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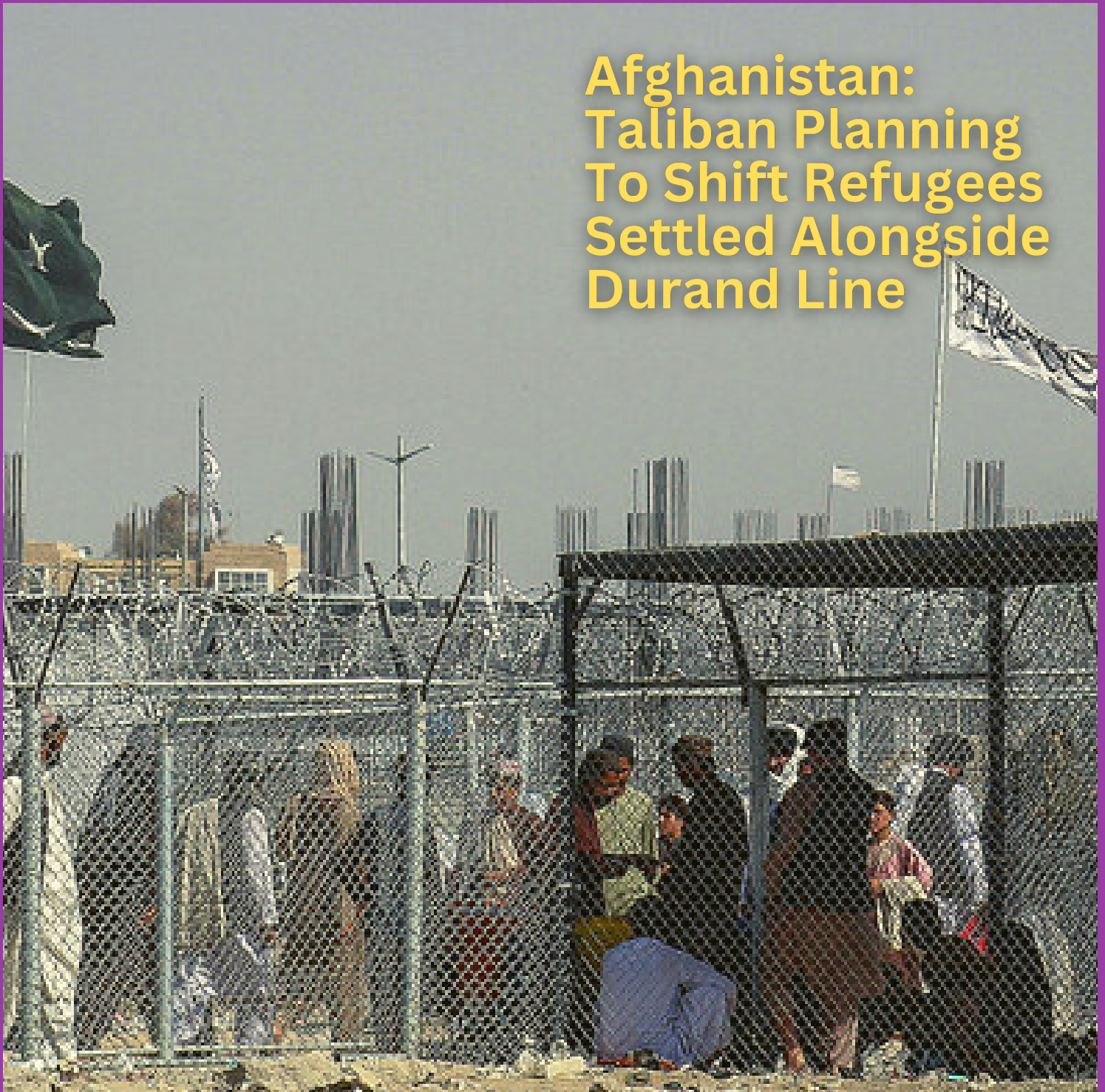
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Afghanistan: Taliban Planning To Shift Refugees Settled Alongside Durand Line



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<https://thenewsmill.com/2023/06/afghanistan-taliban-planning-to-shift-refugees-settled-alongside-durand-line/>

Taliban is planning to relocate the refugees settled alongside the Durand Line to other provinces in Afghanistan, TOLO News reported. Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid said that the decision has been taken to assure Pakistan that refugees are not involved in attacks against the Pakistani government.

