From Refugees to Citizens

A Report on Integration from Refugees in Towns

Dhaka, Bangladesh

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FLETCHER
HENRY J. LEIR INSTITUTE FOR
MIGRATION & HUMAN SECURITY

RiT

March 2023

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Cover photo: Main entrance of Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. The sign visible is that of the head office of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee, an organization founded in the decade after Bangladesh's Liberation War to push for these refugees' repatriation to Pakistan. Photo Credit: Khalid Hussain.

Acknowledgments: Khalid would like to acknowledge the Geneva Camp and other refugee camp residents in Dhaka, including community leader Sadakat Khan, he interviewed, as well as the interns and staff of the Council of Minorities. This report was edited by the following members of the RIT team: Karen Jacobsen, Jacob Ewing, and Sarah Morehouse.

Location: Dhaka, Bangladesh

Figure 1: Bangladesh. Located in South Asia, Bangladesh is surrounded by India to most sides, Myanmar to the southeast and the Bay of Bengal in the south. It hosts over a million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Cox's Bazar district as well as around 400,000 Urdu-speaking Bihari refugees who live in camps across the country following the Liberation War of 1971.

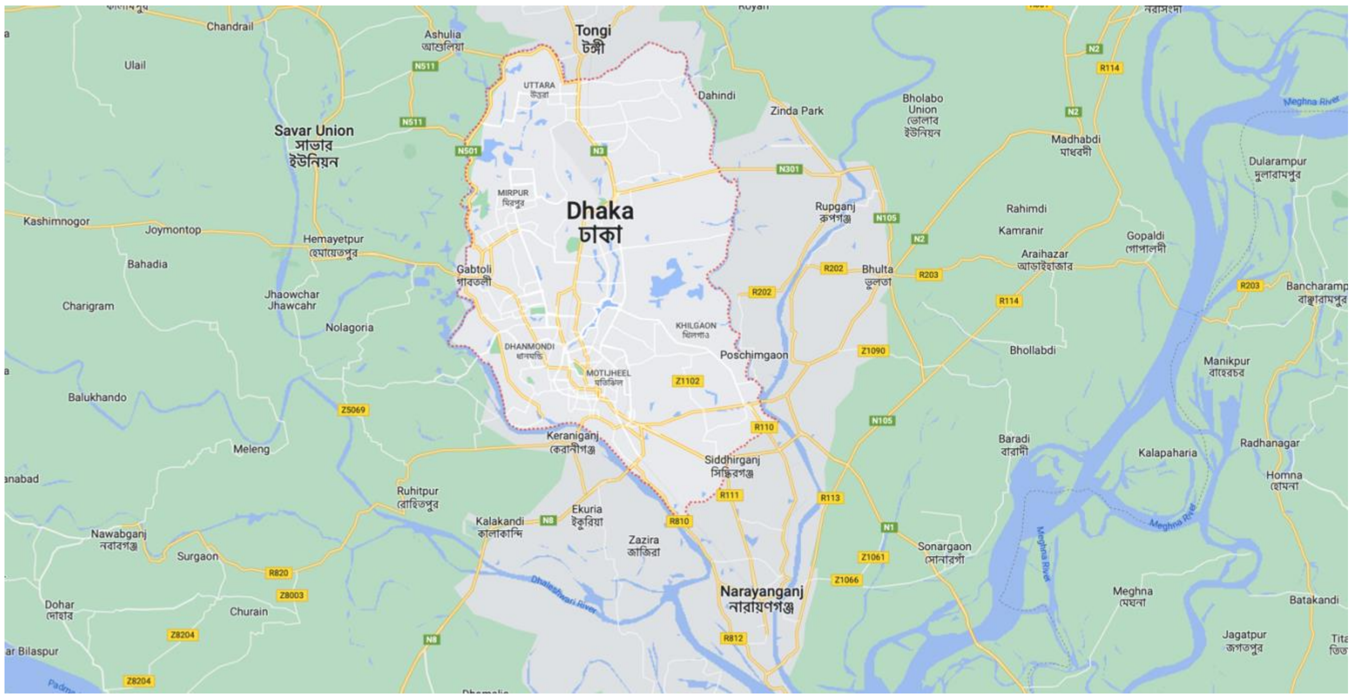

Figure 2: Dhaka, Bangladesh.

