

Violence and vulnerabilities: Afghans in Pakistan

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Given that the majority of Afghans who live in Pakistan today are unlikely to return to Afghanistan, more needs to be done to address their vulnerabilities and protect them from harassment and violence.

There are an estimated 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees and one to two million undocumented Afghans in Pakistan. After 2001 the Government of Pakistan no longer recognised Afghans entering Pakistan as refugees, and these undocumented Afghans have no legal protection. The majority of Afghans in Pakistan live in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces although a significant number have settled in Karachi, Islamabad and various urban areas in the Punjab. Many registered Afghans live in refugee tented villages (RTVs), mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, but the majority of Afghans live in rented or informally purchased accommodation, in regulated and unregulated (i.e. squatter) areas.

The majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan first arrived in the 1980s and early 1990s and have firmly established lives in Pakistan. Many have contributed to the economic growth in rural and urban areas and have formed deep social relations with Pakistanis through friendships, marriages or business partnerships, or through living in shared neighbourhoods. Despite this, hostility towards Afghans has increased significantly in recent years, triggered by factors such as 'hosting fatigue' and nationalist tensions.

Afghans are increasingly negatively stereotyped in public discourse and in the media. Once idolised as the heroic mujahideen ('religious fighters'), Afghans in Pakistan are now seen more in the light of the destructive Taliban, and this increased hostility towards Afghans has had a number of negative impacts for Afghans. Security of housing for Afghans in Pakistan, whether in RTVs, informal housing areas or rented accommodation, is precarious and sudden sharp increases in rent are common. Provision

of basic services is unreliable, and some NGOs are unwilling to invest in Afghan areas for fear that the area will be closed down. Routine arrests, harassment, arbitrary detention and even deportation of Afghans have become common. Increasing security threats have meant that security checkpoints are a routine feature of daily life – and an identity card, which many Afghans lack, is essential. Furthermore, the systematic targeting of Afghans is also seen by many as a strategy to 'encourage' repatriation to Afghanistan.

"Pakistan is no longer safe for us. They [the state] just want us to go. This is why they constantly harass us." (Afghan Pakhtun refugee who has lived in Pakistan since 1982)

Recommendations for 2014 and beyond

Many Afghans in Pakistan either live transnational lives, moving between Afghanistan and Pakistan, or have limited intention and scope for returning to Afghanistan, whether because of the continued conflict in Afghanistan or because of their improved social position in Pakistan. The Pakistani government and international and local NGOs should plan and act accordingly.

Greater efforts to support vulnerable Afghans who have limited access to health care, water and sanitation are needed, and local NGO actors should be encouraged to assist in this. Residents of RTVs are often keen to become self-sufficient and have organised committees to deal with pressing issues such as access to clean water. Better coordination and communication between local NGOs and Afghan communities could support these communities in improving their environment.

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More space for positive discourse on the ways in which Afghans contribute towards Pakistani society should be created. For example, the Citizens Archive Project in Karachi records the oral histories of migrants in Pakistan; it currently focuses only on migrations that took place during Pakistan's Partition and Independence but could be encouraged to make space for Afghan oral histories.¹

Continued education for government actors (including local courts), civil society actors and the Pakistani police and security forces on the legal rights of Afghans in Pakistan should be promoted by the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR. And legal aid for Afghans should continue to be promoted by UNHCR implementing partners in areas with high Afghan populations.

In the longer term, the Government of Pakistan should be encouraged to recognise what is already a reality in Pakistan: that millions of 'non-nationals' are an integral and long-term part of Pakistan. Given

that the majority of Afghans who remain in Pakistan today are unlikely to return to Afghanistan, the government should consider introducing an amnesty scheme which would allow Afghans to become legal citizens of the state, thereby allowing the state to better govern a sizeable population that is de facto a part of the state as well as providing this population with full rights and protection. If not this, then, at the very least, Afghans should be provided with long-term work and/or residency permits that are not as ad hoc and unpredictable as the current Afghan registration card which requires frequent renewal that is not always guaranteed and is often delayed. Afghans are an integral and long-term part of Pakistan. This must now be recognised in law.

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This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Karachi and Peshawar since 2010.

1. www.citizensarchive.org/oral-history-project/