“To give a general assurance, the Islamic Emirate planned to take the refugees, who come from the other side of the Durand Line in Khost and Kunar provinces, to far provinces, so that they will be away from the (Durand) line,” TOLO News quoted Zabiullah Mujahid as saying.

The Norwegian Refugee Council in 2014 revealed that the Pakistan military operation in North Waziristan District resulted in displacement of thousands of civilians into Afghanistan, particularly into Khost and Paktika provinces, TOLO News reported. In 2019, the NRC estimated that approximately 72,000 refugees remain and most of them live in Gulan Refugee Camp close to Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Khost.

Comments

Background

Reported by Tolo News, the official spokesperson for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, confirmed (what many speculated) on the Taliban’s decision to relocate the refugees settled alongside the Durand Line to other provinces. He further assured that the refugees were not involved in planning attacks against its eastern neighbour and the Islamic Emirate decided to move those crossing the Durand Line into Khost and Kunar provinces, to far areas.[1] This decision to settle Pakistani nationals who had fled Pakistan in 2014 after Pakistani military launched (what it termed as a counterterror operation), Operation Zarb-e-Azb, in its North Waziristan province.[2] The operation was conducted to eliminate extremist groups settled in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, a region dominated by ethnic Pashtuns, which resulted in displacement of over one million, many of whom settled along the border in Afghanistan.[3]

[1] Mohammad Farshad Daryosh. 2023. “Islamic Emirate to Relocate Refugees Settled Along Durand Line.” TOLO News, June 4, 2023. <https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-183644>.

[2] ANI. 2023. “Afghanistan: Taliban Planning to Shift Refugees Settled alongside Durand Line.” ANI News Desk, June 5, 2023. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-planning-to-shift-refugees-settled-alongside-durand-line20230605195243/>.

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Since then, the displaced Pakistani citizens have been residing in the provinces of Kunar, Khost and Paktika in Afghanistan.[4]

According to an expert on refugee displacement who is also a former member of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)[5], over 10,000 families had fled their homes from the Datta Khel region in the North Waziristan's province at the on-set of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, then in June 2014.[6] According to him, Afghanistan witnessed influx of more than one million residents from North Waziristan[7], with some permitted to return to their homes a year later.[6] According to an analysis from the Norwegian Refugee Council published in 2019, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, displaced over 72,000 Pakistani citizens, including 20,000 children, and a majority of them continue to live in Gulan Refugee Camp, close to the internationally recognized border between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the Khost province.[9] Additionally, the number increased after the cross-border skirmish at the Durand Line (which occurred in May 2019), displacing more than 800 families from the province of North Waziristan into Khost along with an estimated 400 refugee families who had taken refuge in the camps near Paktika.[10] [11] With varying data and unavailability of new census on the estimated refugees currently living at Ghulan refugee camp, the author spoke to renowned Afghan journalist Abidullah Masoud, who had visited the refugee camp in 2020.[10] According to him, an estimate of over 30,000 refugee families (biometrically registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2017) displaced from the Pakistan's North Waziristan provinces, continue to stay at the camp, with less than 10,000 families having access to medical and basic services.[12] Additionally, over 20,000 refugees (biometrically registered by the United

[3] News Desk. 2016. "490 Pakistan Soldiers, 3,500 Militants Killed in Operation Zarb-e-Azb." Economic Times, June 15, 2016. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/490-pakistan-soldiers-3500-militants-killed-in-operation-zarb-e-azb/articleshow/52766005.cms?from=mdr>.

