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# AFGHANISTAN: INVEST IN PEOPLE

The humanitarian situation is worsening in Afghanistan. Millions of Afghans need help rebuilding their lives and country. While all Afghans suffer from the government's poor capacity and the country's lack of services, Afghan refugees and returnees have been neglected and are particularly vulnerable. To increase regional stability, the United States and other donor nations must allocate their resources differently to tackle problems that are specific to vulnerable Afghans.

Money for large-scale development programs must be reallocated towards direct support for community-level integration of long-term refugees in Pakistan and returnees in Afghanistan. Donors must also reassess their support for land allocation schemes that are not properly designed and managed, leaving Afghan families stranded in the desert with little prospects. To prioritize humanitarian concerns, the UN must significantly improve its leadership on the humanitarian front and ensure that appropriate mechanisms and sufficient resources are devoted to coordination and advocacy. Protection concerns, such as the fate of deportees from Iran, need to be better addressed.

## I. Background

Since 2002, in the largest refugee return process ever, over five million Afghans have gone home, the vast majority from neighboring Pakistan and Iran. More than half of these returns took place within the first two years, as Afghans seized the opportunity to rebuild their lives and their country following the fall of the Taliban regime. Today more than three million registered refugees remain in exile – 2.1 million in Pakistan and 0.9 million in Iran – and hundreds of thousands more are living abroad to escape economic hardship or targeted violence. Many are now being pressured to return home despite the fact that conditions for sustainable returns are often not met.

The U.S.-led invasion and the establishment of a democratic government created high expectations, but slow progress has bitterly disappointed Afghans. For the average Afghan, neither physical

## Policy Recommendations

- ❑ The U.S. and the UN should uphold principles of international refugee law, and ensure that any returns from Pakistan are voluntary;
- ❑ The U.S. and other donor countries should support integration and reintegration programs in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and reallocate their resources to fund existing and new programs targeted at refugees and returnees;
- ❑ The U.S. and other donor countries should support UNHCR in its effort to ensure Afghanistan's existing land allocation schemes are sustainable, and refrain from funding more sites;
- ❑ Either through UNAMA or an independent OCHA office, the UN should improve its mechanisms to coordinate humanitarian programs and advocate on humanitarian issues;
- ❑ Donors should fund IOM to provide assistance to deportees from Iran.

security nor the ability to access jobs, health care and education has improved nearly fast enough, and in some areas it has actually worsened over the past couple of years. Afghans have begun to lose confidence not only in the international presence but in their own government. Poverty levels remain high despite the billions of dollars in aid poured into the country. This situation has been exacerbated by the global food crisis and a severe drought in the north and the west. Moreover, in the past twenty-four months security has considerably worsened, particularly in the south and southeast, creating fears for the long-term future of Afghan democracy.

Ongoing attacks are hampering aid agencies' ability to provide aid. Indeed, UN and international aid agencies do not have access to almost half of the country. These areas – many of which were accessible until 2006 – are considered too dangerous, and little information is known about the needs of the population there. Even in accessible districts, security measures have drastically impeded both international and national staff from assessing, implementing, and monitoring projects.

While the Government of Afghanistan is ultimately responsible for the protection and the well-being of its people, seven years on it remains weak and fragile. It is financially dependent on external aid, which constitutes around 90% of the national budget, and unable to ensure its territorial integrity or the delivery of basic services to its people. The international community has tried to build the capacity of the government from the very beginning. The UN deliberately chose a 'light footprint,' playing a supporting role behind the government, and concentrating its efforts in Kabul. This approach has shown its limits. The Afghans are now paying the price for the lack of leadership of their own government, with the under-resourced UN unable to pick up the slack.

## II. Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Moving Towards Durable Solutions

In their efforts to fight insurgency and ensure regional stability, the U.S. and other donors should take into account the importance of assisting Afghan refugees and their Pakistani hosts. Indeed, Afghanistan can not absorb large numbers of returns, and lack of services in Pakistan could lead to politically motivated non-state actors providing assistance to refugees. Injecting resources into regions with large numbers of Afghan refugees would have the dual effect of promoting durable solutions for Afghans and supporting the Pakistani government.

