

Evolving Migration Trends from Afghanistan: Management and Honourable Repatriation of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan



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Abstract: Since 1979, Pakistan has been a key player in the management of Afghan refugees despite challenging economic and security conditions. The repatriation efforts in the past could not bring conclusive results as a significant population still live in Pakistan. The outbreak of COVID 19 has increased their vulnerability due to inadequate quarantine and health facilities. The positive political developments by way of new elections and a political settlement with the Taliban provide an opportunity for honourable repatriation of Afghan refugees. This article investigates the dilemma in the management of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and suggests a viable course of action for their honourable repatriation to Afghanistan.

Key Words: Social Media, Afghan Refugees, Management of Afghan Refugees, Repatriation of Afghan Refugees, Protracted Migration Crises

Introduction

Global migrations and refugees are not a new phenomenon. The world has witnessed mass migrations during world wars, inter and intrastate wars and communal riots of varying dimensions. The war on terrorism in the aftermath of the unfortunate events of 9/11, regime changes across the Middle East during Arab Spring and the rise of Non-State Actors (NSAs) destroyed the fabrics of societies and ruined their infrastructure. This resulted in mass migrations of innocent civilians fleeing troubled conflict zones to save their lives. This trend of migrations has been consistently on the rise despite the fact that no war at the scale of the Second World War has occurred, yet the intrastate conflicts have forced refugees outside

their home countries. At the end of 2018, the overall global displacement stood at 70.8 million people due to a host of factors like conflict, violence, fear of persecution and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2018a, p. 1). Despite forty years of instability and varying degrees of conflict, the Afghan refugees even today constitute the second-largest global migrations after Syria. Since 2002, around 3.8 million Afghan refugees have been voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan, but still, approximately 1.5 million registered and nearly 1 million unregistered Afghan Refugees continue to live in Pakistan (GOP Ministry of Frontier Regions & UNHCR, 2012, p. 3).

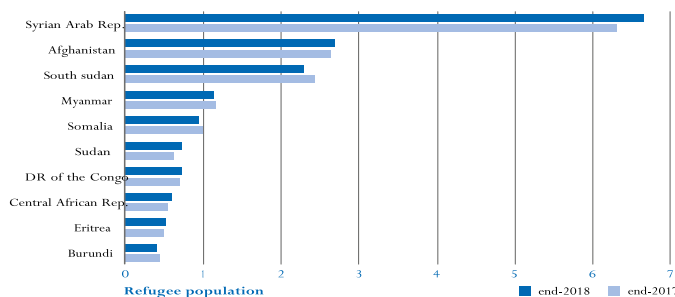


Figure 1: Update on Global Refugees Status (UNHCR, 2018a, p. 4)

Pakistan has taken significant actions in ensuring the protection of Afghan refugees and provision of essential services on humanitarian grounds and shared bonds of history, religion and culture. The Pakistani State's policy towards Afghan refugees has largely been a function of its relationship with the Government of Afghanistan, international commitments and domestic political expediencies. Despite serious efforts in the past by all the stakeholders for their honourable repatriation, significant headway could not be achieved due to the worsening security situation, inadequate pull factors and dilapidated infrastructure in Afghanistan. The prolonged presence of Afghan refugees inside Pakistan over the years has provided them with an opportunity to create socio-economic stakes for themselves within the society, which has further compounded the problems for the struggling economy of Pakistan. Management of Afghan refugees, being a multifaceted problem, would not easily lend itself to clear cut solutions and strategies. It would instead require a multidimensional and holistic approach to devise practical solutions to this protracted migration crises. The lengthy stay of remaining Afghan refugees with associated environmental, socio-economic and political consequences has placed a heavy burden on the Government and state of Pakistan besides introducing hosting fatigue.

Developing prudent policy options and a realistic implementation strategy to end one of the most tragic human displacements is not only in Pakistan's national interest but is also fundamental to the stability and security of the whole region. In this context, the article investigates the plight of landless Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and suggests policy measures for their honourable repatriation to Afghanistan.

