. About half of them live inside the camps, in huts with their parents and extended family. Others share small flats in Kathmandu with other students, but return to the Jhapa camps for major holidays and to supervise the running of their parties and organisations. The majority of them have studied up to Class 8 Level, thereby attending school until the age of 14. Several of them have studied further, and are now attending university and college, and

simultaneously running youth organisations. In-depth interviews were conducted with the refugee youth leadership, over a five-month period, between September 1999 and January 2000.

It must be stressed that the refugee youth leadership is not necessarily representative of the feelings and motivations of the larger numbers of youth that they represent. Most of the refugee youth who are still attending school do want to leave the camps, and many do so as soon as they are able, in pursuit of higher education. Their motivations and desires are similar to youth of the same age group anywhere – they desire a good education, and later, aspire to earn an adequate income. Many of the younger children who were born in the refugee camps, or arrived here when very young, have never seen Bhutan, and have very little idea of what they have left behind. The intensity of their desire for repatriation will necessarily vary from those of youth who were “actively” involved in the process of becoming a refugee. However, if militancy is to come from within the camps, it will most likely originate from among the refugee leadership. As we see from the Sri Lankan experience, a handful of persons determined to fight an insurgency war can garner the loyalty of many others, who may not necessarily have otherwise become leaders themselves.

Many of the youth belong to “youth wings” of already well-established parties. The Druk National Youth Congress (DNYC), is the youth wing, formed in 1998, of Chairman Rongthong Kinley’s party, the Druk National Congress (DNC). The party is very active in the area, and numbers between 50-55 members from all the ethnic groups. The youth from the DNYC mentioned that they wanted to raise awareness that not only the Lhotshampa had problems with the Bhutanese regime, but that all ethnic groups in Bhutan were suppressed. They felt that their ethnic group had been severely discriminated against in Bhutan, and expressed a strong desire that “justice be done.” They also expressed great anger at their present situation, and mentioned that they would not “sit around and wait forever for a political solution” to be found to the problems of the refugees.<sup>55</sup>

Refugee youth of the DMT were less aggressive in their approach to finding a solution, and seemed confident that a political solution would soon emerge. This is a relatively new party, formed as a breakaway faction of the DNC in December 1998. The party chairman and most of the members are Sarchchop, and their aim is to bring democracy to Bhutan. The DMT youth had clearly been less discriminated against within Bhutan, and had had access to more educational facilities. Two of them had been educated at the prestigious National Institute of Teacher Training in Bhutan, and were at present working illegally in schools in the Jhapa district and also giving private tuition to the children of local Nepali families to earn extra money. This group had left Bhutan later than most other refugee youth, and were thus relatively new entrants to the refugee situation. Being Sarchchop, they did not have strong links with the other ethnic groups in Jhapa, and seemed to operate very much on their own. These youth had been jailed, questioned, and harassed by Bhutanese authorities because of their links to the dissident movement of the DNC. There are about 20 Sarchchop families who live outside the refugee camps, in Birtamod, Jhapa.

Since the DMT youth are by and large new arrivals, they still have very strong links with Bhutan, and worry about their families who are left inside, and potential harassment from the authorities. These youth were also worried that they lacked an “official” refugee status”, since

they lived outside the camps, and fear arrest or bad treatment from the Nepali police. Although they want to return to a democratic Bhutan, they are wary of democracy and the changes it brings, as they say that, “In Bhutan, civics, democracy and freedom are never discussed in the school curriculum. Yet, even if we get democracy over there, in Bhutan, people need to learn from outside, and implement it properly – or it will spoil the country.”<sup>56</sup> The DMT youth are firm believers in the Shabdrung, an exiled spiritual leader of Bhutan, who enjoys a following similar to that of the Dalai Lama. One of their DMT party’s goals is to reinstate the Shabdrung as the ruler of Bhutan. These youth, on average seem unlikely to experience the same levels of frustration as the others we interviewed, primarily because their access to economic resources is greater, enabling them to live outside the refugee camps, and think of a future in India, or even in Nepal.

One of the most active youth organisations at present is the Youth of Bhutan (YOB). Run by university students during their free time, the organisation is a member of the International Union of Socialist Youth. They have made several international links, and have three members currently raising funds for their movement in western countries. These youth have, on average spent seven years growing up in the refugee camps, amidst the various splinter parties. They express a clear disregard for the elder leadership and their attempts towards a political resolution of their refugee issues. These youth are politically aware, and commented that they felt ashamed that they had not done nearly as much as they should have, considering their age. When pressed further, they clarified their statement by citing the example of the LTTE, and the Burmese students, who were of the same age group, and had accomplished much more that they, in terms of bringing the struggle of their people to international attention. The YOB has been politically active for about five years now, and as such are one of the longest standing refugee organisations that has not fractured. Their aim is full repatriation of all their people with dignity and honour. Many of them were underground activists for democracy while still in Bhutan, and used to assist their seniors in distributing anti-government pamphlets in schools etc. These youth were among the first wave of refugees to flee Bhutan, and took shelter for a short time in West Bengal, among leftist sympathisers, whom they say have helped shape their ideology. These youth feel that they are now reaching the limits of political appeal to the Government of Bhutan. They have spent considerable amounts of time and money in the past five years organising cycle rallies and peaceful demonstrations to indicate their desire to return to Bhutan, and to draw international attention to their cause. They have strong links with Bhutan, and often slip back across the border to visit family and friends. In this, they are assisted by a student organisation in Assam, with whom they have a supportive agreement. The Assamese students assist YOB in evading the Indian and Bhutanese authorities who guard the border. YOB also has members in small towns near the Indo-Bhutanese border who keep them abreast of developments inside Bhutan. These youth feel that the current talks between HMG/N and RGOB may lead to some limited repatriation. However, they feel that their destiny lies very much in their own hands, and have, to a great extent now lost faith in the older refugee leadership.

