**Our migrant burden is far larger than Britain’s**

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All over the world, governments are adapting to a new era of mass migration linked to conflict, climate change, and economic opportunism. The West is no stranger to painful judgments that must be made in managing undocumented foreigners. The UK Government’s plan to deport illegal immigrants to Rwanda is a sign of that pressure. The heated debate surrounding the proposal and the many efforts to derail the scheme illustrate the huge challenges for policymakers as they seek to balance human rights with hard realities.

France is also struggling, while Italy has expressed fears that it may become “Europe’s refugee camp”. After opening its arms to several million refugees in recent years, Germany is also feeling the strain, prompting the announcement of tough new deportation measures. The situation in the US is no easier.

Pakistan’s problem is of a different magnitude altogether. Over the last three to four decades, between four and five million migrants (roughly the population of Ireland) have arrived. Many have no right to remain. Despite being a non-signatory to 1951 Convention on Refugees (and its 1967 Protocol), we have generously accommodated the single largest caseload of refugees.

Hospitality is in Pakistan’s DNA which is why we have, and will continue to fulfil our legal, moral and humanitarian obligations.

We have worked very hard, over a very long period of time, to accommodate as many as we can while giving those with no right to remain ample opportunity to leave voluntarily.

Unfortunately, despite frequent opportunities to repatriate voluntarily, and multiple government attempts to register those who remain undocumented, a significant number has persistently refused to formalise their status, choosing instead to stay in the shadows.

While Pakistan has benefited from many hardworking and law-abiding migrants, the overall socio-economic and security cost of this huge influx has been staggering. Many work on the black market, paying no tax, depressing wages for legitimate workers. They are also susceptible to exploitation by the criminal underworld, with all its disturbing links to terrorist organisations operating in the region.

Since Aug 2021, at least 16 Afghan nationals have carried out suicide attacks inside Pakistan, while 65 terrorists killed in encounters with security forces, mainly in the bordering region, were identified as Afghans. No responsible government can ignore such concerns. Whenever we raised this with the interim Afghan government, they advised us to “look inwards”. We have finally decided to heed to their advice to put our house in order.

Our painstaking repatriation programme has attracted predictable criticism from those who do not understand the complex history of the problem – or the extraordinary efforts that have been made to avoid forcible deportations.

Misinformation and unfounded allegations abound, especially on social media. In any such programme, there will always be a small number of particularly difficult cases. We felt – and continue to feel – a deep responsibility for the welfare of all of those being repatriated, which is why all officials involved in the program are under strict orders to treat deportees with due respect and care.

Furthermore, our emphasis is on voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation of individuals (along with their legally acquired assets), and not on deportation. Some 93 per cent of those who have returned to Afghanistan have done so voluntarily. Importantly, none of the 1.46 million Afghans who applied for proof of registration cards have been returned; nor have 800,000 or so individuals who hold Afghan citizen cards.

We have set up some 79 transit centres, providing free meals, shelter and medical facilities while additional crossing points have been opened on the Pakistan-Afghan Border to facilitate the processes. Security personnel are escorting the immigrants to border crossings, taking particular care of women and children. Emergency helplines are available to report any abuses.

Much has been made of the risk of persecution of those who return. We take this very seriously, and are reassured by the strong tribal and regional links between those who are being repatriated and the authorities in Kabul and Kandahar. The interim Afghan government has also shown visible concern for the welfare of those who return.

The abrupt withdrawal of Western allies from Afghanistan in Aug 20201 prompted a whole new influx of refugees to Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of Afghan nationals crossed the border, claiming their lives were in danger. Again, we take their welfare very seriously, recognising that some do require special protection.

We will not deport at-risk groups, such as musicians, journalists, and human rights activists. We do however need help from other countries.

Unfortunately, only 59,033 of the new arrivals have been resettled outside Pakistan, while 42,068 await evacuation to the west. The rest have failed to put forward a convincing case to anyone for asylum, and continue to stay in Pakistan illegally.

Pakistan, today, stands at the crossroads of history. We can no longer continue to compromise our national security by accommodating such huge numbers of undocumented individuals. Our ultimate aim is to build a safer, more peaceful and prosperous Pakistan – with associated benefits for our own people, for the region, and the wider world.

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