

# Refugee Watch Online

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## "Taking Stock: Refugee and Migration Situations in South Asia" – A Report

**SAN CDM**  
SOUTH ASIA NETWORK FOR COMMUNICATION, DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

**SOUTH ASIA NETWORK FOR COMMUNICATION, DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION (SAN-CDM)**

PRESENTS ITS ONLINE EVENT ON

**TAKING STOCK: REFUGEE AND MIGRATION SITUATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA**

**LET'S TALK!**

organised by

**Calcutta Research Group (CRG), in collaboration with DW Akademie**

**DATE: 30.08.2023 (WEDNESDAY)**  
**TIME: 6 : 30 PM IST**

**Moderator: Bharat Bhushan, Journalist & Member, CRG**

**Panelists**

**Iqbal Khattak**, Journalist/Media Development Expert, Freedom Network, Pakistan

**Shafqat Munir**, Political and Security Risk Analyst, Non Resident Fellow at ISAS-NUS, Bangladesh

**Shambhu Kattel**, Journalist, Annapurna Media Group, Nepal

**Greeshma Kuthar**, Journalist, India

**M. C. Rasmin**, The Foundation for Advancing Critical Thinking in South Asia (Facts), Sri Lanka

South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration

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**LET'S TALK!**

**SANCDM**

On August 30, 2023, the South Asia Network for Communication, Displacement and Migration organised an online discussion titled "Taking Stock: refugee and Migrant Situations in South Asia". There were five speakers in this roundtable discussion: Iqbal Khattak, journalist, media development expert, and head of Freedom Network from Pakistan; Shafqat Munir, political and security analyst from Bangladesh; Shambhu Kattel, journalist from Anapa Media Group of Nepal; Greeshma Kuthar, Independent Journalist from India; and M.C. Rasmin, Centre for Media and Information Legacy, Sri Lanka. The discussion

included incidents leading to displacement and migration in South Asia and the various issues faced by the displaced. The discussion was largely focused on the role played by traditional and non-traditional media in portraying these crises. Anannya Das reports.

The moderator for the discussion was Bharat Bhushan, an eminent journalist and South Asia Editor for 360info and an expert in the field of migration and media. Bhushan has also edited the volume *Media, Migrants and the Pandemic in India*. In the welcome note, Bhushan mentioned the factors that have led to massive human displacement and movement of migrants and refugees in South Asia and stated that each panellist will focus on one such event from their country of origin. He further stressed how these events would highlight the dos and don'ts of media in covering such issues in South Asia.

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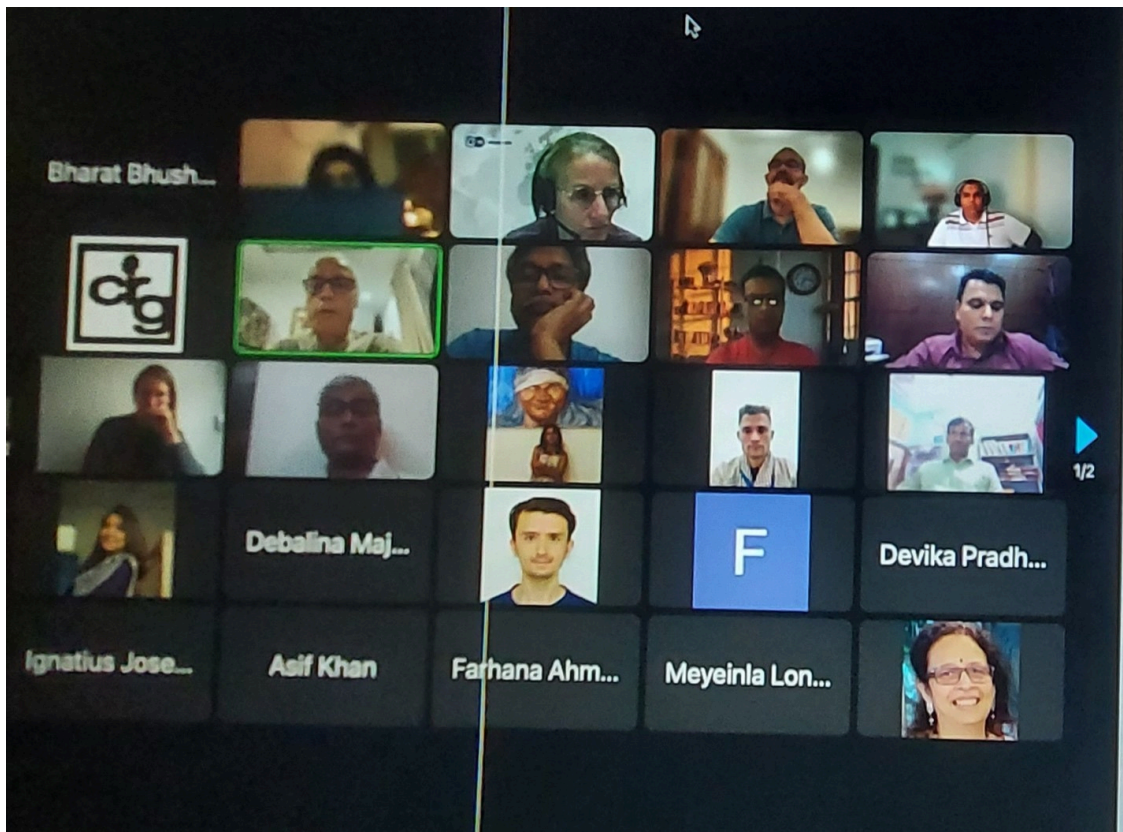


