

CONFIDENTIAL

020/1.

British Embassy
RANGOON

cc JAD
done 23/4 (7)

cc JAD
done 23/2

B Smith Esq OBE
South East Asian Department
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
LONDON SW1A 2AH

FAB 243 | 1
13

23 February 1979

File
B. Beale - (in contact re site operation - part better than had expected)
Copy sent to USA
H. [unclear]
711

Dear Brian,

BURMESE REFUGEES

I have just returned from a fascinating five day trip to the Arakan State to see the "Hintha Project" at first hand. I went with my opposite numbers from the Australian and US Embassies. The Burmese readily gave their permission and the Immigration Authorities in the Arakan arranged the programme to make our trip a success. I attach a report on the visit.

2. My first impression is that the Burmese Government is determined to have no repetition of adverse international comment on their handling of the Bengali refugees or rekindle the fears of the Arakanese Muslims which spread like wild fire through the Arakan at about this time last year. All the personnel at the border reception camps are appointed from Rangoon under a crash programme. The permanent Arakan immigration force is only nominally involved - and even they have a new chief. The top officials are alert, efficient, and sympathetic to the refugee problem. Not surprisingly therefore this phase of the operation, in my view, is working well. There has been no security problem with the refugees and from what I saw of the 750 refugees on the day I visited 3 reception camps they are content to return to their villages.

3. With the smooth running machinery, the camps are already coping with up to 2,500 returnees every 3 days and are planning to accept this figure every 2 days to complete the immediate phase of the ~~13,500~~ 135,000 (undocumented dependents) before the Monsoon breaks in June. This fore shadows the Burmese/Bangladesh agreement following the visit of the Bangladesh Foreign Minister as reported in the Ambassador's letter of 6 February. The flow should shortly reach 30,000 a month. The latest figures show a return of 77,474 refugees up to 21 February.

* documented returnees (and their

CONFIDENTIAL

/4...

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

4. The success of the exercise is even more striking when one realises that very simple means of transport are available for taking the refugees from the reception camps to the transit camps and then onward to their villages. All reception camps however have no difficulty in getting the refugees to the Transit camps in 2 days. Neither is there log jam at the transit camps where the refugees stay merely for 24 hours prior to going back to their villages.

5. Where I detect a weakness in the arrangements and a potential cause of danger is with the lot of the refugees once they are back in their villages. The Burmese officials I met, including the officials from the Relief Department of the Ministry of Social Welfare believe that once the Muslim refugees are back at home with their rations and basic necessities they can cope until the harvest of next October through the "food for work" programme as supplemented by fishing and raising some vegetables. This may be true. Life is poor and simple for all in this area of the Arakan But neglect could lead to trouble. The Government appear to be alive to this danger even if the locals are not. They have appointed a Relief Coordinator, who is an armymajor, to the area. He should be able to get grips with the problem far easier than the scattered Township and Village Councils. This is where the UNHCR and other international agencies will have to step in quickly to give a boost to the development of the region and to supplement the food supply.

6. Secondly one is very conscious that the border area is flooded with Bengalis. They consist of 90% of the 400,000 population of the two main townships involved against only 35% ten years ago with the Arakanese forced to move to the South. The Arakanese are the top dogs in the area and obviously look down on the Bengalis. One official commented "They live like rats". But the Bengalis are needed to do all the coolie work. Further south in the Arakan more bitterness between the races is apparent. Although spiced with propaganda comment the Bangladesh Council at Akyab reports frequent incidents of ill treatment of his compatriates. He himself leads an isolated life virtually shunned by the Arakanese. I can understand rumours of ill treatment spreading like wildfire around the Muslim community and being exaggerated in the process. It is less easy to accept the exodus of whole villages of, in the main, ignorant and poor peasantry to the North of Buthidaung judging by the pathetic nature of the refugees I saw

CONFIDENTIAL

/7...
"unless they were strongly led"
See (4).

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

7. Thirdly, I note in my report the absence of young men amongst the returnees. Immigration officials tell me that it is the general trend. If so where have they gone? Officials told me they might have been recruited by the Awami League in Bangladesh. Dacca may know the answer. Last year there were reports that this age group did not go to the refugee camps so may have ended up in the hills either in Burma or Bangladesh. But they are not apparently returning to the villages in any force.

