

Repatriation to Afghanistan: durable solution or responsibility shifting?

Susanne Schmeidl

Despite the return of almost five million Afghan refugees to Afghanistan since 2002, about three million still remain abroad. What are their prospects of return? More to the point, what is the prospect of those who have returned remaining in Afghanistan?

UNHCR considers repatriation to Afghanistan as a sustainable part-solution to a protracted refugee situation.¹ I doubt many Afghans would agree. Evidence suggests the opposite, with incidences of 'recycling', subsequent internal displacement and large numbers of refugees who remain outside Afghanistan. Rather than a success story, the Afghan case painfully demonstrates the problems with resolving protracted displacement where considerations other than refugee protection are at the heart of the activities of international actors and where the human security of refugees is in competition with national, regional and international security agendas. Even UNHCR now concedes that "the Afghanistan experience has highlighted the complexity of the repatriation and reintegration process, which has proven to be a much more sustained and complex challenge than initially anticipated."²

The rapid repatriation of Afghans that began in 2002 was the largest UNHCR-assisted programme in almost 30 years, involving about five million refugees. But these refugees returned to a politically unstable environment and the motives behind the push for repatriation were not necessarily in the best interests of the refugees or Afghanistan. In the post 9/11 world, Afghan repatriation was needed to legitimise the US-led intervention, subsequent peace process and the fledgling government.³ These three factors seemed to outweigh more careful considerations of the feasibility of return and the

impact that such large numbers of returnees would have on a poor and war-stricken country which was already struggling to accommodate those who had remained. The interests of host countries (wanting to rid themselves of a long-term burden, or regain land for urban expansion as in the case of Pakistan) also overruled the best interests of the refugees and Afghanistan, and possibly even of long-term regional stability. In the search for quick success, the durability of the repatriation solution was not adequately considered.

The return of such large numbers of refugees since 2002 has almost certainly exacerbated existing problems (if not contributed to new ones) by placing huge pressure on Afghanistan's absorption capacity. In Afghanistan today:

- corruption is widespread and there is a lack of rule of law; services such as health care and education are inadequate, especially outside urban areas.
- security has deteriorated over the past two years and humanitarian space is continuously shrinking
- shelter is scarce, with, for example, 80% of the population of Kabul (including many returning refugees and IDPs) living in squatter settlements
- disputes over land ownership and tenure are major sources of conflict and many returnees have found their land occupied; lacking documentation to prove

their ownership, these returnees in turn occupy the land of others.

- secondary displacement (returnees becoming IDPs) is common, due to insecurity, lack of rural livelihoods and land/property disputes
- the majority of returnees – as indeed, many of those who remained – struggle for survival, are un- or under-employed, and live at or below the poverty level.

In response, 'voluntary' repatriation has come to a halt and those who remain abroad are likely to return only if forced. The great majority of those families remaining in Pakistan and in Iran have been in exile for more than 20 years; 50% of the registered Afghan population in these two countries were born in exile. Remaining refugees may try to 'disappear' within the urban areas of their host countries – many Afghans in Pakistan already hold Pakistani identification cards – or join the masses of (illegal) labour migrants. This increases resource and job competition in host countries and is likely to further exacerbate already negative public sentiments towards refugees in Iran and Pakistan.

Afghan refugees have once again become convenient scapegoats in their host countries for social ills and insecurity. Pakistan in particular, under increasing international pressure for its failure to rein in growing fundamentalism, has accused Afghan refugee camps of harbouring extremists (even though the camps suspected to be training sites are never proposed for closure). In a twist to the association between repatriation and peacebuilding, disappointed and frustrated returnees provide an easy recruitment pool for the growing insurgency in Afghanistan.

In light of the above, a single focus on trying to resolve the protracted Afghan refugee situation through repatriation only has led to unintended consequences such as threats to national and regional stability. On that account alone, UNHCR should exercise more caution in using Afghanistan as a key example in promoting repatriation as the preferred durable solution for resolving protracted refugee situations.

Thinking outside the durable solution 'box'

Finding solutions for protracted refugee situations is never easy, especially when dealing with a population that is large and has spent a very considerable amount of time abroad, with an entire generation born in exile with little knowledge of their 'home' country. Solutions need to acknowledge the complexity of the situation at hand. A first step might be accepting the obvious, that "full repatriation is neither feasible nor desirable"⁴ and that repatriation so far has not been the success story that it has been made out to be.

