**Refugee processing**

BY A R I F A Z A D 2021-09-02

IN the aftermath of the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, Western media`s attention has been drawn to the airport in Kabul where foreign forces, aid and media workers were chaotically concentrated.  
  
Scenes ofutterfrenzy and despair,especially in the wake of the deadly attacks, emerged from Kabul airport. As the deadline loomed and airlif ts proved inadequate, Western embassies advised their citizens to rush to neighbouring border exits.  
  
This has yet again thrust Pakistan into the eye of the refugee storm. Pakistan has welcomed millions of Afghan refugees since the 1980s. Despite a considerable number of Afghans having returned, some 1.4 million registered refugees still remain in Pakistan.  
  
In the present scenario, though Pakistan has its borders of ficially closed, there is no way the country can stop Afghans from filtering in due to porous borders and close cultural and linguistic af finities.  
  
Travel data collected by The Guardian shows that Pakistan flew several flights to evacuate stranded foreigners. However, a fresh influx via border crossings is set to snowball despite the official reluctance to take in more refugees.  
  
Since the Taliban takeover, an increasing number of Afghans have been amassing at the Pakistani border, with the number of people crossing the Balochistan border going up from 6,000 to 20,000 daily, according to one media report.  
  
This stream of refugees will imperceptibly swell the number of people seeking protection in Pakistan posing both short-term and long-term problems with regard to financing from domestic funds as the West is unlikely to offer much help. A combination of coherent policy prescriptions rooted in offering protection to the needy while promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan would be key to alleviating the refugee influx into Pakistan.  
  
Another expected stream of Afghans would be those already cleared for relocation in Western countries. This stream will pose entirely different long-term problems and needs careful handling by the government. As an interim measure, such Afghans are being relocated to neighbouring countries where their cases will be processed.  
  
According to one media report, the UK is planning to set up an offshore centre in Pakistan for assessing asylum cases.  
  
It has been observed that countries that at first promise sanctuary to fleeing refugees under the glare of the media, soon want to wash their hands of them. The offshore `processing` centre for refugees set up at Nauru by Australia in 2001 soonbecame a detention centre notorious for human rights violations as families waited for years for their papers to be processed.  
  
At the height of the Syrian crisis, the European Union coaxed Turkey to act as an offshore processing centre in a bid to stem the flow of refugees to the region. Many years down the road, Europe has received only a small trickle of processed cases leaving Turkey lumbered with refugees for the foreseeable future. Not only that, Turkey also has the unenviable responsibility of deporting unsuccessful applicants to their homeland.  
  
In the present case, the United States, despite its exit f rom Afghanistan, has been slow to admit even those refugees whose applications have been approved. The generous of fer of relocation made in the heat of withdrawal guilt is vulnerable to domestic political pressure from anti-immigration f ar-right circles back home.  
  
The UK of fers the best case. Given these realities, the only solution for in-transit, visa-approved and asylum-worthy Afghancases is to put them on fast track and fly them out of the processing country within weeks of their arrival, not years and decades.  
  
TheEUandUScan afford to take in a large number of Afghan refugees.  
  
However, the EU has not made any commitment so far, as a secret document reveals that it does not want a repeat ofthe Syrian refugee crisis that garnered significant opposition from far-right political parties.  
  
As well as taking in more than its due share, the West should stop the practice of using neighbouring countries as processing centres. It is a practice which is good neither for the stability of the transit country nor for the refugees themselves, who find themselves stuck in a black hole.  
  
Pakistani policymakers need to think thrice before agreeing to the reported understanding of the country being used as a processing centre in light of the f acilities` sordid history elsewhere in the world.  The writer, author of Patient Pakistan : Reforming and Fixing Healthcare for All in the 21st C entury, has worked on refugee projects in Europe, UK, Lebanon and Syria.  
  
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