



Monthly Round Up

Afghan Refugees: A Looming Crisis

Abbas Moosvi

As the United States makes haste to withdraw its military presence and oversight from Afghanistan, the newly created vacuum of power is rapidly being filled by the Taliban – who are scrambling to wrest control of important regions including Kandahar, Lashkargah, Kunduz, and Herat from the Afghan National Army. Over the past five months, the Taliban have gained control of the entirety of the southern and western parts of the country – over 150 districts as per latest estimates. Today, the Afghan government only retains the central and northeastern regions, and those too are on shaky grounds. Violence and bloodshed are once again rampant, with the Human Rights Watch reporting entire villages being burned to the ground, schools destroyed, hospitals blown up, and large swathes of people displaced, arrested, or killed – particularly in the northern areas. These developments have important consequences for Pakistan, with domestic estimates of fresh refugee inflows estimated at around 700,000–800,000 – adding to the tally of Afghans already present in various areas of the country from previous migration waves. (Haq)

Pakistan has had a long history of hosting refugees from across the Durand line (Af-Pak border region), starting in the early 1980s in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion and becoming

a recurring pattern every few years due to instability and conflict: the second wave in the 1986–1989 period as the Soviets withdrew, the third wave in 1996 when the Taliban took control, and then again post 9/11 in 2001. In a report by the UNCHR in 2005, it was estimated that a total of 3,049,268 Afghans were present in various parts of Pakistan at the time of the study – making it one of the largest refugee hosts in the world. In 2015/2016, this number shrank slightly – going down to 2.5 million, 1.5 million of which have attained official registration while the remainder have not. A significant number of these individuals reside in refugee villages set up by the government of Pakistan, mostly in KPK and the newly merged districts (formerly FATA), but the majority (> 1 million) of registered refugees have located elsewhere. (Borthakur, 490–491)

Naturally these inward flows have led to shifting demographics, sometimes in a drastic manner. For instance, Sindhis in Karachi were estimated at 60% in 1947 – in 2017, they stood at just 7%. Furthermore, “Afghan refugees, as a proportion of the population, are larger than the combined total of the three indigenous ethnic groups of Baloch, Brahui and Pakhtuns in Balochistan.” (Borthakur, 492)

Afghan Refugees per Province

[JSON](#)

| Location name | Source | Data date | Population |
|----------------------|--------|-------------|------------|
| Khyber Pakhtunkhwa | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 834,387 |
| Balochistan | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 327,247 |
| Punjab | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 168,351 |
| Sindh | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 66,111 |
| Islamabad | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 35,003 |
| Azad Jammu & Kashmir | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 4,341 |
| Gilgit-Baltistan | UNHCR | 31 Dec 2020 | 5 |

Source: UNHCR

This is besides the plethora of other problems, including rising sectarian rifts within host communities, frictions between ethnic groups, and a flourishing arms and drugs trade across the border region. On the other hand, however, a substantial proportion of these refugees become economically active – contributing immensely to the country’s exports and GDP

growth more generally. For instance, the trades of gemstone and carpet weaving is largely dominated by Afghans – with the former generating USD 27.5 million in exports over the period 2015–2020. Further, Afghans dominate certain sectors in Karachi – including waste management, disposal and resource recovery, and transportation. (Ahmed) In 2006, the

government of Pakistan opened up the option for Afghan refugees to obtain a 'proof of registration' (PoR) card – which recognized them as “Afghan citizens living in Pakistan who were entitled to live and work for three years,” allowing them to “open bank accounts, obtain driving licenses and mobile SIM cards”, thus making commercial activity and business easier. (Khan, 52) However, there are still stipulations in place which require refugees to give up their PoR cards and have them replaced with Afghan passports in order to access certain facilities, such as scholarships for higher education – thus foregoing the benefits that come with the PoR. (Khan, 52) Further, the widespread notion that refugee communities generate criminal activity does not seem to be supported by empirical data – for instance, a mere 134 out of 10,000 cases that appeared in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa court from 2014–2016 involved Afghan refugees. This viewpoint, therefore, appears to be fueled by an irrational sense of xenophobia and hostility rather than actual fact. (Khan, 50)