Another large student organisation is the Students’ Union of Bhutan (SUB), which encompasses all students under 25. It is largely an inactive organisation, however between 10-12 members participate as a “youth voice” in the Bhutan Refugee Repatriation Resolution Committee (BRRRC). The BRRRC, led by S.B. Subba, is an umbrella organisation, which is attempting cohesion of the different splinter parties. BRRRC wants to work solely for the repatriation of the

refugees, and does not want to involve itself in questions of democracy, or self-rule. These youth are fast appearing as a “moderate” voice, and gaining the respect of the NGO community who work with the refugees.

Many of the student organisations did not wish their plans to be discussed in detail in this paper, but did express a latent militancy when interviewed.

The elder leadership of the Lhotshampa refugees seem complacent about their power, and feel that the youth still have respect for their leadership. Despite acknowledging that their leadership has been fractured, and still lacks a common purpose, they believe that the youth will not take up arms, but wait patiently for a solution. The elder leadership believe in fate, and in the natural restraint that comes with growing up as a sub-group in Bhutan. They doubt that the youth think independently of the party line, and as such feel that the youth will not jeopardize the chances of a peaceful repatriation for the other refugees by taking up arms. Some of the elder leadership also expressed surprise that the youth wanted to work in schools and leave the camps, as they felt that it would be best if the youth stayed in the camps and remained “close to their people.”<sup>57</sup> The refugee leadership also cited the older refugees’ feelings of abandonment, and isolation. The older refugees feel that while the youth were moving on with their lives, they themselves had no options, and were bound to live out their days in their huts within the camps.

Teachers of the Lhotshampa refugee youth vary in their perceptions of the current situation. The older teachers, who used to practise in Bhutan, have traditionally been accorded much respect, as teaching is a venerated profession in Bhutan. Their comments on their students indicate that the refugee students seem less inclined to work well in the camp atmosphere, and that their behaviour has become less respectful and more disruptive. Interactions with the local Nepali culture are usually blamed for such changes in the students, as overall, the standard of education in Bhutan is superior to that of Nepal.

The younger cadre of teachers, who have not had much teaching experience in Bhutan prior to becoming refugees, focus mainly on how politicized the refugee youth have become. Compared to what they would have been exposed to in Bhutan, in Nepal they have had the freedom to study civics, rights, democracies etc. and have, as a result become very aware of the situation they are in, and the potential power, or lack thereof, that they wield. The refugee youth are also exposed to mass media here in Nepal, and this has contributed to changed perceptions, say their teachers. Demographics are changing, as more children, in particular, young girls, attend schools than they did back in Bhutan, where they were needed for farm work. Here in the camps, even adult literacy is growing as there are few other activities that the refugees are permitted to engage in, within the camps.

Some of the teachers are certain that their students have plans to take up arms in the future. “A group of former students has now left for Southern Bhutan to train alongside ULFA, a separatist organisation which uses the jungles in Southern Bhutan as hideouts for guerilla warfare. Their plan is to acquire the skills necessary for guerilla warfare, although as yet they have not formally acquired any weaponry.”<sup>58</sup> Several teachers also mentioned that the recent Indian Airlines hijacking that took place on a flight out of Kathmandu has fired the imagination of some of the

refugee youth, as they have since been consistently discussing different methods of bringing their plight to international attention.

The Jesuit priests from the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) who work with the refugee youth in schools and in the vocational centres feel that if solutions are not found shortly to the refugee crisis, there will be trouble. The refugee youth are reaching a peak of frustration – the JRS can help only a very few to study further, learn a trade or work in the project offices, as for the others, the camp authorities are slowly beginning to lose control. The police who are employed in the camps to maintain law and order say that there are no real problems, because the majority of the refugee youth, who are over school going age, are simply not around the camps.<sup>59</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Nepal is currently facing Maoist insurgency operations against the government. No links between the Maoists and the refugee youth have yet been cemented, but some of the refugee youth say that they have been approached by the Maoists. They have thus far declined to build any ties, because they feel that since their aims are not related, any relationship will be short.

Our interviews show that there is a latent militancy that lies, at present, dormant and smouldering within the Lhotshampa youth. Distinct frustration is present, and if the talks between the RGOB and HMG/N do not bear fruit in the near future, it seems likely that some form of activism will begin to take place. Interviews also stress that there is a clear divide between what the elder leadership expect of the youth, and how the youth see the future. The elder refugee leadership has been advocating the process of peaceful dialogue for the past decade; the refugee youth feel that it has produced no results and are ready for a change.

### **Political Leadership and Militancy**

When an ethnic minority has a strong political leadership, one that attempts to find feasible solutions for its constituency, the potential progression towards militarisation may be somewhat delayed. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil protests against discrimination in the fifties and sixties were largely non-violent and took the form of political discourse. The LTTE was formed by the then 19-year-old Prabhakaran a full 25 years after militancy among Tamil youth could have surfaced. The reason in this case was the political leadership by Tamil politicians like Chelvanayagam and Ponnambalam; strong leaders, who, had their Sinhala counterparts been more accommodating, could have achieved considerable victories for their people. The Tamil youth only resorted to militancy when it became clear that negotiations with the Sri Lankan government were not going to result in any compromises. Strong, non-violent political advocacy did much to stave off militarisation for some years among this group.

In contrast, the Lhotshampa have so far had no strong political leadership. Leadership fails when it does not fully represent the aspirations of the majority of its people. For the main part, the Lhotshampa want to return to their lands in Bhutan and to enjoy a safe existence there. For them, any other goals are at present extraneous to the issue, and should be addressed by the leadership after achieving repatriation of the people, with guarantees from the RGOB that they will be granted rights similar to those enjoyed before 1988. Unfortunately, the Lhotshampa refugee leadership has lost sight of the goal to be achieved, and has consequently failed to represent the people's aspirations. Since Bhutanese of all ethnic groups have very little exposure to politics, the majority of the leadership has very little experience in managing a successful political party.

Frustration with the elder leadership's inaction thus far may push the Lhotshampa youth towards militancy.

The refugee youth, growing up in the camps have watched their fractured leadership's progress thus far with growing frustration. Had the leadership come together under the aegis of a determined, purposeful leader, a breakthrough might have been achieved by now, and HMG/N may have even attempted to seek the opinion of the dissident leadership while negotiating the bilateral talks with RGOB.

