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The Refugee Problem: Looking Toward Afghanistan's Long-Term Stability

Elizabeth Parker

Elizabeth Parker is a former research intern with the South Asia Program at CSIS

Nearly three decades after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sent some 3.5 million refugees into exile in Pakistan, nearly 2 million are still there. The refugees' own meager assets, lack of education and skills, compounded by Afghanistan's lack of infrastructure to accommodate returnees, have made returning an unattractive option. The refugees represent a political and economic strain on Pakistan today; if they return, they will add to the stresses in Afghanistan. The result is a continuing policy problem for the United States.

Tensions on the Ground: The refugees are concentrated in the two provinces bordering Afghanistan, the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan. These are the least prosperous areas in Pakistan, with the lowest human development statistics and educational achievements. Most live in camps, supported by international assistance. Some have been able to find jobs outside the camps through family networks, but most remain unemployed, which presents its own set of problems in an economy that has had little job creation in recent years. Some 74 percent of the refugees are under 28 years of age and have never lived in Afghanistan. Their relationship with the Pakistani government and the provincial authorities are strained. In addition to the cost of hosting refugees for nearly 30 years, the Pakistani government is increasingly concerned by the ability of extremist groups to infiltrate and mold refugee populations.

The View from Islamabad: The Pakistani government sees the refugee problem as a drain on resources and a security threat and wants them to return to Afghanistan. Pakistan has not signed the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees and has no legislation that recognizes refugees. At this point, the Foreigners Act, which makes employment of unregistered foreigners illegal, is the only legal framework applying to refugees. Those Afghans who have identity cards are exempt from its provisions. The rest of the refugee population continues to be assessed for protection needs and an extension of refugee status. Islamabad has agreed that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should manage the majority of refugee affairs, but it has made clear its wish that refugees be repatriated to Afghanistan as soon as possible. Despite the strain that Afghan refugees place on resources, simply returning refugees to Afghanistan is insufficient. For the long-term stability of Pakistan, returnees need to be successfully reintegrated into Afghan society so that they are not susceptible to extremists nor seek to return to Pakistan.

In January 2007, Pakistan primeminister Shaukat Aziz expressed the Pakistani government's desire that all Afghan refugees still in Pakistan should repatriate and reiterated the government's plan to selectively fence and mine the border between the two countries to restrict the movement of high-risk individuals. The Pakistani government has repeatedly clashed with Afghan refugees over efforts to enhance border security and encourage repatriation. Most efforts have taken the form of camp closures, an approach that is particularly resented by the refugee population. Relations worsened last year as Pakistani police searched door-to-door, resulting in the expulsion of unregistered refugees. Confiscation of property and documents, threats of fines for individuals renting property to refugees, and camp closures were documented. Confrontations followed in April 2007, when refugees stoned a UNHCR repatriation center in Baluchistan and police responded violently. The closure of Katcha Garhi camp near Peshawar and Jungle

Pir Alizai camp in Baluchistan led to more violence with refugee deaths resulting in clashes with police. Despite these challenges, most refugees continue to stay in camps; only 63,000 of the 175,000 displaced refugees from the closure of Jalozai refugee village are willing to repatriate.

Roadblocks to Repatriation: Despite the challenges of living as an Afghan refugee in Pakistan, roughly four-fifths of refugees are unwilling to return, citing security concerns. But this was not always the case. Following the 2001 fall of the Taliban, more than 3.5 million Afghans repatriated from Iran and Pakistan, an operation that marks one of the UNHCR's most successful repatriation efforts in its 54-year history. However, since 2004, repatriation numbers have dropped off, with most refugees citing security, shelter, employment, health, education, and nutrition—in that order—as reasons for not repatriating. In 2007, economic concerns outstripped voluntary repatriation.