8. Aside from the "Hinthia Project" I found it useful to see life in a remote part of Burma, where normal means of transport and communications are unknown. It was also intriguing to retrace the steps of the British forces who had fierce battles with the Japanese near the Maungdaw/Buthidaung road and the Mayu Ridge. I had Lord Slim's book "Defeat into Victory" with me. There is in fact a monument next to the East tunnel on the road which obviously commemorated the 1944 fighting. Unfortunately the plaque was removed long ago. According to the book the Gloucesters under General Festing were successful in taking this tunnel. An interesting throw back to the past.

Yours ever,

Rex Farrar

R. G. Farrar

Encls.

Chances:

Mr Dunhill
Disaster Unit
ODM London

UKMIS, Geneva

DACCA

BANGKOK (for SEADD)

CONFIDENTIAL

SEAD
F.C.O.

CONFIDENTIAL

British Embassy
RANGOON

020/1.

VISIT TO THE ARAKAN REFUGEE RECEPTION CAMPS :
13-17 FEBRUARY 1979 by Head of Chancery,
Mr R G Farrar.

1. Together with my opposite numbers from the Australian and US Embassies, I visited the Arakan State last week to see the "Hinthathar" Project in action on the Bangladesh border at Maungdaw. The trip took 5 days involving 2 nights stay at Maungdaw; 2 nights at the port of Akyab; almost 3 days on the water getting from there to the border and back as well as visiting the reception camps; and an insight into the Burmese way of life in a remote area of the country.

2. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs readily gave permission for the trip. Their only constraint was that we should not cross the border nor take TV or movie films. All the officials we met were friendly, helpful and went out of their way to make our programme a success. They achieved this in spite of only one day's notice from Rangoon of our arrival resulting from the slow movement of the Burmese bureaucratic machinery. The Immigration Officer in Charge of the Border Reception Camps, U Tha Thaung who is an Arakan was our bear leader at Buthidaung and Maungdaw. From the time of our arrival at Akyab by jet on 13 February (the only reminder on the trip of modern life as known in the West) until our departure for Rangoon on 17 February we were accompanied by a liaison officer, U Tha Mya, who had the nominal title of Assistant Immigration Officer but I suspect had his origins in the BSPP. He had little knowledge of immigration work and had never previously visited the border area. For all that he was a very generous host - and the fattest man I have yet seen anywhere aside from Sumo wrestlers.

CONFIDENTIAL

/3...

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

3. There are 130 Immigration Officers at the 10 reception camps representing 9% of the total force. They are sent from Rangoon on a three monthly rotating basis. All the Camp Commanders struck me as being competent at their job, confident, alert and, I would judge, especially picked for this political sensitive work. The State Divisional Immigration Officer, who is also Secretary of the "Hintha" Project, at Akyab on a normal tour of duty basis also impressed me as a quiet and efficient operator not given to panic. He was a recent appointee.

4. In all about 400 officials are attached to the Reception Camps. Apart from Immigration there are customs, medical, police (10 per camp) officers together with nurses, photographers, radio operators (radios loaned by UNHCR) and Red Cross. This is quite an influx of officialdom at the border area which, before the exodus, had been neglected and rather sleepily run by the local Township Councils.

5. The ten reception camps stretch for 40 miles along the Naf River. I visited three: Kanyinchang camp, Pyinpyu and Nguakya. The first named was opened on 31 January. It is clean, tidy and conveniently located only four miles from Maungdaw but approachable only by boat. At this point the Naf River is 2-3 miles wide. It can get pretty rough if whipped up by the wind but was calm during our trip. So far 2,000 refugees have passed through it with 2 fatal casualties due to malnutrition (one a 3 month old baby).

6. Our arrival at Kanyinchaung camp, in a fibre glassed bottom boat powered by a Yamaha outboard motor (of which four have been donated by UNHCR), fortunately

CONFIDENTIAL

/coincided

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

coincided with that of three boats full of refugees from Bangladesh. They numbered 254 in all comprising 44 families. About one-third were returning to villages in the Buthidaung township (a township is roughly equivalent to an English county) and the remainder to the Maungdaw area. This offered a good opportunity to observe their emotions on returning to Burmese soil. I saw no sign of fear or apprehension. The refugees disembarked willingly, confidently, and soon made themselves at home in a straw-matted shelter from the sun to await clearance. According to a Bengali interpreter they said they were glad to be back; but unfortunately it was difficult to get any intelligible response from any returned. They were impassive and non-communicative. (At all the camps I looked in vain for an intelligent face to speak to) The Burmese officials handled them in a friendly and sympathetic manner, helping the aged and the children off the boats. The same friendliness was evident at all three camps I visited.