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Iqbal Khattak spoke mainly on the "new phenomenon" of how the Afghan media in Pakistan was a refugee itself. He mentioned how Pakistan is hesitant to allow the UNHCR to enlist them and other activists, government employees for fear of opening the floodgates for more refugees from Afghanistan. Iqbal pointed out that the possible reason why Pakistani media is not highlighting the refugee issue is that there is no such direction from the Government. He talked about the lack of funding from the UNHCR in Pakistan and how it is the reason almost fifty percent of the projects remain unfinished. He stated that fifty-four percent of the projects that were completed were funded by international communities. Iqbal examined the terrorism issue in Pakistan by drawing attention to the UN Security Council's report on how Pakistani Talibans have safe havens in Afghanistan. He spoke about how these issues were affecting Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Iqbal then focused particularly on the problems Afghan journalists were facing in Pakistan, like long waits for the renewal of expired VISAs, not getting a work permit, being stranded at home, and even arrests. He mentioned how, after two years of struggle, some funding was obtained to integrate Afghan journalists into Pakistani media and form solidarity with the Pakistani journalist community. He pointed out how it was risky, as Afghan journalists who would report on Talibans would be close to Afghanistan and would be easily found by the Taliban in case they wanted to avenge the negative reports. Another important point mentioned by Iqbal was the shift of world attention from the Taliban and Afghan refugees to Ukraine and how it affected the refugees in Pakistan.



*Screenshot of the online event*

Shafqat Munir talked about how Bangladesh hosts more than a million Rohingya refugees. He gave a brief overview of the reason for their displacement from Myanmar, which was caused by genocide there, and then moved straight to the humanitarian issues faced by the refugees in Bangladesh, most importantly the lack of funds for most basic amenities like food. He brought forward the data of the World Food Program which cited a \$125 million shortfall in international donor funding because of which the food ration support was cut from \$12 to \$10 per person per month. Other problems faced by the refugees due to inadequate funds were also mentioned by Munir, lack of sanitation, lack of access to healthcare, and lack of access to education for the children. Shafqat then provided his views on the transformation Bangladeshi media has gone through in their portrayal of Rohingya refugees. He mentioned how in August 2017, when the Rohingyas first came to Bangladesh, they were presented as victims of a genocide in dire need of humanitarian assistance, with the Government being lauded for their open border policy. He pointed out how this changed with a change in the Government's position itself, and now they are called "burden" which echoes the narrative of the Government as a "security threat" by the media. Shafqat highlighted the reflection of this transformation in different kinds of media. He first mentioned how local media fuelled anti-Rohingya sentiments, and when international media's attention shifted to other crises in the world like the invasion of Ukraine, local media coverage of the refugee situation in Bangladesh also ceased to be regular. Social media, too, depicted them as security risks and burdens. Munir mentioned the challenges of misinformation spread by social media about what happens in the camps, which created a lot of fear, confusion, and misgivings about the populace. He summed up his discussion by pointing out how the media had started to echo some of the sentiments of the authorities and the host communities about the Rohingya refugees, which changed with time. He ended by stressing the importance of "balanced reporting and a better understanding of the plight of refugees" and how one should never "over securitize any refugee crisis."

