



Congo: New wave of refugees flees fresh fighting

Brazzaville (allAfrica) — Renewed clashes in northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have led to a further wave of refugees, leaving corpse-littered villages in the affected area deserted, say humanitarian officials.

About 100 people are thought to have died in clashes over fishing rights in DRC's South Ubangi district, which lies in Equateur province. Others are believed to have drowned while crossing the Ubangi river, which separates the two Congos.

"Today we have 30,600 displaced persons. We have had a massive influx since Thursday because of a resumption in fighting," Rufin Mafouta, head of the NGO Médecins d'Afrique in Impfondo, the main town in the Republic of Congo's (ROC) northern Likouala department, told IRIN.

Likouala is located about 800km north of the capital, Brazzaville.

"There was a week we had just 24,000 refugees. The number has quickly risen because of a resumption in fighting in towns and villages in the DRC," Mafouta said.

Conditions are harsh for the refugees.

"They are exposed to the bad weather," Mafouta said. "The sanitary conditions remain worrying. We have recorded some cases of diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections and skin diseases among the children."

"In Eboko, we carried out an evaluation and found there are a lot of unaccompanied children. They lost their parents," he added. "There are also many pregnant women."

An 18 November update by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Kinshasa said four children had died of diarrhoea in Eboko.

A recent interagency mission to the South Ubangi villages of Dongo, Tangala, Ozene and Kungu found Dongo deserted, with corpses still strewn in the streets, stated the OCHA report.

Houses, shops and other property were also burned. Congolese police deployed in the area are afraid for their health.

The refugees include members of the DRC's navy, which patrols the Ubangi.

"We have been forced to flee with our families because we neither have weapons nor ammunition (to) protect ourselves," Wazaba Paluku, a sergeant, told IRIN in the ROC village of Dongou, where sailors had taken refuge in a police station.

About 70 percent of the refugees are women and children, 25 percent are young people, with the rest elderly persons, according to Boubacar Ben Diallo, head of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) crisis unit.

Hospitals reported receiving people with bullet and machete injuries.

DRC's ambassador to the ROC, Esther Kirongozi, said her government had recently set up a special commission to find a lasting solution to the crisis.

DRC authorities also launched an appeal for its citizens to return home.

Aid agencies recently distributed about 15 tons of food and non-food items such as insecticide-treated bed nets, cooking pots, water jerry cans and blankets to the refugees in Betou, Boyele, Dongo and Impfondo following a joint UN and ROC ministry evaluation mission.

Where's the idea of India?

By Kuldip Nayar

It is happening too often. Parochialism is rearing its ugly head in Mumbai too frequently. The Shiv Sena is threatening to throw out 'outsiders' from Mumbai and the rest of Maharashtra.

Self-centered party chief Bal Thackeray has created a ruckus once again, this time dragging into controversy Sachin Tendulkar, the world's best batsman, who said that he was proud to be a Maharashtrian but that he was Indian first. How should this remark irritate anybody?

I think it is time that Mumbai was made a Union Territory. Industrially and commercially, it is the hub of India's financial activity. Delhi is a Union Territory because it is the center of the country's political activity. Why should Mumbai, which is India's financial capital, have a different status?

People from various parts of the country have settled in Mumbai making large investments and contributing to business life their labor and entrepreneurship for decades. More money has come from others, not the Maharashtrians. Even population-wise, my impression is that the non-Maharashtrians are a bit up.

If nothing else, the contribution by 'outsiders' should shut up the Shiv Sena and its ilk, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, that they are a burden on Mum-

bai or that the jobs in the state should be given to Maharashtrians alone. This pernicious thesis, the son-of-the-soil articulation, was advanced by many states, including Maharashtra, before the Fazl Ali States Reorganization Commission in 1955. It firmly rejected the various claims and held: "It is the Union of India that is the basis of our nationality." In its report, the Commission said that "it (Bombay) has acquired its present commanding position by the joint endeavor of the different language groups".

The proposal that Bombay should be constituted as a separate unit was first mooted by the Dar Commission when the constituent assembly was debating in 1949 the formation of linguistic states. The then ruling Congress party accepted the proposal for the reorganization of states.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took a fancy to the idea of keeping Bombay apart. He pushed it when Maharashtra and Gujarat were agitating against the commission's recommendation to integrate them into one bilingual state. Nehru presented before the cabinet a proposal to have three units: Maharashtra, Gujarat and the city of Bombay. The then finance minister, C.D. Deshmukh, agreed to the formula in the cabinet. But he changed his stand following the furor in Maharashtra and submitted his res-



Shiv Sena activists demonstrate in Mumbai.

(Photo: Reuters/File)

ignation. Bombay was made part of Maharashtra.

Nevertheless, the linguistic states have not been of much help to the country. They are increasingly becoming 'islands of chauvinism'. This was the danger to which Nehru drew attention after new boundaries were drawn on the basis of language. The BJP-run Madhya Pradesh is the latest one to announce that it does not want Bihar labor.

