

National priorities and refugees

Events that took place during the last two decades of the twentieth century led to changes in the political, economic, cultural and social environment of the world and adjustment in the priorities of nations, global organizations and communities. In most cases association for mutual economic, or strategic benefit overrode national, cultural, as well as ethical and religious considerations in certain economic strata and leadership cadres spanning the globe. These cadres set aside many religious, cultural, ethnic and social links in favour of global associations which led to the further marginalization of deprived communities. Entire social groups within states did not have a stake in the formal economy or national socio-political structures. This was a dangerous trend because association for economic benefit, shared prosperity and shared prospects can be the most desirable common denominators between various national, sub-national, social, cultural and religious groups. These issues have been discussed from time to time in these columns (Pakistan: National Priorities, S. Junaid). The choices that nations have made, and are making now, will determine the future course of events, just as past decisions have created present circumstances. One cannot lay claim to infinite wisdom and exceptional maturity in considering future options but can draw upon experiences as a deliberately marginalized entity within the kind of global environment described above.

Decisions that the incumbent governments of Pakistan took during the 1970's and 1980's overshadowed other developments in South Asia: at the time the government decided it was politic for it to ally itself with the United States, undermining the former USSR through armed intervention in Afghanistan. The military government needed international acceptance at a time when democratic norms were at a premium but democracy was still a decade away for a large part of the world. Ironically, it is still a decade away for Pakistan and a large part of the world as Western forces gather to fight vague terrorist entities eluding them. In this environment, created by past policy as well as the attitudes and personalities it fostered, the government is faced with several predicaments, each requiring policy decisions affecting the course of social, economic and political activity for decades to come. One decision that needs to be taken right away is of hosting another wave of Afghan refugees. In this connection I am reminded of an interchange, some years ago, with a senior member of the British establishment. When asked why he had not intervened in a crisis situation that could have been easily resolved some years ago, he said bluntly, "We could have helped, but we didn't." It is a response that needs to be remembered. It is difficult to imagine a Government of Pakistan giving the same succinct response, in the national interest.

At this time the government is being asked to change its demography to suit the war plans of the international community by accepting about two million Afghan refugees. They are asking for this without revealing operation plans—whether they are going for spectacular strikes or digging in for guerrilla warfare. As one cynic put it, it would be excessive to use a Cruise missile to hit "a camel and a tent" not to mention the dozen or so women and children clustered around it. If Western media had not whipped up war hysteria so relentlessly after the September 11 attacks in the United States, most of the people who subsequently converged on the Pak-Afghan

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border would have stayed at home. After camping on the border for a week in anticipation of attacks and the opening of the Pak-Afghan border, thousands were reported to have returned to their homes by September 25.

Meanwhile, let us not forget that just three weeks ago the attention of Western media was focused on the fate of 438 Afghan refugees rescued by a Norwegian freighter when their boat sank in Australian waters. The Australian government refused to allow them to disembark, even temporarily, on Australian soil, although their numbers would not have changed Australia's demography. Australia said its actions were based on the principle of the issue. Subsequently, on September 03, 2001, a "Pacific solution" was announced: the Australian government proposed that 150 be sent to New Zealand and the rest to the island of Nauru, via Papua New Guinea. On arrival at the two locations their refugee status would be assessed. Thereafter, those judged to be genuine refugees would be accommodated in Australia, New Zealand and Norway. The resolution of the crisis was delayed by the legal intervention of an Australian civil rights group. The group had been pleading on behalf of the refugees. The courts subsequently decided the refugees be allowed to disembark on

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Australian soil and their refugee status should be determined there. However, by that time the refugees, joined by another boatload of two hundred, were well on their way to Papua New Guinea. Since then nothing has been heard about that particular bunch of the hapless Afghan asylum seekers, originally dismissed as economic refugees, a category not entertained by Western countries. Pakistan also needs to focus on the principle of the issue with regard to Afghan refugees.

World attention shifted focus to the US on September 11. While the debris in New York and Washington was still being cleared away media attention had moved on to the looming refugee crisis on Pakistan's borders in the wake of US threats of military action against Afghanistan—the masterminds of the attacks on US were believed to be somewhere in that country. Pakistan government officials and ministers preened before western media, basking in the kind of media blitz not seen in the region since the Afghan war was wrapped up and Agra mania faded out on Indian soil. We would be failing in our duty if we did not suggest that the government redraw a list of priorities in which needs of its long-suffering population were on top of the national agenda and those of the international community at the very bottom.

Let us not forget that refugees are big business. The movement of populations faced with an emergency and the influx of international assistance for them creates windfalls for international agencies, non-governmental organizations and national governments in the shape of activity, jobs and funds, not to mention publicity and social status—which is why actresses and other celebrities vie for UN ambassadorships once they have made their fortunes. The brunt of unprofitable fallout, in the shape of economic and social pressure, is borne by general population in host countries. In emergency situations strict accounting of funds and relief goods is often waived, creating additional windfalls for those in charge. I have seen how the system works. Not everyone is out there sweating it out in "appalling conditions", as one correspondent put it, for the love of God. There is money in it for workers as well as suppliers and producers of relief goods as well.

The traditional focus of the activities of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees has continued to be on securing right of refugees to asylum. However, there is little doubt that most of Afghans citizens making their way out of Afghan cities would be classified as economic refugees, not seekers of political asylum. Most were encouraged by frenzied propaganda in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, to move from their homes. At this time UNHCR acknowledges that even countries once proud to grant asylum to those seeking refuge from persecution are now less keen to do so. Most countries say they want to guard their frontiers from "economic refugees", rather than political refugees, and have passed legislation to plug the loopholes. A number of countries are of the view that it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between those under political attack, those who are the victims of injustice and those who are merely subject to generally prevalent social and economic distress. The latter, according to the books, do not merit asylum.

In most parts of the world UNHCR is said to be working to protect internally displaced people by seeking to remove, through negotiations with national governments, the causes of their displacement. Such negotiations include efforts to persuade national governments to secure basic human rights within their borders and to take responsibility for maintaining law and order where groups of the population are pitted against each other. This strategy aims to contain displaced people within their country of origin in an effort to prevent them from becoming refugees in the technical sense of the word. Similar safeguards should be negotiated with the international community planning to conduct military operations in Afghanistan. Operations to contain displaced persons within national borders can require the provision of a full range of services, from establishment of safe areas and military intervention through the deployment of multinational forces operating under mandates given by the United Nations Security Council, to the provision of clean drinking water, food, clothing and shelter. UNHCR should keep Afghan refugees within fully equipped camps within Afghanistan. Field staff should move into these camps with the refugees to supervise administration with the assistance of the local government. Let us see them get their hands dirty and earn their living for a change.

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