**03KATHMANDU322**

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 C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000322 SIPDIS STATE FOR SA/INS AND PRM LONDON FOR POL - REIDEL GENEVA FOR RMA E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/23/2013 TAGS: PREF PHUM EAID NP BT SUBJECT: GARLANDS AND PETITIONS: AMBASSADOR VISITS BHUTANESE REFUGEE CAMPS REF: A. GENEVA 580 [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#parB) B. KATHMANDU 287 [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#parC) C. KATHMANDU 228 [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#parD) D. 02 KATHMANDU 2207 Classified By: DCM Robert K. Boggs for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d). [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#par1) 1. (U) Summary: Ambassador Malinowski visited UNHCR-administered camps in eastern Nepal during the weekend of February 15-16 to assess the situation of the Bhutanese refugees and to monitor the provision of food and other assistance from donor countries including the United States. The high-level delegation, including Ambassadors from the UK and Australia, toured the camps, reviewed new administrative procedures, and accepted petitions from refugee groups, requesting donor pressure on Thimpu to take back the refugees. The meetings followed a visit by the DCM in December. End summary. APPEALS FROM THE REFUGEES ------------------------- [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322%22%20%5Cl%20%22par2) 2. (U) Joined by Ambassadors from the UK and Australia, as well representatives from France, Germany, Norway, Finland and the European Commission, Ambassador Malinowski toured UNHCR-administered Bhutanese refugee camps in Eastern Nepal on February 15-16. The arrival of the eight-member delegation was heralded with traditional Bhutanese trumpets and garlands of flowers, but refugee leaders soon got down to more serious business at a roundtable meeting in one of the camp's community rooms. Under handwritten signs saying "I love my mother country Bhutan," and "Please consider our plight," representatives presented several petitions, each requesting that future financial aid to Bhutan be predicated on demonstrated respect for human rights, and seeking international efforts to persuade Bhutan to "take back its citizens." [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#par3) 3. (U) Petitions from women's rights groups and the general camp population included additional appeals, ranging from cessation of allotment to other Bhutanese of land formerly owned by refugees, to adoption of only two categories--Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese--for use in the verification process. The latter issue is a particularly sensitive one for many in the camps, who see the adoption of four categories (those forcibly evicted from Bhutan, those who left Bhutan voluntarily, criminals, and non-Bhutanese) (ref C) as a ploy by Bhutan to avoid repatriating significant numbers of refugees. Citing India's "better position" to negotiate with Thimpu, the petitions also called on the delegation to "persuade the government of India to use its good office to resolve the crisis." STATE OF THE CAMPS ------------------ [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322%22%20%5Cl%20%22par4) 4. (U) Administration of the camps has undergone significant changes following accusations of sexual abuse of refugees by NGO workers (ref D), and the condition of the camps is good. In general, the demeanor of the refugees is peaceful, with no sign of hostility or agitation. Refugee services are well-organized, and the camp residents are well-fed and clothed. At the food distribution point, weekly and bi-weekly schedules are posted on large signs, and the distribution process is orderly. The warehouse is well-stocked with pallets of rice and other supplies. Though employment inside the camp is minimal, a small textile factory was operating during the delegation's visit, and some women were engaged in the small-scale manufacture of traditional fabrics. [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#par5) 5. (U) Touring the camp, the Ambassador also visited a children's play area, a school for the mentally challenged, and a small elementary school with a burlap-covered floor, where students, surrounded by pictures of birds and animals, were boisterously participating in a language lesson. Facilities for the children appear adequate, especially by Nepali standards. CONSIDERING THEIR PLIGHT ------------------------ [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322%22%20%5Cl%20%22par6) 6. (U) Despite the well-mannered population, the well-ordered services and the well-stocked warehouse, life in the camps is not without frustration. The weavers working busily at their hand-looms are prohibited from selling their products outside the camps. Employment opportunities for working-age refugees are extremely limited, and children are deprived of any chance for higher education. After thirteen years