

PROPOSAL AIBS Travel Grant

Applicant: Hannah Sholder

Conference: "Rehabilitation with Dignity: The Camp-Dwelling Urdu-Speaking Community of Bangladesh"

Paper: *Housing and Land Rights: The Camp-Dwelling Urdu-Speaking Community in Bangladesh*

Location: Dhaka, Bangladesh

Date: July 29 and 30, 2011

This July, 2011, I plan to travel to Dhaka, Bangladesh to participate in a conference on *Rehabilitation With Dignity: The Camp Dwelling Urdu-Speaking Community of Bangladesh*. The conference will be hosted by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) at Dhaka University, with which I was affiliated during my year in Bangladesh as a Fulbright Scholar (September 2009-August 2010). In addition, I have worked closely with my colleagues at RMMRU since August, 2010 to publish the results of my research findings on the housing and land rights situation of the camp-dwelling Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh.¹ It is the contents of my recently published book as well as other insights gained during my 9 months of research in the Bihari Camps in Dhaka, which I intend to share with invested stakeholders at the conference in July, 2011.

The conference will take place over two days, July 29 and 30, 2011, and contains four panels pertaining to the current living conditions and future rehabilitation of the camp-dwelling Urdu-speaking (Bihari) community of Bangladesh, including their housing, health, education, and livelihoods. My paper, titled *Housing and Land Rights: The Camp-Dwelling Urdu-Speaking Community in Bangladesh* will be presented during the panel on housing. The findings revealed in my paper primarily deal with the housing conditions and land ownership status of this minority community, however, they also explore the themes of health, education, and livelihoods; therefore I will participate in all four panels at the conference.

My paper begins with a brief overview of this community's turbulent history, following the transitions in their social status, from being *refugees* during the 1947 Partition of British India, to becoming the esteemed *mohajir* citizens of East Pakistan, to *Stranded Pakistanis* after Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971, and to

¹ Sholder, H. (2011) *Housing and Land Rights: The Camp-Dwelling Urdu-Speaking Community in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: RMMRU.

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finally being *Urdu-speaking Bangladeshis*. This background gives critical insights into why 160,000 members of this community were interned in the 116 Bihari Camps in Bangladesh, and remain there to this day.²

In the second section of my paper, I present the findings from the two surveys I conducted, from December, 2009 through August, 2010, in two of the Bihari Camps in the Mohammadpur region of Dhaka, Bangladesh, namely Geneva Camp (population 25,000) and Central Relief Organization Camp (population 282). Collectively, the two surveys, totaling 105 household interviews, give an illustration of contemporary life in the camps. For each camp, population and household statistics are presented, as well as information about the camp's infrastructure (number of toilets, water access points, gas connections, and electricity connections). In addition, data collected on employment and education levels are presented in tables, and comparisons are made between the literacy levels in the camps versus non-Bihari slums, as well as with the national literacy level. The community's current legal status and views on rehabilitation and integration into Bangladeshi society are also explored using personal excerpts as well as statistics on possession of national identity cards and other forms of identification needed accessing schools and jobs.

To conclude the paper, recommendations are made about the physical rehabilitation and social integration of the camp-dwelling Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh. It is my hope that the presentation of my findings and recommendations will launch a productive discussion between the stakeholders in attendance at the conference on the future rehabilitation of this community.

This conference and the presentation of my paper come at a critical time in Urdu-speaking community's struggle for recognition as citizens of Bangladesh. For the past 40 years, since Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971, they have been interned in 116 Bihari Camps across the country, and considered internally displaced people. Only in recent years have they been able to come together as a community and

² The "Bihari Camps" are segregated slums where members of Bangladesh's Urdu-speaking linguistic minority live. They were originally constructed by the International Committee of the Red Cross after Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971, as temporary housing for this internally displaced community as they awaited repatriation to Pakistan.

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argue for their citizenship rights to be restored. On May 19, 2008, the High Court in Dhaka responded to their petitions in a landmark judgment to reinstate their voting rights. This ruling resulted in voter's registration and national identity card dissemination amongst the camp-dwelling population, and marked the start of their official social integration into Bangladeshi society. While this ruling has positively impacted their access to education, jobs, and other resources outside the camps, it has done little to improve their physical living conditions. Invested stakeholders in this community's future must now turn their attention to the issue of physical rehabilitation. The presentation of my paper will make a significant contribution to this discussion, as little has been published about both the current living conditions in the Bihari Camps, as well as the future rehabilitation of the camp-dwelling Urdu-speaking community.

The presentation of my paper and participation in this conference will also make a significant impact on my budding academic career. In August, 2011, I will begin my Masters degree in City Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, where I plan explore the role of urban planning in the conflict resolution process. My experience working with the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh has greatly influenced my desire to explore this topic, as I see their physical rehabilitation and social integration as the key to ending the 40-year conflict between the Bihari Urdu-speaking community and Bengali Bangla-speaking community of Bangladesh. By participating in the conference hosted by RMMRU this July, I will be able to develop my understanding of the role of urban planning in the conflict resolution process, as well as enhance my contacts with the leaders of the Urdu-speaking community and other stakeholders who I will continue to work with on the issues of rehabilitation and integration during the course of my graduate studies in City Planning.

I would be grateful to be awarded a travel grant by the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies so that I may partake in this conference on *Rehabilitation with Dignity: The Camp-Dwelling Urdu-Speaking Community of Bangladesh* on July 29 and 30, 2011 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.