



Afghanistan: conflict and displacement 1978 to 2001

by Hiram A Ruiz

UNHCR / C. Shirley

*Jalozai refugee camp,
near Peshawar,
Pakistan, 2001*

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US-led military action against Afghanistan's Taliban regime and al-Qa'ida thrust Afghanistan into the international spotlight and finally placed it on the agenda of senior policy makers worldwide. What the media and policy makers discovered was a country ravaged by conflict and already in the grip of one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

In fact, Afghanistan has experienced one of the world's largest refugee crises for more than two decades. Between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the present day, one in four Afghans has been a refugee. At the peak of the crisis in the late 1980s, there were more than six million Afghan refugees. When American bombardment began in October 2001, 3.6 million Afghans remained refugees, mostly in Pakistan and Iran, while at least 700,000 more were internally displaced.¹ Decades of ongoing conflict, human rights abuses by both the Taliban and the opposition forces and severe drought have

all taken a grave toll on the Afghan people.

The conflict's early days

The coup that brought a communist government to power in Afghanistan in April 1978 ignited the first of a series of conflicts that have crippled Afghanistan and left an estimated 1.5 million Afghans dead.² Afghanistan's largely uneducated, traditional, rural population deeply resented and resisted the new communist regime. Faced with widespread opposition, the regime turned to force. Its violent tactics left tens of thousands of Afghans

dead, prompted the exodus of thousands of refugees and gave rise to an armed resistance movement.

Concerned that the communist government in Kabul was losing ground, in December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The civilian population once again faced violence and intimidation and hundreds of thousands more refugees fled Afghanistan.

During the 1980s, new Afghan opposition forces - the *mujahideen* or holy warriors - grew rapidly, increasing the intensity of the conflict. In 1981, some 1.5 million Afghans were refugees;³ by 1986, this number had increased to nearly five million, mostly in Pakistan and Iran.⁴ Most of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan were ethnic Pashtuns, housed in refugee camps established by UNHCR throughout Pakistan's two westernmost provinces, the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan.

Over the years, the camps evolved into villages that began to appear much like other villages in Pakistan. Many of the refugees carved out reasonable and predictable lives, at least

compared to what they could expect in Afghanistan. Most found at least subsistence work in the local economy or rented land to cultivate. Some maintained a foothold in both countries by living in Pakistan while hiring tenant farmers to work their land in Afghanistan.

Afghan refugees in Iran did not benefit from similar assistance, however. In 1979, a revolution put an Islamic fundamentalist regime in power in Iran and radical students seized the US embassy, taking dozens of US citizens hostage.⁵ The US and its allies were reluctant to fund programmes in Iran, even for refugees, and Teheran did not want Western agencies – including UNHCR – in Iran. Left largely to fend for themselves, most Afghan refugees in Iran settled in urban centres, with little protection, forced to compete with local people for limited employment opportunities.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan proved costly in both lives and expenditure and sparked political opposition within the flagging Soviet Union. In February 1989, Moscow withdrew its troops from Afghanistan and left in power a puppet regime headed by Mohammed Najibullah. The UN tried to broker a peace agreement between Najibullah and the mujahideen but failed to achieve any result. In April 1992, the mujahideen captured Kabul and killed Najibullah.

Civil war

The mujahideen's victory triggered an immediate and massive repatriation. Between April and December 1992, an estimated 900,000 Afghans returned home.⁶ UNHCR said it was the "largest and fastest repatriation programme [ever] assisted by UNHCR." The UN established two programmes to assist returning refugees. In Pakistan, UNHCR offered refugees who turned in their refugee ration cards a set sum of money to use for their transportation home and for initial survival needs in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the UN created Operation Salam to assist returnees through mine clearance, health programmes, rehabilitation of the water supply, and basic education. UNHCR also assisted Afghan refugees repatriating from Iran but on a much smaller scale.

