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**Pakistan's
New Business:
Asks
Struggling
Refugees To
Pay A Heavy
Exit Fee**

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Pakistan's New Business: Asks Struggling Refugees To Pay A Heavy Exit Fee

<https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/pakistans-new-business-asks-struggling-refugees-to-pay-a-heavy-exit-fee-2466729-2023-11-23>

To be read in Continuation of Afghanistan Watch 01–15 Nov 23

https://cenjows.in/pdf-view/?pID=21730&url=2023/11/Afghanistan_Watch_1-15_Nov_2023.pdf

Comments

Background

Pakistan had ordered in October 2023 that all undocumented/illegal Afghan refugees staying in Pakistan must go back to Afghanistan voluntarily by 01 November 2023. Pakistan, where almost four million Afghan nationals had migrated/displaced to inside geographical boundary of it since last six decades due to wars, oppressive regimes in Afghanistan and non-demarcation/dispute of international borders had taken this step due to increasing terrorist activities and further attributing them to Afghan refugees. Difference between illegal and undocumented refugees has clearly been highlighted in paragraph 10 of previous issue on the subject.

Current Situation

Aid organizations NRC, DRC, and IRC, have observed a dramatic surge in the number of people returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan since Pakistan's announcement that all undocumented Afghans must vacate the country by 01 November or risk deportation. The daily number of arrivals, which now ranges between 9,000 and 10,000 individuals, marks a stark contrast to the previous average of approximately 300 individuals a day before the announcement on 15 September 2023. As many as 1.7 million people could be affected. According to an estimate, a total of 3,74,000 to 4,50,000 Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan in the recent times. The conditions in which they arrive in Afghanistan are dire, with many having endured arduous journeys spanning several days, exposed to the elements, and often forced to part with their possessions in exchange for transportation. The organizations'

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teams stationed in the areas where people are returning from Pakistan have reported chaotic and desperate scenes among those who have returned[1].

Post declaration of Pakistan government on 03 October 23 regarding volunteer return of Afghan refugees, many started moving back to Afghanistan to avoid harassment at the hands of Pakistan law enforcement agencies. Perception of Pakistan authorities regarding involvement of Afghan refugees in terrorist activities further fueled apprehensions in minds of refugees compelling them to move back to Afghanistan. However, it turned out to be another nightmare for well established refugees to return back leaving everything behind in Pakistan.

Afghans who had fled Afghanistan in their early 20s to neighbouring Pakistan after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979 are refugees again in their 60s [2]. Sick and old Afghans have been arrested, with all belongings confiscated. Prominent journalists who wrote against Taliban during previous Afghan regime, human rights activists, members of the LGBT community, contractors who worked for US-led forces or the Afghan military, and women and girls who can no longer receive an education in their country become targets of Taliban on return to Afghanistan. Also, no hue and cry has been made by the Western world on one of the largest refugee crisis, even they remain embroiled with Russia - Ukraine and Israel - Hamas wars.

Another complexity, which has been added by Pakistani law enforcement agencies on refugees while they exit is, asking for their earnings to be left in Pakistan as well heavy exit fee. Cash-strapped Pakistan is now asking every asylum-seeker to pay USD 830 or nearly Rs 69,000 as an exit fee. This information was shared by The Guardian citing conversation between western diplomats and Pakistan authorities [3].

[1] IRC @ 02 Nov 23, "Afghans returning from Pakistan after expulsion order have nowhere to go, warn aid agencies" Accessed on 06 December 2023, URL: [https://www.rescue.org/press-release/afghans-returning-pakistan-after-expulsion-order-have-nowhere-go-warn-aid-agencies#:~:text=The%20daily%20number%20of%20arrivals%20of%20returnees%20from%20Pakistan%20to,Organization%20of%20Migration%20\(IOM\).](https://www.rescue.org/press-release/afghans-returning-pakistan-after-expulsion-order-have-nowhere-go-warn-aid-agencies#:~:text=The%20daily%20number%20of%20arrivals%20of%20returnees%20from%20Pakistan%20to,Organization%20of%20Migration%20(IOM).)

[2] Khudai Noor Nasar @ 16 Nov 2023, AlJazeera, 'In tents again': Life comes full circle for Afghans expelled from Pakistan, Accessed on 06 December 2023, URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/16/in-tents-again-life-comes-full-circle-for-afghans-expelled-from-pakistan>

[3] Samrat Sharma, New Delhi @23 Nov, 2023, India Today, Pakistan's new business: Asks struggling refugees to pay a heavy exit fee, Accessed on 06 December 2023, URL: <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/pakistans-new-business-asks-struggling-refugees-to-pay-a-heavy-exit-fee-2466729-2023-11-23>

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Before leaving back to Afghanistan, these refugees were subjected to humiliation as well financial looting by local Pakistanis. Many refugees were compelled to sell their possessions at half-price since they were not allowed to take them back to their country. The Pakistani authorities only allowed them to carry 50,000 rupees [\$170] while crossing the border[4].



Source: *The Economic Times*

Stalemate : Humanitarian Crisis Looming Large

Due to non involvement of USA and other Western countries, Pakistan continue to deport Afghan refugees at a faster pace. Though UN agencies are flagging this issue at various forums, however it is yet to make any impact on Pakistan or other stakeholders. Asif Durrani, Pakistan's special envoy to Afghanistan, spoke on a day the United Nations renewed its warning that Afghans returning from Pakistan since they "face a precarious, uncertain future".