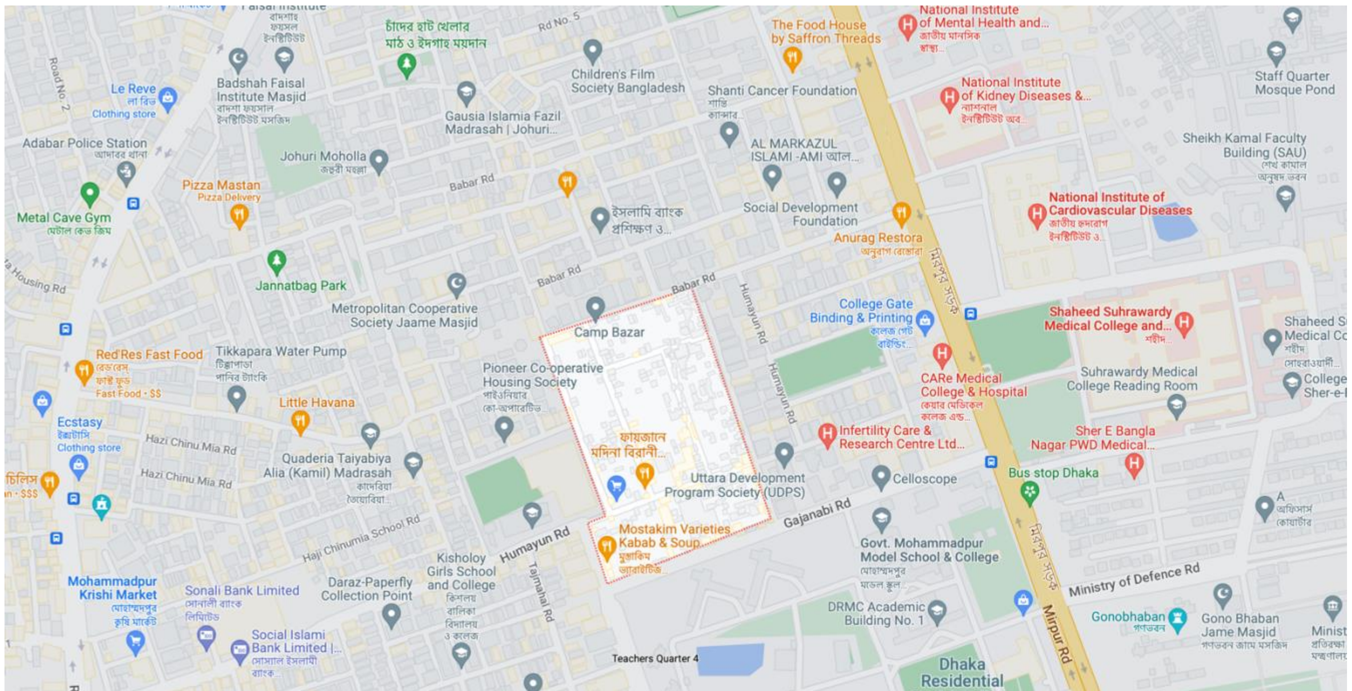

Figure 3: Geneva Camp, Dhaka.

Geneva Camp is a densely populated settlement situated in Humayun Road of Mohammadpur in Dhaka city. It is the largest camp among 116 Urdu-speaking Bihari refugee camps across Bangladesh.

Base map imagery © Google 2023.

Introduction

In 2008, Bangladesh's High Court recognized Bihari refugees' right to citizenship and requested that their names be added to the voter list as citizens. In doing so, a stateless Urdu-speaking linguistic minority living in refugee camps in the heart of Dhaka city and elsewhere in the country gained citizenship rights 37 years after the war between West and East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) left them stranded. They were no longer refugees, having fought for and won their legal rights largely through the efforts of the community. This case study provides an overview of how the refugee camps in Dhaka came to be and their conditions five decades on, and examines the legal battle from the perspective of one of the authors, who was a member of the Geneva Camp youth group that initiated the case, as well as the barriers that the Urdu-speaking community continues to face in their integration in Dhaka.