Historical Trends of Afghan Migrations to Pakistan

The influx of refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan commenced in 1979, and in the last 40 years, Pakistan has been ranked among the leading countries hosting the refugees (Saikal & William, 1986, p. 23). Afghan refugees entered Pakistan in different segments and time frame as the situation deteriorated inside

Afghanistan. The first such migration comprising mainly Hazaras and Tajiks fled to Pakistan in 1979 in the aftermath of the Panjsher revolt. The second massive containing around 1 million refugees, mostly from eastern provinces of Afghanistan like Nangarhar, Paktia and Kunar, reached today's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KPK) in Pakistan after Soviet forces entered Afghanistan and committed massive human rights violations. During the initial period, the Government of Pakistan tried to adjust refugees in 340 camps keeping in view their cultural and social affinity which were established in Balochistan, KPK and Punjab provinces. Enormous hospitality was demonstrated by the entire nation of Pakistan, and they were welcomed everywhere in the country. The initial registration process enabled them to have access to basic amenities and material aid. However, after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the overall international attention appeared on declining mode. Therefore, their sustenance beyond that time became challenging for Pakistan alone. Therefore, with the help of international agencies, honourable repatriation was planned in 1990 and later years but could not be actualized due to the second wave of instability generated due to infighting between lawless mujahideen factions for control of Kabul. In the following years, the situation even worsened, and during the years 1994 and 1995 additional influx of around 77000 refugees arrived in various camps in Pakistan. In 1996, another 23000 Afghan refugees reached Pakistan in the aftermath of the fall of Jalalabad and Kabul to the Taliban. The Taliban demonstration of cruel governance brought further sufferings for the population and doomed any prospects of honourable repatriation of refugees. By the end of 1999, thousands more fled to Pakistan as a consequence of the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif. Approximately 27000 refugees, ordinarily ethnic Hazaras due to their cultural affinity, reached Balochistan due to the looming fear of persecution. In the aftermath of the United States operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, a new influx of Afghan refugees was witnessed in KPK province, which despite voluntary repatriations in the past, still accounts for 2.5 million living in various parts of Pakistan. The following graphs highlight the year wise migrations of Afghans to Pakistan.

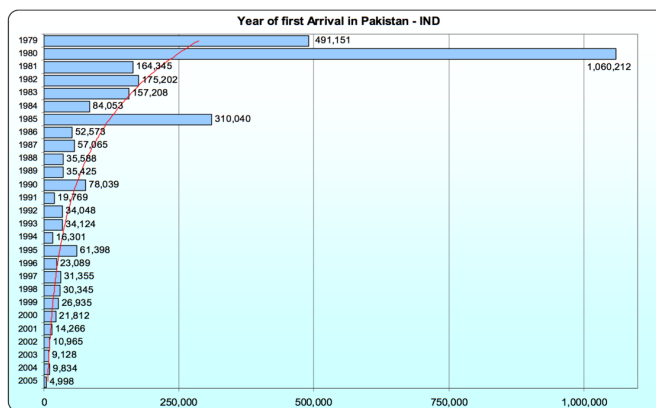


Figure 2: The influx of Afghan refugees in Pakistan since 1979 ([Ministry of SAFRON & UNHCR, 2005, p. 14](#))

Legal Frameworks for the Management of Refugees

Two important legal documents classify the status, amenities and assistance to be granted to asylum seekers and refugees by the international community. 1951 Convention of Refugees, 1967 Protocols entitle refugees to seek asylum in any other country if the conditions of refugee status are satisfied. The refugees fleeing their own country due to violence, insecurity and fear of persecution are protected by such international conventions and treaties promulgated from time to time ([UNHCR, 2020](#)). Similarly, Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also entitles the right to asylum under special circumstance (United Nations, 2015). The refugees are defined and protected in the 1969 African Union Refugee Convention as well ([African Union, 1969, p. 1](#)). The legal codes which have been highlighted in these conventions have been infused into other international, regional, and national laws and rules of business. One of the significant features laid down in the 1951 Convention is that the refugees should not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom would be in danger. The protection of refugees is an all-encompassing concept that enshrines multidimensional aspects to be catered, enabling refugees to live dignified life. Those aspects are; respect for fundamental human rights, fair and efficient asylum procedures and adequate measure to ensure that refugees are not vulnerable to threats of persecution, violence and discrimination while helping them to find a longer-term solution. The nation-states, as rational actors, bear the primary responsibility for their safety, rehabilitation and protection. The international body, like UNHCR, therefore, works

very intimately with the governments, guiding and supporting them as obligatory to implement their responsibilities. The UNHCR also highlights the plight of refugees as they are the people in a specific predicament, lack the protection of their own country, therefore, warrant additional safeguards ([UNHCR, 2017, p. 128](#)).

