



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

Published on *Global Nonviolent Action Database* (<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

---

## Bhutanese refugees hunger strike for repatriation, 2003

January

2003

to: December

2003

**Country:** Bhutan

**Country:** Nepal

**Location City/State/Province:** *Jhapa District*

**Location Description:** *Khudunabari refugee camp*

### Goals:

For the Bhutanese government to disclose the results of the verification of the Khudunabari camp, start the verification by the JVT in other remaining camps, and to start repatriation and rehabilitation of the verified Bhutanese citizens back to their homesteads.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 015. Group lobbying
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 015. Group lobbying
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

### Methods in 4th segment:

### Methods in 5th segment:

### Methods in 6th segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

### Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 089. Severance of funds and credit

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- Refugees

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Ratan Gazmer and other refugees in the Khudunabari camp

**Partners:**

Bhutanese refugees from other camps in Nepal

**External allies:**

Members of Nepali Congress, Asian Human Rights Commission, Joint Verification Team, Bhutanese Refugees Return Support Group (BRRSG), United States, Australia, Canada, Norway, Netherlands and Denmark

**Involvement of social elites:**

Bir Mani Dhakal (Nepali political leader), Shailendra Kumar Upadhaya (Founder of BRRSG), Hiranya Lal Shrestha (BRRSG member)

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Bhutanese Refugees Return Support Group
- Bir Mani Dhakal
- Hiranya Lal Shrestha
- Members of Nepali Congress
- Shailendra Kumar Upadhaya

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Australia
- Canada
- Denmark

- Netherlands
- Norway
- United States

**Segment Length:** 2 months

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Bhutanese government

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not Known

**Campaigner violence:**

Not Known

**Repressive Violence:**

Not Known

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

3 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

The government announced the results of the verification process, began to verify refugees in other camps, and helped repatriate those they found deserving of citizenship, all of which the refugees demanded from the government. However, the refugees were displeased with the result because the government was much harsher on the verification process and made it hard for those returning to Bhutan to sustain their old lifestyle.

In the 1980's the Bhutanese government saw the Lhotshampa people, natives of Southern Bhutan, as a political threat. The government began to discriminate against them, and in the early 1990's, 100,000 people from Southern Bhutan fled their country, fearing for their safety. The Bhutan refugees resided in United Nations-sponsored refugee camps in Nepal.

Bhutan and Nepal had difficulty deciding what to do with the refugees. Nepal wanted Bhutan to take back the refugees because many of them had valid documents to prove their nationality. On the other hand, Bhutan argued that only a few thousand were genuine Bhutanese citizens, and did not want to admit the other thousands of refugees into their country.

In 2001, the Bhutanese and the Nepali governments agreed to work together to review refugee's claims of citizenship. Each country organized a five-member team, and together the two teams formed the Joint Verification Team (JVT). They began their verification process with 12,000 refugees in the Khudunabari camp to determine their Bhutanese citizenship. More than 90 percent of these refugees claimed to have documents to prove their Bhutanese heritage.

After receiving no response about their verifications in two years, the refugees at the Khudunabari camp went on an indefinite relay hunger strike on January 7, 2003. The relay hunger strike consists of groups of refugees taking turns fasting—about one

hundred refugees participate during the day and about twenty-five participate at night. The strikers vowed to take turns striking until all their demands were met. The refugees demanded that both governments disclose the results of the verification of the Khudunabari camp, start the verification by the JVT in other remaining camps, and to start repatriation and rehabilitation of the verified Bhutanese citizens back to their homesteads.

The six other Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal decided to join the relay hunger strike in solidarity with the Khudunabari camp in early February. In addition, refugee leaders, such as Ratan Gazmer, put pressure on the donors of Bhutan to convince the government to take back the refugees. The refugees held rallies in the camps to attract press and draw the attention of outsider donors. Some prominent Nepali political leaders such as Bir Mani Dhakal and other members from the Nepali congress visited the Dharna, the peaceful demonstrations at the camp, to express their solidarity to the refugees. Additionally, members of the Bhutanese Refugees Return Support Group, led by former Foreign Minister Shailendra Kumar Upadhaya, reached the Bhadrapur camp to show solidarity for the repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees on January 23 and to help discontinue aid to Bhutan until the refugee problem is solved.

The Nepali and Bhutanese governments had met eleven times on this issue in the previous twelve years, concluding in August of 2001. However, the hunger strikes motivated the governments to meet again, for the twelfth time, on February 6, 2003. The outcome was that again the countries stood by their previous positions.