The Biharis have been identified locally and officially over the years by various labels, such as stranded Pakistanis, non-Bengalis, Biharis, and as Urdu speakers. The 2003 and 2008 judgments by the High Court confirmed their citizenship and officially recognized them as Urdu-speaking Bangladeshis. However, they and their descendants are still referred to colloquially as “Biharis,” and are seen by many as separate from Bangla-speaking citizens.[1]

In December 1971, Bengalis in East Pakistan won independence after fighting a nine-month war against the Pakistan army. During the war, much of the Urdu-speaking Bihari community sided with West Pakistan with some directly supporting the Pakistan army in attacks against Bengalis. This, in return, led to violence by Bengalis causing several thousand Bihari deaths, according to community estimates. Many Biharis had their homes and property looted and/or seized and were forced to take refuge in temporary settlements, while other more prominent West Pakistani civilians were evacuated alongside the army. Episodic violence against Biharis continued after the war.[2] Despite steady calls for their repatriation, the Pakistani government denied the minority citizenship and did not facilitate full-scale return after a few repatriation efforts in the subsequent decades. This rendered them essentially stateless and left the Biharis stranded. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) set up Geneva Camp and other settlements developed following the war. Conditions in the camps became increasingly deplorable as the population grew and the camps became “permanent”.[3]

Five decades on, living conditions in the camps have only worsened. Approximately 400,000 Urdu-speaking Biharis live in 116 refugee camps across Bangladesh today, with Dhaka city hosting 32 settlements and camps scattered around 12 districts. Geneva Camp, the largest camp in Bangladesh, is in Mohammadpur in central Dhaka. Another large Bihari settlement is in Mirpur, a northern suburb of Dhaka, which is more deprived than Geneva Camp, with fewer economic opportunities for residents. There are also Bihari settlements in major cities such as Chattogram, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Saidpur.

[1] Hammadi 2008; Hussain 2009
[2] Whitaker 1982
[3] Bradley 2013, 201

The Bangladesh government has repeatedly mentioned efforts to rehabilitate Biharis, particularly with regard to providing housing outside the overcrowded camps, but these have not been implemented. Despite gaining mainstream legal recognition, Biharis have been unable to fully integrate into Bangladeshi society and economy—facing barriers to access legal documentation, education and employment opportunities, and insecure land and housing rights. Socially, they remain marginalized in Bangladesh—primarily due to discrimination based on perceived allegiance to Pakistan during and since the war, memories of which still stir strong sentiment in the country.

This case report aims to detail from a firsthand perspective some of the successful advocacy leading to legal rulings which benefited the Urdu-speaking community's legal standing in Bangladesh as well as highlight continued barriers to integration for residents who have now lived in Geneva Camp in Dhaka city for over five decades.

Authors’ Position in Dhaka and Experiences Researching this Case

Khalid Hussain was born as a refugee in Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. For the past 23 years, Khalid has advocated for the rights of the Urdu-speaking community living in refugee camps across Bangladesh—first as a youth activist and then as a lawyer and human rights advocate. During his community’s citizenship struggle at the Bangladesh High Court during the 2000s, Khalid decided to train in law to help and became a lawyer with the Dhaka Bar Council in 2010. In 2013, he established a non-profit organization called the Council of Minorities, a human rights organization with a focus on the establishment of minorities and indigenous communities’ rights. Khalid is a UN OHCHR 2008 senior minority fellow, an alum of the U.S. State Department’s International Visitors Leadership Program, and represents Urdu-speaking Bangladeshis at the UN and international forums on statelessness and citizenship rights.

Maliha Khan is from Dhaka, Bangladesh, and is currently a graduate student at The Fletcher School, Tufts University. Prior to graduate school, she worked as a journalist in Bangladesh with a focus on human rights issues including migration and refugees and gender-based violence.