7. The clearance procedure was virtually a formality since agreed lists of the returnees had been received the previous day from the Bangladesh Authorities. They were all given smallpox vaccination and Cholera/typhus injections and taken to the huts where they stayed for two days before going to the transit camps. The huts had ample space to accommodate the families. The straw-matted shelving was much more comfortable to sleep on than my wooden bunk at the Maungdaw official guest house. Each family was issued with firewood, rice for four days (with a further fifteen days ration being given at the transit camp) cooking oil, salt and split peas together with cooking utensils. The issue was made in an orderly fashion to the heads of the families. Milk was given direct to all children under 12 years old.

CONFIDENTIAL

/B...

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

8. I noted at all three camps the absence of returnees in the 20-35 age group. I only saw 750 refugees in one day and this pattern may not apply generally. However, the officials I tackled confirmed that this was quite normal. In their view the able-bodied are staying in Bangladesh. The theory they put forward was that the men had been recruited by the Bangladesh Awami League.

9. At the second and third camps, Pyinpyu and Nguakya, the procedures were similar. Pyinpu is about 8 miles from Maungdaw sited, like the first camp, on flat paddy land by a creek leading to the Naf River. By the time we had arrived the refugees had already disembarked and were settling into their huts. The children were cheerful and lining up for their milk. In accordance with the Bengali custom some wives - not all - were heavily veiled and kept to the recesses of the huts. The Burmese officials were clearly respecting these customs. They had Bengali interpreters which made this easy to achieve. So far 7,000 refugees have passed through Pyinpyu since last August without any casualties.

10. The furthest point I visited was the camp at Nguakya, 20 miles from Maungdaw where the banks of the Naf River are less than a mile apart (further north the link is merely across a creek). We could see pagodas of the Arakanese settled on the Bangladesh as well as on the Burmese side. And of course there were mosques at Maungdaw and Akyab - a reminder of the mixture of races on both sides of the border. Nguakya is further inland than the other two camps and alongside an Arakan village. I was told that the Arakanese had accepted their neighbours with equanimity. Certainly the Bengali women were collecting water at a new well nearby with their children

CONFIDENTIAL

/playing...

CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

playing quite happily. The Camp Commander told me that he had a working arrangement with his Bangladesh opposite number for all the refugees sent on one day to be from the Maungdaw township with those for Buthidaung to come on the next trip. This speeded up the rehabilitation procedures. This example of the easy rapport between the Burmese camp commanders and their opposite numbers indicates, I think, the flexibility and smooth running of the reception operation.

11. I was told that no security incidents or problems have been reported at any of the reception camps. The atmosphere was calm and relaxed at those camps I visited - in idyllic and scenic surroundings. In the border area as a whole security is under the control of a special striking force of the para-military police division numbering about 800 men. They are armed with .303 rifles, sten and bren guns and hand grenades but, typically, have no transport. They draw on local official transport where it exists or sampans. Throughout the tour our party was escorted by five members of this force (with a colourful wild boar as a shoulder insignia).

12. So much time had to be spent getting to places by water. There are no roads but for the British made one over the Mayu Ridge. It took us 8 hours to cover the 80 miles from Akyab to Buthidaung by launch. The visits to the three reception camps from Maungdaw took up a whole day. Indeed, we had to return along 18 miles of the Naf River from Nguakya by the little fibre glass run-about to avoid being on the river after dark. This took us less than one hour (at the price of wet bottoms) against the eleven hours that an immigration officer took to go the 40 miles from one of the furthest camps to Maungdaw by sampan en route to Buthidaung. He would have gone by trishaw for the 16 miles over the Mayu Ridge to

CONFIDENTIAL

/Buthidaung...

CONFIDENTIAL

- 6 -

Butpidaung but fortunately we gave him a lift in our landrover (donated by UNHCR). The refugees go to Maungdaw from the Reception camps by sampan. Logistics are the main problem. There are a few landrovers, four fibre glass outboard motor run-abouts, and two river launches on the River Naf hired by UNHCR. Previously there was nothing. Outboard motors on long pipes attached to sampans Bangkok-style would speed up enormously all communications in the Arakan North of Akyab although at the price of bringing the area a step nearer to modern life.

