

## The Bhutanese Refugee Crisis in Nepal

An entire generation of Bhutanese children has never experienced life beyond the boundaries of a refugee camp.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees have been living in seven refugee camps located in the southeast of Nepal run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As part of the Department for World Service (DWS) [country program in Nepal](#), the LWF has been providing support to Bhutanese refugees since the beginning of the refugee crisis.

The LWF is responsible for the infrastructure of the camps, housing, water, sanitary installations, logistics, and also for schools and places of learning. The LWF is also committed, together with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UNHCR, to seek a sustainable long-term political solution to the refugee crisis.

### Background

A deliberate policy of the Bhutanese government in the 1980s and early 1990s directed against the population of Nepalese descent living in the south of Bhutan arbitrarily deprived more than 100,000 people, a sixth of the population of Bhutan, of their citizenship. This led to one of the largest ethnic expulsions in the world. The citizenship laws were considerably tightened, with proof of 20 years of residence in Bhutan and knowledge of the language and culture of the northern Bhutanese community declared as prerequisites. A subsequent census carried out only in the south of the kingdom deprived tens of thousands, who did not meet these conditions, of their citizenship. The demonstrations for democracy that followed were violently suppressed, and schools and health facilities in southern Bhutan were closed. Tens of thousands of Bhutanese in the south were either expelled or had no other choice but to leave their country.

The 15 bilateral ministerial meetings that have taken place since then have not resulted in a satisfactory political solution of the crisis. UNHCR has been systematically excluded from the negotiations between the two countries. Most of the refugees continue to express the desire to return to the homes they were forced to leave.

### Verification in Khudunabari

In March 2001, the kingdoms of Bhutan and Nepal agreed after years of stalemate to verify the identity of 12,000 refugees living in one of the seven refugee camps, Khudunabari, as a pilot scheme, and to check their eligibility of returning to Bhutan. The procedure itself and its results -which were only presented in June 2003- were severely criticized by the international community.

At the end of a joint two week information gathering trip in India and Nepal, six NGOs including Amnesty International, Habitat International Coalition, Human Rights Watch, Jesuit Refugee Service, the LWF, and the Bhutanese Refugee Support Group declared that the verification procedure applied by the governments of Bhutan and Nepal contained significant flaws. Find here [more information](#).

According to the outcome of the verification process, only 293 refugees (2.5%) were classified as "bona fide Bhutanese," entitled to regain their citizenship rights (if not their property).

Seventy percent of the 12,000 refugees were classified as "voluntary" immigrants, despite the fact that a clear majority of them stated they had been forced to sign emigration documents when they fled Bhutan. Bhutan agreed to allow this group to return as well, but the government will subject them to a two-year probation period before they can file a new application for citizenship - on condition that numerous prerequisites have once again been met.

Besides an additional 24 percent of refugees found to be "non-Bhutanese" who were denied the right to return, a further 347 people (3 percent) were put into the category of "criminals" (including many who had taken part in pro-democracy activities in Bhutan). They would face court proceedings should they return to Bhutan.

In any event, not a single refugee, even from the group found to be "bona fide Bhutanese," has yet been allowed to return to Bhutan, and verification has not been undertaken in any of the other six camps.

In a [joint statement](#) made in October 2003, the LWF and other NGOs demanded that donor countries exert increased pressure on both kingdoms and an international conference be convened to find a just and durable solution for all the refugees.