More than 100,000 ethnic Nepalese refugees fled Bhutan in the 1990s. Officials say it was voluntary migration; the refugees say they were forced out. So, where does the truth lie? OLGA YOLDI writes.

The way Thakhur Prasad Louitell tells it, his eviction began in the morning when the police arrived at his farm in southern Bhutan and marched him to their camp. “They didn’t begin to torture me until midday. They kept me tied up and took turns beating me with sticks. I passed out. After I woke up they started beating me again. That went on all night. The next morning they threw me out and said, ‘You’d better get out of Bhutan, or we are going to burn down your house with you in it.’” That was December 1991.

Louitell is one of the 100,000 ethnic Nepalese refugees born and bred in Bhutan, who was expelled from Bhutan and has been languishing in a refugee camp in Eastern Nepal for more than a decade. Like most refugees, he has been living in a bamboo hut built as temporary shelter in 1992, and on food and clothes given by donor agencies. Prohibited from working by Nepal’s government, the refugees have been waiting for years for a resolution to their case, but all they have now is an uncertain and bleak future ahead of them.

Nepal and Bhutan have been negotiating the fate of the refugees for the last five years. A series of talks between government officials from Nepal and Bhutan have failed to produce any significant development towards finding a solution to the refugee crisis. In 2000, a Joint Verification Team made up of Bhutanese government officials was sent to the camps to determine the status of refugees, but the process was slow and the outcome inconclusive. Correspondents said one of the main stumbling blocks during the negotiations was defining who was a refugee and who wasn’t. Nepal says that almost all the refugees living in camps in eastern Nepal have valid documents proving they are Bhutanese nationals and should be allowed to return home. Bhutan says that is not the case, that over two thirds of the refugees are not Bhutanese but Nepalese, and has refused to take them back.

The Nepalese government considers the refugees non-citizens and will not allow them to integrate into Nepalese society. This renders them stateless. “No one is interested in resolving the problem,” says Shailendra Guragain, from the Centre for Victims of Torture Nepal. “Both the King of Nepal and the one in Bhutan are friends. Neither is particularly bothered about the precarious situation of the refugees.”

With one sixth of the population in exile, Bhutan became one of the world’s highest per capita generators of refugees in the world. The mass exodus took place in the early 1990s when ethnic Nepalese came to be perceived as a threat by the Bhutanese government, which feared that Bhutan’s Buddhist culture was being swamped by the Hindu traditions of the ethnic Nepalese that had been living in southern Bhutan for decades, and decided to expel them.
A remote and isolated kingdom

For more than 300 years Bhutan was isolated from the outside world. Little is known about its early history, only that since the 12th century, it has been colonized by a succession of rival Buddhist religious orders from Tibet. The ruling Drukpa sect that is ruling Bhutan today became established in the 17th century. In a treaty signed by Bhutan and Britain in 1910, the British promised not to interfere in Bhutan’s internal affairs and the country has enjoyed independence ever since. “Bhutan was spared the usual post colonial exploitation because it does not command the best Himalayan passes,” wrote Journalist Vladimir Stehlik. “It was saved from having to play the role of pawn in the great games of the 19th and 20th centuries … squeezed between India and China, Bhutan mastered its realpolitik to create and preserve its statehood.”

The kingdom is now inhabited by Drukpas, who are Buddhists and make up about 74 per cent of the population. They dominate the government and the civil service. The King of Bhutan, the absolute monarch Jigme Singhe Wanchouk, belongs to this group. The south of Bhutan has traditionally been inhabited by Nepali-speaking Hindu immigrants from Nepal, who have been coming into Bhutan since the 1800s.

Up until mid 1980s, there had been little contact or conflict between Drukpas and the ethnic Nepalese, but around this time a campaign for democracy in the kingdom gathered pace. The authorities blamed much of the unrest on the Nepali-speaking minority who demanded democracy and introduced strict legislation, which required them to adopt the Drukpa culture.

Worried by a recent influx of ethnic Nepalese into Bhutan, the government conducted a demographic census in 1988, which revealed that ethnic Nepalese comprised almost 40 percent of the 600,000 people living in Bhutan. A new Citizenship Act was passed. Each person was expected to prove they were living in Bhutan in 1958 to be classified as a Bhutanese citizen. Officials demanded tax receipts for exactly 1958, but they did not have the credentials needed. “In 1958 Bhutan was a medieval kingdom,” journalist Steve Allen wrote. “There were no motorable roads, no electricity, no hospitals or other government public facilities. There were just five primary schools. There was no individual certification of grant of nationality because neither the government nor the people considered it necessary at the time.”