For the past decade, the Lhotshampa refugee leadership has vacillated between various aims and strategies. Their struggle to achieve repatriation for their people with honour and dignity has so far taken the form of peaceful self-expression, but has been unsuccessful. The leadership has now splintered into a multitude of different organisations. Their multiple objectives include deposing Bhutan's monarchy, achieving democracy in Bhutan, repatriation with honour and dignity and reinstalling the Shabdrung, a now exiled spiritual leader on the throne of Bhutan from which he was dispossessed about a hundred years ago.

Many of the refugee leadership formerly held high positions in the civil service in Bhutan, and thus are in possession of the minimum qualifications necessary to serve their constituents in the capacity of political leaders. For example, the party president and General Secretary of the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), who plan to establish a constitutional monarchy in a multi-party democratic set-up upon their return to Bhutan, respectively held the posts of Managing Director of the State Trading Corporation of Bhutan, and economist with the Ministry of Trade and Industry while in Bhutan.<sup>60</sup>

The bulk of the refugee leadership prefers to live outside the camps which contributes to their distance from the refugee population, the vast majority of whom are peasants. The lack of strong, directed refugee leadership among the Lhotshampa has contributed to the rising frustration levels among the refugee youth.

None of the parties have been formed through refugee votes, with the exception of the Bhutan Refugee Repatriation Resolution Council (BRRRC), which was formed a year ago, through camp-wide elections. Most of the parties have been created through party splits and disagreements. The leadership which has no diaspora to fund its activities and to maintain or increase its constituency, must continue to spark the interest of different groups within the refugees, with promises of improved conditions once they return to Bhutan.

Rongthong Kinley, a northern Bhutanese who was dissatisfied with the monarchy's policies and fled to Nepal was perhaps the Lhotshampa's best hope. His agenda was to bring constitutional reform to Bhutan, a by-product of which would have been the repatriation of the refugees. During his first few years of advocacy, he was acclaimed and welcomed by the Lhotshampa parties, as they felt that a Northerner party would be a serious threat to the regime's legitimacy. At the request of the RGOB, Kinley was arrested by the Indian Government, on the basis of an extradition pact with Bhutan (formalised a month after his arrest) in New Delhi, in 1997. Although since his release, he continues to live in India under police supervision. In recent times, with funding running low, the Delhi-based Druk National Congress (DNC) is losing the edge that it used to have. Their main interest at the moment is the formation of an Indo-Bhutan

friendship society, and they seem somewhat distanced from what is happening in the camps in Jhapa.<sup>61</sup>

Critics of the elder refugee leadership are fuming, and say that the Lhotshampa leaders have done no lobbying. “Ages ago they should have been filing complaints with the Human Right Commission’s Sub-Commission on Minorities and Discrimination, with the Special Rapporteurs on torture, forced evictions, disappearances, and with the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. They should have used the ILO mechanisms and submitted memoranda to the political counsellors in the New Delhi embassies before the Bhutan Aid Consortium meetings.”<sup>62</sup>

As shown in our interviews, the youth have, for the most part, lost faith in the older refugee leadership, who they feel have lost a sense of the urgency of the situation. Many of them verbally express a latent militancy, but say that they are still waiting for peaceful options to be exhausted. They feel that at most, two or three more rounds of bilateral talks can take place, but after that the RGOB’s unwillingness to cooperate will become evident to all concerned. They have made contact with Indian rebel forces across the border, and interviews revealed that a small number of Bhutanese refugee youth are at present training with ULFA forces inside the southern Bhutanese jungles. In return for assisting with ULFA sorties, Bhutanese refugee youth are gathering valuable knowledge of how a guerilla force operates. They also serve as unofficial border police on the Assamese side, enabling their compatriots to go in and out of Bhutan for short visits to their family. The nascent youth movements agree that if and when they take up arms, it must be inside Bhutan, and with the implicit cooperation of ULFA.

Due to lack of funds to purchase weapons and minimal training, it is our feeling that the protests of the Lhotshampa youth may begin in a mild form, with a view to later acceleration and intensity. Even if full-scale militancy is not yet a possibility, many of the youth leaders feel that small acts of terrorism will perhaps, discourage the RGOB from resettling other ethnic groups in the southern districts, a project that is currently under way. Their activities would be different from those of the anti-nationals who operated in the early nineties, mainly for financial gain, against the remaining Lhotshampa population. The targets of these refugee warriors would be the government installations, bridges, government officials – and they plan to, if necessary, maintain a campaign of terror, assisted by the local Lhotshampa population. Their thinking seems modelled on current Maoist activities which started without many weapons, but is now beginning to unsettle the Nepali government. Like many refugee warrior communities, the refugee warriors will probably continue to operate from their host nation, in this case the Jhapa camps in southern Nepal.

The Lhotshampa youth bring to mind the stone throwing youth of the Intifada, who represented a repressed refugee population pushed beyond endurance, that had lost respect for elders and their authority that lay muzzled. The Lhotshampa too are youth that may resort to taking matters into their own hands, for they have little to lose, and much to gain by drawing international attention to their plight.

### **The Timeline of Militancy**

As the cases of the Palestinian Intifada and the LTTE show, many refugee warrior communities

develop several years after the lines of battle are first drawn. Usually, it is the second generation of politically aware youth who take up arms, having grown frustrated with their elders' platitudes of "bringing peace" or "finding a political solution". The first generation ethnic minority who is discriminated against, tends to use the vehicle of peaceful self expression to achieve their goals. Their goals also tend to be more moderate, for example demanding federal devolution, rather than a separate state, as in the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils in the 1950s. For instance, the Bhutanese Lhotshampa, while still resident in Bhutan asked only that their children be educated in the Nepali language - they did not demand that Nepali be given equal status with Dzongkha as a national language.

