

From 1985 onwards, more than 100,000 people from southern Bhutan were forced to flee from their homes, after a new citizenship law was adopted. People were only recognized as citizens if they could prove that their mother and father had already been citizens, and if they could provide tax receipts from before 1958. All others were forced to leave Bhutan within four days. It was a policy of ethnic cleansing. The powerful majority of the Ngalong people was trying to force all other ethnic groups to give up their culture and language. Since then, the Kingdom of Bhutan has neither re-admitted the exiles nor chosen to reform the citizenship law. A country that declares content citizens as one of the state's primary objective and that has a 'Gross National Happiness' index in its constitution should not try to make profit from people who were arbitrarily displaced.

The Royal Government of Bhutan has encouraged a policy of "One Nation One People" in 1989 that required all the different ethnic groups to accept the language, culture, social norms and dress of the Ngalong Buddhist elite. The Nepali language was prohibited in schools and Hindu media institutes or seminaries, which teach the Sanskrit scriptures, were closed. The discriminatory policy was based on the controversial Bhutanese Citizenship Act of 1985 and a nationwide census in Bhutan in 1988. The census confirmed that some 43% of the total population was Lhotshampa, an ethnic and religious group with strong links to Nepal. Many of their ancestors were recruited from Nepal in the mid-19th century to cultivate plantations in southern Bhutan. Buddhist Ngalong and the Hindu Lhotshampa had coexisted for decades in peace. Shortly after the publication of the results of the census Bhutanese security forces moved through southern Bhutan and forced the Lhotshampa to abandon their homes and to seek for protection in Nepal and India. Many minority people were forced by Bhutanese authorities to sign "Voluntary Migration Forms" to formally accept in their expulsion. Peaceful protests against the policy of ethnic cleansing were quashed and discrimination, arbitrary arrests, torture and massive human rights violations by Bhutanese security forces escalated. Several thousand Southern Bhutanese were imprisoned during months under inhuman conditions.

Despite all efforts of the Nepali Government and the international community to facilitate the repatriation of the refugees the Royal Government of Bhutan blocked any compromise for years. Finally in the year 2000, Bhutan and Nepal have agreed to start a pilot screening of the refugees in one of the camps in Nepal to verify the claims of Lhotshampa as being citizens of Bhutan. Despite the fact that 75% of those screened were found to be eligible to repatriate to Bhutan, they never were repatriated due to unacceptable conditions of the Bhutanese authorities. Therefore tens of thousands of refugees have been languishing for years in refugee camps in Nepal before the UNHCR has launched a massive resettlement program to third countries. So far some 80.000 refugees have resettled to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the high suicide rates among the approximately 40,000 refugees from Bhutan in Nepal – and also the approximately 60,000 who reached the United States from 2008 onwards. Alarmed by ever new suicides among the Bhutanese refugees, the US Office of Refugee Settlement, the Massachusetts Refugee Health Center and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have conducted a research study on their psychological situation. Published in July 2013, the study concludes that – with 20.3 deaths among 100,000 people – the suicide rate among the refugees is almost twice as high as the US average of 12.4 suicides among 100,000 people. Among the Bhutanese refugees who still live in camps in Nepal, the suicide rate is 20.7 per 100,000 people. The study strongly recommends more psychological care for the

displaced people, who often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and therefore more likely to commit suicide.

Until today the Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan has failed to send an offer to the more than 100,000 forcibly displaced people from southern Bhutan to return and to share the "Gross National Happiness".