The fate of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

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About the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to throw light on the life of Afghan Refugees living in Pakistan, their standard of life and the issues faced by them particularly harassment, discrimination and protection cases at rise. The paper will also highlight the efforts vis-a-vis the mistakes done by the Pakistani and Afghan Government in making the repatriation efforts less effective and or unsuccessful. The paper also sheds light on the future of Afghan refugees in Pakistan with recommendations for policy institutions in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Background

Pakistan a generous host and worlds’ largest refugee hosting country currently hosts some 1.6 million registered Afghans in various parts of Pakistan. Since Soviet Union million of Afghans have been seeking refuge in Pakistan and many have been settled and consider Pakistan as their home land. Data compiled by Pakistan’s home and tribal affairs department found that the country was simultaneously playing host to 400,000 undocumented Afghans, many of who live in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), one of the Pakistan’s four major provinces. Pakistan has been playing host to Afghan refugees since more than three decades but due to the continuous economic problems. According to the census done by Pakistan Census Organization (PCO) in 2005, there is a 3-percent growth rate among refugees. (Source: 2005 Afghan Refugees census by UNHCR) This is a point of concern for authorities as well as locals as, in the coming years; there will be more mouths to feed and resources to share. Some 19.4 percent of all Afghans are children under the age of five. The young growing Afghans identify and associate themselves more with Pakistani society, and are comfortable with their existing situation. In all, 16 percent of Afghans are reported to be Kuchis, who are most likely to be an obstacle in future, repatriation programs. Kuchis are nomads who have moved to and fro between Afghanistan and Pakistan for centuries. Although their nomadic life has undergone change, they claim to be seasonal migrants who should not be categorized as refugees. The census also highlighted Some 62 percent of Afghans live in NWFP with 25 percent in Balochistan, 7 percent in Punjab and 4 percent in Sindh. Some 58 percent of the population was living outside camps while 42 percent was in UNHCR assisted camps. The census also indicates that 62 percent of the Afghans living in Pakistan originate from six provinces in Afghanistan, 17 percent from Nangarhar, 11 percent from Kabul, 10 percent from Kandahar and 8 percent from Kunduz, while the remaining 16 percent hail from Paktiya and Baghlan (source: 2005 Afghan Refugees census by UNHCR).

Life of Afghans in Pakistan

No doubt life for Afghan refugees in Pakistan is not easy but still there is hope of a better standard of life as there are many afghan families who have well established their roots in Pakistan and the children of such families who are born here takes Pakistan as their mother land and they have completely abandoned the option of going back to Afghanistan. Such
families have access to all the facilities that an average Pakistani family can have, which include but not limited to good health care, enrollment in education institutes, good job markets, self business establishment and many more such facilities.

However, a major chunk of the Afghan population in Pakistan is having miserable lives, they usually come under the group who are below poverty and can barely afford two times meal a day. Significant needs related to refugees’ access to education, reproductive health services, and vocational training and livelihood opportunities remains unmet. In refugee-hosting communities, where the level of public services in general is low, numerous needs remain unmet, such as access to education, health care, water and sanitation, livelihoods.

“Afghan nationals visiting hospitals in Peshawar for medical treatment, particularly Rehman Medical Institute and North West Hospital Hayatabad, also allegedly faced harassment and extortion by local police.” (Source: http://tribune.com.pk/story/438168/alleged-discrimination-govt-to-redress-problems-faced-by-afghan-nationals/)

As a result of growing insecurity, the perception of local residents about Afghan refugees is becoming worse day by day blaming them for militant attacks. Refugees are subject to varying degrees of police extortion and harassment, in some instances limiting the employment and livelihood options of on-campus displaced people and posing threats to their physical safety. Women face significant protection threats related to cultural sensitivity around gender roles.

**Repatriation by will or by force?**

While it is important to highlight the generosity of Pakistani Government it should be more critical of its role in facilitating the repatriation of over 2.7 million Afghans to a country that lacks stability. The terminology of ‘safe return’ has been increasingly used to impress upon Afghans that the situation in their country has improved for repatriation; however, as has been mentioned above, conditions are still fluid and far from favorable for returnees. The Tripartite Agreement of 2003 speaks of phased repatriation from Pakistan but the risk factors involved in repatriating such huge numbers of returnees have not been given due consideration.

**The Future of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan**

Based on the policies of Pakistan since 2001 and the current donor fatigue, the role of UNHCR and the bulging concern of Pakistani Government over the rapidly growing number of Afghan refugees, it is possible to predict the future scenario for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. There can be possible two situations depends on the upcoming elections in Afghanistan:

1. Most likely to happen:
2. Worst case
1. Most likely to happen:

**Successful elections and Political stability:** The future of Afghanistan depends on the upcoming elections, most likely the political transition would be somehow based on political negotiations between the lead actors and will not result in an armed conflict or “take over” by Taliban but rather a much negotiated and somewhat planned path to expedite the departure of foreign troops and their way to return to power is most likely to happen. The security level will not be volatile but the economic situation would be vulnerable with lack of foreign aid.

In such conditions, any bid to forcibly impose the state’s authority over its diverse people is unlikely to succeed. In the present context, the legitimacy of state can only be reconstituted after a central authority succeeds in accommodating some of the most basic demands of the major elements composing Afghan civil society.

**Implications on Pakistan:**

if the elections went well and there is no security emergency in Afghanistan then we may witness some movement of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan but again most likely most of the refugee will like “to wait and see” the situation in Afghanistan for a couple of months and then they may decide to either have a visit and assess the situation if it is not favorable they might come back or move permanently.