Methodology

Khalid based this case report on his personal experiences as a former stateless, refugee person, as well as his professional experiences working for access to citizenship rights, legal documentation, and education on behalf of Bangladesh's Bihari Urdu-speaking community. Khalid also conducted five in-depth one-on-one interviews and a group discussion in an informal setting with eight Geneva Camp residents, mostly youth. These interviews and discussion were conducted in Urdu over a two-week period in August 2022 and translated and written up in English. The authors have also reviewed relevant literature on Urdu-speaking refugees in Bangladesh, statelessness, and Bihari refugee camps.

Country Context: Bangladesh

Bangladesh, a country with a population of nearly 170 million, is no stranger to refugees and cross-border migration. Around a million Urdu-speaking Muslim population known then as the “Muhajirs” (migrants) arrived prior to and during the subcontinent’s Partition (in 1947) in then East Pakistan. During the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, around 10 million East Pakistan refugees fled across the border to India and returned following the war. Rohingya refugees have been arriving in Bangladesh in smaller numbers since the late 1970s, and then as a major refugee influx in 2017. Around one million refugees from Rakhine State, Myanmar, fled across the Naf River to Cox's Bazar district in southeastern Bangladesh[4] following genocidal clearance operations by the Myanmar military. Bangladesh is also heavily affected by climate-related disasters and is globally the most vulnerable

[4] UNHCR Situation Refugee Response, n.d.

country to cyclones and the sixth most vulnerable to floods. One projection is that Bangladesh will have 13.3 million internal climate migrants by 2050.[5]

Historical Context

The history of the Urdu-speaking Bangladeshi community in Dhaka stretches back to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The subcontinent experienced two critical upheavals—the Partition of India and Pakistan and the resulting mass migration of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities, when many Muslims migrated from India to the newly designated East and West Pakistan. Nearly one million Urdu-speaking Muslims from the Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal came to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Most originated in violence-torn Bihar, and the refugees are still referred to as Biharis 75 years later. While they were Muslims in Muslim-majority East Pakistan, they were ethnically and linguistically different from the Bangla-speaking Bengali majority.

Prior to 1971, Biharis had enjoyed privilege as Urdu speakers, but their relations with the Bangla-speaking Bengali majority were not warm as the Biharis were seen as symbols of West Pakistan domination in the region. During and following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, Biharis were targeted for their perceived support for Pakistan. Many mostly lower-income people were forced to take refuge in temporary camps set up by the ICRC, and by mid-1972, some 735,180 Biharis were stranded in refugee camps across newly independent Bangladesh. In Dhaka, the largest camps were in Mirpur and Mohammadpur, which hosted 150,000 and 95,000 refugees respectively.[6] Despite drawn-out negotiations and several rounds of repatriation, many Biharis remained in the camps in the decades after the war. Some 170,000 Biharis were repatriated to Pakistan (only a portion of those who registered to repatriate to Pakistan) between 1972 and 1993,[7] and more than 100,000 remained in and outside the camps which became permanent settlements. Following the initial acceptance of Biharis from Bangladesh, Pakistan did not show interest in continuing repatriation despite sustained advocacy from refugee organizations such as the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Community formed by the older generation of the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh.[8]

Legal Context

Nationality laws, particularly the Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Order of 1972, recognized as citizens all those who lived in Bangladesh at the time of independence and continued to live there. In addition, the Citizenship Act of 1951 (carrying over from the post-partition era) confers Bangladeshi citizenship on every person born in Bangladesh or whose father is a Bangladeshi resident or citizen as of March 25, 1971. The Urdu-speaking minority were therefore entitled to citizenship and the right to citizenship was even more clear-cut for the younger generation born in the camps.[9] Despite this, between 1971 and 2008, the Bangladesh government refused to treat the Urdu-speaking minority as citizens in practice.[10] The community was effectively excluded from obtaining national identity cards and access to public education, among other basic services.

