

Afghan refugees in Europe

by A-R Faquiri

The tragedy of 11 September became a turning point in the history of a country thousands of kilometres away from New York, a nation with no direct involvement in what had happened to the Twin Towers.

Afghanistan deserved recognition for its role in the fall of the repressive Soviet empire. Instead, it became the biggest producer of drugs in the world and the centre of command and training for Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. The Taliban acted more as the Afghan branch of al-Qa'ida than the government of Afghanistan. The reluctance of the Taliban leadership to hand over Bin Laden and his lieutenants to the US government reflected the subordinate position of the Taliban to al-Qa'ida. The first victim of this state of affairs was the population of Afghanistan.

there is only peace in daylight

The defeat of the Taliban and the dismantling of al-Qa'ida have been achieved, more or less, in Afghanistan. However, another kind of Islamic fundamentalism has returned to power. The so-called Mujahed groups, driven from power by the Taliban, have come back to try to re-establish their ideal Islamic state. The experience of the period between 1992 and 1996 shows that

this Islamic state would offer the Afghan people only anarchy, corruption and repression. Unfortunately Jehadi groups surround the Interim Authority installed by the UN in Kabul. Their presence leaves little space for independent technocrats to do their jobs properly. Even in the capital, Kabul, there is only peace in daylight. At night, when the foreign peacekeeping troops go back to their bases, misuse of power, repression and criminality rule in the city.

Such fundamentalist parties as Jamiat-I-Islami of ex-president Rabani and the Etehad-I-Islami of Professor Saiaf are preparing themselves for a gradual cleansing of the liberal members of the Karzai administration. This cleansing has already started with the killing of Abdul Rahman, Minister for Aviation, at Kabul airport in February 2002.

Many Afghans who have travelled to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban have already returned once more to Europe, demotivated after searching for an opportunity to take part in their country's reconstruction. Some returnees have been killed or abducted. Despite the still uncertain situation, immigration authorities in various European countries have started to talk about voluntary and even forced return of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan. The British Home Secretary has called on Afghan refugees in the UK to return to take part in reconstruction. Other countries have already taken measures to contain the growth of the number of Afghan refugees.

The Dutch authorities appear keen to remove the 30,000 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands. In October 2001 the Dutch Immigration Service stopped making decisions on Afghan asylum applications in order to prevent the issuance of residence documents to Afghans who, some weeks later, might

be considered eligible for deportation. In late December, when the Taliban regime had lost power, the immigration authorities asked the Dutch cabinet and parliament to approve the cessation of normal adjudication procedures relating to Afghan asylum claims. It was agreed to freeze decisions on new and existing claims and allow the Immigration Service a period of up to a year to make decisions.

According to the new Dutch Law on Foreigners, an asylum seeker's claim should be assessed within six months of the application being lodged. If, after acceptance, they have been legally in the Netherlands for three years, and if their country of origin is not safe for their return at the end of that three-year period, they should be granted permanent residence. Afghans who would have become eligible for this kind of permanent residence if their claims had been handled and accepted during the period since October 2001 are now being asked to wait an unspecified period of time for the granting of their legal rights.

The Dutch Ministry of Justice seems to hope that at the end of this period the situation in Afghanistan will be sufficiently safe to enable Afghans' asylum applications to be rejected. It is hard to believe, however, that the security problems of Afghanistan will be solved so speedily. The lives of thousands of Afghan refugees might be at risk if they were sent back. The Secretary of State for Justice, Ella Kalsbeek, has said that she is developing policy on the return of Afghans and hinted that later forced returns might take place. Mrs Kalsbeek's words have greatly alarmed Afghan refugees.

In the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Europe, Afghan refugees and asylum seekers fear for their prospects. It is hard to say whether there will be a future for those returning from exile. Let us hope that European leaders will carefully study the situation on the ground in Afghanistan before judging whether it is safe for Afghan asylum seekers to return.

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US Committee for Refugees