[4] Gul, Ayaz. 2023. "Taliban Move to Address Pakistan's Cross-Border Terror Complaints." Voice of America, June 4, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-move-to-address-pakistan-s-cross-border-terror-complaints/7122978.html>.

[5] During discussion with Author

[6] Siddique, Abubakar, and Umar Daraz Wazir. 2019. "In Afghanistan, Displaced Waziristan Civilians Eager To Go Home." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 15, 2019. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-displaced-waziristan-civilians-eager-to-go-home/30218141.html>.

[7] News Desk. 2014. "Pakistan's IDPs Reach Record One Million." Al Jazeera News, September 1, 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/9/1/pakistans-idps-reach-record-one-million>.

[8] Enayatullah Azad. 2019. "No Place to Call Home for Pakistani Refugees." Norwegian Refugee Council. 2019. <https://www.nrc.no/news/2019/october/no-place-to-call-home-for-pakistani-refugees/>.

[9] Ibid

[10] European Asylum Support Office. 2016. "EASO Country of Origin Information Report." Waziristan. https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/EASO-COI-Afghanistan_Security_Situation-BZ041600IENN_FV1.pdf.

[11] News Desk. 2014. "Pakistani Refugees Welcome End to Afghan Political Deadlock." The New Humanitarian, September 23, 2014. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2014/09/23/pakistani-refugees-welcome-end-afghan-political-deadlock>

[12] During discussion with author.

[13] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2021. "Afghanistan - Socio-Economic Assessment of Pakistani Refugees in Afghanistan's Khost and Paktika Provinces 2017." <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/3997/pdf-documentation>.

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Source: Indian Express

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2017) continue to thrive in inhospitable conditions in the province of Paktika.[14]

Tracing Pakistani refugees in Afghanistan

Pashtuns (Pakistani residents) have been migrating towards the other side of the Durand line for ages and under varied circumstances, but initial reports from western media indicated migration of over 6,000 Pakistanis from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province into Afghanistan, in the initial years of US led Global War On Terror (GWOT).[15]

The reason for migration not only involved armed confrontation between the Pakistani Armed Forces and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) but also sectarian rift between Shia & Sunni played a key role in their flight.[16] In the initial migration, they were able to receive basic emergency services from NATO led coalition troops in Khost & Pakhtia, but by September 2008, their numbers increased to over 20,000[17] with 70% of the refugees Pakistani nationals while the rest were Afghans who had settled in Pakistan more than a decade earlier.[18] The influx into Afghanistan further increased after the 2010 floods in Pakistan.[19] According to the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015, over 221,432 Pakistanis were found living in Afghanistan, majority of them in the Khost and Paktika Provinces respectively.[20] The migrant proportion also involved small number of Pakistani Baloch migrants, who settled in the southern parts of Afghanistan, particularly in the province Nimroz.[21]

[14] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2021. "Afghanistan - Socio-Economic Assessment of Pakistani Refugees in Afghanistan's Khost and Paktika Provinces 2017." <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/3997/pdf-documentation>.

[15] Leithead, Alastair. 2008. "Pakistanis Flee into Afghanistan." BBC News, January 7, 2008. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7174294.stm.

[16] Burns, John F. 2008. "Pakistani Refugees Pour Into Afghanistan." The New York Times, September 29, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/30/world/asia/30refugees.html>.

[17] Leithead, Alastair. 2008. "Pakistanis Flee into Afghanistan." BBC News, January 7, 2008. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7174294.stm.

[18] Burns, John F. 2008. "Pakistani Refugees Pour Into Afghanistan." The New York Times, September 29, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/30/world/asia/30refugees.html>

[19] Asian Development Bank. 2010. "Pakistan Floods 2010 Preliminary Damage and Needs Assessment." Islamabad. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/44372-01-pak-oth-02.pdf>.

[20] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. 2015. "AFGHANISTAN 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT." <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/253169.pdf>.

