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## After 30 years, Pakistan rolls up welcome mat for Afghan refugees

By Saeed Shah

July 23, 2012

Pakistan plans to cancel refugee status at the end of this year for the 3 million Afghans who are living in the country, officials have told McClatchy, leaving the refugees facing possible forced resettlement in their homeland, a war-torn country that many of them barely know.

Pushing the refugees into Afghanistan probably would create a new crisis for that country, which already is struggling with an insurgency, an economy almost entirely dependent on the U.S.-led foreign presence and the illicit drug trade, and the impending withdrawal of foreign combat troops by 2014.

Officials in Pakistan, which has hosted Afghan refugees for more than 30 years – one of the longest-running refugee problems in the world – say that “enough is enough” and are resisting entreaties by the United Nations and others to reconsider the decision. It comes as Islamabad’s relations with Western countries, particularly the United States, have soured over its policies in neighboring Afghanistan and the unannounced U.S. raid on Pakistani soil that killed Osama bin Laden last year.

Pakistan’s top administrator in charge of the Afghan refugee issue, Habibullah Khan, the secretary of the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions, said Islamabad wouldn’t change its decision.

“The international community desires us to review this policy, but we are clear on this point. The refugees have become a threat to law and order, security, demography, economy and local culture,” Khan said in an interview. “Enough is enough.”

One such refugee is Rangeen, 28, who goes by only one name, as is common in Afghanistan. He’s lived in Pakistan since he was 12 and is a registered refugee. Three times he’s tried to move back to his native Kabul, the Afghan capital, but he’s found it too costly to live there.

“I couldn’t find work in Kabul, and it is very expensive there, so each time I was forced to come back” to Pakistan, Rangeen said. “I’m just a laborer. It is not possible to survive in Kabul on what you make as a laborer there.”

Rangeen earns around 200 rupees a day, about \$2, by working as a porter at a wholesale vegetable market just outside Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, pushing cartloads of produce around for buyers. His determination not to go to Afghanistan is all the more striking given the difficulties of life in his adopted home. None of his four children go to school, nor do any of the other children in Sorang Abadi, the makeshift village where he lives, a 15-minute drive south of the capital.

Looking at his 7-year-old son, Noor Agha, Rangeen said: “He will suffer the same fate as me. All he’ll be able to do is push a cart.”

Villagers in Sorang Abadi pay about \$15 a month in rent for just enough land to construct one ramshackle room, from baked mud, and keep a small yard. There’s no electricity or running water; they fetch water from a timber yard about 15 minutes’ walk away. They haven’t been able to find space at a semiofficial refugee camp that’s about four miles away.

Mukhtiar, a 40-year-old from Baghlan province in the north of Afghanistan, which is considered relatively safe, said he’d been in Pakistan for 30 years.

“We won’t go to Afghanistan. There is nothing but war,” he said. “After the Russians got out, the Americans came. Whatever we had back there has been taken over by others. There is no work, no property, nothing there except feuds.

“It would be like throwing us into the sea.”

Afghan refugees started arriving in Pakistan in the 1980s, fleeing the Soviet invasion, and have continued to come here to escape the horrors of a civil war, Taliban rule and, most recently, the conflict triggered by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. Whole generations have grown up in Pakistan and don’t know their homeland. There are 1.7 million Afghan refugees registered in Pakistan – more than half of them younger than 18 – of which 630,000 live in camps. A further 1 million are estimated to be living in the country unregistered and therefore illegally.

The international community and the Afghan government in Kabul have no strategy prepared to deal with any such influx of people. The anxiety over taking back the refugees seems to belie the claims of progress in Afghanistan that the U.S.-led international coalition makes regularly.

“If the international community is so concerned, they should open the doors of their countries to these refugees,” Khan said. “Afghans will be more than happy to be absorbed by the developed countries, like Western Europe, the U.S., Canada, Australia.”

Khan said that after Dec. 31, the Pakistani government didn’t plan to renew Afghan refugees’ registration cards, so those currently registered will lose their refugee status. He declined to spell out what would happen to the refugees after that, but if the policy sticks they’d be in the country illegally and liable to be deported.

Some Afghans have prospered in Pakistan – as seen by their near takeover of Hayatabad, an upscale suburb lined with villas outside Peshawar, a northwestern city close to the Afghan border – but the majority of them struggle.

And as their numbers have grown, Pakistani officials suspect that the leadership of the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups is hiding among the refugees. The western Pakistani city of Quetta is home to the Quetta Shura, the Taliban’s leadership council, and it contains a sprawling Afghan refugee settlement that provides easy cover for militants.

A U.N. voluntary repatriation program is making slow progress. So far this year it’s been able to entice only 41,000 people to return to Afghanistan, a slight increase over the 35,000 who returned in the first half of last year. Since 2002, the U.N. has repatriated 3.7 million Afghans to the country, but the rate stalled in recent years as the war intensified. It’s also likely that many of the returnees have slipped back into Pakistan, given that there are almost as many Afghan refugees in Pakistan today as there were in 2002.

Earlier this year, Valerie Amos, the U.N. humanitarian affairs chief, visited a camp in Kabul and said its conditions for returning refugees appalled her. Once they reach Afghanistan, returnees are entitled to a one-time payment of \$150 per person from the U.N.

Neill Wright, the Pakistan representative of the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, said the U.N. would still recognize the registered Afghans in Pakistan as refugees after this year under international law “until a durable solution can be found.”

“We hope that the government of Pakistan will continue to recognize them as refugees,” Wright said. “Returning them to Afghanistan could destabilize the country further at a time when it is already experiencing instability from the drawdown of international forces.”