

India expels thousands in dead of night

Deportation campaign
exacerbates tense relations
with neighbour Bangladesh

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In a sultry wetland on one of the world's longest frontiers, Bangladeshi border guards use megaphones to tell their Indian counterparts not to "push people" across the border.

"They wait until it is dark to switch off the spotlights and for the right opportunity," said Lance Corporal Mahmud Masud, criticising Indian efforts to expel what some senior New Delhi officials have called "illegal infiltrators".

These "push-ins" have increased since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party won elections in West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh, in May. The state has deported thousands, mostly Muslims of Bengali heritage, to Bangladesh, according to officials from both countries. The "push-ins" involve no formal repatriation process and many of those sent to Bangladesh have not lived there for decades, if at all.

"They open the gates on the Indian fence and push people into the darkness... There are women, there are children and these poor people get stranded in the middle," said Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui, director-general of the Border Guard Bangladesh. He was referring to the dozens of people stuck in the "zero line", a narrow no man's land between the Indian and Bangladeshi borders.

The deportation push has worsened fragile relations between the two countries, underscored fears about Hindu nationalism and heightened the sense of precarity for millions of Muslims in West Bengal and other border states.

India shares its longest land border with Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority nation with which it has strong ties, including a language spoken by millions on both sides and a history of migration.

For years, the BJP has campaigned against Bangladeshi migrants, with Amit Shah, home minister and Modi's closest aide, once calling them "termites". In the wake of the BJP's victory in West Bengal, the state launched a crackdown, establishing "holding centres" to detain and deport primarily undocumented Bangladeshi or Rohingya Muslim migrants from Myanmar. Almost 30 per cent of West Bengal's 90mn people are Muslims.

Critics say the deportation push reflects the BJP's desire to turn India into a Hindu nation at the expense of its Muslim minority.



Bangladeshi guards patrol near the border with India last month

Kazi Salahuddin Razi/
NurPhoto/Getty Images

Meenakshi Ganguly, Human Rights Watch's deputy Asia chief, accused Indian authorities of "cruelly dumping" mostly Muslim families "into Bangladesh or leaving them stranded at the border". She added that India "should stop unlawfully expelling people, ensure procedural safeguards, engage with Bangladeshi authorities to verify citizenship and end this dismaying animosity towards Muslims".

Indian officials have said they have pushed "illegal infiltrators" over the border under a "detect, delete and deport" policy.

Suvendu Adhikari, West Bengal's new chief minister and Modi ally, said last

month that about 10,000 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants had been expelled since he took office, while another 1,800 awaited deportation.

In neighbouring Assam, BJP chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the state had "been waging a relentless war against illegal infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims" whose "very presence threatens to alter the demographic fabric of our nation". He said Assam would "not spare a single illegal migrant" who should be "pushed back to where they belong".

The policy has enraged Bangladesh's government led by Tarique Rahman, prime minister, who took office in February but has yet to visit India.

Officials in Dhaka say Bangladesh, which hosts more than 1mn Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar, cannot absorb thousands of returning migrants. "They just cannot simply push people over the border," said Humayun Kabir, Rahman's foreign policy adviser.

Shama Obaed Islam, Bangladesh's state minister for foreign affairs, said the "push-ins" could undermine efforts to improve bilateral ties, which have been strained since the ousting in 2024 of Bangladesh's long-term premier Sheikh Hasina, a Modi ally who took exile in India. Repeated requests by Dhaka to extradite the former leader, who was sen-

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Apel Mia, Bangladeshi migrant, below

tenced to death in absentia for crimes against humanity, have been ignored by New Delhi.

India's foreign ministry said New Delhi had referred more than 2,680 cases to Bangladeshi authorities to verify their nationality but "in many cases, this verification has been pending for more than five years".

A senior Indian official said: "Deportation is summary expulsion, but it requires co-operation from the country to which we are deporting. Unfortunately, that co-operation is never forthcoming in Bangladesh." India was left with no choice but to "push back" the migrants, the official argued.

In banana fields on the Bangladesh side of the border close to the Singimari river, Apel Mia, an undocumented Bangladeshi migrant, said he had lived in India for a decade. But given the animosity against Bangladesh, he surrendered to Indian authorities. Indian border guards then pushed him and his family across the border in the middle of the night, he said.

"We did not have any documents on us. We were taken from a madrassa in a pick-up truck. They shut off the lights, opened the gate, fired blanks and told us, 'Now go, you do not have to be scared as you are Bangladeshi'," he said. "But we were scared. We did not know where to go as we stepped into the darkness."