In the context of Afghan Refugees, it is vital to note that Pakistan has never signed up to the Refugee Convention of 1951 (UNHCR, 2020, p. 2) and its 1967 Protocol ([UNHCR, 2020c, p. 2](#)). Has been commented Dr Khan that by doing so, the Government in Pakistan has preferred to keep its “hands-free” (Prof. I. [Khan, 2016, p. 4](#)). Conversely, in reference to the various conventions, it is also contended that the legal principles they enshrine have permeated into countless other international, regional, and national laws and practices. In that case, Pakistan’s ratification of other Human Rights Related Treaties amplifies that most aspects covered in the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol are well observed. Pakistan has applied the laws to registered Afghan refugees. But as time has passed, the impact of not having a clear national legal position regarding refugees has meant that Pakistan’s support for Afghan refugees has been inconsistent and at time incoherent. The perception perhaps was generated as most of the conventions and protocols ratified by Pakistan were ratified after the first Afghan refugees arrived in 1979, and Pakistan’s experience with what was the world’s largest refugee population certainly influenced the nation’s approach towards formalization of each convention and protocol into national law. The

difference between a conventional approach to refugees and Pakistan's approach has been well explained by Professor Ijaz as Pakistan's policy towards Afghan refugees has been determined by its foreign policy, political expediencies, the status of relations with the Government of Afghanistan and the relations with the international community through UNHCR (Prof. I. Khan, 2016, p. 5). Formal legal documents do not refer to Afghan refugees as 'Refugees', but 'Afghan Citizens'. They are issued Proof of Residence (POR) cards, not refugee cards. Pakistan considers the principle of non-refoulement does not apply as Afghan refugees presence in Pakistan is renewed on a yearly basis (now on a six-month basis) as a result of an agreement with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2015, p. 5). But despite that, Pakistan has always stuck by its commitment to the principle of voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees with dignity, safety and honour (OCHA, 2019, p. 1).

Management of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Despite an economically struggling country with low Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), low per capita income, low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate and highly precarious security situation, Pakistan is hosting one the largest, longest and most protracted refugees since last four decades. As per the latest estimates, 1.5 million registered and around 1 million unregistered Afghan refugees still live in Pakistan today (Ministry of SAFRON & UNHCR, 2005, p. 7).

Despite the fact that Pakistan is not a party to the 1951 Convention, 1967 Protocol and also does not have a national legal mechanism in dealing with Afghan refugees, therefore, framework agreement made with UNHCR in 1993 is an overarching legal mechanism (UNHCR, 2020a, p. 1). In 1979, then the Government of Pakistan opened its borders for the Afghan population as it was organizing an international response on fighting against Communist invasion as a front-line state. There was hardly any registration mechanism or settlement plan. Therefore, refugees were allowed to spread in the entire country at their will. Resultantly, in a decade long war of resistance and later intra Afghan war for another decade, these refugees were at the peril of the local population, which had generated several socio-economic and demographic problems in Pakistan. The influx of refugees continued from 1979 till 1995. It is highly satisfying to express that UNHCR's accomplishments in Pakistan have been indispensable in handling the most protracted humanitarian calamity in history. The ethnic profile of Afghan refugees now living in Pakistan includes 82% Pashtuns, 5% Tajiks, 4% Uzbeks, 2% Persians and 2 % Hazaras. KPK and Balochistan provinces are hosting the bulk of Afghan Refugees. Pashtuns are spread out in sizable numbers over most of the districts with larger concentrations in Peshawar, Kohat and Swabi, whereas Uzbeks and Hazaras live in Quetta (GOP Ministry of Frontier Regions & UNHCR, 2012, pp. 8–9).

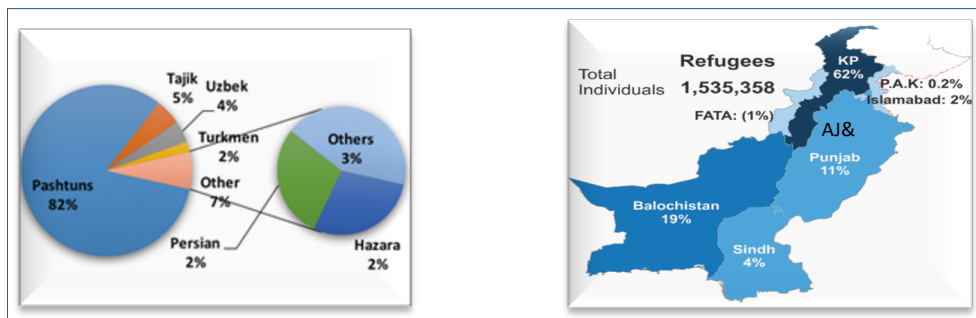


Figure 3: Afghan Refugees Ethnic Profile (GOP Ministry of Frontier Regions & UNHCR, 2012, pp. 8–9)