Repatriation is expensive. Most of the funding is being provided by international agencies and foreign governments. In 2007, UNHCR spent more than \$70 million in Afghanistan, up from about \$47 million in 2006, from shelter assistance to legal aid and the provision of basic health services. During the height of repatriation efforts, between FY2002 and FY2005, the United States spent \$332.37 million on humanitarian assistance for refugees and returnees. In 2008, Japan pledged \$10 million toward repatriation expenses, while the Pakistani government pledged \$20 million in 2007 for repatriation efforts.

These efforts have been severely hampered by in-country challenges. The UNHCR, the international community, and the Afghan government have struggled to achieve the goals outlined in the January 2006 Afghanistan Compact, which include increasing security, reducing drug use, establishing effective governance, and improving economic and social development. Domestic political tensions, governance challenges, and poor synchronization on the part of international actors have all contributed to the failure of achieving these goals.

The worsening security situation in Afghanistan has further exacerbated the overall stability in the country. There were more security incidents in 2007 than any preceding year since the fall of the Taliban. As a result of these challenges, Afghan NGOs are responsible for monitoring many areas, as international development and humanitarian groups can reach only half the country.

Another challenge for Afghan refugees returning to Afghanistan is the limited infrastructure in cities and towns all over the country to support the increasing population. The vast majority of refugees return to Kabul and the eastern provinces. While refugees tend to think of Kabul as a city of opportunity, Afghan officials have expressed concern at the burden that returning Afghans place on the city's infrastructure. Over the past six years, Kabul's population has increased substantially from 1 million to almost 4.5 million, while its physical size has only grown by 35 percent. Most refugees are laborers and do not possess the skills required for high-skill well-paying jobs. So as impoverished Afghans move to Kabul, they fill and expand the poorest areas of the cities, leading to an increase in slums.

With assistance from Kabul, the UNHCR is in charge of almost all the logistics involved in repatriation efforts. But although the number of repatriating Afghans in 2007 was down to 160,000 registered and 206,000 unregistered individuals, the actual rehabilitation projects UNHCR is taking on have become more complex. As per the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, the UNHCR supports efforts to accommodate the needs of returnees, 46 percent of whom face housing problems and 28 percent of whom do not have stable incomes. In 2007, the UNHCR provided shelter assistance to more than 9,700 returnee families, resolved almost half of all cases presented to legal aid centers in 21 Afghan provinces, offered vaccinations and emergency medical support to returnees, and provided a nominal \$100 grant to all returnees.

The Role of the Afghan Government: The Afghan government's meager resources and implementation capacity are badly stretched and are focused almost exclusively on the ongoing war. In practice, refugee issues have low priority. Returnees are in dire need of shelter, employment, and basic provisions, commodities that Kabul is unable to provide in sufficient quantity. This situation is likely to continue until the country stabilizes, an unlikely event in the near future. The UNHCR has taken over responsibility for returnees and is assisting the Afghan government. It is apparent that for the next few years, despite good

intentions, the Afghan government will be unable to provide refugees with substantive assistance and will struggle to provide services for the growing refugee population.

Washington's Perspective: Washington and Islamabad have both expressed concerns over the security challenges that a displaced and potentially dissatisfied group can represent. Some refugee camps have allegedly become recruiting grounds for extremists. Taliban insurgents are alleged by Pakistani officials to have infiltrated four border camps, using them as bases to attack U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Discontent in Afghanistan over security and economic misery are already strong; a rootless refugee population runs the risk of adding to it, with risks to the Afghan government.

Concerns over the progress of the war in Afghanistan have intensified in Washington. The problems of the refugees are secondary, but they also serve as one barometer of the restoration of normalcy in Afghanistan and of the sustainability of economic and political conditions in Pakistan. At the moment, the problem is likely to get worse in both places before it gets better. The refugees most willing to repatriate and easiest to integrate into Afghanistan have already returned, which means that creating a security situation sufficiently safe to persuade refugees to return is getting more challenging over time. Until the security situation improves, Washington will need to continue funding enough services to placate both the returnees and the refugee population that remains in Pakistan.

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