The US State Department’s Country Report on Human Rights in Bhutan defines this proof of nationality as “a nearly impossibly requirement in a country with widespread illiteracy, which only recently adopted administrative procedures.” Registration with the Ministry of Home Affairs was the only acceptable proof of being a resident of Bhutan, but according to historians, the Ministry of Home Affairs did not exist in 1958. It was established ten years later in 1968.

As a result, thousands of ethnic Nepalese were suddenly declared non-nationals, including those who had lived in Bhutan for generations, and owned houses and properties, as well as those accused of criticising the government. To make matters worse the Marriage Act in 1988 left 60,000 children stateless.

Many ethnic Nepalese people had to leave Bhutan in 1990. The exodus peaked during 1992 when the government initiated a campaign of systematic expulsion by forcing people to sign voluntary emigration forms before departing. The ethnic Nepalese opposed these laws and organized demonstrations calling for their repeal. What followed was a series of arrests, atrocities and forceful evictions, but the Bhutanese government insists even today that people migrated voluntarily after an anti-national revolt led by illegal Nepalese immigrants was repressed in 1990.

Forced assimilation

Bhutan began to open up to the outside world in the 1960s. In 1958, the Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, visited Bhutan for the first time. He offered Indian development aid and urged Bhutan to come out of its isolation. The late king Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, father of the current king implemented policies aimed at modernizing Bhutan and developing its economy. In the 1980s many Bhutanese traveled abroad and came into contact with democracy and political freedom. They began to define the monarchy as ‘dictatorial’ and ‘despotic’. Consequently, most

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Five Year Plan included the ‘One Nation, One People Policy’ which sought to preserve and enhance Bhutanese cultural identity and bolster Bhutanese nationalism. The Nepali language was taken out of the school curriculum and a compulsory Drukpa dress code was implemented. The end result was forced cultural assimilation.

“We are a tiny nation of 600,000, the last outpost of an ancient civilization, threatened with extinction, wedged between the two most populated nations on earth. So for us, national survival is at the top of our agenda, always,” said Foreign Minister Dawa Tserin. “We are so small we can vanish without the world even thinking twice about it. Our feeling was that within a generation we would become a minority within our own country. Not from the legal Nepali speaking Bhutanese citizens, but from illegal immigrants. Still, we never used extra-legal means to correct this. We are Buddhist, and this is just not part of our culture.”

However, Amnesty International officials who visited Bhutan in 1998 “were shocked at the level of marginalisation of the Nepali speaking population,” said the director of Amnesty International of Asia Pacific. In its report, Bhutan: Forcible Exit, published in 1994, Amnesty International believes that extreme racial discrimination including rape, torture, indiscriminate arrests, custodial deaths and eviction of ethnic Nepalese began after the peaceful protests against the forceful assimilation policies took place, and it is continuing today.

In 1998 Bhutan introduced reforms to ensure a more participatory form of government. The King, who is both the Head of State and the Head of Government, transferred some of his powers to the Council of Ministers, nominated by the King and vetted by the 150 member National Assembly. Early this year, he pushed for political reform through the adoption of a Constitution that divests authority from the monarchy. It provides for Parliament, a two-party system and 21 fundamental rights covering free speech, freedom of the press, the right to information and even the right to privacy. At present, the government prohibits political parties and pro democracy groups said these changes are largely cosmetic since the King still exercises strong, active and direct power over the government. They say the elite will continue to retain the real social power in Bhutan.

Bhutan, like Nepal, is considered a least developed country. Farming and forestry is the mainstay of the economy and accounts for 90 percent of the gross domestic product. Rugged terrain makes it difficult to build roads and other infrastructure. According to the 2001 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, careful economic planning and the use of foreign aid have increased economic efficiency and performance over the last decade, although its work force is still largely unskilled and there is a wide gap between rich and poor.

The King is well known in the West for his development philosophy or the pursuit of Gross National Happiness, which attempts to achieve human well-being through four policy platforms: economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. He has suggested that happiness is the ultimate objective of development. Development is defined as a process that seeks to maximise happiness. But critics say that there is little substance to such doctrine. “Bhutan has done too little to fill it with flesh and bones. Its core remains elusive as happiness itself,” wrote Stehlik.