The international support and funding for refugees were withheld in 1995. Therefore, the majority of refugees commenced their involvement in economic activities in the absence of a monitoring mechanism by the Government of Pakistan. It is interesting to note that such a practice by Afghans has

historical roots, where during united British India and despite Afghan wars, they use to move around in today's mainland Pakistan in search of jobs and trade. This practice continues even today, where people from Afghanistan cross over to Pakistan from Torkham and Chaman daily in search of work under a temporary

work permit and go back every evening. The bulk of the Afghan population inside Pakistan comes from an extremely poor segment of society, with profound economic difficulties in the management of basic livelihood requirements. Afghan refugees family consists of large uneducated dependents vis-a-vis very less earning members. The bulk of refugees belong to the Pashtun tribe and are settled in KPK and Balochistan. The majority of the Hazara tribe (Shia sect) is settled at Quetta.

Socio-Economic Implications on Pakistan

The Government of Pakistan has spent over US\$ 200 billion in the last three decades, as described by SAFRON Minister Mr Abdul Qadir Baloch, which has burdened Pakistan's economy ([Tribune, 2013, p. 3](#)). UNHCR has also spent over US\$ 1 billion in Pakistan. The economic cost for Pakistan has been phenomenal due to the struggling economy and highly challenging security situation after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. While geopolitical aspects of Afghan wars are the prime movers for aid and other related assistance to Afghan refugees, the current stalemate is generating a predicament for refugees living in Pakistan, and the government is also feeling hosting fatigue. The dwindling economy and unchecked economic activities of refugees are alienating the local population. Therefore, serious consideration is required for their timely and honourable repatriation.

Security Implications on Pakistan

The international, national and security affairs experts in Pakistan argue that due to a high degree of vulnerability to exploitation, the refugees living in Pakistan are susceptible to recruitment by the terrorists owing to their highly pressing economic needs ([Baloch, 2015, p. 1](#)). While it can't be maintained with certainty that refugees are responsible for the law and order situation in Pakistan however, they are surely vulnerable to crimes due to inadequate monitoring mechanism by the government. There are 7.6 million drug addicts in Pakistan, out of which 78% are men and 22% are women. Opiates, namely opium and heroin, are used by almost one per cent of the total drug users, with 860,000 chronic heroin users in Pakistan ([Ali, 2016, p. 5](#)). The expanding drugs trade and opium production in Afghanistan has proved to be extremely challenging for Pakistan. Afghanistan is known to be one of the major producers of high-quality opium; however, due to its landlocked status,

a large quantity of heroin is smuggled through Pakistan. The majority of refugees are involved in drug smuggling and apprehended from time to time ([Ali, 2016, p. 5](#)). Another significant security aspect worth mentioning here is the manipulation of the Pakistani national database and registration authority (NADRA) made identity cards (CNICs). NADRA has blacklisted 0.1 million Afghans who applied for the renewal of CNICs ([Tribune.com, 2016, p. 4](#)). Security agencies have also nabbed over 52 refugees involved in financing terrorists in Pakistan (D. R. [Khan, 2015, p. 6](#)).

Persecution of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

As the security situation in Afghanistan kept swinging from reasonably stable to violent and highly destabilizing, the plight of refugees also kept changing. The commitments of international donors and the Government of Pakistan appear to have exhausted due to hosting and donor's fatigue. Resultantly in 1995, Pakistan changed its stance that it no longer considers Afghans entering into Pakistan as refugees. In November 2000, Pakistan closed its borders, but practically, it could not stop the inflow of Afghans due to weak border management. The precarious security situation in Afghanistan due to continued Taliban assaults, coupled with drought and lack of food, many Afghans tried to flee to the border areas of Pakistan. But this time, they were neither welcomed nor granted any special treatment or facilitation. They were instead labelled as economic migrants with no rights like refugees, which compounded their plight. They were also subjected to the exactitudes of the "Foreigners Act 1946" and "Foreigners Order 1951", under which all foreigners not in proprietorship of a valid visa are taken as illegal migrants. This exposed Afghan refugees to growing persecution from police in the form of arrests, detention, and harassment. It also made it difficult for refugees to participate in any form of work, unlike their predecessors for earning meals. The status quo prevailed till August 2001, when the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR agreed on a framework to screen Afghans to ascertain their status as refugee ship. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and resultant US actions in Afghanistan proved to be a decisive blow on the entire process, and instead of resettling, a huge exodus of refugees again moved into Pakistan. This further aggravated the difficulties for refugees, which continued till 2004 when Pakistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with

UNHCR to arrange a census for Afghans residing in Pakistan. Another MoU was concluded in 2006 dealing with the registration of Afghans recognised through the census of 2004. This process concluded in the issuance of necessary identity documents for Afghan refugees in the form of Proof of Registration (POR) cards. Today, more than 1.5 million registered Afghans living in Pakistan are PoR cardholders.