of delay and perceived duplicity by the Thimpu government, the majority of refugees want to return to their homeland as expeditiously as possible. Impatience and dissatisfaction are not far below the tranquil surface. "We want to be repatriated by 2003," read one of the signs at a rally of a reported 35,000 refugee women on the day of the delegation's visit. Children's rallies, bicycle rallies and relay hunger strikes are also planned by the refugee community as part of a protest program to try to persuade donor countries to put financial pressure on the GOB. "We would like to urge your Excellency to make sure that... financial aid to Bhutan is being used for the welfare of its people," wrote 200 students in grades three through ten. Many of the children have lived their entire lives in the camps, but still hope to "return" to Bhutan. "We urge you all to help us go home." PREVIOUS VISIT BY DCM --------------------- [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322%22%20%5Cl%20%22par7) 7. (U) The Ambassador's observations were supported by those of the DCM, who accompanied Senior Senate Staff Member Jonah Blank on a tour of three of the refugee camps in December. The DCM and Blank found the camps impressively well organized and self-governed, despite the recent revelations of sexual abuse by several refugee employees. Visits to a number of randomly selected refugee homes suggested that many (reportedly most) families have documents proving that they had been legal citizens of Bhutan prior to 1990. In meetings with the governing councils of the camps, DCM and Blank sounded out camp leaders on what possible solutions they envisioned to their plight as refugees. In every camp such questions provoked confusion--if not incomprehension--about any solution other than return to Bhutan. Permanent settlement in Nepal was a distant second choice, and resettlement abroad appeared unimaginable. Clearly, the culture of the camps has preserved intact the notion that every refugee would someday return to his/her homeland of Bhutan. Several refugees explained that their families had been living in Bhutan for generations, since the grandfather of the present king invited them to emigrate from Nepal to settle Bhutan's lower hills, where up-country Bhutanese ethnics refused to live. Like the Ambassador, the DCM and Blank found that the schools still teach Dzongka (Bhutan's dominant language) and Bhutanese history although everyone in the camps speaks Bhutanese-accented Nepali. The notion that Bhutan was their "home" was shared even by the 22 percent of the refugees who were born in the camps. [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#par8) 8. (C) The DCM and Blank held long discussions with locally-based UNHCR staff and with the acting Country Director, Abraham Abraham. The UNHCR officers confirmed our impressions that the camps are exceptionally well-managed and quiescent by world standards. Abraham explained, however, that the completion of document verification among the 12,000 residents of the camp at Khudunabari over a year ago with no obvious progress toward repatriation had raised levels of impatience and frustration in the camps. The current hunger strike in Khudunabari is just one symptom of growing restlessness. UNHCR security staff disclosed that Maoist militants are believed to have transited several of the camps under cover of darkness and may have spent the night in refugee houses. Youthful unemployment and frustration, they warned, were likely eventually to make the camps receptive recruiting grounds for the Maoists. None of the UNHCR officers believed that India would apply pressure on Bhutan to accept at least some of the refugees. They urged the USG to work with Bhutan's international donors to expedite the current bilateral negotiating process and press for early implementation of a formula that would involve refugees being settled in both Bhutan and Nepal, and possibly third countries. Abraham Abraham expressed repeatedly his anxiety that growing funding fatigue among UNHCR's donors would soon render the camps economically unsustainable. COMMENT ------- [¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/03kathmandu322#par9) 9. (C) We share the view of local UNHCR officers that the Bhutanese refugee camps are likely to become growing sources of political agitation in the tri-border area of Nepal, Bhutan and India if concrete steps toward a resolution of the problem are not taken soon. Although the Foreign Ministers of Nepal and Bhutan appear to have made some progress during their recent meeting in Kathmandu (Ref B), it is still not clear that the bilateral process will move fast enough to prevent the emergence of an increasingly explosive situation. The bilateral process is essential, but international pressure is necessary also to persuade the Bhutanese Government that it can no longer evade its responsibilities. Post looks forward to a full readout on the Bhutan donors meeting in Geneva and the promised paper by UNHCR (Ref A). MALINOWSKI