

## Pakistan's national refugee policy

Muhammad Abbas Khan

**In preparation for 2014 and the impact of 'transition' in Afghanistan, Pakistan's new National Refugee Policy tries to address both the uncertainties and the realities facing Afghan refugees in Pakistan.**

It is unclear what impact NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan will have on the 1.6 million registered and estimated 1 million unregistered Afghans still residing in Pakistan. The voluntary return in safety and dignity of all Afghans has always been the preferred solution for the Government of Pakistan but the lack of clarity about how events will unfold in 2014 and thereafter leaves refugees uncertain about repatriating. Decades of warfare and political turmoil have weakened Afghanistan's absorption capacity, particularly in the livelihood sector, and access to basic services such as education, health, water and sanitation still remains a challenge.

In July 2013 the Government of Pakistan agreed a new National Policy on Afghan Refugees,<sup>1</sup> drafted in synergy with the multi-year Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), which focuses on voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity, sustainable reintegration inside Afghanistan, and assistance to refugee host communities.

### Repatriation and reintegration

A Tri-Partite Agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and UNHCR guides and regulates voluntary and gradual repatriation of registered Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Over 3,840,000 Afghan refugees have voluntarily repatriated since March 2002 under this agreement, with each returnee now entitled to US\$200 from UNHCR. The Tri-Partite Agreement has now been extended to 31st December 2015.

The voluntary nature of repatriation remains at the heart of Pakistan's new National Refugee Policy, reflecting a sense of realism among policymakers and an awareness that Afghanistan's poor law and order situation and shortage of livelihood opportunities remain two very significant hurdles to repatriation and sustainable reintegration inside Afghanistan. For Afghans to repatriate and reintegrate on a sustainable basis, the development of a conducive environment inside Afghanistan is imperative. The proposed development of 48 reintegration sites for returnees should therefore be given top priority by Afghanistan and the international community but so far very little progress on these has been made. Pakistan's new national policy stresses the importance of effective information-



NRC/Shahzad Ahmed

Afghan refugee child in a writing lesson at an Accelerated Learning Programme Centre, Quetta, Pakistan.

May 2014

sharing regarding the development status of these sites, in order that this information may be shared with potential returnees.

### Host communities

More than 70% of registered Afghan refugees live outside camps, mostly as a result of discontinuation of food assistance in camps. In the past, very little attention was paid to the communities offering asylum space to refugees but these host communities play a very significant role, allowing the refugees to use their limited infrastructure and resources. However, communities with limited resources eventually find it difficult to maintain support, and friction between the two is inevitable. To mitigate this, assistance to hosting areas has been made an integral component of Pakistan's new National Refugee Policy; out of a total of US\$610 million pledged by the international community for Pakistan under SSAR, the new Refugees Affected Hosting Areas (RAHA) development initiative receives \$490 million.

This is a wonderful development initiative, which will benefit host communities as well as the refugees. More than 1,000 small- to

medium-sized projects in sectors including education, health, livelihoods, environment and water and sanitation have been implemented and a number of larger projects are currently being implemented.

### Education and training

It is important to recognise that a lack of good education for refugees will stand in the way of achieving durable solutions and will be an obstacle to sustainable development and reconstruction of both home and host countries. Education is important not only for those refugees who wish to return home and

participate in the rebuilding of their country but equally so for those who want to stay in their host country and contribute positively. Without the education that can help them become more productive members of society, refugees will continue to be viewed as a burden. More importantly, there is enough empirical data to suggest that refugees with livelihood skills are more likely to repatriate than those with no skills.

More than 51% of the total Afghan refugee population in Pakistan is under 18 years of age (with the majority born in Pakistan). Without education or skills training, these young refugees will find it hard to make a decent living in the host community. To address this concern, new technical training centres are being established in refugee-hosting districts to benefit both the host community and refugees. And through RAHA, the Government of Pakistan is developing an infrastructure of primary-level state schools which will accommodate both locals and refugees alike, with additional classrooms, better teaching tools and trained teachers.

### Conclusion

Pakistan's new National Refugee Policy is a comprehensive document, prepared with the realities on the ground in mind. It is not a wish list but a synthesis of practical and logical interventions designed for achieving durable solutions. Although Pakistan's current security and economic situation puts her in a position wherein she can no longer host millions of refugees on her own, Pakistan continues to stand by her Afghan brothers and sisters. Afghan refugees need international attention more than ever before, and resolution of this protracted humanitarian crisis should be given top priority in any future political settlement regarding Afghanistan.

Muhammad Abbas Khan [comisb@hotmail.com](mailto:comisb@hotmail.com) is Commissioner, Afghan Refugees, in the Chief Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, Islamabad. [www.safron.gov.pk](http://www.safron.gov.pk)

1. Under the Federal Minister for States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON), Lt Gen® Abdul Qadir Baloch.

