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Afghan refugee intake draws political flak

Venkat Raman

Government officials are rushing to India to consider taking refugees from Afghanistan, a move that has drawn political flak even at an early stage.

The department of Labour, which oversees immigration issues including refugees, confirmed to *Indian Newslink* on Wednesday that officials were preparing to travel to India on this obscure mission.

"They will interview around 330 refugees, including approximately 300 from Afghanistan," a spokesperson said.

"The officials will be travelling next week for the purpose."

The department quoted United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee division director Kevin Third as saying 'the refugees have been referred by the UNHCR but there is no guarantee that all the refugees will be selected to come to New Zealand.'

He said the refugees would become part of New Zealand's annual quota of 750 UN mandated refugees.

"Those selected are likely to start arriving

in the country early next year and will be spread throughout subsequent refugee intakes, including some possibly in the next financial year," the spokesperson said.

A New Delhi based western diplomat told *Indian Newslink* that the Indian government had rejected the applications of the Afghan refugees.

"We certainly do not want such people in our country," he said.

The diplomat said instead of taking them as refugees, Afghans must be encouraged to return to their home country and promote democracy.

"Besides, where is the guarantee that some of these refugees, if not all, are either insurgents or Taliban followers?" he asked.

Pakistan president General Pervez Musharraf warned the world that Taliban insurgents were a greater threat than Al Qaeda.

"Taliban fighters have regrouped in Southern Afghanistan. The centre of gravity of terrorism has shifted from Al Qaeda to Taliban," he told the European parliament in Brussels on Wednesday.

National Party MP and immigration

spokesman Lockwood Smith was appalled at the New Zealand government initiative.

"The information that India had rejected taking in these refugees makes this an issue of great concern.

"This is a high risk area and therefore extreme caution should be exercised. I do not think there is a need to take refugees from Afghanistan," he said.

Mr Smith said New Zealand was actively involved in peacekeeping efforts in the Central Asian country and that there was a democratic process in place there.

"A number of questions must be asked including, 'Why is New Zealand evincing so much interest in going to fetch refugees from another country?' 'What are the risk factors involved here?' and 'What assessment process would be employed?' and unless these are answered satisfactorily, I would be concerned," he said.

Foreign minister Winston Peters refused to comment, saying 'it was an immigration issue and hence all comments should come from the immigration minister.'

The labour department spokesperson said New Zealand was a signatory to the 1951 UN

Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

"Being a party to this convention means we accept an annual quota of refugees and asylum seekers.

"Quota refugees are people who have been processed and determined as refugees offshore by the UNHCR," she said.

Mr Smith said he had no problem in accepting refugees but was worried that the safety and security of New Zealand would be comprised.

"I understand New Zealand's international obligations but we are known as a safe haven in the Western world.

"We need to be told what is going on and why Afghans should be qualified as refugees.

"The people of New Zealand should be concerned," he said.

New Zealand's refugee intake is about 750 people per year, processed six times, each accounting for about 125 persons.

Quota refugees are housed for the first six weeks at Mangere Accommodation Centre, Auckland, which doubles as a refugee reception centre for quota refugees and as an open detention centre for asylum seekers.

Indian tycoon takes to pristine New Zealand

Venkat Raman

A top Indian entrepreneur is to showcase the green and clean environment of New Zealand to his staff.

About 250 executives, engineers and technical staff of the US\$3 billion Bajaj Group of Companies are visiting New Zealand over the next two weeks to understand firsthand how New Zealand companies cope with the environmental challenge.

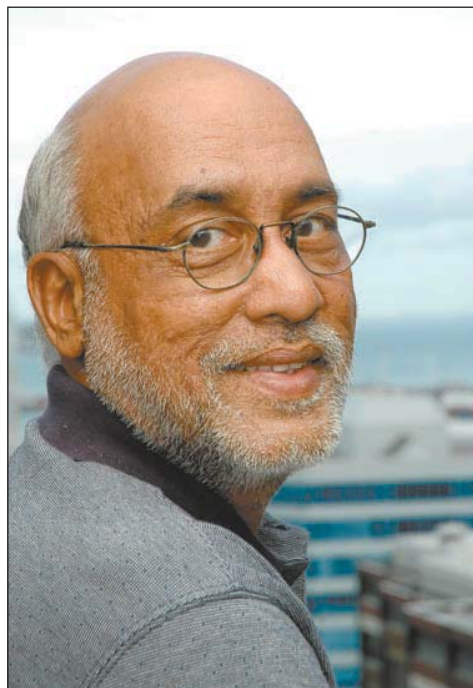
Group chairman and managing director Shekhar Bajaj visited New Zealand early this year with his wife Kiran and was impressed with the sylvan surroundings of the country and the way companies were helping to preserve and promote the environment.

Mr Bajaj said he wanted his staff to experience the pristine beauty of New Zealand.

"I have been to many countries including Switzerland, which of course is beautiful, but still New Zealand is clearly the best," he said.

"New Zealand can continue to have a good, clean life without having to worry about the ups and downs taking place in other competitive countries."

The group accounts for 25 companies,



Shekhar Bajaj Picture by Michael Field

engaged in manufacture of steel, sugar, electronic products, home appliances and vehicles.

He picked senior staff of Bajaj Electricals Limited (BEL), a member of the group for the experiment.

The first team was due to arrive on September 14 to visit Queenstown, Milford Sound and Mount Cook, while the second team is scheduled to be in the country from September 18 and visit Auckland, Rotorua and Waitomo.

They would be able to foster better environment in BEL's activities, which include production of fans, lighting, power, telecommunications and related industries.

Mr Bajaj said his group was aware of the rising problem of pollution in India and was keen to find solutions at least in some areas.

He said New Zealand's remoteness kept it from the fears of terrorism and made it a good place to visit.

It is understood BEL works closely with 'Paryavaran Mitra' ('Friends of the Environment'), a voluntary, non-government organisation run by his wife Kiran.

It was established to create awareness on environmental issues and initiate measures to protect the environment.

"Our people would be able see firsthand how New Zealand maintains its clean environment," Mr Bajaj said.

BEL, which has an annual turnover of about \$220 million, was established 68 years ago and has steadily grown in Indian and overseas markets.

It has 19 branch offices spread in different parts of the country and is supported by a chain of 600 distributors, 3,000 authorised dealers, more than 120,000 retail outlets and 200 service franchises.

Do some weightlifting!

The next issue (October 1) of *Indian Newslink* will be a bonanza.

The biggest ever Diwali Special 2006, with more pages than ever, would be released on October 5. With a wide range of articles, features and news items, the special issue will also carry an exquisite range of pictures with our own models adorned in exotic jewellery and costumes.

Make sure to pick up your copy.

And if you miss, do not worry; the print edition has an identical twin- our e-Paper.

