**Afghans in distress**

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Pakistan has hosted between 1.3 and 3.6 million refugees for over 40 years; many of them have returned several times due to regime changes in Kabul.

Pakistan has not signed any international convention nor enacted any law or policy for refugees. However, Pakistan followed the principle of non-refoulment as the basis for providing refugee status in the past. The cabinet decision of 2017 for state and frontier regions (SAFRON) to propose appropriate laws and make a clear-cut policy remains unimplemented.

In Pakistan, Afghan refugees have different categories: 1.4 million hold proof-of-origin cards (POC); 840,000 have Afghan citizen cards (ACC); and over 700,000 are undocumented and have entered Pakistan between 2018 and 2020. Refugees who came to the country after August 2021 do not have any legal status though 300,000 have been registered by UNHCR-partner NGOs, subject to the Pakistan government’s permission to grant them refugee status. Some of them have been refused registration and others prefer not to be documented for fear of deportation.

At the regional level, Pakistan participates in quadripartite dialogues with Iran, Afghanistan and the UNHCR to ensure: a) international support for voluntary repatriation; b) reintegration in Afghanistan; and c) support for host communities.

In September 2022, the parliamentary committee on human rights took notice of the plight of recently arrived refugees, especially after Afghan Hazara families were forced out of the park near the Islamabad press club and six children incarcerated. A sub-committee was notified to submit its recommendations. Recalling and reinforcing the recommendations of the cabinet committee of 2017, the subcommittee discussed the need for an asylum law, the importance of third country re-settlement as demanded by the refugees, and for the Foreign Office to urgently contact rights groups abroad regarding Afghan refugees’ humanitarian needs.

Global support for refugees has decreased, but the number of refugees and the displaced has doubled in the previous decade to over 90 million in the world. Two trends are apparent: first, countries are reluctant to accept refugees and asylum seekers; and second, the World Bank now provides loans to poor countries to support refugees and displaced populations.

While Pakistan is negotiating a World Bank loan for managing 54 refugee camps, it has used the Foreigners Act, 1946 (Amendment Act 2016) to incarcerate and deport Afghans – over 500 women, children and men (some with valid PoC cards) – from Punjab and Sindh via Chaman to Afghanistan.

Xenophobia in Pakistan has intensified due to the impending economic default in tandem with rising terrorism. Refugees are blamed for crime, drugs and terrorism. Afghan refugees’ contribution to the labour market (especially construction and agricultural work) and investments in Pakistani businesses (transport and food) remains unrecognized. Their spending on health and housing and the Rs2 billion that their relatives abroad send them through Pakistan’s banking channels is also ignored.

Afghans with valid visas confront non-renewal challenges; the post Aug 2021 refugees face extraordinary challenges as they lack access to work, bank accounts, and, importantly, refugee camps; basic schooling; and health facilities. Single women and women with children are especially vulnerable and in need of protection and safehouses. The meagre individual support available to poverty stricken refugees has shrunk drastically as poor host communities also face food and fuel inflation. Pakistani NGOs have unsurmountable restrictions on receiving foreign remittances to help vulnerable Afghans.

As economic pressures mount, the economic and physical security needs of newly arrived refugees have also mounted. Multilateral and bilateral agencies and the Pakistan government can provide sustenance. As a first step, Pakistan and the UNHCR should call an international conference to discuss immediate solutions for the registered and unregistered Afghan population in Pakistan.

Pakistan should enact a law (40 years overdue) and clear policies for refugees and undocumented Afghans and adopt recommendations submitted to the parliamentary committee on human rights. It must adopt transparent screening processes to renew Afghan nationals’ visas. Pakistan should immediately stop humiliating, incarcerating and forcibly deporting Afghans.

Western embassies in Islamabad must ensure their governments extend immediate asylum and resettlement options to Afghans and provide support during the interim period for income generation. Many refugees include educated professionals. The UNHCR must uphold its mandate to ensure protection for refugees, especially recently displaced people; it should immediately accommodate greater numbers of women and children and young men in safe houses.

Our Foreign Office needs to step up on advocacy with human rights groups abroad to highlight the desperate situation of Afghans in Pakistan and seek solutions from these groups. Only serious and urgent concerted actions by all parties rather than business-as-usual in silos can provide meaningful results.

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