The Palestinian refugees, during the first 20 years of Israeli occupation in the territories were almost completely inactive in terms of protest or attempts to change their situation. Don Peretz remarks that "The first phase of mourning from 1948 to the 1960s, was denial. The Palestinians did not believe that what had happened to them really did happen; many kept the keys to their homes in Jaffa, Haifa, or elsewhere, hoping - even believing - that they would return any day, any second. The next phase was anger, when they began to accept reality. Anger was seen in their support for military attacks and guerilla raids on Israel."<sup>63</sup> The first generation of refugees used non-violent methods like boycotting Israeli made goods, demonstrations, and organised efforts at non-cooperation to make their voices heard. The second generation, who were born and raised in the camps, were described by Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttub as children who had learned the language of resistance early in life. Having been raised in a camp environment, the children of the Palestinian refugee camps often learnt the names of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) warriors before they learnt to read and write. Most parents supported their youth in their militant activities, as "To be the parent of a young man or woman who has become a martyr in the struggle against the occupation, though tragic, is a source of pride, a badge of communal honor."<sup>64</sup> Militancy took nearly 40 years to achieve its full expression among the Palestinian refugee youth.

When examining the case of the Lhotshampa refugee youth, we see that we are only perhaps a third or a fourth of the way down the road towards militancy. The potential and the possibilities of what may happen ahead are extremely serious, and need to be carefully considered by the refugee community, the international community, HMG/N, the RGOB and the Government of India. When examining other refugee movements that have turned militant, we see that some of them, like those mentioned above, took up arms a full 20 years after their initial struggle began.

### **Education Levels, Exposure to Outside Forces, and Militarisation**

Higher levels of education, along with correspondingly high political awareness can contribute to hastening the prospect of militarisation. Once again, to use the example of the Sri Lankan Tamil youth, we see that they were more educated than the Lhotshampa refugee youth, and also had relatively more exposure to the outside forces that might have pushed them towards militancy earlier. This may explain why it has taken a relatively longer period of time for the nationalism of the Lhotshampa to turn to militancy, or even other milder forms of activism. In the Lhotshampa case, there was very little politicization of the issue before the Lhotshampa left Bhutan. The Lhotshampa were a farming population, with a handful of activists and intellectuals, most of who had been educated in India. In clear contrast to the Palestinian and Sri Lankan refugee populations, the Lhotshampa were not well educated. However, the Lhotshampa youth in

the camp have had access to considerably more education than their parents' generation. This has increased the refugee youth's expectations, and will correspondingly increase their frustrations when faced with little or no employment opportunities.

The experience of expulsion was something that the Lhotshampa peasants were completely unprepared for, and the first few years, predictably, have been spent in shock, denial and adjustment to their new lives, with hopes that they will be able to return to Bhutan in the immediate future. Although they were not wealthy while still in Bhutan, most of them did own land and small farmhouses. They were used to space, and the transition to a cramped refugee camp has not been easy. It is only now that the full realisation of their position is beginning to dawn upon them, only now that they feel that their date of return may not be particularly close, and only now that the seeds of militant activism are beginning to be sown among the refugee youth.

In summary, there are several factors that point to the likelihood of the Lhotshampa youth taking up arms to become a refugee warrior community. The lack of a strong leadership among the refugees may leave a vacuum that the refugee youth may attempt to fill by taking up arms. There seems to be little likelihood of the refugees assimilating into the host population. Since many of the refugees are not highly educated, this could lead to a delay in greater politicization and exposure, both crucial components of well conducted militant activism. However, the Lhotshampa youth are relatively better educated than their elders, and as in the cases of the Maoists of Nepal, or the Chakma of Bangladesh, we note that literacy levels do not necessarily play a primary part in grassroots rebel movements.

Further, when viewed in the context of other refugee warrior movements, we see that the Lhotshampa are perhaps just coming out of a stage of denial, and moving towards the next stage, that of anger at their situation. Popular perception of the Lhotshampa refugee problem is that since, for 10 years, there has been no activism, or notable progress on the issue, it is unlikely that there will be any extreme form of militant activism. However, we suggest that when viewed in the appropriate time frame, there is indeed scope for militant activism. The roots of militancy are at present, in their infancy. However, unless any significant progress is made in the resolution of the refugee issue, the Governments of Bhutan, Nepal and India may face considerable problems in the near future in this regard.

In the next chapter, is discussed. The consequences of the potential for militarisation on regional security.

## **Chapter 5: Consequences of Delayed Action**

The implications of potential militancy among the Bhutanese Lhotshampa are grave. With regard to intra-regional implications, the socio-cultural contiguities in many cases spill over the territorial confines of the adjacent states and complicate in the process the linkages of 'neighbourhood' and 'nationhood'. Thus, ethnic violence in one state may bring in its neighbourhood refugees as well as political activists, making it a sanctuary or the base for secessionists.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Current State of Play**

Most situations involving refugees have several actors, each of whom attempt to optimise the situation for themselves. Power relations between the refugee leadership in the Jhapa camps, HMG/N and the RGOB have thus far been complex. The lack of clarity in their attempted resolutions has resulted in minimal attention being paid to the refugee issue at an international level.

The Bhutanese government has thus far been the most accomplished player in the game, by managing to draw out any talks and possible resolution of the issue for an entire decade. As discussed earlier in this paper, the RGOB initially claimed that it knew nothing about the refugees, allowing no possibility of talks during the first two years of the crisis. After an international outcry, and Nepali efforts to bring Bhutan to the negotiating table, bilateral talks began. Bhutan managed to convince HMG/N to agree to jointly categorize the refugees in the camps into four different categories, which allowed Bhutan to indulge in calculated procrastination while dealing with the refugee issue.