Since the Soviet pull-out from Afghanistan, however, the West's interest in the country had faded. Funding for reconstruction and repatriation, as well as for assistance to the large number of refugees who remained in Pakistan and Iran, dried up. Operation Salam soon collapsed. Although repatriation continued at a brisk pace in 1993, it subsequently levelled off.

Two factors contributed to the slowdown in repatriation: inadequate repatriation assistance and the infighting that erupted between the various mujahideen factions that had worked together to oust the Soviets and Najibullah. Unable to agree on a political power-sharing arrangement, the mujahideen turned against each other "as each sought to achieve its objectives by military means".⁷ Afghanistan became what Afghan expert Robert Kaplan described as "a writhing nest of petty warlords who fought and negotiated with one another for small chunks of territory".⁸ Fighting for control of Kabul left an estimated 50,000 people dead and much of the city in ruins. In Kandahar, the largest city in southern Afghanistan, civilians "had little security from murder, rape, looting, or extortion".⁹

The emergence of the Taliban

During the 1980s and early 1990s, religious schools called *madrassas* became popular with Afghan refugee populations, as they were in many cases the only form of education and discipline for refugee boys. The schools were funded largely by ultra-conservative groups in Saudi Arabia and conservative Pashtun religious leaders in Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. They taught Koranic study and sacrifice rather than, for example, mathematics or literature. The *madrassas* proved to be ripe breeding grounds for the Taliban movement. Students were taught that the cure for the factional fighting and lawlessness that had taken over the country lay in the creation of a strict Islamic state. The Taliban began what was to be a quick takeover of most of the region of Kandahar in 1994.

Most Afghans were at first receptive to the Taliban, as they initially brought relative peace and stability to the war-torn nation. By mid-1995, the

Taliban had grown to more than 25,000 fighters and controlled most of southern and western Afghanistan. However, the movement's strict reading of an ancient tribal social code called *Pushtunwali* was resented by the vast majority of Afghans who had never before been subject to such restrictions. As the movement headed north, it was met with increasing resistance from many of the former mujahideen groups which eventually banded together to form the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. The Taliban captured Jalalabad and Kabul in late 1996 and Mazar-e-Sharif – the Northern Alliance's *de facto* capital – in 1998.

a writhing nest of petty warlords

The fighting for control of northern Afghanistan triggered a new refugee exodus. Many of Kabul's educated élite, including government workers, medical professionals and teachers, fled to Pakistan. They opposed the Taliban's anti-western, fundamentalist Islamic stance and the many restrictions that the Taliban imposed on the population. Many members of ethnic minorities such as the Hazara, fearing discrimination by the Pashtun-led Taliban, also fled. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of civilians within the region were displaced internally.

The post-Cold War period

In Pakistan, UNHCR and WFP, faced with huge funding shortfalls for their relief activities for Afghan refugees as well as robbery and threats from local warlords, ended food aid to most refugees living in camps in late 1995. They based their decision – which was to have a significant long-term impact both on refugees in Pakistan and the government of Pakistan's attitude towards their presence – on the results of a survey that indicated that a majority of the refugees were self-sufficient or could become self-sufficient if necessary. A year after the cut-off, however, a subsequent study found that, far from being self-sufficient, many camp refugees "were living at a marginal level of existence, dependent on intermittent daily labouring work."¹⁰

The termination of food aid to camp residents prompted the exodus of tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands

of refugees from the camps to Pakistani cities. The Pakistani authorities blamed the increased number of refugees in the cities for Pakistan's growing social and economic ills. According to one senior government official, the refugees caused "an increase in crime, drug addiction and drug trafficking, and illegal trade. Local people say that the Afghans take their jobs and drive up real estate prices."¹¹

UN agencies and international NGOs sought to help the displaced population within Afghanistan but their efforts were often thwarted by widespread fighting and the Taliban's distrust of them. That distrust escalated when the UN imposed sanctions on the regime in 1999. A year later, an

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assessment of the sanctions' impact by the UN's Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs found that the sanctions "had a tangible negative effect ... on the ability of humanitarian agencies to render assistance to people in the country." The report added that many individual Afghans felt victimised by the sanctions, believing that the UN had "set out to harm rather than help Afghans".