The Nepali public, media, and donors put the two governments and JVT under pressure to resolve the issue, which led the governments and JVT to meet on February 24. The Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Jigme Y. Thinley, attended the discussions, and afterwards both governments and JVT began discussing plans for announcing verifications to the Khudunabari camp.

The governments arranged a thirteenth round of talks in March to examine the status of the displaced persons in one of the camps in Jhapa, where joint teams had already completed a study of the status of the refugees. In March, Hiranya Lal Shrestha of the Bhutanese Refugees Repatriation Support Group lobbied for international support for the repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees and argued that this issue had to be settled internationally because the two sides could not compromise.

In July the Bhutanese government claimed that they would give in to the demands of the refugees. The refugees took the government at its word and ended their hunger strikes.

Although a few refugees sustained mild ulcers, most of the refugees completed the fast without any medical incidents. Cumulatively, the leaders of the hunger strike spent a total of 3,580 man-hours without food, which is a national record. The Bhutanese government admitted afterwards that the protest through hunger strike was effective because they could not bear to see their leaders go hungry.

On December 22, 2003, representatives from Nepal and Bhutan visited the Khudnabari camp to declare the joint verification result. They decided to divide the refugees into four categories—original Bhutanese, voluntarily migrated Bhutanese, criminals Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese. According to the results, the JVT placed 3 per cent of the total 40,000 refugees in Khudnabari in the original Bhutanese category, 70 per cent under the category of voluntarily migrated Bhutanese, 2.4 per cent under the criminal Bhutanese category and 23 per cent under the category of non-Bhutanese.

The verification team decided that original Bhutanese citizens would be allowed to return to Bhutan and given citizenship and rehabilitation; however, the government refused to give them back their land. The government allowed the refugees under the voluntarily migrated Bhutanese category to return to the country, but refused to give them immediate citizenship. Additionally, the government would keep refugees under the criminal category at prison camps in Bhutan, while one member of each family would be given a labor job. The government would then shift the criminals to police custody in Bhutan for trial. The government refused to admit the non-Bhutanese refugees back to Bhutan.

The refugees strongly disagreed with the decision of the verification team. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International issued a statement condemning the process and asking donor governments to increase pressure on the two states. The ethnic-Nepalese refugees in the camps re-started hunger strikes. None of this forced a new decision.

Starting in 2008 countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, Norway, Netherlands and Denmark began to allow refugees resettlement in their countries.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

- Baral, Leela. "UN Official Urges Bhutanese Refugees to End Hunger Strike." Kathmandu Post [Nepal] 10 Feb. 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- "Bhutan to Hold Talks on Refugees." Nepal News 6 Feb. 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal Call Relay Hunger Strike." Nepal News 27 Jan. 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- "Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal Threaten Hunger Strike." The Rising Nepal 3 Jan. 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- "Bhutanese Refugee Support Group in Nepal Urges Donors to Cease Aid to Bhutan." Nepal News 24 Jan. 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- "Bhutanese Refugees: The Story of the Forgotten People." Bhutanese Refugees. 12 Mar. 2010. Web. 12 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.bhutanese-refugees.com/>>.
- "Bhutanese Refugees Threaten Stir." Statesman News Service [Siliguri] 26 Mar. 2004. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- Dixit, Kunda. "News Roundup." The Nepali Times 11 July 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- "Refugees Still on Hunger Strike." Nepali Times 31 Jan. 2003. LexisNexis Academic. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
- Sharma, Sushil. "Bhutan Refugees on Hunger Strike." BBC News. 18 Feb. 2003. Web. 18 Mar. 2011. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/2774803.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2774803.stm)>.
- "UPDATE (BHUTAN/NEPAL/INDIA/UNHCR): Hunger Strike Is Going On; Need Your Support — Asian Human Rights Commission." Asian Human Rights Commission. 17 Jan. 2003. Web. 18 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/UP-04-2003>>.
- "Time for Cautious Optimism?: The Joint Verification of Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal Begins." Human Rights Documentation Center (HRDC). Web. 12 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.hrhc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures/HRF38.htm>>.

### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Nicole Vanchieri, 20/03/2011

**A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.**

Copyright Swarthmore College.



Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Original website design and artwork created by [Daniel Hunter](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.

Registered users can [login](#) to the website.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 02/17/2020 - 15:42):** <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/bhutanese-refugees-hunger-strike-repatriation-2003>

**Links:**

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>