Mass returns to Afghanistan are an unlikely prospect. The majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan fled during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, while others left the country with the advent of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Most of the early returnees in 2002 onwards were families who had recently left Afghanistan or who could afford to return, either because they owned land or had social networks in their home country. The remaining caseload has deeper roots in Pakistan and often has little to return to.

For the past three decades Afghans have integrated into Pakistani society and now benefit from support systems that they do not have back home. Fifty-five percent of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are children under 18, most of them born and raised in the country. In a recent UNHCR profiling exercise, 84 percent of families said they did not intend to return to Afghanistan, citing insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities and lack of housing and/or land. Moreover, close to 60 percent live in Pakistani cities such as Peshawar, while the rest are in camps.

In 2007, UNHCR registered all remaining Afghan refugees and provided them with a Proof of Registration card. This card, which expires in December 2009, grants them temporary protection by allowing them to reside in Pakistan. Pakistan's official position is that all Afghans should return home when their cards expire.

The uncertainty as to their status after 2009 creates severe anxiety amongst the refugee population and has pushed many to return "before being forced to." When Refugees International asked a recent returnee whether she would have rather stayed in Pakistan, she answered, "Of course. But who knows when they would have come and bulldozed our house? My children were scared. It was better we left." To prevent further involuntary returns, the Government of Pakistan should extend the Proof of Registration cards beyond 2009, and international donors should make sure to prioritize the welfare of this population in their discussions with Pakistan.

In 2006, within the framework of a Tripartite Agreement between UNHCR and the Pakistani and Afghan governments, four camps were identified for closure. So far two have been forcibly closed, with homes bulldozed to the ground. The camp closures went against the core principle of voluntary returns and uprooted vulnerable families who were forced to relocate inside Pakistan or return to Afghanistan. Moreover, while security threats were a reason frequently given for camp closures, the process was largely counter-productive in this regard as the Pakistani government

no longer had any means of tracking individuals. The U.S., other donor countries and UNHCR must stand firm in the future and uphold principles of international refugee law both for humanitarian and security reasons.

The discrepancy between direct assistance money to refugees and military/development projects in Pakistan is astounding. While budgets for refugee projects have declined to a few dollars per head, in 2007 the U.S. Congress passed a \$750 million bill for a 5-year USAID development program. It is too soon to assess the success of such an ambitious program, but most of the targeted region is too insecure for development agencies to work in. Moreover, the program is perceived as a U.S. counter-insurgency exercise, making it difficult to gain local support.

Recognizing the need to move towards durable solutions for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, UNHCR and UNDP have put together the Refugee Affected and Hosting Area project (RAHA). The aim is to fund key sectors and services that would benefit both Pakistanis and Afghans. Despite its relatively low budget and potentially high impact, that appeal has fallen on deaf ears. It is necessary that such projects are fully funded and that U.S. assistance be directed towards areas hosting refugees.

### **III. Returnees in Afghanistan: Targeted Programs Needed**

Sustainable returns are key to ensuring stability and developmental successes in Afghanistan. Donors can no longer afford to ignore more than fifteen percent of the population and need to include returnees in existing large-scale development programs. They should focus on high return areas such as districts of the eastern and central regions. Programs targeted specifically at returnees are needed to ensure that this particularly vulnerable segment of the population benefits directly from the money poured into the country.

Returnees to Afghanistan face an uphill battle in rebuilding their lives. They need to integrate back into communities they had left decades ago, or adjust to a new country for those born abroad. UNHCR provides basic cash assistance upon arrival, and the government encourages resettlement in the provinces of origin. However, the repatriation process never took into account the urbanization of this population. Many refugees were living in cities in Pakistan and Iran, and developed skills that can only be applied in an urban environment. The urbanization is further accentuated by landless returnees swelling the ranks of the urban poor in Kabul and provincial capitals.