[21] Zurutuza, Karlos. 2014. "Pakistani Baloch Find Home in Afghanistan." Al Jazeera News, September 17, 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/9/17/pakistani-baloch-find-home-in-afghanistan>.

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Implications for TTP?

From the hindsight, Taliban's decision to remove Pakistani refugees (or TTP factions) from the border reflect an indirect support to TTP efforts in coercing Islamabad into entering negotiations, and its direct support in series of attacks escalated through joint TTP and Hafiz Gul Bahadur (HGB) group within the Pakistani territories.[22] The HGB is affiliated to the TTP with close ties with Taliban and is assumed to be under explicit control of the Taliban Interior Minister Siraj Haqqani. In the past, the HGB and TTP have jointly carried out a series of attacks in the Chaman District of Balochistan and Bannu district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[23] The group's coordination with TTP points towards a change in their operational relationship, as (since its inception), HGB's operations and command & control has been independent of TTP.[24] The Taliban's decision to relocate Pakistani refugees from its borders, may instigate Islamabad to negotiate with the TTP. Zabiullah Mujahid's statements to remove refugees from the camps in Khost, Paktia and Kunar provinces to far provinces in Afghanistan with the objective to prevent cross border attacks against Pakistan. Connecting the reference of cross border attacks with refugees indicates a reference to TTP militants as TTP has been using Afghanistan as a safe haven to conduct attacks in Pakistan. That said, Islamabad has refused to engage in formal talks with the TTP until Taliban prohibits its affiliate from using safe-havens in Afghanistan.[25]

It is without a doubt that, the Taliban is looking to manage the relations between TTP and Islamabad. Although, asked repeatedly by Islamabad, Taliban have been denying on providing any safe havens to terror factions operating from Afghanistan and very recently, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China and Afghanistan signed an agreement to counter terrorism and strengthen bilateral relations (ratified on 08 May, 2023).[26] That said, TTP is an affiliate of Taliban, and negotiations with Islamabad will provide valuable time for the TTP to strengthen its control in the KPK, recruit followers and plan attacks. Even if the aforementioned statement turns out to be true, the TTP could struggle to consolidate its battle-hardened followers, as any negotiation with Islamabad could draw a wedge among its fighters, and prove a challenge to retain internal cohesion for its leadership. This is evident from TTP spokesperson denying any negotiation with Islamabad especially in the context of TTP seeking talks with the Pakistan.[27] Many factions within the TTP do not wish to negotiate with Islamabad, with a prominent faction even condemning TTP leadership for negotiating a temporary cease-fire with the Pakistani government in 2022. Although, it is too early to predict the implication on Islamabad and its prospective negotiations with TTP, but for refugees, it's a barefoot walk on a minefield, with existence entirely dependent on an interplay for political objectives.

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[23] News Desk. 2023. "Pakistani Taliban Claim Attack in Northwest Left 2 Soldiers, 2 Militants Dead." Voice of America, June 4, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistani-taliban-claim-attack-in-northwest-left-2-soldiers-2-militants-dead/7122591.html>.

[24] Mirror Web. 2023. "TTP-HGB Operational Merger." Minute Mirror, June 5, 2023. <https://minutemirror.com.pk/ttp-hgb-operational-merger/>.

[25] HUSSAIN, SAJJAD. 2023. "Pakistan Rejects TTP's Talks Offer Following Bitter Experience in Past: Report." The Print, June 4, 2023. <https://theprint.in/world/pakistan-rejects-ttps-talks-offer-following-bitter-experience-in-past-report/1615052/>.

[26] India, Press Trust of. 2023. "Pakistan, China and Afghanistan Agree to Combat Terrorism at Islamabad Meeting." The Hindu, May 7, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-china-and-afghanistan-agree-to-combat-terrorism-at-islamabad-meeting/article66823837.ece>.

[27] Abid, Hussain. 2023. "Pakistan Taliban Threatens Top Political Leadership Including PM." Al Jazeera News, January 4, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/4/pakistan-taliban-threatens-top-political-leadership-including-pm>.