13. The arrangements for receiving the refugees at the reception camps are in my view working well with an absence of irksome bureaucracy. Apart from checking lists the initial interviews are swiftly concluded. Each refugee is photographed, but I was told that permanent documentation would be left until the refugees are back in their villages. The camp administration is well run. It is of course of the simplest nature. One cannot help comparing all the detailed and sophisticated requirements of Westerners in the same position as the Bengali refugees - modern mechanisation, nurseries, kitchens, cooked food, elaborate toilet and bathing facilities. Such needs are of another world not expected by the refugees or anyone in the region.

14. Visits to villages resettled by the refugees and the transit camps had to be ruled out owing to the distances, poor communications and lack of time. I discuss this phase of the operation with township council members, relief committee representatives as well as the Immigration officials. The transit camp operation is the quickest and simplest of the lot. Returnees are processed in one day. They are given 15 days rice (4 days given at the reception camp), hand tools, clothing and sent on their

CONFIDENTIAL

/way

CONFIDENTIAL

- 7 -

way back to the village. In some cases members of the families are waiting at the transit camp and they do not even spend a night in the camp. They travel on foot, by sampan or (rarely) by the odd truck. The transit camp is under the Relief Committee of the local township council.

15. Resettlement in the villages is a harder problem and still a hazy phase of the "Hintha" Project. So far thinking and action has concentrated on getting the people home and covering their immediate needs. But the harvest is in October/November and there is a gap of six months or so, including the Monsoon season in the meantime. I spoke to members of the Akyab, Maungdaw and Buthidaung Township Relief Committees about this. They pin their hopes on a "food for work" programme to give employment to the refugees until they gather in the harvest. This covers road building and other public works. There is plenty to do. Publicity on the refugee problem has highlighted the deficiencies of the border areas. It lacks any modern means of transport and communication. Maungdaw and Buthidaung are pathetic looking shabby towns consisting of straw huts with a few isolated stone buildings - even the jail at Maungdaw is made of straw. The Bengali population exists on a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of rice, 2 chillies, salt and a mug of water daily. It has been a neglected area. Apart from farming, fishing is the main pursuit. The UNHCR programme will give a boost to the economy. Water pumps and powered tillers will be invaluable. The relief committees also expect to build 4,500 housing units in the villages in the Maungdaw township and 3,000 in the nine villages of Buthidaung. The road from Maungdaw to Buthidaung built by the British in 1918 as a railway and converted to a road in 1927 is already being repaired to meet the sudden

CONFIDENTIAL

/use

CONFIDENTIAL

- 8 -

use of it by motorized traffic. ~~There is plenty to do.~~

16. But at present the logistical problem is formidable and there is no coordinated grip on the situation as with the reception camps. I understand the Burmese Government are aware of this and have just appointed an army Major from the Relief Department of the Ministry of Social Welfare as area relief coordinator. Coordination is needed with so many ~~for the~~ villages involved. The exodus was mainly from the remote areas not from the actual towns of Maungdaw and Buthidaung. I met an International Red Cross delegation including the British representative, Michael Collins, at Buthidaung quite fortunately owing to engine trouble with our river launch (the crew had to search the market for a spark plug). They were going to visit a resettled village to assess their needs. I was also able to assist at a little ceremony handing over British medical equipment donated by the Christian Aid to the Buthidaung Township Medical Officer. This phase will be much more difficult to resolve. I suspect however that the returnees will settle down to their previous routine in the same way as the Bengalis further down the Mayu River, who did not flee to Bangladesh. This is the view of most of the Burmese with whom I spoke.

17. My conclusion is that everyone on the Burmese and Bangladesh side involved in the repatriation exercise is determined to make it a success. It is running smoothly. I did not detect any sign of heavy handedness or hostility with the officials. The rehabilitation phase leans heavily on international support which in turn has to face logistical problems. The Burmese have no resources to uplift the lot of the resettled population. The

CONFIDENTIAL

/Burmese...

CONFIDENTIAL

- 9 -

Burmese on the spot hope to resettle the documented refugees (and their undocumented families) before the Monsoon. They are working on a figure of 135,000. With the Monsoon and rainfall of up to 200 inches in the Apakan the operation will have to stop from June to September. The camps have a holiday atmosphere now but I would hate to go there in the Monsoon wind and rain and mud.

18. I found the trip fascinating. Apart from the refugee problem I saw quite a lot of a remote part of Burma and had some insight into its problems and way of life.

23 February 1979

Distribution:

B Smith Esq OBE ✓
SEAD FCO

Mr Dunhill
Disaster Unit
ODM London

CHANCERIES:

UEMIS, GENEVA

DACC

BANGKOK (for SEADD)

CONFIDENTIAL