[5] World Bank Group 2022
[6] Whitaker 1982
[7] Under the 1973-74 New Delhi Tripartite Agreement
[8] Bradley 2013, 200
[9] Bradley 2013, 201
[10] UNHCR 2022, 16

The primary international law pertaining to statelessness is the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, which defines stateless persons as those who are "not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law" in Article 1.[11] The convention establishes minimum rights of education, employment, and housing as well as guaranteeing stateless people a right to identity, travel documents, and administrative assistance. However, it focuses on de jure, rather than de facto stateless persons like the Biharis who have not necessarily been officially denied citizenship but have difficulty proving nationality and exercising their rights as citizens. The latter is more relevant to Dhaka's Urdu-speaking minority after the landmark 2008 High Court ruling recognizing them as citizens.[12] Regardless, Bangladesh is not a party to the 1954 Convention.[13]

[11] UNHCR n.d.
[12] Ibid.
[13] UNHCR 2021

City Context: Dhaka

Dhaka, the bustling capital of Bangladesh, is one of the world's most densely populated cities, with a population of over 20 million. Some 2,000 internal migrants from rural areas flock to Dhaka every day, in search of work opportunities, settling in overcrowded, informal settlements such as the Korail and Kallyanpur slums.

Of the 116 Bihari camps across the country, Dhaka hosts 32 with 26 in Mirpur and six in Mohammadpur. Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, one of the first to be established by the ICRC, is the largest Bihari camp in the city (and country) with a current population of 21,672. The ICRC ran these camps until 1973 when it transferred oversight to the government's disaster management and relief ministry.[14]

Geneva Camp

The area of Geneva Camp, 135,000 square feet or around three acres, has not increased in the past five decades and houses 21,672, according to a recent profile.[15] The camp is in the Mohammadpur

[14] Whitaker 1982
[15] Council of Minorities & Cadasta 2021

area, a central neighborhood in the city with no obvious demarcation beyond the official name and address, and is similar to other informal settlements across Dhaka. Today, as many refugees and their descendants live outside the camp as inside and some non-refugees and others have moved in. Mohammadpur is generally a highly sought area for housing and for families moving to the city from outside Dhaka, rent in the Geneva Camp area is more affordable than outside in the same neighborhood.

A small eatery in Geneva Camp selling popular fried snacks including puris, samosas, and shingaras. Over the years, residents have sectioned part of their homes to run, or rent out, as barbershops, small eateries, and grocery stores.
Photo Credit: Gerry Popplestone via Flickr.

While living conditions are not ideal, many Bihari families have remained in Geneva Camp for generations due to high rent outside while their camp accommodations are rent-free. As discussed below (*Challenges to Integration: Access to Employment*), most camp residents have limited access to employment opportunities in part because of difficulties gaining legal documentation and lack of mainstream recognition. Families able to afford housing outside the camps sublet their houses to other Biharis or Bengalis.[16] In the 1980s and 1990s, Geneva Camp was less crowded, mostly huts, but two- or three-storied buildings began being built in the early 2000s. So did stores, with families sectioning part of their homes to run, or rent out, as barbershops, small eateries, and grocery stores.

The living conditions in the camps remain poor with cramped, derelict housing, and conditions worsening over the years due to overcrowding. The huts in Geneva camp in which Khalid was born and his family of eight lived were barely eight-by-ten feet. One-room houses of this size, in some instances, host up to three generations living under the same roof. Houses are separated by two-feet-wide passageways. During the monsoon season, the camp frequently floods, including the common toilets. Other than toilets built in newly constructed homes by better-off residents, many Geneva Camp inhabitants still use around 250 common toilets that were built in 1971. Residents have to collect water for household use from common water pumps and deep tubewells.

A local relief committee and chairman are elected to collect charges for utilities and other necessary services. Starting in 1975, Geneva Camp residents received access to water and electricity provided by the government without charge. However, this is now in contention following the official change in their

[16] Sholder 2011, 28

refugee status; city authorities claim a decade of unpaid bills as the reason for electricity connection issues frequently affecting the camp.[17]

Compared to the earlier one-story one-room houses, more and more multi-story buildings were built in Geneva Camp starting around the 2000s. Photo Credit: Khalid Hussain.

End of Refugee Status and Statelessness

In 2008 the Bangladesh High Court recognized the Biharis' right to citizenship in Bangladesh and inclusion on voter rolls, a landmark decision for stateless refugees in the region and worldwide.[18] The end to the minority's statelessness was a combination of long-term community-based advocacy, successful litigation, and lobbying to ensure the court decisions upholding citizenship were implemented.[19] The post-1971 youth who arguably have suffered most from the community's legal limbo emerged at the forefront of advocacy. Below is Khalid's personal account of his experience growing up in Geneva Camp and his efforts as part of the youth who went to the courts to attain legal status as Bangladeshis.

