**[A grim future](https://www.dawn.com/news/1785728/a-grim-future)**

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THE [recent decision](https://www.dawn.com/news/1779106) of the interim government to deport all ‘illegal immigrants’ from Pakistan after Nov 1 has created a humanitarian crisis for refugees and asylum seekers, in particular for Afghan refugees.

Going by UN figures, nearly 1.3 million Afghan refugees with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, and another 880,000 have the legal right to remain in Pakistan, while 1.73m, according to the interior minister, are ‘unregistered’ and ‘illegally’ living in the country.

What the interim government fails to acknowledge is that this ‘illegal’ category includes families who have applied for legal status, those waiting for visas to third countries, those with expired PoR cards but no recourse for renewal, and many who have escaped persecution after the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan.

Despite the recent claim that the government is targeting all ‘illegal immigrants’, the ongoing crackdown has focused primarily on Afghan refugees. Even those who have the legal right to stay in Pakistan are being targeted.

In a recent interview on a local TV channel, the interim interior minister spoke about the next stages of refugee repatriation, where in the first phase, ‘illegal immigrants’ would be deported, while the second and third phases would see the repatriation of Afghan Citizen Card holders and PoR card holders. This decision has even greater implications for refugee children.

Deporting people who came to our country to seek refuge is deplorable.

The Afghan refugee community has lived in this country for more than four decades, with generations calling Pakistan their home. They have experienced xenophobia and have been scapegoated for terrorist attacks. They have limited rights, but they have also built communities and friendships.

According to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, in 2022, “more than half (52 per cent) of the registered refugee population” were children with 15pc four years or younger. Seventy-six per cent include women, children and older individuals. Similar trends may also exist among the ‘illegal’ Afghan immigrants.

In my work as a sociologist of education, I have met refugee students, their families and teachers who despite innumerable difficulties are committed to education. Due to the bureaucratic nature of access and admission to schools, despite every child having the constitutional right to an education, PoR cards are often not recognised by school administrators outside refugee villages, in cities like Lahore for example.

With the support of NGO schools, students who are enrolled will eventually reach a similar bureaucratic obstacle during board exams — getting their PoR cards recognised yet again. Despite these bureaucratic hurdles, Afghan refugee parents are committed to education for their children.

In refugee villages, a decision by the UNHCR and the Pakistan government was made to introduce the local curriculum in 2018. To understand this transition, I met parents, teachers and students in schools in a refugee village in Balochistan when this change was being introduced.

Their main concern was that without the guarantee of a future in Pakistan, this transition to a local curriculum would only breed more uncertainty. They had witnessed families who were forced to repatriate to Afghanistan, despite the official policy of voluntary repatriation, and the problems those students faced.

Between bureaucratic hurdles and geopolitics, the education received in Pakistan is often not recognised. In principle, an educational degree from Pakistan needs to be attested. However, students run into delays and further obstacles, but even after getting them attested they are often not recognised.

The community in this refugee village supported educ­ation for boys and girls. Some parents were wil­ling to supp­ort their daughters going to college if ap­­pr­­opriate transportation could be guaranteed. Yet, all parents were worried about their uncertain future.

These parents’ concerns were clearly justified. At a time when the Taliban government has banned education beyond grade 6 for girls, with economic sanctions and an infrastructure devastated by the ‘war on terror’, and the recent earthquakes in Herat, deporting people who came to our country to seek refuge is deplorable.

Such a decision is also strategically damaging for future relations. Despite the obstacles, Relief International has reported a “160pc increase” in Afghan children’s enrolment “across 70 designated schools” in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

This success is a result of years of dedicated work to building trust and acceptance. It is an even bigger tragedy that we are throwing away all this goodwill, instead of supporting children who started feeling at home in their country of refuge. What happened to Pakistani hospitality?

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