Based on the aforementioned factors certain assumptive conclusions are:-

a. Afghanistan is likely to remain economically dependent, thus its politico military structure will remain unstable and subdued; subjected to the quantum of aid and wishes of the donors.

b. The strong effect of society, attitudes, social customs and psychological make up are likely to continue in a significant manner in times to come.

2. Worst case:

The worst case scenario is considered unlikely to happen, which is the resumption of civil war. In the absence of peace, the re-establishment of state legitimacy will not be possible. Such a situation will lead to the formation of independent fiefdoms, controlled on the grounds of ethnicity, sectarianism, tribal origin or territorial identities.

In such a case the election might be a failure comprised of fraud and thus will not be concluded which will result in armed conflict. In such case there might be security evacuation for most of the humanitarian agencies including the UN and thus leaving Afghanistan once again in a state of unmet needs and closing the doors on development and prosperity.
Implications on Pakistan:

Huge number of influx of refugees, it will certainly be a big challenge for the Pakistani Government economically and especially security wise to cater to the needs of growing number of refugee population.

There will be more internal displacement if the influx is towards the FATA/tribal regions which will result in increased insecurity. The “push factors” for the Pakistan Government in such case is likely to increase, leading to forced repatriation.

Afghans will probably face even more pressures from Pakistan as many have shown their reservations to return. The closure of camps, the Pak-Afghan border and educational institutions is an indicator of the official mindset.

The door that welcomed Afghans is most likely to shut and they are being asked to repatriate.

Recommendations

It is interesting to know the future of Afghan refugees depends on the validity of the Tripartite Agreement as when the agreement expires, will there be illegal border crossing? And how to ensure that there will be no or less movement from the border of Afghanistan to Pakistan? Below are some of the recommendations for the Pakistani Government and lead humanitarian actors who are assisting the afghan refugees:

1. Proper screening of Afghans can take place with the financial and technical assistance of UNHCR after the expiry of the Tripartite Agreement, as initially envisaged, it will help Pakistan adopt a policy for dealing with the remaining refugee population. Those who still qualify to be refugees should be treated and assisted accordingly. Those who are screened out should not be harassed to repatriate immediately but should be informed about their illegal status and the problems they would be facing in future because of their status. How to achieve the target without using force or harassment is indeed an area that should be looked into. Repatriation should be made more attractive for returnees; otherwise, it will reverse itself. Refugees should sense that they are not being pushed back to their country, which is still gripped by instability. Repatriating refugees in an atmosphere of cordiality could become a major bridge for Pakistan to build a lasting relationship with its neighbor.

2. Pakistan should pursue role of constructive engagement in Afghanistan. The first priority should be to impress upon the new government the need for the maintenance of conditions for the unimpeded flow of humanitarian assistance to the population.

3. Priority needs to be given to measures to assist the refugees, both with their current needs, and with the creation of conditions for their return to their homes.
4. To ensure safety and security of its own people it is much demanded to carry out an immediate census in order to cancel maximum illegally acquired national ID cards and domicile certificates.

5. Government of Pakistan should introduce relevant themes through mass media to indoctrinate the refugees to return to their homeland and help in its reconstruction.

6. It is imperative that the regional countries exert pressure on various Afghan factions under their influence for patching up their differences and for holding dialogue without any pre-conditions in the larger interest of the region. Pakistan, having vital geo-strategic and trade interests in Afghanistan should play more effective and assertive role in this regard. Pakistan and Afghanistan have become economically interlinked after the Afghan war. A share in Afghanistan’s reconstruction coupled with commercial relations is likely to have positive influence on Pakistan’s economic sector. Aware of the prevailing cross currents, regional moods and own situation, Pakistan must make concrete efforts to help restore a peaceful long term political stability in Afghanistan, as it would be in her own larger interest.

7. On the other side of the border the Afghan government has to adopt a balanced and integrated approach to make repatriation durable and sustainable. The essential confidence and will of the people to overcome the present difficulties and face challenges need to come from within, and should not depend on strategies worked out on foreign lands to rebuild and reconstruct Afghanistan. While such policies may have positive intentions, plans imposed from outside have never worked with Afghans. Rebirth, therefore, has to come from the Afghans who have suffered from decades of civil war.

Below are some of the interesting articles from the newspaper

“Pakistan will not welcome fresh influx of refugees from Afghanistan and use all legal channels in collaboration with the international community to block entry of Afghans on the border,” he said when asked whether Islamabad would provide shelter to fresh refugees if there was turmoil in the neighbouring country after the Nato pullout. said Minister for State and Frontier Regions Lt-Gen (r) Abdul Qadir Baloch (source: http://www.dawn.com/news/1051934/more-afghan-refugees-not-welcome-minister)

“Pakistan cannot afford to host Afghan refugees any longer and has spent more than $200 billion in the last 30 years on them,” said Minister for States and Frontier Regions Abdul Qadir Baloch.

(Source: http://tribune.com.pk/story/622518/burdened-economy-pakistan-has-spent-200b-on-afghan-refugees/)

“The Pakistani government’s decision to extend the deadline for repatriation brought relief for refugees who run businesses or have other interests here and could not have left for
Afghanistan immediately,” Muhammad Hashim, a 51-year-old carpet dealer in the Board Area of Peshawar on Jamrud Road that leads to Afghanistan

Our younger generation doesn’t want to leave Pakistan for Afghanistan. The situation there offers no hope for young Afghans,” he said

“Police demand bribes from us,” Muhammad Rafiq, a taxi driver who hails from Kabul, told IPS. “We pay because most Afghan drivers don’t have valid documents,” added the 44-year-old father of two boys, aged 10 and 12 “

(Source: http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/11/caught-between-afghani-and-pakistani/).

Sources

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