During the seven years since the categorisation was agreed to by HMG/N, Nepal has continually tried to address the broader issue of the refugees and their return, whereas Bhutan has referred only to these categories and related procedural trivia. Remarkably, Bhutan, a country heavily dependent on international aid, has managed to avoid a large amount of negative press, and continues to keep its donors happy by stating that it will certainly repatriate any bonafide Bhutanese citizens, if any are found among the refugees. It is said that the "Bhutanese government seems to adopt a two-track policy to conduct its policy towards the refugee problem. First, it keeps a low profile by keeping away from all kinds of informal discourses in universities and other institutions but keeps on sending good-will messages for the success of such seminars and conferences. Second, it seems to cultivate intellectuals and other people, thereby creating its own support structure outside Bhutan."<sup>66</sup>

The Nepali government, completely inexperienced in such negotiations, has perhaps failed to see the possible Bhutanese strategy of procrastination. Not only have they allowed the classification of foreign nationals on Nepali soil, but they have agreed to assist in this process. It will be difficult for HMG/N to reach a well-informed decision regarding whether or not acts that the Bhutanese refugees had committed in Bhutan were criminal or not, as these must be judged according to Bhutanese law. The categorization process has all the elements to ensure that the verification process can continue to be extended at will by Bhutan, since most of the information

necessary for the procedure (tax records, citizenship registers, emigration data) is held by Bhutan.

India has so far played a minor role in the game, yet the results of her lack of involvement have been important. The GOI has so far chosen not to intervene, and insists that the matter is purely a bilateral one. However, since India is responsible for guiding Bhutan's defence policy, India could pressurise the King of Bhutan to repatriate the refugees without delay. India is also implicitly involved, as to get from Bhutan to Nepal the refugees have to cross Indian territory. India's rationale for the lack of involvement is that it does not want to appear hegemonic in a regional context. Still rebuilding the morale of the Indian Army a decade after their unsuccessful stint in northern Sri Lanka, the Indian government has become more cautious regarding regional involvement. However, when asked about India's reaction to potential militancy among the refugees, ex-Foreign Secretary J N Dixit commented that "If there is a move towards militancy, India would take firm and decisive action. Rather than ask the Bhutanese to take back the refugees, it would be more likely that we would suppress militancy. India's interest would be to quash it. We will not allow something that has a bearing on internal security to be resolved by resorting to diplomacy."<sup>67</sup>

India is economically committed to funding a large portion of Bhutan's five-year development plans, and also maintains certain "strategic" roads inside Bhutan. This is largely a security measure so that Bhutan can be used as an access zone to the state of Arunachal Pradesh, some portion of which is claimed by the Chinese to be their territory, and other parts of the China border. The narrow portion of land between Bhutan and Nepal also serves as a vital gateway to the other Northeast states of Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Assam, where violent insurgencies have raged for the past two decades. This region also serves as a buffer zone with China, and is therefore of strategic importance. The Indian government has been trying to flush out militant groups who have been active in the Northeast, who have received training and maintain insurgency bases in Burma, Bangladesh, China and Bhutan. Many of the militant groups have been waging a long drawn out separatist war against the security forces, and their field and jungle craft is among the best in the world. The Northeast has long been, a festering sore, for India which the authorities can do very little about. A recent newspaper article showed that within the first 48 days of this year, 39 persons were killed, 22 injured, 23 raped, 16 kidnapped, and 35 houses torched.<sup>68</sup> Although these figures may be relatively small compared to other insurgency wars like Sri Lanka, they are significant enough to conclude that the Northeast of India remains unstable, and that should the Lhotshampa youth become militant, there will be no dearth of organisations with whom they could link up.

### **Why the Current State of Play Cannot Continue**

For various reasons, none of the players in the game can continue to maintain their current positions for very much longer. As discussed above the GOI is currently dealing with an extremely volatile situation in the Indian Northeast, where separatist movements like the ULFA and Bodo Security Force, among others are active and growing. At present, the governments of India and Bhutan are negotiating the tricky issue of the ULFA cadres. When Bangladesh clamped down on the ULFA forces that were using Bangladeshi territory as a safe haven, the Bhutanese government is rumoured to have invited the ULFA into Bhutan to assist them in evicting the non-national Lhotshampa from Bhutanese territory. There are now over 800 ULFA

cadres who maintain training camps in the jungles of Southern Bhutan.<sup>69</sup> The Indian government is desperate to flush the ULFA cadres out of the Bhutanese jungles, but for this, needs the cooperation of the Bhutanese government.

The Bhutanese government is under pressure to cooperate with India, but is fearful of retribution from ULFA. Kuensel, Bhutan's national newspaper said that "His Majesty the King has toured the south-eastern Dzongkhags to review the security situation in areas affected by the presence of the armed militants from Assam....Speaking to the students and the business community, His Majesty said that, as they were aware, peace and tranquillity had been disrupted by the presence of the armed militants from Assam. ...expressed regret that the Nu 5,000 million Dungsam Cement Project could not be implemented as scheduled because of the serious security threat prevailing."<sup>70</sup> The same article mentioned that the National Assembly of Bhutan's 77th Session had taken out a resolution on the ULFA-Bodo problem. "...If members of the business community did not sell rations to the militants in their area or help them in any way they would not find it conducive to stay and the security situation in Nganglam would return to normal."<sup>71</sup>

The difficulties faced by the Government of Bhutan were summarised in a report that stated "The royal government, His Majesty said, was negotiating with the ULFA leaders, and had repeatedly insisted they leave Bhutan. The militants had however stated that they had no option but to take sanctuary in Bhutan for a few years till their objective of independence of Assam was achieved. His Majesty pointed out that if they did not leave, and steps are taken to stop supply and sale of rations to them, there was every possibility of the militants retaliating by targeting government officials, student institutions and sabotaging development facilities and services."<sup>72</sup>

The Royal Bhutan Polytechnic in Dewathang, Samdrup Jonghkar, a southern district has been moved to a safer location due to the threat posed by the ULFA militants in the area. With important power projects coming on line shortly, Bhutan needs technically qualified persons. Approximately a thousand students have graduated from the Polytechnic since its inception in 1972, and any disruption of this facility would mean a serious set-back for Bhutan. Bhutan's present dilemma is that it cannot risk endangering relationships with India, which provides a substantial chunk of development project funding to Bhutan, nor can it withstand the tremendous damage that ULFA, if thwarted, can inflict on the Bhutanese economy.