A Critical Appraisal on the Repatriation Mechanism of Afghan Refugees

At present, two policy documents regulate the management and repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan; a UNHCR sponsored multi-year regional policy known as Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) and Pakistan's National Policy. The SSAR was the outcome of an intensive and collaborative consultative process initiated as part of the Quadripartite Consultative Process in 2011. The SSAR was endorsed by the international community in 2012, which serves as a roadmap to address protection and durable solutions for Afghan Refugees through regional and international cooperation (Zetter, 2018, p. 25). Three pillars of the multi-year solution strategy are; first deals with the creation of conducive conditions for voluntary repatriation through community-based investments in areas of "High Return inside Afghanistan", second focuses on the development of the economic incentives in Afghanistan to facilitate returnees and ensuring their sustainable reintegration. In pursuit of the above two core areas, the SSAR focused attention on 48 selected 'High Return' areas in Afghanistan in order to concentrate activities linked to the reintegration of returnees (Zitnanova, 2015, p. 4). As a symbol of international solidarity to assist host countries and communities, the third pillar of SSAR includes support for hosting communities (UNHCR, 2015, p. 4). The national policy guidelines of Pakistan are documented in the form of a handbook titled management of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, which was published in 1981 provided comprehensive guidelines for refugee management during the 80s and early 90s. The Handbook essentially contained aspects regarding refugee camps and aid distribution mechanism. However, in 2007, Pakistan formulated its first policy which besides management provided framework for repatriation in the spirit of the Tripartite Agreement of 2007 (Management And Repatriation Strategy |

Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, 2020, p. 1). In 2013, the policy was reviewed, which streamlines the action plan for the implementation of SSAR. The repatriation of PoR holders is to be governed by the Tripartite Agreement of 2007, which envisages repatriation to be "voluntary and dignified". The precarious law and order situation in Pakistan warranted treatment of undocumented refugees as per existing national laws. In July 2016, the Government of Pakistan issued a directive on a commitment to the principle of voluntary repatriation for documented Afghan refugees and the decision to mobilize international support for undertaking suitable reintegration efforts inside Afghanistan for sustainable repatriation. UNHCR Pakistan operates three Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in Quetta, Peshawar and Nowshera to facilitate the voluntary return of Afghan refugees. Families who want to repatriate are de-registered at the VRC, and their Proof of Registration (POR) card, is cut in the corner. Returnees receive a cash grant once they have reached one of the three UNHCR Encashment Centres in Afghanistan. The cash grant has been increased from US\$ 200 per family member to US\$ 400 per family member from 25 June 2016 onward (UNHCR, 2020b, p. 1). The undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan are dealt with in accordance with the Foreigners Act 1946, and after necessary legal actions, they are deported. From 2002 till 2018, around 4.38 million registered Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan, and during 2019 another 6220 were successfully repatriated (UNHCR, 2020b, p. 2). This considerable increase in voluntary repatriation since July 2016 is due to a variety of factors, such as increase in UNHCR cash grant, a tightened border management regime, the uncertainty regarding the PoR card extension and increased crackdown against undocumented refugees.

Investigative Discourse on the Challenges of the Repatriation Process

Despite the weak economy, unsteady political and security landscape within Pakistan, yet the people and the government of Pakistan have demonstrated an admirable level of commitment to humanitarian values by hosting Afghan refugees since 1979. The very opposite is visible in few countries who, despite being a signatory of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, have built off-shore internment centres, have erected razor-wire fences and have deployed tens

of thousands of soldiers to keep the refugee population away from mainland nation-states in Europe and Middle East ([Dyer, 2016, p. 1](#)). Pakistan's frustration, however, arises due to the lack of urgency on the international front and the low priority of the Government of Afghanistan to address the protracted nature of the Afghan population living in Pakistan. From the neutral perspective, the Government of Pakistan in 1979 did not follow any comprehensive plan of action for temporary settlement in refugee camps as per international best practices and gradual repatriation on return of normality inside Afghanistan. Being a chief architect and front-line ally of anti-Communist response, the Government of Pakistan remained heavily occupied towards military response, leaving the settlement of Afghan refugees on national volunteers, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGOs) and the United Nations (UN) agencies. The end state in Afghanistan could not be appropriately visualized; therefore, even after Soviet withdrawal and later demise of the USSR, Afghanistan's stability is far from reality. The intervening periods of transition between peace and conflict also could not provide a comprehensive repatriation policy for Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere. The major powers who were actively involved in a military conflict in Afghanistan catered for refugees till their own strategic objectives were being met. Thereafter, a lukewarm response has been witnessed, which has amplified the difficulties of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. While UNHCR has done exceptionally good work in shouldering the burden of refugees with the Pakistani government in a highly professional manner, and remains the only hope which can be instrumental in honourable repatriation process.