[17] Rahman 2019
[18] UNHCR 2015
[19] UNHCR 2022

Box 1: Khalid's Experience Growing up in Geneva Camp

I was born and raised in Geneva Camp, situated in Humayun Road, Mohammadpur. After completing my schooling, I was a part of efforts with fellow youth in the camp to learn more about our social and political circumstances from respected elders in our community. We came to understand that despite living in refugee camps, we were Bangladeshi citizens by birth and had equal rights as other Bangladeshis. We formed a youth organization called the Association of Young Generation of Urdu-Speaking Community which fully observed Bangladeshi national holidays and mobilized more youth from the camps to do so.

In 2001, the national Election Commission began voter registration of Bangladeshi nationals 18 years and older. However, the registration officials did not enter the Bihari camps and register any voters. Our association called an urgent meeting to discuss the need for voter registration and decided to submit a memorandum to the local Election Commission office to enroll our names in the voter list. A special branch officer of the commission verbally rejected our memorandum saying we were not Bangladeshi citizens and therefore, not allowed to vote.

Ten of us then filed a writ petition in the High Court claiming that our names were missing from the voter list, and we were being denied the right to vote in the upcoming national elections, despite being residents of Geneva Camp and Bangladeshi citizens by birth. On May 5, 2003, the High Court declared in the court case *Abid Khan and others v. Government of Bangladesh and others* that we were Bangladeshi citizens under the law and instructed the national Election Commission to enroll us as voters as we had been minors during the war or born after the war in Bangladesh. This ruling was the tipping point nationally and internationally for Bihari camp residents being officially recognized as Bangladeshi citizens.

While the High Court confirmed the citizenship status and voting rights of these ten youth, this did not mean systemic recognition of all camp-based Bihari refugees. Ahead of the next elections in 2008, while the Election Commission registered some Bihari camp residents, it avoided systematic enrollment in the refugee camps and settlements. Once again, the refugees took to the courts. Another group of 11 refugees from two camps located in Mirpur, Dhaka, filed another writ petition with the High Court, seeking enrollment of all camp-based Urdu-speaking refugees in the voter list. On May 18, 2008, the High Court again ruled in the petitioners' favor in *Md. Sadaqat Khan (Fakku) and 10 others v. Chief Election Commissioner*, directing the Election Commission to enroll all Bihari adults living in camps all over Bangladesh and provide them with national identity cards, which would entitle them to social services. This marked the first time all Bihari refugees in the country were recognized as Urdu-speaking Bangladeshis. By 2014, the majority of Urdu-speaking refugees in Geneva Camp had acquired national ID cards, while a small minority decided to maintain their status as "Stranded Pakistanis" and chose not to apply for this identification card.

Despite these strategic legal victories and subsequent change to government policy enacted with regard to national identity cards and voter registration, basic rights to non-discrimination, legal documentation, employment, an adequate standard of living, and adequate housing and land security remain elusive for hundreds of thousands of Urdu-speakers in Bangladesh. As a linguistic minority, the community also faces limitations in fully enjoying or perpetuating its distinct culture and the Urdu language. Constitutional provisions limit recognition of minority groups and indigenous peoples' identities. In 2016, a draft Citizenship Bill raised fears that Urdu-speakers could again become stateless—for example, a provision allows for stripping citizenship based on actions by parents and grandparents for acting as "enemies of the state" and another allowing this bill to supersede court judgements, with the possibility of overriding the 2003 and 2008 rulings in favor of the Urdu-speaking community.[20]

Challenges to Integration

Institutionalized discrimination and social stigma are still prevalent in camp residents' experiences in Dhaka. Camp residents regularly face discrimination in their daily life, particularly harassment for their perceived Pakistani allegiance and anti-liberation role, and for speaking Urdu. Younger generations of Biharis mostly speak Bangla in public. However, their national identification cards (if they have these) reveal their camp addresses and can lead to denial or discrimination when seeking housing, healthcare, education services, and employment.