A recent article in Nepal's Kathmandu Post bears evidence that the security climate in India's Northeast is becoming more turbulent. The state of Assam has formally declared that it wishes to launch a joint military crackdown with Bhutan on separatist Assamese militants based in Bhutan. Assam's Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta said "A joint military offensive" by Indian and Bhutanese troops was the only answer to tackling the resurgent separatist movement in the northeast. The situation with the ULFA cadres has become so grave that the Chief Minister has even offered to resign if ULFA agrees to cease their separatist activities in response.<sup>73</sup>

What has this to do with the refugee issue? The present climate of apprehension can only be exacerbated by the appearance of the Lhotshampa refugee youth on the scene. As discussed earlier, several Lhotshampa youth are currently training with ULFA. If the Bhutanese government does agree to repatriate the Lhotshampa refugees, and pre-empt the situation, they will return to repopulate lands and farms now lying empty. This could assist the task of the Royal Bhutanese Army in fighting the ULFA cadres. The time could be right for a "hearts and minds"

operation by the Bhutanese government – to seek the Lhotshampa populations’ help in defending the southern borders to the country. India would perhaps be well advised to lean on the Bhutanese government to repatriate the refugees without delay, as this would be advantageous to their own needs.

It is important for the RGOB to recognise that although the potential militancy of the Lhotshampa youth is, as of now, latent, if their diplomatic stonewalling continues unabated, they may soon face larger problems than they had once believed imaginable. In this context, there are many lessons to be learnt from the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. If the Sri Lankan government had acceded to earlier moderate demands, Tamil youth may not have been pushed to the brink and forced to take up arms, and may not have demanded a separate state for their people. The Sri Lankan government has now substantially compromised its stance, and the original advocates of self determination for the Tamil people would in all likelihood have been well pleased with the compromises made by the government thus far. However, since compromise was left too late, we find that the LTTE will now not negotiate, and will settle only for a separate land.

The RGOB need only make a partial effort at finding a solution to the refugee issue to spare themselves the trauma of a long drawn out war with the rebel youth. In all likelihood, if Bhutan asks India to intervene, a tripartite division of the refugees might be found acceptable to all parties concerned. However, the Bhutanese monarchy will have to take account of political changes that have been developing within the country to better accommodate the different ethnic groups, and may eventually have to transit to a constitutional monarchy.

It is significant that the Lhotshampa in the refugee camps continue to give importance to the Dzonghka language and insist that their children learn it, in preparation to go back to Bhutan. This fact should not be ignored, as it represents the fact that the Lhotshampa are still ready to negotiate, and remain willing to make compromises. This indicates that they may not want to embrace their ethnicity to the point of demanding equal language status for Nepali in Bhutan. Until now, the Lhotshampa seem content to live as a peaceful, sub-national group within Bhutan. Indeed, most feelings of ethno-consciousness within the Lhotshampa arose after being expelled from Bhutan. Said one refugee: “This feeling arises because the very reason we have been made refugees is that we speak Nepali. I used to feel Bhutanese first and Nepali second. Now it is the other way around.”<sup>74</sup>

The Lhotshampa refugee leadership, both senior and junior, cannot continue to wait indefinitely for the bilateral talks to bear fruit. As the junior leadership maintains – even if the two sides finally agree on the refugee categories and begin classification, it will probably result in a token number of refugees being repatriated. This will only lead to dissatisfaction within the remaining refugee population. The leadership needs to further internationalise the issue, before the power to do so is taken out of their hands. Already, the number of Nepalis who claim to be Bhutanese refugees, and seek asylum on this basis in Western countries is increasing. The unfortunate fact that a Nepali can easily pass as a Bhutanese Lhotshampa, only allows the RGOB more grist for its mill. This strengthens the RGOB’s claim that many of the refugees are not the Lhotshampa that they claim to be, but Nepalis from India or elsewhere who have moved to the Jhapa camps to gain UNHCR benefits.

Furthermore, it is alleged that the RGOB is beginning to resettle Sarchchop families in the now empty lands of the southern districts. According to refugee leaders who travelled to the Assamese border in February 2000, the resident Lhotshampa are at present being asked to help their new neighbours to adjust to life in the foothills. The repopulation programme may help to guard Bhutan's southern border from ULFA guerillas, but is a clear indication that the RGOB is not expecting the Lhotshampa refugees to return in the near future. If the Lhotshampa refugee leadership is to achieve a safe and honourable repatriation for their people, they need to act soon, to stem the resettlement process.

The situation in Jhapa and Morang districts in southern Nepal, where the refugee camps are based, is worsening daily. The Lhotshampa are alleged to be earning wages outside the camps and offering their services at a lower rate to undercut the local labour force. Newspaper articles allege that the Lhotshampa are "having their cake and eating it too", by accepting daily rations from UNHCR, yet seeking employment outside the camp.<sup>75</sup> Perception of the refugee situation by the host population has considerably worsened during the past six months, as reports say that refugees now buy televisions and radios (which the host population cannot afford) with their savings from illegal work. Lhotshampa women are also reported to be working as prostitutes in nearby areas; refugees say that these allegations are baseless, but it is undeniable that tensions in the area are rising. Unless the Nepali government takes clear steps to ensure that the refugees remain refugees awaiting repatriation, the socio-economic environment in these districts will continue to be under pressure.