No intervention

Without India’s support Nepal cannot exercise pressure on Bhutan to repatriate the refugees. Both Nepal and Bhutan are economically dependent upon India, so India wields much political power over both countries. In the 1949 Treaty of Friendship between India and Bhutan, the government of Bhutan agreed to be guided by India with regard to its external affairs. Yet
Delhi has been reluctant to become involved in the dispute. India says the refugee problem is a bilateral problem between Bhutan and Nepal better solved by them. It has made it clear that no dissident activity against Bhutan's royal government will be tolerated on the Indian side of the border.

India finances 40 percent of Bhutan’s government expenditure and receives at least 80 percent of Bhutan's exports. “India has been totally indifferent to the problem,” Shailendra Guragain says. “What India wants from Bhutan is its support in international forums and Bhutan’s hydroelectric resources,” he adds.

A matter of immediate concern to the King of Bhutan is the spillover of the ethnic conflict in India’s northeast, which has been spreading to Bhutan. Several separatist groups seeking separate statehood, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam have set up guerrilla bases in the forests of southern Bhutan. According to journalist Rakesh Chhetri, the northeast militants were given official sanctuary in Bhutan in 1991 in return for their support in terrorizing the Nepali-speaking southern Bhutanese to leave Bhutan.

In 2003, with the aid of India, Bhutan launched ‘Operation All Clear’, a military action to push the rebels out of Bhutan, after they had failed to respond to the King’s call to quit voluntarily. In return, India assured Bhutan of its continuous support for military and development projects. India is preparing a comprehensive modernisation package for the Bhutanese army. It has agreed to sell low-tech arms, vehicles and training and establish a joint military grid to patrol against the Indian militants. However, no talks have taken place between the two countries on the refugee issue. “Bhutan is confident that India will turn a blind eye to the refugees’ hope of returning to the homeland,” Steve Allen wrote.

Not everyone has ignored the plight of the refugees. In 2000, the European Parliament called on the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to find a prompt solution to the dispute over the issue, and set up the process of repatriation of refugees. Bill Clinton also urged Bhutan to reach an agreement with Nepal to begin with the process of verification for the repatriation of refugees. As a result of the pressure, Bhutan agreed to constitute the Joint Verification Team. However, in a world of 25 million refugees, 100,000 more barely register and the media has paid little attention to the issue.

In the mean time a new generation of refugees is growing up in the camps. “Many volunteer on camp committees as teachers and medical workers, others build their lives around the daily waiting for the distribution of rations,” says Shailendra. “A growing number are starting to seek work outside, particularly those lucky enough to have an education. They work as cheap labour in schools and other institutions,” he said.

**Donor fatigue**

Repatriation of the refugees seems unlikely in the current scheme of things. Since 1998 the government began resettling Drukpas from the north on land vacated by the ethnic Nepalese in the south, now living in refugee camps. Human Rights groups maintain that this action jeopardizes the return of the refugees to the country.

The prospect of empty days weighs heavily on refugees; some mount protest marches and engage in letter writing campaigns. The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has announced that it is phasing out its activities in the camps. It wants others to “share the burden”. According to the Asian Human Rights Commission, this has triggered much discomfort among the refugees, who feel increasingly abandoned. Misiko Mimika, chief of the UNHCR office in Jhapa, Nepal, said: “We are trying to bring this whole program to a resolution, to promote a solution … with the phase-out the Nepalese government is responsible. So we hope that something shall move if we pull out. The phase-out will raise the profile of the issue and there are indications that things are moving.”

The UNHCR has been pursuing a threefold solution of returning some refugees to Bhutan while the rest would either be integrated into Nepali society or resettled in a third country. Human rights groups have criticized this approach as playing into the hands of the Bhutanese government, but many have conceded that it is no longer realistic to believe that every refugee can go back home.

Although the refugees are grateful for the help they receive, they want to go home. Outside one of the camps a young refugee has written: “Bhutan is our homeland. We had been there for generations. We had land and house to live. We were productive farmers, self-reliant and peace loving people. We want to go back home early. It is plead to our well-wishers to send us back with dignity, safety and assurance of our human rights. So the money you are spending from us can be saved for future calamities or spared to other destitute in the world.”