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Afghan asylum bids at 10-year high, human smuggling rife as troops begin to leave

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More Afghans fled the country and sought asylum abroad in 2011 than in any other year since the start of the decade-long war, suggesting that many are looking for their own exit strategy as international troops prepare to withdraw.

From January to November, more than 30,000 Afghans applied for political asylum worldwide, a 25 percent increase over the same period the previous year and more than triple the level of just four years ago, according to U.N. statistics obtained by The Associated Press ahead of their scheduled publication later this year.

Many Afghans are turning to a thriving and increasingly sophisticated human smuggling industry to get themselves — or in most cases, their sons — out of the country. They pay anywhere from a few hundred dollars to cross into Iran or Pakistan to more \$25,000 for fake papers and flights to places like London or Stockholm.

Thousands of refugees also return each year, but their numbers have been dwindling as the asylum applications rise. Both trends highlight worries among Afghans about what may happen after 2014, when American and other NATO troops turn security over to the Afghan army and police.

The true numbers of people leaving is likely even higher — since those who are successfully smuggled abroad often melt into an underground economy. Still, the jump in a rough indicator like asylum seekers suggests the total numbers are also on the rise.

Smuggling people out of Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan is a \$1 billion-per-year criminal enterprise, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime estimates. Those who pay to leave often face a risky journey and detention abroad because many developed countries now see many Afghans who flee as illegal economic migrants, not political refugees.

Still, the business finds an eager clientele in Afghans such as Ahmad, an unemployed 20-year-old in Kabul. He has agreed to pay a smuggler \$400 to take him over the Iranian border, where he hopes to find work and save up to move on to Europe in a few years. He has no money, but his smuggler is giving him credit — he'll have a month to pay up once he's in Iran.

“I don’t think anything will improve in three or five years, so it’s better to leave now,” said Ahmad, who expects to leave for Iran within a few weeks. He asked to be identified only by his first name for fear of being arrested.

Ahmad’s family fled to Iran during the Taliban’s late 1990s rule and returned full of hope after the regime fell. But now, he sees no future in his homeland.

“If foreign troops leave, the situation will only get worse, not better,” he said.

That’s a view shared by many. Tajma Kurt, who manages an International Organization for Migration program helping Afghans who have returned home, says she’s noticed a marked change in ordinary Afghans’ outlook since roughly 2007, when the Taliban insurgency began to gain strength and violent attacks increased.

“Before, they were looking for a job, discussing buying a house or whatever,” Kurt said. “Now, they are all thinking of leaving because the situation has deteriorated dramatically and they don’t see that it’s going to get much better.”

Devastated by decades of war, Afghanistan is already the world’s biggest source of refugees, with more than 3 million of its total population of 30 million still outside the country, most in Iran and Pakistan, according to the office of the U.N. High Commissioner of Refugees and the Afghan government.

After the 2001 U.S.-led military intervention that toppled the Taliban, some 5.7 million Afghan refugees returned. The vast majority of those came back in the first five years. The numbers have since dwindled, with about 60,000 refugees returning last year, about half the number as the previous year.

As the pace of returns slowed, the number of Afghans seeking asylum abroad rebounded. In 2011, 30,407 sought asylum through November, the latest available figures.

Driving both trends is not only economic ambition but deep uncertainties about the country’s future, says Abdul Samad Hami, deputy minister of Afghanistan’s Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation.

“Who knows what happens when foreign troops leave Afghanistan? Is it going to get better or worse? Who knows what happens with the foreign aid to Afghanistan — going down or increasing?” he said.

Some Afghans fear that once most foreign troops leave, the Taliban will take over more territory and civil war could erupt along ethnic lines, as it did in the 1990s. Others worry the Afghan economy will collapse if foreign aid dries up.

The real number of Afghans leaving is unknown, but undoubtedly higher than the asylum figures. The country’s foreign ministry recently said 50,000 Afghans illegally entered Greece in

the past two years alone, many of them now stranded without passports or money to move farther into Europe. Most of those arranged their journey with smugglers.

For their money, many endure a perilous journey.

Esmat Adine nearly drowned after the overcrowded boat he was on sank off Indonesia late last year, killing at least 200 fellow asylum-seekers headed for Australia. He says he left his wife and infant son at home in Afghanistan and paid \$5,000 to travel to Australia after the Taliban threatened to kill him for working with American aid workers. He flew from Kabul to Dubai, then boarded a plane to Jakarta, Indonesia. From there, he was taken to eastern Java and was packed onto the doomed boat.

When the vessel capsized, Adine managed to survive by swimming to a nearby island.

“I swam and swam until I reached the shore,” Adine, 24, told The Associated Press in an Indonesian detention center, where he is awaiting a ruling on his legal status. “I thought of how my wife and children are counting on me, of how I must earn a good life in Australia, free from intimidation.”

He says he still hopes to be able to enter Australia and send for his family.

Australia has vowed to crack down on asylum-seekers but has been forced to relax a policy of mandatory detention because its detention camps are dangerously overcrowded.

Hami, the Afghan refugee official, says the country has come a long way and if the transition goes smoothly, fewer people will want to leave. But he conceded that depends on whether the government can provide security and jobs.

“If the situation gets worse, people will go out. If the situation gets better, people will return.”