Although India is under no pressure to do so, it would certainly improve relations between India and Nepal, should India put pressure on Bhutan to repatriate the refugees. After the 1989 trade blockade that India imposed on Nepal, severe economic hardship caused a revolution in Nepal which brought democracy, and the transition to the present constitutional monarchy in 1990. Resentment against what Nepalis see as Indian hegemony continues to run high in Nepal, in particular at the time of the writing of this paper, after the heavily tourism-dependent economy has taken a battering in the first quarter of 2000, largely due to the cessation of Indian Airlines flights to Nepal. More importantly for India, its fragile Northeast equation is increasingly in danger because of the instability within Bhutan. If the Lhotshampa can mitigate the danger presented by the ULFA cadres, by re-populating the southern districts of Bhutan, and thereby lessen the *carte blanche* that the militants enjoy at present within Bhutan, India will have every reason to encourage Bhutan to facilitate a speedy repatriation. Further, if as suggested by many intellectuals, Confidence Building Measures (CBM) can be implemented, it will surely act as a powerful instrument for removing the cobwebs of mistrust of the two countries.<sup>76</sup>

In summary, although our interviews show that militancy lies dormant at this point, since there are likely to be very few other options available to the Lhotshampa, we surmise that there is considerable potential for future militarisation among the refugee youth. As other groups in the region have shown, when frustration boils over, as in the case of the Nepali Maoist insurgents, very little initial investment is needed to start a guerilla movement. Other militant movements are active in the surrounding area, and the Lhotshampa youth are already making links with the most relevant organisations. Analysis of other youth insurgency movements shows us that the timeline of militancy can differ among refugee populations, so we conclude that in this context, there is still potential for the Lhotshampa to become militant. Our interviews with the refugee

youth show that although there is some potential for assimilation, many, having been educated at least up to the 8th standard, will not be satisfied with working as labourers in the foreseeable future.

The progress of the bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan thus far is a clear indicator of the RGOB's lack of interest in resolving the refugee issue. Interviews with government officials from both countries, show that while Nepal faces increasing pressure from concerned parties to facilitate a speedy repatriation for the Lhotshampa, Bhutan has few incentives to repatriate persons whom they maintain are not bona-fide Bhutanese citizens, and thereby have no place in the country.<sup>77</sup> It is also possible that Bhutan is concerned about the potential effect that the Lhotshampa refugee returnees might have on the peasant population that remained behind in southern Bhutan. Whether the refugee youth turn militant or not, the Bhutanese monarchy will have to shortly face the reality that economic progress will most likely bring with it political progress, which may be peaceful, or otherwise. The RGOB is currently pursuing a policy of greater grassroots democracy, which should set in place a useful framework for the inevitable future changes.

The fears of an ethnic minority trying to preserve its culture are understandable. The fear that a poor country, heavily dependent on foreign aid to feed its population, will be forced to feed illegal immigrants that it cannot afford, is also understandable. However, to place the burden of proving citizenship upon one's existing population is an entirely different matter. Instead of precipitating a potential insurgency war, perhaps Bhutan could now attempt to facilitate a speedy repatriation of the refugees. Once it has done so, it can put its affairs in order, tighten its borders to stop further illegal immigration, and allow for an administrative assessment of the Lhotshampa to ascertain which, if any, are illegal immigrants. The RGOB can then plan to negotiate on behalf of any Lhotshampa who have citizenship elsewhere, if it wishes them to return to those countries. If it does not want to involve itself, it could ask UNHCR to conduct an assessment of the refugees to ascertain how many of them did come from Bhutan. It has been suggested that a simple series of diagrams, which depict the village layout, can be easily constructed. This would enable the refugees to identify which house they lived in before coming to Nepal, and this in turn could be verified by their immediate previous neighbours.<sup>78</sup> This procedure is entirely feasible, and its integrity could be supervised by an independent organisation familiar with the refugees. Simple solutions such as this can be easily put in place to achieve a quicker resolution of the issue. There is still time to avoid the potential militarisation of the Lhotshampa youth. For all parties concerned, ignoring a situation that threatens to spin out of control in the near future, is inadvisable under the circumstances.

South Asia is home to many refugee populations; the Bangladeshi Chakma in India, the Tibetans and Sri Lankan Tamils in India, the Pakistanis in Bangladesh, and vice versa. Apart from the Tibetan refugees, who, through the immense surge of western interest in Buddhism and a consistent doctrine of non-violence, have succeeded in attracting a remarkable diaspora who fund their place of refuge, other refugee populations usually gain international attention on the occasions that they turn to violence. The Bhutanese refugee youth know this only too well, and continue to nurture their latent militancy. They know that there may soon come a time when all other options are exhausted, and it is their turn to play the game according to a new set of rules.

## Notes

1 Lhotshampa – “People of the South”

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3 White, J. Sikkim and Bhutan, 1909. First Indian reprint, (New Delhi: Sagar Book House, 1992), pp.13-14.

4 National Assembly of Bhutan, Resolutions, 18th Session, Autumn 1962

5 The 1985 Citizenship Act tightened requirements to become a Bhutanese citizen by mandating that a child would be entitled to Bhutanese citizenship if and only if both parents were Bhutanese citizens. This tightened the earlier Marriage Act which mandated that if a child’s father were a Bhutanese citizen, the child would then be entitled to Bhutanese citizenship.

6 National Assembly, Bhutan, Resolutions, 20th Session, Autumn 1964

“In support of the proposal submitted by the Ministry of Finance and the Thrimpon (High Court Judge), Thimphu, the members from Chapcha, Shemgang, Mongar and Dungsam requested the Assembly to introduce the payment of taxes by cash. It was accordingly decided to introduce the same, which was reported to His Majesty also.”

7 “Anti National Activities in Southern Bhutan Report” by The Government Of Bhutan, Thimphu, 1992

8 National Assembly, Bhutan, Resolutions, 13th Session, Fall 1959

9 People’s Forum For Human Rights, Bhutan (PFHRB), Bhutan: Forced Evictions and Human Rights (Kathmandu: March 1995), p. 3.

10 Ibid, p. 2.

11 Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan 1990, Central Statistical Office (CSO), Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu, July 1991.

12 “Also our official population figure is 1.3 million, but actually, it is closer to 600,000.” His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in an interview in Sunday, Calcutta, 28 October- 3 November 1990.

13 Approval for an official visit to Bhutan is still pending. Details presented here are collated from newspaper and magazine interviews of senior ranking Bhutanese officials during the early nineties.

14 The Bhutanese official concerned wished to remain un-named for the purpose of this paper. The population increase that he reports cannot be independently verified, except by RGOB statistics which are not available.

15 In 1992, militant activity had all but ceased in Garganda, West Bengal, and the camps had disappeared. The evidence in the RGOB’s 1992 report is from 1990.