The challenges to the repatriation of Afghan refugees can be attributed to both exogenous factors as well as internal policy inconsistencies. Pakistan's policy on Afghan refugees keeps changing with every change of government. In certain cases, the Afghan refugees were labelled as the biggest source of terrorism inside Pakistan when the Pakistani Taliban created havoc in the country. While concrete evidences of Afghan refugee's involvement in terrorist activities inside Pakistan could not be substantiated, therefore, three decades of hospitality is gradually turning into animosity due to lack of government's attention and societal discrimination. Afghan refugees

strongly feel landless as both Afghanistan and Pakistan are not meeting their obligations towards their honourable living and subsequent repatriation. Some of the critical factors creating despondency are discussed in ensuing paragraphs;

Dwindling International Support

The burden of hosting refugees is disproportionately placed on the developing countries in comparison to the more developed countries, which have decided to close borders or impose limits on the numbers they can take, as seen in the plight of migrants desperately trying to enter Europe during most challenging times in their countries of origin. There is a perennial lack of attention by the international community in the case of Afghan refugees. Presently a big chunk of humanitarian aid and financial assistance is being diverted towards the Syrian refugee crisis at the expense of neglecting other refugee situations ([Hashim, 2015, p. 2](#)). Despite the presence of a large number of Afghan refugees, the international assistance budget for Afghan refugees in Pakistan is "a tiny fraction compared to refugee situations in other parts of the world", and the budget for UNHCR's operations in Pakistan has been reduced during the past few years ([Correspondent, 2015, p. 6](#)). Global UNHCR budget was under-funded by 61 % in 2015, the largest gaps since the last fifteen years, whereas UNHCR Pakistan only received US\$ 33.6 million out of the promised annual budget of \$ 136.7 million ([Hashim, 2015, p. 3](#)). Similarly, the budget estimate of the last two years and expenditures are highlighted to build a comprehensive picture of the financial difficulties in managing and repatriating Afghan refugees in times to come. In 2019 amount of US\$ 99 million and 2020 US\$ 100 million has been promised, while expenditure figures up to the year 2018 show US\$ 37 million, which is almost half of the slashed budget for managing over 2.5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2020d, p. 1). Such a scenario is a continuous burden on Pakistan's own economy, which is facing a serious downward trend for last two years.

Precarious Security and Economic Situation Inside Afghanistan

Approximately 82 % of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan originate from ten Provinces (Nangarhar, Kunduz, Kabul, Logar, Baghlan, Paktya, Laghman, Kunar, Kandhar and Jawzjan) ([Majidi, 2014, p. 4](#)), and

traditionally, these areas proved to be high return attraction for repatriations from abroad. From the security point of view, the year 2015 was one of the worst years with regards to internal displacement and the number of casualties in Afghanistan, with 3545 civilian deaths and 7457 injured (Moylan, 2016, p. 4). The internal displacement has mostly occurred in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan, which are also the high areas of return for refugees and reached up to 1.2 million by July 2016 (UNHCR, 2016, p. 4). The security situation in some regions of these provinces is far from satisfactory. Besides the increasing influence of the Afghan Taliban, the ingress of Daesh and its confrontation with the Afghan Taliban for greater space has further complicated the security matrix in potential areas of return. In Afghanistan, unemployment exceeds 40 %, and UNDP ranks the country 171 out of 188 in its Human Development Report (UNHCR, 2016, p. 11). The country is facing very limited economic absorption capacity. The absence of pull factors and conducive conditions in Afghanistan constitute serious obstacles for sustainable return and reintegration of refugees. Paltry cash and in-kind assistance offer a little inducement for voluntary repatriation if reintegration is not sustainable for returnees. Though the current Government of Afghanistan has shown resolve to seek a solution for returning its population back to their country, its plans to reintegrate the returnees are facing implementation challenges. Due to funding shortfalls, security issues, capacity issues and weak socio-economic infrastructure, the developments are slow and setbacks are quite frequent, hampering the entire repatriation plan from orderly implementation.

