

16

Elle
The best
The Singapore
of the

243/1

10 April 1979

7/4

W K K White Esq
S A D
P C C

cc AD
22/4

REFUGEES FROM BURMA

1. We were very interested, and encouraged, to read Rex Farrar's report of his visit to the Arakan refugee reception camps, which he forwarded with his letter of 23 February to Brian Smith.

7

2. As you know, I visited Rangoon in early March, and was able to have a very useful discussion about the refugees with Charles Booth and Rex Farrar. My main impression was confirmed of the good sense of the Burmese and Bangladesh Governments in settling this problem by quiet diplomacy. It is unusual to have a situation where a large group of refugees have actually returned to their country of origin (the last I can recall was the return of the 10 million refugees from India to Bangladesh in 1971/72). To date about 115,000 refugees have gone back to Burma.

3. The absence of young men among the refugees is something we have noticed from the beginning. We do not think that the view expressed by Burmese officials to Farrar, namely, that the able bodied were staying on in Bangladesh, can be true, since not many young men came in the first place. In the early days there were wild rumours that some must have been killed by the Burmese, and others taken to the hills to join the "freedom fighters". Or again it was suggested that many had been conscripted into labour camps. However, these rumours were never confirmed and the truth is probably less dramatic. When I was in Chittagong recently I had a long talk with the Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong District, Ziauddin Mohammad Chowdhury, who is in administrative control of the area in which the refugee camps are

/located ...

D
+

located. He too said he had been puzzled by the general absence of young men. He thought that many of them had stayed in Burma to look after their properties in the villages. He had noticed that some had come over into the refugee camps for a short time, and had then returned of their own accord to Burma. Chowdhury also thought that others, whether conscripted or not, had simply taken labouring jobs on the roads and in other public works in the Arakan, since it was the Bengalis rather than the Arakanese who were accustomed to doing this type of work.

4. In view of the controversy about the deaths of children in camps, I asked the Deputy Commissioner for his views. The letter is a sympathetic individual - unlike some of the officials in Dacca who seemed to take the view that the more harsh the conditions in the camps were, the more likely the refugees were to return. He frankly admitted there had been high mortality among children last November and December. He attributed this less to malnutrition in the first instance than to a cold spell which particularly affected children used to the warmer plains of the Arakan, but now transferred to the more hilly and wooded areas of the refugee camps; and also to a bad outbreak of measles. I might add that the British Director of the World Food Programme, Trevor Page, gave me an additional reason, namely a severe outbreak of diarrhoea followed by the incorrect but common reaction of mothers in the sub-continent who stop feeding their children in such circumstances. The Deputy Commissioner added that he found the men among the refugees a pretty heartless bunch of people, who would, if they could get away with it, wolf up the food first, leaving women and children to pick up anything that was left over. For what it is worth, the DC gave the number of deaths in the camps since the exodus started nearly a year ago, as 20,000 men, women and children. This had been balanced by an almost identical number of births.

5. It was pleasant to hear Chowdhury express his warm appreciation for the good work done by the UNHCR and by the British voluntary agencies like Oxfam and

/Save the

Save the Children Fund. He also had praise for the way in which the British Government had come forward so promptly with assistance. Again his attitude was a pleasant contrast to the more lukewarm attitude of officials in Dacca.

6. I am glad to say that the storm over the politically sensitive articles in the "Observer" in January and February, critical of the Bangladesh Government's handling of the refugees, has died down. It was fortunate that the authorities were apparently unable positively to identify Oxfam as the originators. Had they done so, there was a real danger that Oxfam would have been expelled from the camps, and possibly also asked to close their operation in Bangladesh.

F S Miles

Copies: Mr B Smith OBE, SEAD POC
Frank Dunnill Esq, SEAD CDM
UNRIS Geneva
E G Farrar Esq, MVO, Rangoon
Mr C L Booth, CMG MVO, C/o Heads of Mission
Section POC