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Pakistan mounting campaign of state harassment and intimidation to expel 1.7 million Afghan refugees

Tens of thousands of impoverished Afghan refugees—many of whom have lived in Pakistan for years, even decades—have fled to the country of their birth in recent weeks in order to escape detention and deportation.

With the full backing of Pakistan’s military, the country’s interim government has vowed to expel all 1.7 million “illegal” Afghan migrants starting November 1.

Even before the passing of the official deadline to “voluntarily” leave Pakistan, Afghans who sought refuge in Pakistan from the social catastrophe caused by decades of imperialist-fomented war and neocolonial occupation have been the target of a vicious campaign of state harassment and intimidation.



Afghan refugees aboard a truck heading to the Torkham, Pakistan, border to return home hours before the expiration of an Oct. 31, Pakistani government deadline for those who are in the country "illegally" to leave or face deportation. [AP Photo/Muhammad Sajjad]

In a statement issued Tuesday, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said the government was using "threats, abuse, and detention to coerce Afghan asylum seekers without legal status to return to Afghanistan or face deportation." HRW researcher Fereshta Abbasi told Al-Jazeera, "Pakistan's announced deadline for Afghans to return has led to detentions, beatings, and extortion, leaving thousands of Afghans in fear over their future."

Fearing hefty government fines, landlords have evicted Afghans from their homes, and employers have dismissed them en masse. In Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, police have carried out mass arrests of Afghan refugees.

Pakistani authorities have rejected appeals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, international refugee aid organizations and Pakistan-based human rights groups for the mass deportation campaign to be dropped or at least delayed.

"After November 1, no compromise will be made over illegally staying immigrants," Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti told a news conference last week. To underscore this, he menacingly added, "Those leaving the country voluntarily would have lesser difficulties than those nabbed by the state."

The government has set up deportation centres—in reality, mass internment camps—in all four provinces to "process" and detain "illegal" refugees prior to their expulsion.

With Pakistan facing a devastating economic crisis and its political establishment and state institutions, including the military, largely discredited in the eyes of the masses, Pakistan's authorities see a vendetta against Afghan refugees as a means of diverting popular anger, while building up the apparatus of state repression.

Pakistan's anti-immigrant witch-hunt is being mounted by a so-called caretaker government that assumed office in August and, according to the constitution, was supposed to hold power for only 90 days during which national and provincial assembly elections were to be held. However, at the behest of the military and with the support of much of the political establishment, the elections have been delayed until at least the end of January. In the interim, the caretaker government has been tasked with pushing through a raft of highly unpopular austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. In victimizing refugees, Pakistan's ruling elite is lifting a page from the playbook of the imperialist powers, who have responded to the global surge in refugees caused by their

predatory wars and capitalist-driven economic collapse and environmental devastation with Fortress North America and Fortress Europe anti-immigrant policies.

This has not stopped Washington and the European Union powers from issuing hypocritical calls for Pakistan to provide sanctuary to those fleeing the repression of Afghanistan's Taliban regime. "We strongly encourage Afghanistan's neighbors, including Pakistan, to allow entry for Afghans seeking international protection," the US State Department declared in an October 19 statement.

US imperialism and the ravaging of Afghanistan

US imperialism bears primary responsibility for the horrendous social and economic conditions that have driven millions of Afghans from their homes over the past four decades. In the late 1970s, Washington began its patronage of Islamist militants to first provoke a Soviet invasion and then weaken the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. These forces included Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaida. With Pakistan, then a longtime close US ally serving as the conduit for CIA weaponry into Afghanistan during the 1980s, Washington gave its full support to the brutal anti-working dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq and his reactionary project to "Islamize" Pakistan.

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, a bloody civil war ensued and the Islamist Taliban ultimately seized power. After September 11, the Bush administration exploited Bin Laden's presence in Afghanistan to legitimize the brutal invasion and neocolonial occupation of the geostrategically significant country—an occupation which lasted over two decades and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Since the US-led war was launched, 5.9 million Afghans have fled the country or been internally displaced, according to the Cost of War project by Brown University's Watson Institute.