In the latest moves to accommodate refugees, the Interior Ministry has declared that it will strategize in a manner similar to Iran – whereby refugee communities will be stationed at the border zone and be offered a degree of protection via the Pakistani security forces, but that that will be the extent of it. This approach is unlikely to be sustainable, as the sociocultural linkages that Afghans have within Pakistan are significant, not just in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but also Karachi, a region the population of which is 15% Pakhtun, – and sooner or later there will be growing frustration with the state of affairs and a general push for entry, whether that is through legal or illegal means. (Ahmed) A better approach, therefore, would be to design a comprehensive strategy that deals with integration, repatriation, legal provisions for commerce, a collaborative border control agreement between the two countries' militaries, and generating fundraising channels from international humanitarian organizations in order to cushion the costs associated with hosting refugees. In other words, rather than a

one-size-fits-all response, a set of conditions ought to be generated for entry past the border, permission to move freely, commerce and entrepreneurship, access to health and education, and shelter arrangements. PoRs also ought to be rethought and standardized, whereby renewal processes/conditions are established well in advance rather than being left ambiguous, something that has in the past left room to utilize refugees as political tools for purposes of bargaining when relations with Afghanistan seem to be deteriorating. (Hatam, 3) Alongside this, agreements with the Afghan government with regards repatriation processes must be established – whereby any losses that refugee communities experienced during the time of migration, which are causing a reluctance on their part to return, ought to be adequately compensated when the situation at home begins to improve. (Khan, 61–65) In this way, a series of 'pull factors' ought to be introduced by the government in Afghanistan that incentivizes return in the future, including “freedom from arrest and torture, access to food, healthcare and basic shelter in the place of origin of the returnee, right to education, and equality before law.” (Hatam, 11) These amenities will help reintegrate displaced communities, and the process could be streamlined with the assistance of donor agencies and the international community at large.

On a broader level, concessionary agreements with the Taliban (and other non-state actors) in the domestic sphere ought to be put on halt – and all signs of collaborations or sympathies must be suspended. This will likely come at some cost to Pakistan, considering the nature of geopolitics in the region – i.e. the Taliban are the only viable means for leverage as far as Pakistan is concerned due to other important Afghan actors (such as Ashraf Ghani) being aligned much more strongly with India. This must, however, take place – with the objective of, if nothing else, signaling to the international community that terrorist activities/intentions that put lives at stake and derail the economy will not be incubated under any circumstances.

Works Cited

Borthakur, Anchita. "Afghan refugees: The impact on Pakistan." *Asian Affairs* 48.3 (2017): 488-509.

Hatam, Ahmad Khalid. "Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan: A Legal Analysis (Part-II)." *Humanities* 2.1 (2019): 1-18.

Khan, Muhammad Abbas. "Pakistan's urban refugees: steps towards self-reliance." *Forced Migration Review* 63 (2020): 50-52.

Khan, Amina. "Protracted Afghan Refugee Situation." *Strategic Studies* 37.1 (2017): 42-65.

Afghanistan: Taliban Forcibly Displace Civilians. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/07/afghanistan-taliban-forcibly-displace-civilians>

Displaced Afghans. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1639435/displaced-afghans>

Pakistan shuts door to further Afghan refugees. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Pakistan-shuts-door-to-further-Afghan-refugees>

UNHCR Operational Data Portal. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/pak>



Nadeem Haque

@nadeemhaque



Why do we hate good independent appointments?

Hate change

26.9%

Like central control

49%

Lazy know all leaders

24.1%

145 votes · Final results

2:20 PM · Jul 21, 2021



9



5



Share this Tweet

Tweet your reply