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TO ROUTINE FCO

TELNO 90

OF 060735Z FEBRUARY 1992

INFO ROUTINE RANGOON, MODUK, ODA, NEW DELHI, BANGKOK, ACTOR

SIC U2H

MY TELNO 84: ⁽²³⁾ BANGLADESH/BURMA: ROHINGYA REFUGEES

1. I CALLED ON THE FOREIGN MINISTER YESTERDAY, ACCOMPANIED BY THE DHC. THE OSTENSIBLE REASON FOR THE CALL WAS TO DELIVER SIGNED PHOTOGRAPHS OF MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN'S ENCOUNTERS WITH THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE SECRETARY OF STATE IN HARARE (FOR WHICH HE WAS TOUCHINGLY GRATEFUL), BUT WE USED THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESS HIM ON HIS GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF THE ROHINGYA ISSUE.
2. MUSTAFIZUR REPEATED THE MAIN POINTS OF HIS STATEMENT IN PARLIAMENT: THE FOUR OPTIONS, ESTIMATED 42-45,000 REFUGEES, NAMES OF 4,612 REFUGEES PASSED TO BURMESE, NO FORCED REPATRIATION AND CONTINUING EFFORT TO ENCOURAGE REFUGEES TO REGISTER AND STAY IN CAMPS. HE EMPHASISED THE DIFFICULTIES OF POLICING A BORDER THAT HAD BEEN OPEN FOR CENTURIES AND OF SECURING THE COOPERATION OF REFUGEES WHO WERE SUSPICIOUS OF GOVERNMENT MOTIVES AND COULD MERGE INTO LOCAL SOCIETY WITH EASE. A MAJOR EFFORT WAS NOW UNDERWAY TO SPREAD THE WORD THAT REFUGEES HAD NOTHING TO FEAR FROM THE GOB, WHOSE CAMPS HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED PRINCIPALLY TO PROVIDE SECURITY, MEDICAL TREATMENT AND FOOD. AT THE SAME TIME, IT WAS BEING MADE CLEAR THAT THOSE WHO FAILED TO REGISTER BY A PARTICULAR (UNSPECIFIED) CUT OFF DATE WOULD BE REGARDED AS ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS.
3. CONTRARY TO THE LINE HE TOOK IN PARLIAMENT, MUSTAFIZUR ADMITTED (BUT ASKED NOT BE QUOTED) THAT GROUPS OF ROHINGYA INSURGENTS WERE PRESENT IN BANGLADESH. THEY HAD BEEN MOVED FROM THE LOCATIONS KNOWN TO THE BURMESE AND WERE NOW IN CAMPS UNDER THE QUOTE CONTROL UNQUOTE OF THE BANGLADESH AUTHORITIES. UNIFORMS AND TRAINING HAD BEEN BANNED. THEY HAD NOT BEEN DISARMED, BUT WERE NOT ALLOWED TO CARRY WEAPONS OUTSIDE THE CAMPS. MUSTAFIZUR MERELY SIGHED WHEN WE ASKED WHY STEPS WERE NOT BEING TAKEN TO DISBAND THESE GROUPS AS A GESTURE OF GOOD WILL TO BURMA.
4. MUSTAFIZUR SAID HE HAD NO REASON TO DOUBT THE SINCERITY OF BURMESE ASSURANCES THAT THEY WERE PREPARED TO TAKE BACK THE ROHINGYAS. THE 1978 EXPERIENCE, WHEN LARGER NUMBERS HAD BEEN REPATRIATED, WAS GOOD. HE SEEMED CONFIDENT THAT THE BURMESE FOREIGN MINISTER WOULD VISIT DHAKA SOON. HE SAID THAT U OHN

GYAW'S HESITATION STEMMED FROM FEAR OF HAVING TO FACE THE BANGLADESHI PRESS. HE REJECTED MY SUGGESTION THAT A MEETING MIGHT BE ARRANGED ON NEUTRAL GROUND, CLAIMING THAT LOCAL POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS DEMANDED THAT HIS OWN VISIT TO RANGOON LAST NOVEMBER BE RECIPROCATED. HE WAS LESS CONFIDENT ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF IDENTIFYING A ROLE FOR UNHCR IN SAFEGUARDING THE INTERESTS OF THE REFUGEES. HE ARGUED THAT, TO THE BEST OF HIS KNOWLEDGE, UNHCR HAD NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN REPATRIATING REFUGEES ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD. ACCORDINGLY, THERE WAS NO PLAN TO OFFER THEM A ROLE FOR THE TIME BEING.

5. ACCORDING TO THE MINISTER, ACCESS TO THE CAMPS BY NGOS WAS BEING STRICTLY CONTROLLED. THOSE ALREADY ACTIVE IN THE AREA WOULD BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE THEIR WORK BUT NEW COMERS SEEKING PERMISSION TO GO THERE WOULD BE CAREFULLY VETTED. THE MAIN FEAR WAS THAT SOME NGOS MIGHT NOT BE QUOTE ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH UNQUOTE AS THE GOVERNMENT. THE FRENCH EMBASSY HAD BEEN TOLD THAT IT WAS UNACCEPTABLE FOR THEM TO CHANNEL FOOD AID THROUGH A POLITICALLY CONTROVERSIAL LOCAL NGO: ONLY THE RELIEF MINISTRY WAS AUTHORISED TO ACCEPT GIFTS OF FOOD FOR THE REFUGEES.

COMMENT

6. MUSTAFIZUR EVIDENTLY VALUED THIS OPPORTUNITY FOR A FRANK EXCHANGE OF VIEWS. HE SAID HE WOULD BE GLAD TO KEEP US INFORMED, NOT LEAST BECAUSE HE MIGHT WISH TO SEEK OUR HELP AT SOME STAGE. HE AGREED TO MEET EC HEADS OF MISSION, DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF MARCH, ON HIS RETURN FROM EUROPE.

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