



Brussels, 15 September 2009

Dear Member of the European Parliament,

We would like to take the opportunity to congratulate you on your election in the European Parliament. Our experience in co-operating with the European Parliament has been good and we have found European Parliamentarians being responsive to important issues of our region.

We would like to bring to your attention an issue that is affecting South Asian countries: the plight of the forgotten Bhutanese refugees who are residing in Nepal and India, and the ongoing democratic process in Bhutan.

The Bhutanese refugees have spent almost two decades in Nepal and India, and have been in camps since 1990, after political problems emerged in Bhutan. The Bhutanese refugee problem emerged in the region when the Lothsampa people from South Bhutan demanded political reforms and the practice of ethnic and cultural rights in Bhutan. The reactionary regime expelled some one-third of the Lhotsampa population from 1990 to 1994. Later, other ethnic groups, particularly the Sharchops from eastern Bhutan, were also victimized when they joined hands for democratic reform in Bhutan. The Sharchops are one of the indigenous ethnic groups in Bhutan and the Lothshampa have been living in the country for over a century. In total 130.000 Bhutanese are currently living outside the country, of whom 110.000 were living in the UNHCR registered camps in Nepal prior to the launch of the third country resettlement program. This is out of a total population for Bhutan which is reported to be 700.000 approximately.

In recent years there has been some constitutional reform, however we note with dismay that the rights of the citizens are not adequately safeguarded by the constitution or by its implementation. Bhutan is still essentially governed by an autocratic monarchic system of governance and the constitution was not drafted on the basis of true democratic principles and not implemented in the spirit of an inclusive democracy. There are still 90 political prisoners in Bhutan; meanwhile freedom of press and freedom of speech have continued to be denied.

The refugees have been demanding dignified repatriation to Bhutan for the last twenty years and there have been several rounds of negotiations between the government of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve this issue amicably. There have been no bilateral talks between Bhutan and Nepal since the elected Prime Minister took office in Bhutan.

Facilitated by



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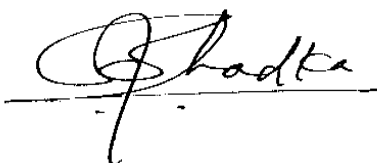
The refugees had to pass through Indian Territory to seek asylum in Nepal but due to the special relationship between Bhutan and India, India decided not to get involved in the bilateral negotiations, which technically could have been a trilateral issue to be solved by the three countries. As the countries could not resolve this problem and India decided to keep away from the refugee issue, the international community had to intervene and came up with the proposal of third country resettlement. We believe that India can play a greater role to settle this political problem amicably.

The refugees are primarily peasants and subsistence farmers who have little skill to adjust in the economies of developed countries. Today some 20.000 refugees who have been resettled in various western countries, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, Netherlands, Norway and Denmark, are facing serious adjustment problems, due to isolation leading to depression and making the resettled people vulnerable to committing suicide.

While the resettlement might be an interim, practical solution for the young and upcoming generation, it is surely not an appropriate solution for the older people. In addition, there is a significant group among the refugees who have not expressed willingness to participate in the third country settlement programme. These refugees should be allowed to enjoy their right to nationality and to repatriate to their country of origin. The resettlement programme should in no way become effectively a policy that legitimizes political persecution or ethnic cleansing and the programme should strongly reflect the refugees right for return if they so wish.

The European Union has been supporting Bhutan in its effort to build a democratic polity and the European Parliament had sent election observers for the election held in Bhutan in 2008.

We would like to request you to ask the European Commission and the European Council to clarify the EU policy in relation to the rights of refugees to return. We would also welcome an EP resolution that would clearly identify the principles on which any resettlement programme should be based. Furthermore we seek a clarification from the European Community Humanitarian Office in its dealing in this matter and we would welcome its continued support to fund the camps until an appropriate solution is agreed. We finally would hope that the EU can take up this matter in its ongoing political dialogue with India and Nepal, as well as Bhutan.



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