**Bend it like. . .**

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN 2021-10-14

ETHNICITY is the underside of nationality. No one is more acutely aware of this than political refugees persons who turn their backs on their own country only to discover that the grass they thought greener on the other side has been sprayed with a noxious pesticide: Ethnic Integration.

Foreign investors come singly; when they panic, they leave in a flock. By contrast, immigrants leave their homes in hordes but return (or are returned) individually. In May 2012, however, 28 Nato countries and their 22 partners banded together at Chicago as a flock;in August 2021, they fled Kabul as one.

During the past war-torn decades, Syrian, Iraqi, and now Afghan refugees have scavenged for asylum in countries that had wilfully, wantonly devastated their homes and destroyed their social order. Ironically, it is those very countries that are now offering victims of their belligerence safety and succour.

The incidence of accommodating Afghan refugees has not fallen proportionately on them.

Germany has opened its steel doors to over 50,000 Afghan refugees, while its smaller neighbour Austria has provided homes to 40,000Afghans-`adisproportionatelylarge contribution`, its chancellor Sebastian Kurz complained.

The United Kingdom under its Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy aka `Operation Warm Welcome` aims to resettle 5,000 Afghans by the end of the year, building up to 20,000 over the next five years.

Out of 333 local councils in the UK, 328 have voiced reservations. Their Local Government Association called on the Home Office `to reduce confusion in data that it is sending to differentlocationsover the actualnumbersof Afghans and their needs`. One councillor from Greenwich cribbed more bluntly: `There was a huge mismatch between the rhetoric of senior government politicians and their actions to support those people.

The United States Congress, with conscience-ridden largesse, has sanctioned over $6 billion towards Afghan resettlement.

Apart from those already absorbed in the US (`Northern Virginia is home to one of the largest Afghan communities in the US`), about 53,000 Afghans are living under a temporary status of `humanitarian parole` on military bases across the US from Texas to New Jersey.

More than 14,000 are marking time at US military bases in friendly countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain and in Kosovo and the Middle East. Not all of these hopefuls may reach the US. The immigration formalities are rigorous, tedious and open-ended. Until the refugees are cleared or rejected, they could find themselves relocated in temporary camps in f araway Albania or Rwanda.

Canada has offered to resettle up to 20,000`vulnerable Afghan nationals`, but, as some earlier migrants have discovered, entry into Canada can take between three to five years.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has thrown up its hands in despair.

Any refugee accessing the website of the UNHCR in Pakistan should expect to see this notice: `Please note that UNHCR Pakistan does not have an active resettlement programme at this time.

One empathises with those dispossessed Afghan families who, af ter being subjected to iron-fisted aid for the past 20 years, are being force-fed charity. The cells they feared in an Afghan prison have been replaced by cramped hotel rooms in Western suburbia or crowded accommodation in tented camps erected on disused airfields.

Understandably, some of them disoriented and disgruntled now want to return to Afghanistan. The Germans have schemes in place, offering unhappy refugees government-funded repatriation to their home countries. Considering the danger they will predictably face in their countries of origin,this is a benign form of state-assisted euthanasia.

Pakistanhasmore Afghan refugees than it deserves.

More than 500,000 fill a satellite suburb on the periphery of Peshawarcity. Afghans entrepreneurs are to be foundin the main shopping areas of every major Pakistani city. Their repatriation plans are evidenced by the wooden caskets standing upright outside the camps in Peshawar, for while Afghans maylive and trade in Pakistan, they prefer being buried in Afghanistan.

It says much for the empowerment of women in Afghanistan by the postand preTaliban efforts of Western-trained administrators that, among thousands of refugees seeking asylum, there should be a squad of 35 girls and women footballers ranging from the ages of 13 to 19 all `with promising careers`. They are currently in Islamabad on temporary visas but have been assured asylum by the United Kingdom.

British soccer fans, despondent at the sale of Newcastle United to a Saudi consortium (allegedlyonbehalfof CrownPrinceMohammed bin Salman) can now watch a football team of Afghan women exposing their calves. And cinemagoers who enjoyed Gurinder Chadha`s brilliant 2002 comedy about a girls` football team Bend it like Beckham c an look f orward to its sequel: `Bend it at Bagram`.  The writer is an author.

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