Inconsistency and Adhocism at National Level in Pakistan

A comprehensive policy that maintains a balance between economic, social and national security imperatives in dealing with the Afghan population living in Pakistan is missing. Pakistan has dealt with the management and repatriation of Afghan Refugees on an Adhoc basis. With no policy at all for quite some time, Pakistan's current Policy framework supplemented with cabinet decisions reflect political expediencies. Pakistan's national policy on Afghan refugees does not define protocols, obligations, restraints and constraints for registered Afghan refugees and illegal Afghan migrants. It is for these reasons that Pakistan has lost control over the Afghan population living in Pakistan. With no clear policy and

implementation mechanism, today, Afghan refugees are spread across Pakistan with no check on their activities, whether he is a registered or an illegal immigrant. Besides national security issues, the Afghan population is involved in economic activities without any check and payback mechanism to Pakistan. Humanitarian and social dimensions of the issue aside, the state institutions have failed to implement Pakistani laws, and problems have magnified to such an extent that genuine goodwill created over the last thirty-seven years seems to be in jeopardy. Pakistan Policy on management and repatriation of Afghan refugees does not address the protracted and diverse nature of the issue. Most Afghan households (90%) are caseloads of years 1979-1985, 70 % of the Afghan children in Pakistan are under the age of 24 years (50 % are 5-14 years and 20 % are youth 15-24 years), and 74 % are the second or third generation born in Pakistan (RAHA, 2016, p. 2). Many have never visited Afghanistan, thus lacking linkages with their ancestral homeland. For such a diverse population, comprehensive solutions are required. One size fits all solutions are neither realistic nor will serve Pakistan's own national interest. Thus, it is concluded that multi-layered solutions are needed for the diversified strata of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. For illegal migrants, the Foreigners Act 1946 clearly spells out the disposal of illegal immigrants, including their requirement to register with NADRA. The Act specifies the penalties for illegal immigrants and explains punishments for contravening and abetting illegal immigrants; however, enforcement of the Act is far short of desired standards. The handling of undocumented Afghans remains a major problem for Pakistan. While UNHCR does not embrace undocumented Afghans for voluntary repatriation regime, the Government of Pakistan has also not dealt with this matter strictly in accordance with the Foreigners Act 1946.

The Afghan population movement trend is not only outward flow but rather multiple flows both in and out of the country. A large number of Afghans travel to Pakistan illegally for multiple reasons. The porous border and inadequate border control mechanism subjects Pakistan to huge challenges. It is estimated that around 25% - 30 % voluntarily repatriated Afghan refugees trickle back to Pakistan for economic reasons. Though better border control measures since the last few months have relatively reversed this trend, lack of sustainable reintegration measures, divided families, and better livelihood

opportunities inside Pakistan all contribute towards recycling and fresh inflows. Hence, if a repatriation strategy is to be made successful, it will have to meet two fundamental criterions: one an effective border control mechanism and second, sustainable reintegration arrangements inside Afghanistan to stop secondary migrations.

Vulnerability to COVID 19 Outbreak

The Afghans in refugee camps inside Pakistan and those unregistered are living in appalling conditions with limited access to freshwater, sanitation and other civic facilities like health and education. As per the RAHA report, Pakistan also suffers from one of the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) rating 150 out of 189 countries at global index in 2018 ([APP, 2018, p. 5](#)). As per the assessment paper of RAHA, Pakistan's capacity in 2015 to spend on 322 refugees was 1US\$ GDP per capita ([RAHA, 2016, p. 2](#)), which continues to remain so even today. The concept of social distancing, protective gears and economic hardships due to negligible economic activities have multiplied their problems. The government has requested international help as the food items and stocks are running out ([Sajid, 2020, p. 1](#)). The minister for refugees management in Pakistan has also initiated a call for additional funding to cope with the aftershocks of COVID 19 ([Afridi, 2020, p. 1](#)). The temporary shelters in Karachi also house around 250000 refugees whose condition is very precarious and more than COVID 19; they are worried about looming hunger due to consistent lockdown ([Agency, 2020, p. 4](#)) and the only thing which can alleviate their sufferings are NGOs donations. There is also an urgent need for preparing a sustainable and comprehensive plan of action for the relocation of such camps in view of COVID-19 and immediate repatriation when the situation improves.

Political Settlement Inside Afghanistan

While we can comment on the approaches and challenges of host countries and agencies who are handling these refugees for almost four decades, but sustainable and enduring political dispensation inside Afghanistan has also proved to equally challenging. Since the disintegration of the USSR some thirty years ago, lasting peace inside Afghanistan and the manifestation of a comprehensive reintegration strategy are hardly visible. Whether it was Mujahideen, Taliban or the current dispensation after

the fall of Taliban, very few efforts were made by successive governments in Kabul for comprehensive resettlement of refugees inside Afghanistan. Those who returned during the previous years remain on the lookout for the sneaking opportunity of returning back to Pakistan. The current rapprochement between the US and Taliban is the testimony of the fact that reintegration and resettlement of all refugees is not the focus of attention, which will continue to destabilize the security matrix in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. There is an enormous responsibility on the current Afghan government, the Taliban, regional stakeholders and global players to support comprehensive time-bound repatriation and reintegration strategy for any future settlement process between various factions inside Afghanistan for enduring peace and stability.