Unfortunately, the manner in which certain administrations have conducted their affairs has partly contributed to the growth of parochial sentiments. The rulers have an eye on elections, not realizing that the idea of India gets defeated if people prioritize domicile considerations.

After the formation of states, it was understood that the regional language could be learnt after the recruitment. But now its knowledge has been made compulsory before a person is eligible for the job. This is making state services an exclusive preserve of the majority language group of the state.

The prosperity of some states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka has raised questions in UP, Bihar and Orissa, the economically backward areas, that they were not getting their due. Relations between the centre and the states have

become strained on this count.

The country's unity has been uppermost in the mind of policymakers. There have been a few movements here and there, raising the standard of autonomy. But the democratic system with a federal structure, established firmly after the introduction of the constitution in 1950, has taken the wind out of the separatists' sail. Except for a few militants' organizations in the northeast, the people's heart is in the country's unity.

In the late 1950s, the southern states felt that they were not getting their share. There were agitations and public rallies. Nehru was quick to convene the National Integration Conference to discuss the various grievances. The conference appointed many committees to give their recommendations on how to bring about national integration.

Before they could submit the reports, China attacked India in 1962. All committees made just one comment: The Chinese invasion had united the entire country. Indeed, this was true because all dissenting voices died in no time.

The country had a jolt in the 1980s. The Akalis in Punjab revolted. The state was in the midst of militancy for about a decade. The Sikhs themselves turned against the militants who had made their life hell. Punjab is today a peaceful state.

The odd voice of linguistic chauvinism, the fallout of the reorganization of the states in 1955, has been heard in some areas off and on. The real purpose has been to gain votes in the name of the 'step-motherly treatment' meted out to a particular community. It must be admitted that slogans in the name of language or caste has helped.

The only state where parochialism has been constantly fostered by the Shiv Sena is Maharashtra. The group even won an election with the support of the BJP, on the slogan 'throw out outsiders from Maharashtra'. Bihar laborers were beaten up, something which Raj Thackeray, nephew of Bal Thackeray, repeated after breaking away from the Shiv Sena.

No doubt, the basis of nationality is the Union of India. The states are but the limbs of the union. Yet the limbs must be healthy and strong. Some states have too many poor people concentrated in their territory. Yet what keeps India together is its diversity. By dividing the country into linguistic spheres or by injuring the rights of those who are in a minority, the parochial elements are posing a danger to the very idea of India. It is better that organizations like the Shiv Sena understand this.

(Source: Dawn)

New leaders in Japan seek to end cozy ties to press clubs

TOKYO (New York Times) — Twice a week, Japan's new minister of financial services is forced to hold two back-to-back news conferences: one for the members of Japan's exclusive press clubs, the second for other journalists.



Journalists for Internet sites were allowed to join a press conference by Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada in September.

He does so because the press club members refused his proposal to open the conferences to nonmembers. Even though the agency provides the rooms for the meetings, the press club demanded that the minister, Shizuka Kamei, hold the second conference in a different room.

Japan's new government is challenging one of the nation's most powerful interest groups, the press clubs, a century-old, cartel-like arrangement in which reporters from major news media outlets are stationed inside government offices and enjoy close, constant access to officials. The system has long been criticized as antidemocratic by both foreign and Japanese analysts, who charge that it has produced a relatively spineless press that feels more accountable to its official sources than to the public. In their apparent reluctance to criticize the government, the critics say, the news media fail to serve as an effective check on authority.

The assault on the exclusive access the press clubs' members have long enjoyed is part of the new government's drive to end the news media's cozy ties with authorities, and particularly with Tokyo's powerful central ministries. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, whose Democratic Party won a landmark election victory

in late August over the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party, promises a "grand cleanup of postwar governance."

Takaaki Hattori, a professor of media studies at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, said: "The post-war system was all about mutual back-scratching among insiders, including the big media. The

change of government could finally bring real journalism, and real democracy."

But the changes will not come without a fight, as the standoff at the Financial Services Agency shows.

"Japan's news media are closed," Mr. Kamei complained recently to the outside journalists. "They think they are the only real journalists, but they are wrong."

On a recent morning, the contrast between the two news conferences was stark. At the first, for press club members, about 45 mostly male reporters in suits sat in rows of desks like students at a lecture, raising their hands to ask detailed questions about financial policy. Mr. Kamei, who sat on a podium in front of a blue-gray curtain, gave curt answers and even reprimanded reporters for their coverage.

The second was held immediately afterward in Mr. Kamei's wood-paneled office, where he chatted at length and joked while lounging in a big leather chair. An assistant provided coffee to about 25 Japanese and foreign journalists, including several women and tie-less men, some carrying bicycle helmets. They circled around the minister to ask broad questions on issues from Japan's aging society to postal reform to his clash with the establishment news media.

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