16 Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan, An Update On The Terrorist Movement, August 1992, Published and Printed by:-The Department of Information, Thimphu, Bhutan, p. 22

17 Interview with R.Chethri, Activist on Bhutan Affairs, Kathmandu, October 23, 1999.

18 Interview with R.B. Basnet, President, Bhutan National Democratic Party, Kathmandu, August 12, 1999.

19 The Bhutan Review, January 1993, p.1

20 Dorji, K. “A View From Thimphu”, published in Bhutan: Perspectives on Conflict and Dissent, ed. Hutt, M. (Stirlingshire: Kiscadale, 1994).

- 21 Dixit, K. "Looking For Greater Nepal", in Himal Magazine, Kathmandu: March 1993.
- 22 Interview with R.B. Basnet, Leader of the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), Kathmandu, November 8, 1999.
- 23 Interview with Mr. Leela Sharma, Foreign Ministry of HMG, Nepal, December 20, 1999.
- 24 Bulletin No. 1, published by the Central Publicity Division of the CPN (Maoist), Kathmandu: May 1996.
- 25 Interview with Milan Rana, Youth Organisation of Bhutan (YOB), November 1999.
- 26 Subba, B. "Nepal-Bhutan talks: The Categorization Farce", Unpublished Paper, Kathmandu, March 1997, p. 2.
- 27 Ibid, p. 3
- 28 People's Forum For Human Rights, Bhutan (PFHRB), Bhutan: Forced Evictions and Human Rights (Kathmandu: March 1995), p. 9
- 29 The Bhutan Review, Kathmandu, January 1994
- 30 Interview with Father Varkey of Caritas, Damak, December 27, 1999.
- 31 Subba, B. "Nepal-Bhutan talks: The Categorization Farce", Unpublished Paper, Kathmandu, March 1997, p. 4
- 32 Himal Magazine, Kathmandu, July/August 1994, p.18
- 33 The Kathmandu Post, March 8, 2000.
- 34 Interview with Milan K. Rana, International Secretary, Youth Organisation of Bhutan, Damak, December 28, 1999.
- 35 Interview with Rakesh Chhethri, a political analyst of Bhutanese affairs, Kathmandu, July 18, 1999
- 36 Himal Magazine, Kathmandu, July 1994, p. 17
- 37 Article 1. A. 2, UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951
- 38 Article 1.2, OAU Convention on Refugee Problems in Africa, 1969
- 39 Conclusion 3, Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, Colloquio sobre la Proteccio Internacional de los Refugiados en America Central, Mejico y Panama: Problemas, Juridicos y Humanitarios, November 19-22, 1984.
- 40 Interview with Dilli Dhakal, Programme Officer, UNHCR, Bhadrapur, September 3, 1999.
- 41 Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, February 22, 2000.
- 42 Zolberg, A. Suhrke, A. Aguayo, S. Escape From Violence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 28-31
- 43 Ibid, p. 12.
- 44 Stavenhagen, R. The Ethnic Question, (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1990), pp. 2-3.
- 45 Phadnis, U. Ethnicity and Nation Building in South Asia, (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 15
- 46 Newland, K. Ethnic Conflict and Refugees, in Ethnic Conflict And International Security, ed. M. Brown, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 146
- 47 Ibid, p. 148
- 48 Ibid, p. 48
- 49 Phadnis, op. cit, p. 28
- 50 Zolberg, A. Suhrke, A. Aguayo, S. op. cit., p. 171.
- 51 Ibid, p. 168.
- 52 It should be noted that since many of the youth organisations and movements are as yet in their infancy and planning stage, several of the youth interviewed agreed to discuss the potential

for militarisation on the condition that details of their planned operations not be mentioned in this paper.

53 A small post-SLC and college scholarship programme was funded by Germany's Albert Einstein Scholarship Programme. UNHCR has also funded a small number of Lhotshampa refugees to undertake higher education.

54 The return of the Lhotshampa teachers to the refugee camps took place only in one district of Nepal, and other vested interests could have caused this particular police raid.

55 Interview with Arjun Subba, DNYC

56 Interview with Pema Wangchuk, Assistant at the DMT, September 5, 1999.

57 Interview with S.B. Subba, BRRRC, December 26, 1999.

58 Interview with former civil servant who now works as a teacher in the refugee camps, December 1999.

59 Interview with police officials at the Refugee Coordination Unit (RCU), Bhadrapur, September 5, 1999.

60 Interview with R.B. Basnet, Party President, BNDP, Kathmandu, October 18, 1999.

61 Interview with Rongthong Kinley, President of the Druk National Congress (DNC), New Delhi, January 27, 2000.

62 Ravi Nair, Human Rights Activist, New Delhi in "House of Cards", Himal Magazine, Kathmandu: July 1994, p. 18.

63 Don Peretz, Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 116

64 Ibid, p. 84

65 Phadnis, U. op. cit, p. 29

66 Baral, L.R. "Nepal And The Problem Of Refugees", The Regional Paradox: Essays in Nepali and South Asian Affairs, Delhi: Adroit, 2000, p. 16

67 Himal Magazine, Kathmandu, July 1994, p. 15

68 Rediff.com – Indian News on the Web, February 28, 2000: Varsha Bhosle "A Time To Kill"

69 Email interview with Sanjoy Hazarika, author of Strangers Of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994).

70 Kuensel Newspaper , Thimphu, October 23, 1999, p. 1

71 Ibid, p. 20

72 Ibid, p. 1

73 The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, March 3, 2000.

74 Himal Magazine, Kathmandu, March 1993, p.17

75 Spotlight Magazine, Kathmandu, October 1999.

76 Baral, L. "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal: Quest For New Confidence Building Measures (CBM)" (Kathmandu: Institute of Foreign Affairs 1999), p. 12,

77 Only one interview with a government representative from Bhutan (who wished to remain unnamed for the purpose of this paper) was granted.

78 Interview, Bhim Subba, Former Director-General of The Department of Power, Bhutan, in Kathmandu, October 18, 1999.

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