Assistance directed towards sustainable returns is low, such as ensuring access to livelihoods, housing, health care, and education. UNHCR and international NGOs have been effective, particularly in the east, at constructing homes and implementing income-generation programs. Such assistance is small, however, and there is a clear gap between humanitarian assistance and large-scale infrastructure development. Early recovery actors, such as the UN Development Program (UNDP), are absent. The successful community-level programs, such as the National Solidarity Program (NSP), have included returnees among their beneficiaries and need to be complemented by programs more specifically targeted at returnees.

The U.S. and other international donors have neglected the fate of returnees. On the U.S. side, while USAID and American Provincial Reconstruction Teams have an annual budget of more than a billion dollars for infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, and the military spends nearly \$100 million a day, the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM) is addressing the needs of Afghan refugees and returnees with \$50 million a year. The U.S. government is also making clear that these populations are not a priority by cutting BPRM staff in Pakistan and combining the two portfolios within the officer's position in Kabul.

### **IV. Land Allocation Schemes: Mitigating Damages and Improving the Process**

Most of Afghanistan's population lives off of agriculture or livestock. Yet, only 12 percent of the country's land is arable, most of which is owned by the State. This lack of land, coupled with a demographic explosion amongst both the host and returnee populations, means that land disputes and landlessness are the main obstacles to sustainable return. Documentation of land ownership, especially in rural areas, is extremely limited.

In 2005, President Karzai issued decree 104, which instituted land allocation schemes for returnees. According to the decree, landless returnees can apply for a plot of land in their province of origin. The project initially envisioned that 55 sites would be identified and laid out to accommodate hundreds of thousands of potential beneficiaries, but it has proved challenging to implement.

The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) was designated to lead the project, but it lacks the expertise and the resources to implement it properly. Most land allocated is of little value and agrarian potential, often in the middle

of the desert. Due to a lack of planning and coordination amongst the various ministries involved, construction of shelters began before the establishment of essential services such as water, access to markets or livelihood opportunities. Allegations of corruption in the beneficiary selection process also plague the initiative, as plots have been allocated to friends or relatives of government officials. To make matters worse, the Karzai decree lacks clarity and is interpreted differently in all provinces. For example, there is no poverty criterion for participation. This leads to absurd situations, with two-story villas built amongst UNHCR-standard shelters.

Refugees International visited three land allocation scheme sites in the provinces of Kabul, Nangarhar and Herat. All three townships were built in the desert, miles away from the closest town, in spite of UNHCR objections. In Kabul province, many of the beneficiaries were forcibly displaced from government buildings they were occupying in the city, and transferred to the Barikab land allocation scheme before schools, clinics or income-generating activities were in place. As a result, more than 150 families – about a third of the population who initially moved there – left and returned to Kabul, leaving their shelters unoccupied.

In Herat, of the 430 shelters allocated and the 200-plus that were built in the Taghi Naghi land allocation scheme, only a handful are occupied by ten families. They are abandoned there, with no water, food or job prospects. One man told Refugees International the only reason he was not moving his family back to Herat was that they could not afford paying rent in the city. However, he added, they would be forced to leave anyway should services not improve, as he had increasing difficulties feeding his children. The Sheikh Masri new township in Nangarhar is the most successful of the three, as UNHCR coordinated efforts to put services, such as transportation and micro-finance activities, in place. Still, residents complained that when they first moved in, there was no water or services available.

UNHCR got involved in the land allocation schemes belatedly, and is now trying to ensure that the eleven planned schemes are sustainable. The creation of a Program Implementation Unit within the MoRR is an important step in increasing the capacity of the government to deal with the issue, but this unit needs more resources with international experts provided as necessary. Moreover, MoRR should only play a coordinating role, while important, better-funded ministries like the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) get more involved in the implementation of the projects.