Many refugees and their descendants have moved out of the official "camp" to find better housing options, and access to education and employment. In this way, Urdu-speakers—particularly those born and raised in Bangladesh—attempt to integrate into mainstream Bangladeshi society around them with their understanding of and ability to speak Bangla. They also obtained national ID cards as Bangladeshis by using faked residence addresses outside the camp, before the community received legal recognition in court.

Geneva Camp residents also remain anxious about camp evictions, given insecurity over their land and housing despite five decades of residency. Sadakat Khan, president of the Urdu-Speaking People Youth Rehabilitation Movement and resident of a refugee camp in Mirpur, has petitioned the government through the courts several times in order to protect camp residents from eviction (he was also the lead petitioner in the 2008 case detailed above). This is a disastrous reality for poor residents in informal settlements across the city, who are regularly uprooted from their residents due to periodic evictions by city authorities and acts of violence as part of land grabs. However, evictions of Bihari camps have not been sufficiently covered in the national media or literature and so, are not explored further in this report.

<u>Barriers to acquiring documentation</u>
Without equal access to or recognition of documentation, Urdu-speakers cannot gain their full citizenship rights and struggle to access basic services, including education, housing, and financial services. A birth certificate is a prerequisite for school enrollment and getting a national identity card, which in turn is required to open a bank account, rent a house, and apply for a passport. Structural

[20] RMMRU 2019

barriers to accessing legal documentation include a lack of education and awareness of the rulings as well as discrimination and a history of marginalization.

Together with Namati, a U.S.-based nonprofit, the Council of Minorities has been training community paralegals to spread awareness of the legal rulings regarding citizenship status and work with camp residents to acquire birth certificates, national identity cards, passports and more. In late 2013, we noticed that camp residents in the Mirpur area had their applications rejected by the local city corporation office. City officials cited several reasons for their rejections—including internal instructions preventing the issuance of birth certificates to "non-Bengalis" or refugees, or citing problems with the applicant's address. Some residents were encouraged to pay a bribe for "urgent" processing, as officials claimed "regular" processing would take up to six months. However, our paralegals in other camps were seeing applicants receive birth certificates in an average of 17 days. Using this data, we raised the issue with the local Mirpur authorities. Following extensive negotiations, city corporation officials in Mirpur agreed to process birth certificate applications for camp residents as provided for in the law.

Passport applications were also being rejected by police investigation officers either due to applicants' camp addresses or a lack of utility bills (treated as official proof of residence). Officials would cite an internal letter from the home ministry, declaring that Biharis and Rohingyas are not eligible for passports. In 2014, I filed a Right to Information petition to the home ministry to ask what policies exist regarding issuing passports to Bihari camp residents. After following up and the involvement of the Information Commission, I received a copy of a 2009 order from the home ministry that stated Bihari camp residents with national identity cards can get passports. After receiving this order, our paralegals once again assisted camp residents in re-submitting their rejected passport applications. Although passport investigation officers were initially hesitant to approve applications, showing them the official home ministry order resulted in approved applications in a few cases. However, this has not always worked. The process is an arbitrary one and requires significant personal and legal perseverance, which makes it difficult for camp residents to access such a necessary service.

Access to education

Younger members of the Urdu-speaking minority initially struggled to gain entry to primary schools outside the camps which primarily teach in Bangla. They could only access schooling once they learned to speak Bangla and largely after official access to public schools became a reality for the community post-2008. Prior to this, only children whose parents could access public schools through other means or afford to pay for private schools had a better chance of integration. In Khalid's own case:

Box 2: Khalid’s Education Experiences

I received primary and secondary schooling at a school within Geneva Camp. For my four final years of schooling, along with 20 other classmates, I enrolled in a Bangla school outside the camp. Many other students who couldn’t afford school outside the camp dropped out after the eighth grade. I also found it challenging to continue my schooling, but my mother struggled to get me access to a scholarship and funding for school materials from an international nonprofit, which helped me stay on. It was especially difficult for girls to continue schooling beyond the eighth grade, and most of my peers who moved on to the school outside the camp were boys.