While the sheer size of the Afghan refugee population may have made resettlement or local integration unfeasible, greater efforts could be made to look beyond repatriation as

the only (or even primary) durable solution, especially as it seems to have increased the vulnerability of returnees and increased problems in Afghanistan and the region. Solving the Afghan puzzle of protracted displacement may not lie within the somewhat rigid traditional durable solutions framework. UNHCR itself has recently put forward suggestions for a broader migration framework offering greater flexibility of options.⁵

It is necessary to understand, differentiate and disaggregate the needs of Afghan refugees depending on the reasons for and circumstances of displacement, the length of time they have been displaced and the reasons why most refugees in both Pakistan and Iran (and further afield) do not show a strong desire to return home. Refugees are rational actors, deciding to return only after a careful calculation of costs and benefits, including not simply the situation at home but also their experience abroad (the latter often overlooked). For example, the notion of 'home' is often transformed during long-term displacement. It is important for both refugees and humanitarian actors to distinguish between a nostalgic longing for what once was home and a more rational attachment to more than one country.

More attention needs to be paid to the environment to which people are returning and the absorptive capacity of a country that so far has not succeeded in rebuilding the state and the rule of law. The link between return and internal displacement in Afghanistan also needs further assessment.

Lastly, we could learn from, and expand upon, the migratory strategies that Afghans have adopted to survive the past volatile decades – which have included labour migration, local integration, temporary migration, resettlement and repatriation. The economic interdependence and interconnectedness between Afghanistan and its neighbours could accommodate a combination of such strategies. Local integration, for example, need not mean awarding citizenship but could include temporary labour agreements allowing a transitional and transnational lifestyle. Consideration should also be given to assistance to host states (both economically and in terms of diplomatic incentives) in seeking to resolve long-standing refugee situations. If not, options for both refugees and migrants will begin to close down, as we are currently witnessing in both Pakistan and Iran. It is questionable if the US\$140 million assistance to Pakistani villages in exchange for agreeing to host refugees for another four years⁶ will be well spent if it keeps Afghan refugees in a familiar holding pattern, rather than if it were used to seek out and facilitate more lasting solutions.

It has been argued that "without a regionally based approach, no single state's problems are likely to be resolved. Interconnectedness is the name of the new Great Game."⁷ Recognising this reality, however, may take some time and the protracted nature of the Afghan refugee situation is likely to continue to be unresolved. Personal solutions for some Afghans (e.g. through smuggling) will be isolated and can hardly be claimed as more than individual success stories.

UNHCR would do well to examine more critically the assertion that repatriation is a 'successful' solution for resolving protracted refugee situations and to focus more on implementing alternative strategies which UNHCR itself appears to



After 23 years of exile in Pakistan, in October 2008 Qayum and his family returned home to northern Afghanistan after negotiating to buy land in Sholgara district. When a local tribe refused to let Qayum and his neighbours unload their trucks, the provincial authorities moved them to their current site at Mohajir Qeshlaq. The government has promised them land but until individual plots can be demarcated and distributed, nobody can build. This means that all the returnees – some 150 families – had to spend the Afghan winter living under canvas.

promote as possible interim or even permanent solutions outside its traditional framework.

This rhetoric urgently needs to become reality before the Afghan situation once again spins out of control. As Pakistan and Iran are increasingly losing their appeal as viable exit options (at least for refugees), internal displacement is likely to increase drastically in Afghanistan – in a situation where there is very limited access to provide protection to such populations.⁸

Susanne Schmeidl (susanne@schmeidl.com) is a Visiting Fellow at the Asia-Pacific College on Diplomacy at The Australian National University and Research and Peacebuilding Advisor to The Liaison Office in Afghanistan (<http://www.tlo-afghanistan.org>), which she co-founded in 2003. This article draws on S Schmeidl and W Maley 2008, 'The Case of the Afghan Refugee Population: Finding Durable Solutions in Contested



Qayum's daughter Aziza shows the Voluntary Repatriation Form that her family was given when they returned from Pakistan in October 2008.

Transitions', in H Adelman (ed) Protracted Displacement in Asia: No Place to Call Home. London: Ashgate, 2008, 131-79

1. UNHCR, Protracted Refugee Situations: A discussion paper prepared for the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, 20 November 2008. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/492fb92d.html>
2. *ibid*, p.9
3. D Turton and P Marsden 'Taking Refugees for a Ride? The Politics of Refugee Return in Afghanistan', Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. 2002 <http://tinyurl.com/AREU202>

4. A Monsutti 'Afghan Migratory Strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27: (2008) 1, 19

5. UNHCR, Protracted Refugee Situations, 20 November 2008. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/492fb92d.html> p20

6. 'Pakistan to get \$140 mln for sheltering refugees', Reuters India, 13 March 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/reutersPak140mn>

7. W Maley 'Afghanistan and its region' in J A Thier (ed), *The Future of Afghanistan*, Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2009, 90

8. Alexander Mundt and Susanne Schmeidl, 'The Failure to Protect: Battle-Affected IDPs in Southern Afghanistan', The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement/ The Liaison Office. <http://tinyurl.com/BBMundtSchmeidl>