The construction of shelters and the movement of population into the new townships should not precede the setting up of basic services. In particular, much more attention needs to be paid to the availability of water, as well as access to income-generating activities and economic centers. The U.S. and international donors must support UNHCR's efforts to improve existing land allocation schemes and refrain from funding new ones. Similarly, non-governmental organizations must refuse to implement shelter or other activities until they are sure that people will not be left to fend for themselves once the construction is completed. Ultimately, the land allocations schemes may provide solutions to a small proportion of returnees, but they will not constitute a large-scale reintegration program for all.

## V. Greater Humanitarian Coordination and Advocacy

The inadequate response to the humanitarian needs of returnees and other vulnerable Afghans is partly a consequence of the UN structure in Afghanistan. The UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan's (UNAMA) primary mandate is to provide support to the Afghan government, which is at war with various anti-governmental elements controlling parts of the country. In this context it is extremely difficult for UN humanitarian agencies to fulfill their mandates. Their lack of access to large portions of the country, combined with their inability to initiate contact with anti-government groups, severely impedes their operations. Conflict-induced internal displacement is underreported, with the UN unable to quantify and assess the needs of the displaced in insecure areas. The Afghan Government, donors, NGOs and UN agencies all have different data, ranging from 30,000 to over 300,000 persons newly displaced by the conflict.

Distribution of aid by the military should only occur as a last resort, when access is impossible for all humanitarian actors, but this principle is not upheld in Afghanistan. Since 2002, budgets devoted to humanitarian response have continued to decrease. Assistance is increasingly channeled through NATO members' Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), whose objectives are political and military in nature. NATO member countries direct their aid budgets to the areas in which their troops are deployed, regardless of needs. This undermines independent humanitarian action and politicizes the assistance.

Pressed to take on a more substantial coordinating role, UNAMA has expanded its humanitarian affairs unit, established a Humanitarian Country Team, and adopted

the cluster approach. Although it is still too early to assess the impact of these initiatives, they have been largely welcomed by the humanitarian community. But more is needed, both in terms of coordination and humanitarian advocacy.

UNAMA's humanitarian affairs unit remains intrinsically linked to the organization's political mandate. Reports on humanitarian conditions are censored when the Government of Afghanistan's and the Coalition's political and military goals might be undermined by the information divulged. Moreover, there are nine officers for the entire country, and they don't all belong to the same organization, as some have been seconded by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and others by UNDP. This creates additional bureaucracy and divides loyalties, making for what a member of the unit has called "a very unhealthy work environment."

Given that the UN effort in Afghanistan is an integrated mission, there are two ways to improve humanitarian coordination and advocacy, and prioritize humanitarian needs. The first is to strengthen UNAMA's humanitarian affairs unit by significantly increasing staff, both in Kabul and in the regions. These staff must have significant humanitarian and coordination experience and be able to draw on OCHA's tools and institutional memory. It is also important that the head of the unit has a line of reporting to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the UN's most senior humanitarian official, in order to communicate directly any pressing concern regarding the protection of civilians.

The second option is to open an independent OCHA office. Although financially and bureaucratically more cumbersome, the establishment of an OCHA office would send a clear message to the UN, the Afghan government, NATO member countries and the rest of the international community that humanitarian monitoring and analysis is important, making it much harder for them to neglect or underplay humanitarian needs. An OCHA office would also reassure NGOs and others that the UN intends to make humanitarian coordination and advocacy a priority in Afghanistan.

## VI. Improving Services for Deportees

In 2007, more than 300,000 individuals were deported from Iran back to Afghanistan. Deportations continue, although the rate has slowed in 2008, with 16,000 to 18,000 deportees in the past three months. Most deportees are economic migrants, single men who went to Iran looking for job opportunities. Others are entire families, without

any form of documentation, picked up in the street by Iranian authorities. A small percentage of deportees are registered refugees in Iran and holders of the Amayesh II card, the refugee card that entitles them to temporary residence status in Iran.