Once at mainstream Bangla schools, our early student days were not smooth. We were not welcomed by local Bengali students and were harassed as children of war criminals and jeered at for living in the camps. One day, some of my fellow refugee students fought with local students at school, and afterwards a good number of my classmates dropped out because of continued insults by local Bengali students. Only around five of us from the camps ended up successfully completing school.

Although formal restrictions no longer prevent access to government schools, camp addresses still cause complications for Bihari children seeking admission. This appears to be changing, but rules vary between institutions and access is dependent on the attitudes of the individuals in charge. Private educational facilities remain inaccessible to most low-income camp residents.

Alisha, an 18-year-old nursing trainee from Geneva Camp, said refugee women and girls’ continued access to education is particularly difficult. She was able to finish her schooling and move to nursing college with the help of a scholarship from a private foundation. Many were denied such opportunities in previous decades, and social barriers are harder to dismantle. Alisha finds it difficult to socially interact with her classmates having to hide her identity and address. “I have many friends at my nursing college and even though I have visited their homes, I can’t extend an offer to them to visit my home because of where I live.”

Access to employment

At the beginning of his community activism, Khalid and his colleagues decided to emphasize their identity in Bangladesh as an Urdu-speaking linguistic minority. A significant gap exists between younger generations of Biharis, who prefer integration as citizens, and older Biharis—who cling to their Urdu-speaking identity and some of whom are still holding out for repatriation to Pakistan and who have refused Bangladeshi citizenship. For some, having to get by as “Bengalis” speaking Bangla meant turning their back on their own culture and mother tongue, Urdu.

When he was setting out on a job hunt in his early 20s, Hasan went with his application papers to take the national exam for entering the army, a prestigious position many young people aspire to in Bangladesh. The officer checking papers noted his Geneva Camp address, put a mark next to his

address saying that was incorrectly filled out, and sent him away. Hasan had knowingly taken the risk of using his own address. “I thought that if I get this chance, others from the camp will also be able to access such an opportunity [in the future].” After that, he didn’t have the courage to apply to such positions using his own address. Such experiences make it increasingly common for younger generations in the camps to not identify themselves as a minority or as Urdu speakers. Some said they wanted to integrate completely in Bangladeshi society. By hiding their identity, language, and culture, they said they would gain more access to educational and work opportunities.

There is no quota for Biharis in educational institutions and public sector jobs, as exists for other minorities and indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Research by the Islamic Relief, a nonprofit, in 20 Mirpur camps in 2016 found 97 percent of households to have an average monthly income less than BDT 15,000 (whereas the national average income at the time was BDT 16,475) and only two percent of households had a member who had completed secondary schooling.[21]

Camp residents repeatedly cite equal access to employment as a right denied to the community. Urdu-speakers are typically unable to access government positions, with few progressing to higher degrees, and their camp address and tenuous legal status still cause wider discrimination in the job market.[22] As a result, most refugees resort to working in the informal sector earning paltry wages and with limited opportunities to transcend their poverty or class status. Male refugees largely work in trades or businesses passed down in the family as day laborers, rickshaw-pullers, drivers, butchers, barbers, electricians, automobile mechanics, and handicraft workers, while women work particularly as domestic workers and in embroidery.

As a result of poverty and difficulty accessing employment, camp households may have only one or two persons earning, making it difficult to prioritize children’s education and leading to dropouts. Families struggle to manage educational expenses for their children, with only sporadic support from national and international NGOs, some of which run primary and secondary schools inside Geneva Camp.

[21] Rahman 2016
[22] The New Humanitarian 2015

Conclusion

In the five decades since Bangladesh gained independence, the Urdu-speaking minority formally gained citizenship rights but largely remain interned in neglected refugee camps with few opportunities to improve their social and economic status. Challenges to integration include institutionalized discrimination and social stigma, insecure housing and land rights, and barriers to accessing documentation, education, and employment. Many camp residents, particularly younger generations, seek full integration in Bangladeshi society, which comes at the cost of marginalizing the Urdu language to the private sphere. While important legal recognition was gained by sustained advocacy and through the courts, this case report highlights how the former refugees still struggle to fully access their hard-earned citizenship and the accompanying political, economic, and social rights.

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Leir Institute for Human Security at The Fletcher School at Tufts University.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

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