Nevertheless, in December 2000, even as the UN, donor governments and NGOs struggled to provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable Afghan civilians, the UN Security Council, spurred on by the US and Russia, voted to impose additional sanctions on the Taliban. NGOs and UN agencies providing humanitarian relief in Afghanistan said that additional sanctions would further strain relations between the Taliban and UN agencies and NGOs, and could put the lives of UN and NGO staff at risk or cause their withdrawal from Afghanistan, crippling relief efforts. UN agencies temporarily withdrew their staff from Afghanistan when the Security Council approved the sanctions.¹²

Pakistan: an end to the welcome

In 1999, Pakistan's growing frustration with the seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan and with its growing Afghan refugee population

led to increased harassment of Afghan refugees. Police in Pakistan's major cities stopped undocumented Afghans and deported many who did not pay bribes. In June 1999, police demolished the stalls of a number of Afghan traders at a market in Peshawar and assaulted the traders and their Afghan customers. Later that year, local authorities in Baluchistan pushed back across the border 300 Afghan asylum seekers and forced thousands of Afghan refugees who had been living in Quetta to move to camps.¹³

Another refugee influx, the largest in four years, began in mid-2000. It followed heavy fighting in northern Afghanistan and the widening effects of the worst drought to hit Afghanistan in 30 years. UNHCR estimated that more than 172,000 Afghans entered Pakistan in 2000.

In response to this influx and as a result of frustration with the international community, Pakistan closed its border with Afghanistan in November 2000. Though the border closure was largely ineffective in practical terms (the border is porous and border guards easily bribed), it signalled Pakistan's hardening stance. Pakistani authorities resented what they saw as the international community's abandonment of the region after the Soviet withdrawal and its saddling of Pakistan with more than two million refugees with few prospects for a speedy return home. With hindsight, many in the international community recognise that Pakistan's increasingly harsh treatment of Afghan refugees in recent years can be traced to that abandonment.

Pakistan's hardened stance toward Afghan refugees continued throughout the displacement crisis that followed the start of US military action in Afghanistan in October 2001. Like all of Afghanistan's neighbours, Pakistan kept its border officially sealed, trapping tens of thousands of Afghans in places of danger within Afghanistan. Although UNHCR and donor governments promised to meet the cost of assisting new refugees, Pakistan continued to fear that the international community would again soon lose interest and leave Pakistan struggling to cope with even more refugees.

Conclusion

The crisis that existed before 11 September was 24 years in the making. The US intervention initially compounded the situation, displacing hundreds of thousands more civilians and disrupting relief efforts. However, the ousting of the Taliban, the inauguration of a new government and the promise of substantial, long-term international aid have given the Afghan people their first spark of hope in many years.

It is now up to the international community to ensure that it does not repeat past mistakes that led to the suffering of Afghan civilians and contributed to a political climate that facilitated the work of terrorists.

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For statistics on Afghan refugee movements, see www.refugees.org.

1 Statistics compiled by UN UNOCHA, Internal Displacement in Afghanistan, June 2001.

2 Human Rights Watch (HRW) 'Crisis of Impunity: The Role of Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in Fueling the Civil War', New York, July 2001, p3.

3 *World Refugee Survey 1981*, US Committee for Refugees (USCR), Washington.

4 *World Refugee Survey 1986*.

5 UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees 2000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p117.

6 *World Refugee Survey 1994*.

7 British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) 'Afghanistan Briefing Pack', January 2001, p5.

8 Robert D Kaplan 'The Taliban', *The Atlantic*, September 2000.

9 HRW 'Crisis of Impunity', p15.

10 *World Refugee Survey 1997*.

11 USCR interview with Muhammad Haroon Shaukat, director general, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad, June 2001.

12 *World Refugee Survey 2001*.

13 Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), UNOCHA, Islamabad, 16 August 2001.