There are currently 920,000 registered Amayesh II card holders in Iran. Humanitarian agencies are concerned that they could be increasingly subjected to deportation, as Iran has started a re-registration process and the issuance of Amayesh III cards. Those who fail to participate in the exercise will presumably fall out of status and be considered undocumented migrants. Moreover, the Iranian government's decision to declare 19 "no-go areas" for foreigners in the country has further complicated the situation of Afghans in Iran. Many were deported from these areas, some with Amayesh II cards that were taken from them by the Iranian police. Conditions of deportation can be very brutal. Due process is systematically denied.

Most deportees fall outside UNHCR's mandate. The refugee agency only provides assistance to registered refugees, as well as deportee families and extremely vulnerable individuals. These groups are identified at the Iran-Afghanistan border by the MoRR's departments and referred to UNHCR's implementing partners for assistance. They are then taken to a transit center, where temporary accommodation and food are provided.

Since most deportees are single men, they do not receive any assistance. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), whose mandate is to assist migrants, only pays for the transport of families from the border to the transit center. The single men are left to fend for themselves and often depend on begging or on the generosity of passer-bys to get from the border points to the city. It is essential that IOM increase its presence and activities with all deportees, including single men. Many of them are vulnerable, and lack the means to return to their place of origin on their own. At the very least, transportation costs should be provided, as well as food and other essentials for the journey.

Other agencies focus on children migrants, as a proportion of the male workers are minors. Despite deportations taking place for years, UNICEF has only recently, through the Child Protection Action Network (CPAN), established a referral mechanism. UNICEF is also looking at supporting psycho-social activities by community members to vulnerable deportees, a welcome initiative for this traumatized population.

## VII. Conclusion

Despite the investment of billions of dollars in the reconstruction of Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, the situation for Afghan refugees and returnees remains far too precarious. Unlike many countries, lack of resources is not the fundamental problem. But donors and the Afghan government are devoting too many of these resources to large-scale infrastructure projects and counter-insurgency programs under the guise of development activities. What is essential is a re-thinking of the overall strategy for assistance to the country and its people, one that places vulnerability due to past and present displacement at the forefront. The focus should be on the activation of sustainable community development initiatives in areas with high numbers of returnees in Afghanistan and of remaining refugees in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, both the government and international agencies and donors need to face the fact that the population of Afghan refugees is stable and long-term legal residence is the only durable solution for the majority of families. The international community should facilitate a voluntary return process, while at the same time assisting those families that choose to remain in host countries. Forcible camp closures, deadlines and deportations are a disservice to the population and to regional stability as well. It is essential that donors recognize the importance of a dignified and secure reintegration process.

The Government of Afghanistan recognizes the challenge of integrating returning refugees. In November 2008, UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be hosting a conference in Kabul on returns and reintegration. The intention is to engage regional governments, donors and international institutions like the World Bank on refugee and returns issues. Its aim is to direct national initiatives on health, education, water, and income generation towards high return areas. This conference will seek to reach

consensus on repatriation planning figures and builds on the recently launched Afghan National Development Strategy, which states the need to “transition out of a purely refugee and humanitarian framework ... to a more comprehensive set of policy arrangements that will advance durable solutions” for returnees and internally displaced people. For the time being, however, the document lacks any substance on how to achieve this.

While the Afghan government should remain in the lead, it is clear that it lacks the capacity to coordinate strategy on a national level and implement at a provincial level. In this context, a more engaged UN with a renewed focus on humanitarian issues should not be viewed as a sign of failure, but rather as a lucid assessment of the challenges Afghanistan faces today.

*Kristèle Younès and Patrick Duplat assessed the situation for Afghan refugees and returnees in Pakistan and Afghanistan in June.*

## About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises. Based on our on-the-ground knowledge of key humanitarian emergencies, Refugees International successfully pressures governments, international agencies and nongovernmental organizations to improve conditions for displaced people.

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