"So, almost 450,000 illegal immigrants have left. As per UNHCR, this figure stands at 3,74,000. Durrani clarified again, however, that nearly 2.3 million documented Afghan nationals, including 1.4 legal refugees, hosted by his country are not being asked to leave. The envoy rejected international criticism of the "lawful" expulsions, saying countries around the world routinely deport foreigners who breach their immigration laws. It has been reported that the United States did not oppose Islamabad's deportation of illegal Afghan nationals but requested the process be slowed down during winter. Washington is pressing Islamabad to prevent the deportation of approximately 25,000 "vulnerable" individuals who fled the Taliban's August 2021 takeover in Afghanistan and could be eligible for relocation to or resettlement in the United States [5]

[4] Khudai Noor Nasar @ 16 Nov 2023, AlJazeera, 'In tents again': Life comes full circle for Afghans expelled from Pakistan, Accessed on 06 December 2023, URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/16/in-tents-again-life-comes-full-circle-for-afghans-expelled-from-pakistan/>

[5] Ayaz Gul @ 06 December 2023, VOA, "Pakistan Says 450,000 Undocumented Afghans Returned Home", Accessed on 07 December 2023, URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-says-450-000-undocumented-afghans-returned-home/7386907.html>

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Mass influx of refugees back in Afghanistan has created a humanitarian crisis. Already suffering from financial ailment due to constant wars, absence of any credible economic policy and lack of employment avenues has led to a grim scenario in the country. Food deprived populace in harsh climatic conditions is bound to rebel or resort to desperate measures to leading to dangerous security situation in the region. Meanwhile, the U.N. World Food Program said on 06 December that returnees are unsure how they will survive a devastating winter in Afghanistan, where more than six million people are already internally displaced nationwide.

Pakistan under immense pressure from USA has extended the deadline for expulsion of Afghan refugees till end of 2023. Pakistan extended Proof of Registration (PoR) of nearly 1.4 million Afghan refugees until the end of 2023 but said it would not stop deporting the Afghans it says are "undocumented". The development comes amid relentless international pressure calling for the relief to the refugee community living in Pakistan[6].

Taliban Government Reaction

Pakistan's decision to expel more than 1.5 million allegedly undocumented Afghan refugees and migrants has once again triggered tensions with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. However, the Taliban government response has been very calculative to this drive of Pakistan. Probably, Taliban government also wants some of their perceived enemies specially Hazaras to come back, so that score can be settled with them and also with those nationals who sided with USA during previous regime. However, some strong remarks have been made.

"This is injustice, an injustice that cannot be ignored in any way. The forced expulsion of people is in conflict with all the norms of good neighbourliness," Bilal Karimi, spokesperson for the Afghan government has said. Last week, Afghanistan's interim Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund said Pakistan's decision to expel refugees violated international laws. Akhund's deputy Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai was more scathing in his response, warning Islamabad to "not force their hand to react over the move". The reaction of Afghans is historically known to the whole world. Most of the time they don't show any reaction, but if they do show, they are recorded in history," Stanikzai said during a news conference in Kabul on 04 Dec 23 [7]. Growing demand in Pakistan that Afghanistan government be dealt firmly in backdrop of increasing terrorist attacks and stern warnings conveyed in subtle manner by Taliban government will certainly put already strained relations between Pakistan and Taliban authorities to the test.

[6] Mukul Sharma @ 13 November 2023 – WION, "Pakistan says it is extending stay of nearly 1.4 million Afghan refugees till the end of 2023" Accessed on 07 December 2023, URL: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/pakistan-says-it-is-extending-stay-of-afghan-refugees-till-the-end-of-2023-657531>

[7] Abid Hussain @ 07 Nov 2023, Aljazeera, "As Pakistan deports refugees, tense Afghanistan ties come in sharp focus", Accessed on 06 December 2023, URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/7/as-pakistan-deports-refugees-tense-afghanistan-ties-come-in-sharp-focus>

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Way Ahead

Strained bilateral relationships, disinterest of Western world and fragile economic condition of Afghanistan have led to immediate demand of international collective efforts to tide over this humanitarian crisis. All agencies working in this field have univocally demanded urgent and immediate financial aid and infrastructure.

NRC, DRC, and IRC share grave concerns about the prospects for survival and reintegration of returnees from Pakistan into Afghan society, particularly with the onset of winters. Returning Afghans have overwhelmed the resources and the fragile infrastructure in Afghanistan. Zia Mayar, DRC's interim country director in Afghanistan said: "Our teams are on the ground witnessing the desperation of those returning to a country already grappling with immense challenges, and with no house or land to go back to. Salma Ben Aissa, IRC's country director in Afghanistan said: "The situation in Afghanistan is dire. With an existing population of over six million internally displaced individuals living in dire conditions, the Afghans returning from Pakistan face a bleak future. We urgently need international support to provide shelter, food, and healthcare for these vulnerable people." Regrettably, Afghanistan, still reeling from decades of conflict, recent devastating earthquakes and a crippling economic crisis, has little to offer, leaving those who return with few prospects to rebuild their lives. The Afghan people need long-term sustainable solutions to end the humanitarian crisis, including much-needed development assistance that international donors do not currently fund[8].

One of the largest refugee crisis developing in Asia cannot be left unattended by Western world due to their policy flaws and unplanned exit of USA. Cash, shelter and food starved populace with no employment avenues, reeling under harsh climatic conditions and in close proximity of terrorist organisations is certainly a readymade recipe for disaster as well grave security concern for whole region if not addressed timely. It is an apt time that world organisations and all stakeholders take due cognizance of alarming situation and step in to take corrective actions.

By
Col Rajesh Grover
Senior Fellow, CENJOWS

[8] IRC @ 02 Nov 23, "Afghans returning from Pakistan after expulsion order have nowhere to go, warn aid agencies" Accessed on 06 December 2023, URL: <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/afghans-returning-pakistan-after-expulsion-order-have-nowhere-go-warn-aid-agencies>