Strategy for Honourable Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

The dreadful conditions of Afghan refugees due to substandard sanitation, hygiene conditions and urgency created by COVID 19, where human security should now be given top priority by the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the international agencies for honourable repatriation and reintegration of Afghan refugees. After decades of sufferings and maltreatment, they deserve a dignified life. UNHCR Pakistan has done tremendous work along with the governments in making a comprehensive road map for the repatriation of refugees. The current policy document titled solutions strategy for Afghan refugees 2019 highlights the responsibilities of all stakeholders and the methodology of repatriation and reintegration (UNHCR, 2018b, p. 5). In that connection, two repatriation centres have been established at Peshawar and Quetta; however, the process has been quite slow (UNHCR, 2019, p. 1). Another inhibiting factor affecting the repatriation process is the relations between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which have been subject to various complexities. There has been a policy dilemma for Pakistan to ensure honourable return of refugees and maintain delicate balancing in relations with the Government of Afghanistan. Somehow, these two have not been managed well, and the worst sufferers are the refugees. The success of repatriation depends upon a host of factors like security environment, provision of basic infrastructure and economic opportunities for returnees at their destination. The Afghan government

alone cannot provide the requisite enabling environment; therefore, sustainable reintegration of returnees requires solid initiatives supported by donors to simultaneously build the capacity of Afghan state institutions to cope with the resettlement process.

Instead of a violent crackdown on undocumented refugees in Pakistan and bringing more undocumented Afghan refugees within the ambit of control, the PoR cardholders may be allowed to bring in undocumented blood relatives for registration. This population should be subjected to the UNHCR Refugee Status Determination procedure and, on qualification, should be included in voluntary repatriation regime. The family structure of Afghan refugees is built around tribal affinities and extended family structure making group return attractive for the majority of refugees. This offers a sense of security to them and a social support network. The group return of registered Afghan refugees is a sustainable approach that supports families and tribal groups to return on the basis of guarantees offered by the Afghan Government, UNHCR and other stakeholders. This is a sociological intervention that needs more attention as it proposes to create social support systems. It is also highlighted that Afghans were predominantly displaced from those areas that had been hit the hardest by the Soviet invasion. Decades of civil war and war on terror have further devastated the areas. Lack of infrastructure, inadequate amenities and security problems have rendered most areas unfit for settlement. Therefore, in the first phase, Afghan refugees may not be taken to the areas of their origin; instead, they may be relocated to the areas that are secure, provide opportunities for socio-economic development and contain sustainable infrastructure. Later, in the second phase, they may be taken to the areas of origin once these are made safe and habitable. A special incentive package should be considered by the Government of Pakistan, UNHCR and other stakeholders for university students and widows who have no caretaker. The Government of Pakistan may consider offering residential visas for such a category. A large population of Afghans have

well-established business ventures inside Pakistan; therefore, they may also be included in the residence visa regime for the security of their investments and boosting investors confidence. Such measures will create secure and sustainable environments for honourable repatriation of Afghan refugees after years of sufferings and hardships.

Conclusion

The complex security situation in Afghanistan is going on for the last four decades, and full-fledged stability is still far from a certainty. The tribal and warlord culture, lack of opportunities, struggling economy and continued political instability due to power turf between various politico-religious parties has made the stability matrix more complex and fragile. Unfortunately, the international and local agreements inside Afghanistan ignored the urgency of honourable repatriation and mainstreaming of Afghan refugees living outside Afghanistan in highly precarious conditions. It must be appreciated that refugees are not a permanent phenomenon; they are expected to return back to their native country once conditions return to normalcy. However, when the issue becomes prolonged, a complete return is not always possible, which calls for exploring alternative solutions in addition to voluntary repatriation, which continues to be the most viable and sustainable remedy. Sustainable solutions can only be achieved through long-term and comprehensive strategic planning based on correct mapping of the problem, realistic expectations and solid partnership among all the stakeholders. For successful repatriation, the relationship between the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan and unstinted support of international organisations like UNHCR and other INGOs is essential if the process has to succeed. The security situation inside Afghanistan and economic road mapping are complementary to each other, which must be pursued as two-pronged strategy for sustainable peace, development and above all regional stability in a highly volatile region of the world.

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