**UN should focus on repatriation of Afghan refugees**

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Addressing an international conference in Islamabad, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that “Pakistan’s solidarity and compassion for hosting [Afghan refugees](https://dailytimes.com.pk/558503/in-mini-kabul-afghan-refugees-mark-40-years-in-pakistan/) is a remarkable blueprint that the rest of the world should follow. Working towards solutions for the Afghan people is not just a sign of solidarity; it is in the world’s best interest.” The UN chief spoke alongside Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which jointly convened the conference with the Government of Pakistan. Though acknowledgement of Pakistan’s role by the US secretary general for hosting a large number of Afghan refugees is welcome, but using superlatives would not help Pakistan in resolving the issue. The crisis of Afghan refugees in Pakistan owed its origin to US interference in Afghanistan, firstly in 1979 when it started a proxy war after Soviet Union’s invasion in Afghanistan; and secondly when US and NATO forces invaded Afghanistan after 9/11 events.

In both of the above cases, millions of Afghan nationals crossed over to Iran and Pakistan and elsewhere. International community should realize that for more than 40 years, the government and the people of Pakistan accommodated these refugees who are settled in Tribal area and throughout Pakistan. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), hundreds of thousands refugees returned to Afghanistan, and some 1.6 million Afghans are legally residing in Pakistan, having been granted proof of registration (PoR) by the UN body. Having that said, UNHCR should make arrangements to repatriate Afghan refugees as soon as possible to address Pakistan’s security concerns. Officially, the year 2015 was said to mark the end of the agreement that Pakistan had with Afghanistan and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) allowing Afghan refugees to stay in Pakistan, but to no avail.

Many a time extension in Afghan refugees’ stay was given; in 2017 the federal cabinet at a meeting presided over by the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif approved an extension in Afghan refugees’ stay till December 31, 2017. Pakistan had been continuously extending their stay since 2007; however, the governments could not implement immigration laws along the border with Afghanistan. It requirs registered refugees to provide their Proof of Registration (POR) cards before going to their country. A few post-terrorist attack investigations had found the involvement of Afghan refugees in housing or helping the terrorists; and refugees’ camps also were used by the criminals as well as the terrorists. It was in this backdrop that the state had decided to take measures vis-à-vis management of the borders, verification of the identity documents of refugees, their mobile phone SIM cards and implementation of visa regime.

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These steps did cause inconvenience to the Afghan refugees, yet they cooperated with the government for the security of the host nation. Their difficulties have been highlighted by the world Human Rights Watch report 2017 stating that the Afghan refugees have been occasionally harassed and subjected to other abuses. But there is no denying that Pakistan’s own security has been adversely impacted. After 9/11 events and ensuing war, Pakistan faced spectre of terrorism and the country had over 80,000 causalities as a result of the terror-related activities. Confirmed intelligence reports indicated the involvement of some of the refugees hosted in the camps as well as from those settled outside the camps. Pakistan has the right to take necessary measures if some criminals in the guise of refugees become a source of instability. International institutions must understand the threat to Pakistan’s economy and security.

Proper documentation and Proof of Registration (PoR) implementation together with better border management will help UNCHR as well as Government of Pakistan to better manage and regulate the Afghan refugees’ issue. However, most Afghan refugees avoided documentation due to cultural egalitarianism and consider it as their insult. Process of the repatriation, which is going on snail’s pace, has also not been very transparent and fool proof. Most refugees going back to Afghanistan have a revolving door approach to come back to Pakistan amid security and economic concerns. Growing influence of India in Afghanistan is also causing strains on Pak-Afghan relations. Pakistan has proved its sincerity as a brotherly neighboring country by hosting record number of refugees; however, it expected of the Afghan government to take action against TTP elements and Daesh, and not to blame Pakistan for all the wrongs in Afghanistan.

At his confirmation hearing at the Senate Armed Forces Committee on 17th January 2017, the then US defence secretary James Mattis had stated that 50 per cent of Afghanistan is controlled by the Taliban; but in fact, the Taliban control more area than that. Afghan Government, dominated by Northern Alliance elements, did not wish to see peace in Afghanistan, because they will have to share power with the Taliban. Anyhow, the UN and its subsidiary organizations like UNHCR must come forward to take up the matter with the US, NATO and EU member countries to arrange repatriation of Afghan Refugees to their homeland. The UNHCR and international community should persuade the Afghan government to create necessary environment inside Afghanistan so that these people can return. But instead of taking action, Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) had advised Pakistan to ease the uncertain and insecure lives of the millions of Afghan refugees on its territory. What a logic?

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