

update

UNHCR/Default: Refugee Service

Why did they return? The mass return to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran

by Peter Marsden

Over the spring and summer of 2002, Afghanistan received a reported 1.8 million refugees returning from Pakistan and Iran. This was perceived by many Western governments, anxious to return their own Afghan refugee populations, as a massive vote of confidence in the new Afghan government established in the wake of the US-led military intervention of October 2001. It is clear, however, from a recent study undertaken by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit¹ that the reasons for return were far more complex and that refugees have returned to a situation which can barely sustain them.

Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran from the early 1980s onwards, in response to the Soviet military engagement, and there have been successive outflows over the course of the 1990s as a consequence of inter-Mujahidin fighting, the Taliban conquests of one city after another, Taliban restrictions on the population and the effects of the 1998-2001 drought. There have also been some returns, notably in 1992, when almost a million went back from Pakistan to mark the ending of the jihad against the Soviet Union following the collapse of the Soviet-backed government.

Iran has been placing steady pressure on Afghans to return since the three-year voluntary repatriation agreement, negotiated with UNHCR and the Afghan government in December 1992, failed to secure the return of more than a few hundred thousand out of its 2.9 million Afghan refugee population. This pressure has taken the form of a progressive withdrawal of entitlements to health and education services and the introduction of regulations to impose penalties on Iranian employers who employ Afghans. The Iranian police have also maintained a climate of fear through the use of arbitrary arrests and deportations of Afghans and the use of detention centres. These pressures have been compounded, this year, by



a sustained media campaign in which Afghans have been advised that it is now time to return to Afghanistan, that they will be provided with free transportation to their home areas and that the UN will be there to assist them on their return. Returnees are therefore aggrieved on arrival in Afghanistan to find that UNHCR is only making a contribution to their transport costs, not meeting the full costs, and that the UN is not resourced to provide assistance to more than a small fraction of the returnees and that even this is on a very limited scale. The Iranian government's media campaign has also had the effect of fuelling long-standing prejudice in the Iranian population so that Afghans have been subjected to much higher levels of verbal and physical abuse.

Pakistan received substantially greater assistance from the international community than was accorded to Iran. However, its tolerance also waned in the mid 1990s after donor support for food assistance and the provision of basic services to Afghan refugees effectively ceased in September 1995. A major downturn in support for the refugees occurred at the beginning of 2001, following a further large influx of refugees and the Pakistan government made the conditions for new arrivals extremely unattractive thereafter. This, combined with growing police harassment and the closing of one of the major camps, sent a powerful message that Afghans should not see themselves as having a long-term future in Pakistan. Then, when a repatriation agreement was drawn up

with UNHCR and the government of Afghanistan to provide assistance to up to 400,000 returnees from March 2002 onwards, Pakistan firmly closed its door on new arrivals. This change in the climate with Pakistan was compounded by concerted action by the Pakistan police to substantially reduce the Afghan refugee population in the cities of Pakistan, leaving those in the camps to be dealt with subsequently. Refugees were also encouraged to return by the media coverage of a donor conference held in Tokyo in January 2002 which gave the clear impression that a substantial amount of funding would be provided for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and that there would be plenty of jobs available. The reality has fallen far short of expectations. The fact that 1.5 million returned from Pakistan while fewer than 300,000 returned from Iran can be seen as reflecting the much greater ease with which Afghans can return to Pakistan. It would also appear that as many as half a million people returned immediately to Pakistan after claiming the assistance package. The numbers therefore need to be treated with some caution.

The AREU study poses the question as to whether UNHCR, by offering an assistance package, was lending legitimacy to a premature return programme. UNHCR is now taking steps to ensure that those considering return next year have more realistic expectations of what they will find on their return.

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Afghan returnees receive mine-awareness training, Pul-i-Charkhi distribution centre, Kabul.



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1. The **Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)** is an independent research institution that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and analysis to inform policy, improve practice and increase the impact of humanitarian and development programmes in Afghanistan. Fundamental to AREU's purpose is the belief that its work should make a difference in the lives of Afghans. AREU is the only humanitarian and development research centre headquartered in Afghanistan; this allows the unit both to produce valuable research and to ensure that its findings become integrated into the process of change taking place on the ground.