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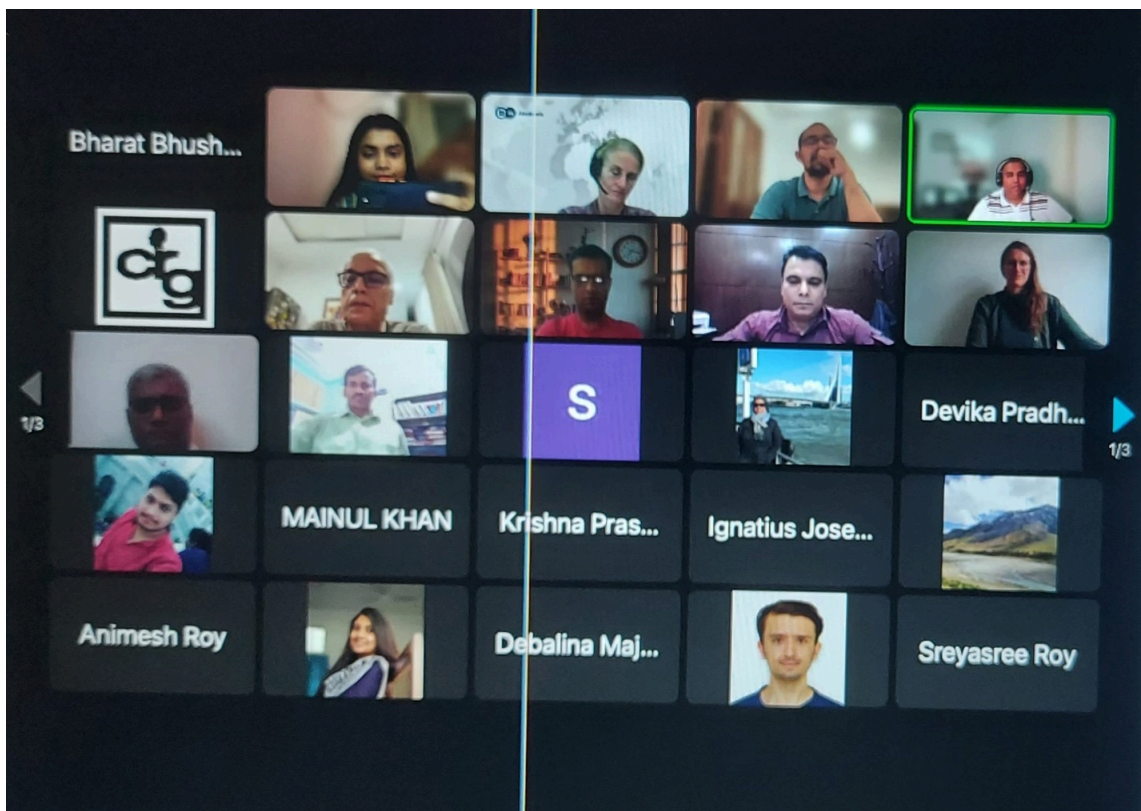


## Paranormal Experience

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Shambhu Kattel spoke on how Nepal does not have a domestic asylum legislative system, as a result of which the Nepali Government treats different refugees differently at different times. He pointed out the two refugee categories that the Nepali Government has recognised: the Tibetans, who came in 1959, and the Bhutanese, who came in the 1990s. Kattel mentioned how 100,000 Bhutanese refugees from Nepal have received resettlement in other countries, and 7,000 refugees are waiting to be resettled or go back to Bhutan. He pointed out how the Nepali Government has issued refugee cards for the Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees, and they live without any fear and with every form of assistance. Kattel stressed on how the issue started with Nepal and the UNHCR not recognising the Tibetan migrants coming to Nepal after 1995. He called them urban refugees and mentioned how they, along with other urban refugees from Iran, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Rohingyas from Bangladesh, have sought asylum in Nepal as well. He pointed out how the Rohingya refugees there were only given refugee cards but didn't get any benefits from them except for their children's education. As drawn from his experience asking the UNHCR about the reason for this, Kattel mentioned that he was told that the reason was the termination of funds for Rohingyas in Bangladesh. Other refugees in Nepal, especially Somalians, Afghans, and Pakistanis, face the same issue. He cited an example of how Somalian refugees started an agitation before the UNHCR to ask for their rights.



