[**No choice but to leave**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630435/no-choice-but-to-leave)

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REFUGEES are amongst the most vulnerable groups of people by virtue of being at the mercy of other states when it is no longer safe for them to remain at home. It is an uprooting process that is painful and tragic, and must be made as easy as possible by host states on purely humanitarian grounds. History shows that one never knows when they may become a refugee.

Refugees bring in new ideas and skills, contribute to the economy, and expand the market base in a host country, apart from having a high success rate due to the fact that they often have to work extra hard to prove their value as well as to settle in a new country. It is important to note that all refugees leave their homes not by choice but by compulsion, and most would rather be back at home.

This World Refugee Day (June 20), it is important to consider the state of refugees residing in Pakistan, the refugees created due to the policies of the Pakistani state, and prepare for the influx of displaced people that Pakistan may get in the near future.

The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan is likely to increase again with the US withdrawal.

Pakistan has been recognised for opening up its borders to Afghan refugees in the past three decades, which is highly admirable, and playing host to the largest refugee population in the world for the longest time. However, legal issues have persisted for Afghans in Pakistan since the beginning, especially in the absence of any specific legal protections. Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Optional Protocol, and hence does not even have the word ‘refugee’ mentioned in any of its laws.

Afghans who have lived here all their life including an entire generation that was born here and has known no other country as its home continue to be governed by the Foreigners Act of 1946 which sees them as ‘aliens’. This has meant a lot of police harassment, social prejudice and discrimination in basic services such as banking. The lack of a refugee law has also meant that refugees can be asked to leave Pakistan at any point, without any legal protection under the international humanitarian law principle of non-refoulement. Under this, states cannot forcibly send back refugees to their home country where there is a credible threat of persecution.

The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan is likely to increase again with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan scheduled for September, and the corresponding increase in violence in Afghanistan, which never really stopped. In fact, the Afghan Taliban are taking over more territory, terrorising Afghans, and continuing to target women, journalists, judges and humanitarian workers amongst others. Pakistan’s historical relationship with the Taliban, whereby their government was recognised in the 1990s, and the links the state continues to enjoy with them, must be leveraged to stop the violence in Afghanistan for peace to materialise there, and to prevent Afghans from having to seek refuge in other countries again, including Pakistan.

Pakistan must also keep its doors open for refugees from Myanmar who are being persecuted by a violent military dictatorship; the same military has been involved in the genocide of the Rohingya community. Moreover, Pakistan must stop supplying weapons and air force supplies to Myanmar until the dictatorship ends as Pakistani exports should not be used to further massacres abroad.

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s promise to Afghans born in Pakistan that they will get Pakistani citizenship — the Citizenship Act 1951 stipulates that anyone born in Pakistan will be a citizen — is yet to materialise. It must be speeded up. However, Pakistan’s arrangements to include Afghans in the Covid-19 vaccination campaign is admirable, and worthy of emulation in Europe and elsewhere where refugees are struggling to get inoculated due to their immigration status. Pakistan must also expand the vaccination campaign to unregistered Afghans in Pakistan, which number around 1.5 million currently.

Pakistan also needs to focus its human rights strategy to protect religious minorities, dissidents, and ethnic minorities — groups that are compelled to leave this country for asylum abroad due to threats to their life and safety. This includes Ahmadis, Hindus, members of the Hazara community, Christians and political and other dissidents. Most end up in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Australia, Sweden, Italy, Greece, Australia, Canada, etc. In 2019, more than 33,000 Pakistanis applied for asylum abroad, of which 21.3 per cent were accepted, and another 20pc of the rejected applications were accepted in review, numbering a total of 7,554, as per World Data.

Prosecution of those who threaten, discriminate against and persecute religious minorities must be ensured under the law quickly, and the abuse of the blasphemy laws and Ordinance XX to persecute minorities, and settle personal scores must be discouraged and prosecuted too.

The highest number of Pakistani asylum seekers are going to Europe, where they are often smuggled in by mafias who profit off the despair of the poor or marginalised by charging exorbitant amounts. I had a chance to interact with Pakistani refugees in northern France where they often camp for months and are mistreated by the local authorities. They face a similar situation in Greece.

Another major factor causing Pakistanis to take great risks to migrate is economic hardships; though not life-threatening in an immediate sense it is gravely impacting the quality of life of citizens. The government has not helped this situation much by boasting about the high amounts of remittances by overseas Pakistanis and the increase in ‘export’ of labour from Pakistan. Instead, the government should be improving the economic situation in Pakistan so that citizens can stay at home, be employed or set up businesses and be able to earn and contribute to the economy.

To conclude, it is essential that Pakistan signs the Refugee Convention 1951 and brings laws up to date to protect refugees, takes measures to improve the situation of minorities so they are not compelled to leave, and leverage a peaceful policy in the neighbourhood to prevent the further influx of refugees in the region.

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