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UNHCR funding crisis?

By early December 2002, it was reported that UNHCR had received a record US\$317 million in pledges for 2003, amounting to one third of its overall projected requirements for the year.¹ UNHCR said that the pledges, which were made in response to its 2003 Global Appeal², were seen as a "good early signal" of donor support. "These initial pledges are higher than ever and they are generally more flexible – a sign that the donors heeded our call for early pledges with less earmarking for specific regions," said Anne Willem Bijleveld, UNHCR's Director of Communications and Information.

Despite the pledges for next year, however, High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers added that a shortfall of about \$25 million was still faced for this year. "There is an urgent need to receive this amount," he said. Africa is the most needy area for 2003, requiring a total of \$325 million. \$112.8 million is required for East and the Horn of Africa, \$84.8 million for West Africa, \$82.5 million

for the Great Lakes region and \$38 million for southern Africa.

In November, it had been reported that UNHCR's funding crisis was adversely affecting the implementation of a wide range of programmes for the welfare of the world's refugees. Funding by donor nations for international refugee programmes had been seriously inadequate during 2002, triggering major assistance cut-backs in refugee camps around the world, according to the US Committee for Refugees.³ USCR reported that UNHCR was experiencing a shortfall of some \$200 million and that the organisation had severely curtailed programmes providing food, water, health care and education. The funding crisis had also forced dozens of relief agencies that depend on UNHCR funds to cut their services to refugees. For example, programmes to prevent sexual and gender-based violence against female refugees have been curtailed despite investigations this year pointing to the persistent problem of violence and exploitation committed against refugee women and girls.

1. See IRIN, UNOCHA's Integrated Regional Information Networks: www.irinnews.org. To receive IRIN reports via email, subscribe via www.irinnews.org or contact subs@ocha.unon.org.
2. See www.unhcr.ch and click on 'Global Appeal 2003' in right column.
3. USCR report (20 November 2002): see www.refugees.org/news/press_releases/2002/112002b.cfm

Filipinos displaced by war on terror

The Global IDP project has drawn attention to the plight of those displaced in 2002 by US-Philippine military operations against Muslim rebels in the southern island of Mindanao. It highlights the need to provide greater assistance to rebuild homes and livelihoods in a region torn by ethnic and religious conflict for three decades.

Thousands of villagers, mainly women and children, have been affected by military operations on the islands of Basilan and Jolo against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Although an August 2001 agreement between the

government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led to the return of nearly a million people who had been displaced, tens of thousands are still displaced due to security fears and lack of support to rebuild their homes.

Displaced people, or 'evacuees' they are often called in the Philippines, mainly flee their homes lest they be caught in the crossfire or accused of supporting the MILF or ASG. Many have fled due to the impossibility of farming in heavily mined areas. Indiscriminate government shelling of rebel areas has caused widespread fear.

Displaced people and civilians face serious human rights violations perpetrated by the army and the rebels. International observers have noted that the Philippine military have been responsible for 'disappearances', arbitrary arrests of suspected ASG sympathisers and burning of houses. Further displacement is feared as the US and the Philippine army focus on Abu Sayyaf. Many observers question the alleged links between al Qa'ida and ASG used to justify the offensive, arguing that the ASG – notorious for ransom kidnappings and beheading of hostages – is a localised bandit group with no political agenda.

Prolonged residence in overcrowded evacuation centres without adequate health and sanitation services has exposed IDP children to measles, cholera, stomach disorders and upper respiratory problems. A third of children in the most affected regions of Mindanao are reported to be undernourished. Though assistance is being provided by the UN and NGOs, the government of the Philippines has made little effort to seek external assistance. Offers from donors to provide direct aid have been rejected as the government prefers resources to be channelled through state institutions.

Global IDP Project reports on the Philippines can be accessed at: www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Philippines. For further information, contact Frederik Kok, tel: +41 (0)22 799 0700; Email: frederik.kok@nrc.ch.