### *Screenshot of the online event*

Greeshma Kuthar started her discussion on Manipur by pointing out how the violence there is not only a clash of two communities but something steered by the State government itself. She further explained the role played by the media in helping the Government. Kuthar pointed out the lead-up that led to the crisis that was targeted against the Kuki Community, like targeting their land system, their ethnic identity, calling them anti-forest, pro-drugs, or labelling them as "illegal immigrants". She mentioned the numbers of displaced people in and outside Manipur and highlighted how the Meitei community has moved from the hills to the valleys and the Kuki community has moved from the valleys to the hills. She examined the disparity of support given by the Meitei-dominated State government to the two communities. By bringing to the discussion the money given to the Meiteis and the money given to the Kukis as support from the State, Kuthar pointed towards inequality. She also mentioned that the basic medical support from outside has to be airdropped to the hills, as communication from the valley has been totally cut off by blocking the roads. She called this discrepancy in the treatment as well as the coverage of the media of such a difference both part of the crisis in Manipur. She cited how regional media calls any violence acts of Kuki terrorism to create a kind of narrative aligning with the State government. She ended her discussion by stressing the importance of questioning the narratives created by the mainstream media.

M.C. Rasmin started his discussion by citing an example to depict the polarisation of the Sri Lankan media. He mentioned a study on the report on missing families given by the Singhal media and the Tamil media, in which the former reported only one paragraph while the latter posted 243 articles. He attributed the ethnic conflict of the past between the two groups as the reason for such polarisation. He spoke about the coverage of international refugees by the Sri Lankan media as well as the displacement of Sri Lankan people to other countries due to the ongoing economic and political crisis there. He analysed the type of representation by the media and highlighted the media sustainability model of Sri Lanka, which is going through a serious crisis, making it act for a different cause and operating as a non-independent entity under politicians and businessmen for the sake of its own survival. He talked about how one should understand the structure in which the media operates while looking at the reporting status. He ended by pointing out how the refugee crisis can be brought about through storytelling and not reporting to garner more attention.

In the question-answer session, Shafqat Munir spoke about how the government of Bangladesh was in negotiation with Myanmar to repatriate a sizable number of people by December. He explained that as the general elections were approaching in Bangladesh, the government wanted to do this to show some success on its part with the refugees. He mentioned how the refugees were not sure whether they would be safe after the repatriation or not. He then gave a brief overview of his ideas on why the portrayal of Rohingyas by the media changed, saying that it was because of the change in the narrative of the government and the increasing anxiety among the host community. He pointed out the difference between national and regional/local media portrayals of the Rohingyas. Greeshma Kuthar pointed out various issues faced by the employees, students, and patients due to the lack of transport between the valley and the hills. She mentioned various incidents about how Panglas and Nagas were being targeted in Manipur. Shambhu Kattel threw light on the corruption going on in Nepal regarding ministers taking money from ordinary Nepalese in return for a promise to resettle them in the States by giving them false papers as Bhutanese refugees. He mentioned how all of them are in police custody and are now under investigation. M.C. Rasmin referred to the historic divide between Tamil and non-Tamil

media in Sri Lanka to determine the disproportionate coverage of certain issues in Tamil and Singhal newspapers and how there were a lot of politically organised attempts to keep the northern media of Sri Lanka unaware of certain issues.

Bharat Bhusan, the moderator of the online discussion, spoke about the issue of how the Indian government treats different kinds of refugees differently and highlighted how it was not only along the lines of communal/ethnic segregation. He drew attention to the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), which segregates refugees on the basis of their religion. In his closing remarks, Bharat Bhusan presented a list of dos and don'ts for people working with or around the field of media. He suggested that while reporting, it is necessary to tell the story with a certain amount of humaneness, to empathise with the displaced and to focus on their sufferings, to improve links with the displaced, to raise alarm about situations that could lead to migration and displacement, and to sensitise reporters and increase diversity in the newsroom. On the other hand, he cautioned media practitioners to not follow the agenda of politicians, not overplay the anti-migration and malevolent statements of politicians, not use derogatory descriptors for refugees, and not rely on telephone calls while covering a crisis. The webinar ended with an official vote of thanks from Samata Biswas who also pointed out the necessity of organising such events.

A recording of the discussion can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj8ptn7BqDM>

Anannya Das has completed her Masters in English from University of Calcutta. She is now researching memoirs of Partition, with special interest in ghost-memory. Anannya may be reached at [ananyadas05@gmail.com](mailto:ananyadas05@gmail.com).




🗓 March 9, 2024

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