After the ignominious departure of US and coalition troops in 2021 in the face of Taliban resistance and popular opposition to the corrupt neo-colonial regime in Kabul, Washington took revenge on the Afghan people by plunging the country into an economic catastrophe. In addition to sanctions against the Taliban-led regime, the US government illegally seized \$7 billion in Afghan Central Bank assets held by the New York Federal Reserve.

More than 60 percent of the Afghan population presently live on less than \$1 per day, while a staggering 97 percent have fallen below the poverty line. Wide swaths of the population have been mentally traumatized and thousands physically maimed by the reign of terror experienced by impoverished Afghans at the hands of their US-NATO occupiers. A February 2023 World Food Program report found 4 million people are acutely malnourished, including 3.2 million children under the age of five. Nearly 20 million

people, or half of the population, were projected to be acutely food-insecure by March 2023, with 6 million of them in the emergency stage.

Pakistan's impoverished Afghan refugee population

The wars and upheavals of the last four decades have resulted in repeated waves of Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan. According to the UN, more than half a million Afghans crossed over into Pakistan after the Taliban came to power in Kabul in August 2021.

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The refugee flows have served to further cement ties between the Pashtun-speaking regions of the two countries. Historically, the Afghan-Pakistan border has meant little to the Pashtun tribes who live on both sides. It was established in 1893 as the result of the machinations of British India's colonial rulers, and Afghan governments have long argued the so-called Durand line was meant only to indicate spheres of influence, not state boundaries. This has long been a serious bone of contention between Islamabad and Kabul, resulting in armed clashes both under the US-backed regime and the current Taliban-led one.

According to UN High Commissioner of Refugees, about half of the Afghan refugees live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province. In 2018, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a semi-autonomous region predominantly populated by Pushtun tribes, were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These tribes have fiercely resisted the dividing of their communities across the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Another 24 percent of refugees are living in by far Pakistan's poorest province, Balochistan. Sharing the poverty of the vast majority of the Pakistani population, many of them are forced to live in mud huts or other makeshift shelters not suitable for living, with little or no educational or health facilities.

The Pakistan government's announcement of forced deportations created panic and shock waves across the entire Afghan refugee community, including undocumented migrants and those living in Pakistan with documentation. The government has assured the 2.7 million Afghans who do have papers that they will be unaffected by its crackdown on "illegals." However, even those whom the government concedes have legal status are highly

apprehensive. This is principally because of the breadth and indiscriminate character of the chauvinist politics animating the state's anti-Afghan campaign. A further concern is that roughly 1.4 million refugees have Proof of Registration (PoR) cards that expired on June 30 and which they have been unable to renew due to the incompetence and stalling of the authorities.

The Pakistan government has sought to justify its anti-immigrant crackdown as necessary to suppress and contain an intensifying wave of attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Government officials have accused the Pakistan-based Islamic fundamentalist militia of receiving support among the refugees without providing a shred of evidence.

Since the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, terrorist attacks by the TTP, an entirely separate organization from the Taliban despite their ideological connections, have intensified in Pakistan. Islamabad has accused the Taliban of allowing the TTP to operate from Afghanistan and has demanded its suppression.

Government ministers have incited anti-Afghan sentiments by blaming Afghans for recent terrorist attacks. On October 17, Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti claimed "14 out of 24" suicide bombings this year were carried out by Afghan nationals. The Home Minister in Balochistan's provincial government, Zubair Jamali, said, "They are involved in destabilising the country, and it won't be tolerated."

The TTP is the byproduct of the Pakistan military's offensive against the anti-US occupation forces in the FATA during the US occupation of Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the region has been a base of operations for the CIA-funded Islamist militia, including Al Qaeda, fighting the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack, the Bush administration forced the US-backed Pakistan dictator General Pervez Musharraf to end his support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and send security forces into the FATA to establish control of the border. Musharraf used the bloody methods typical of the Pakistani ruling class. On his orders, the military launched indiscriminate air strikes and helicopter gunship attacks, devastating villages and farmlands, imposed collective punishments, and made widespread use of torture and disappearance.

This provoked increasing hostility and armed opposition. More than 2 million people have fled the FATA in a massive internal displacement of the Pashtuns across the country, producing a massive, ongoing humanitarian crisis.

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