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## Thousands of Afghan refugees in limbo in Pakistan

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Abdul Karim walked for nearly 12 hours to cross the border into Pakistan and escape the warlords who were raining rockets on his neighborhood in the Afghan capital Kabul. That was nearly two decades ago, when he was a young teenager. Since then, he's gotten married and raised six children, all born in Pakistan.

He is one of 1.7 million Afghan refugees who have been living in limbo in Pakistan for years as part of one of the world's largest and longest-running refugee crisis. But after 30 years of hosting Afghans, many Pakistanis are growing frustrated with the toll they say the refugee population is taking on their country, and pressure is mounting on the government to do something.

The Pakistani government is now weighing whether to remove their refugee status, a step that would increase the pressure on them to go home.

Most of the refugees can't fathom returning to Afghanistan any time soon. They may feel like outsiders in Pakistan, but they say their homeland is still too violent and desperately poor.

"Unless the Pakistani government forced us back to Kabul, I am in no mood to go there," said Karim. "There is no safety... We have nothing left there."

The Afghan population in Pakistan is the legacy of Afghanistan's repeated conflicts. Millions streamed across the border after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the start of a decade-long war against the occupation. After the Soviets pulled out, the country was torn apart by fighting between warlords, and more Afghans fled. When the Taliban rose to power in 1996 their strict form of Sunni Islam further terrorized the population.

The 1.7 million Afghans registered as refugees include those who remain from those exoduses and their children born since. More than a third of them live in camps, while the rest are scattered across Pakistan. Alongside them, another roughly 1 million Afghans are believed to be living in the country illegally.

A combination of reasons keeps them from returning. There are the big concerns: Afghanistan's woeful economy, fears that its turmoil will only worsen when international forces leave at the end of 2014. And there are the equally weighty personal worries: Many parents worry their kids won't get a decent education in Afghanistan or, if they're girls, maybe no education at all.

Others like Kowki Nazari have no prospect of finding a job in Afghanistan. She fled to Pakistan after her husband was imprisoned and tortured by the Taliban. She crossed the border by donkey in the dead of night and made her way to Rawalpindi, next to Islamabad, where she now works as a house cleaner. Like many people in this neighborhood she is an ethnic Hazara, a minority group in Afghanistan. Most Hazaras are Shiite and as such have often been persecuted by Sunni extremists like the Taliban who don't consider them true Muslims.

If she returned to Afghanistan, she says her family would be destitute.

"I can't work there because it's not like Pakistan where the women are free to work," she said.

As the refugee crisis has dragged on, there is a sense in Pakistan that the Afghans have become a burden the country should no longer be required to carry. Generosity is turning to frustration and accusations that Afghans are responsible for crime and are undermining Pakistan's security. Whether that suspicion is driven by fact or xenophobia, the atmosphere has become more hostile.

Earlier this summer, officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province threatened to evict thousands of undocumented Afghans. The deadline passed without an increase in deportations but worried aid groups and Afghans.

In an interview with The Associated Press, the secretary in charge of the States and Frontier Regions Ministry, which has primary responsibility for refugee issues, said the Pakistani government would not renew the refugee status cards for registered Afghans when they expire Dec. 31.

Habibullah Khan said Pakistan would not forcibly evict anyone, but said once the cards are revoked it would encourage people to return.

The ultimate decision on whether to renew them will be made by the Cabinet.

The ID card, issued by the government, provides registered Afghan refugees with certain protections. The cards are used for everyday activities like banking or registering for school. Revoking them would potentially make Afghans much more susceptible to harassment by police.

When asked whether it was safe for the Afghans to go home, Khan said the situation in Pakistan was not ideal either.

"Are these conditions exceptional to Afghanistan? If somebody asks me 'Oh, there are bomb threats in Kabul?' Then I would say 'Then what about Peshawar? What about Karachi? What about Baluchistan?'" said Khan.

Khan also said every year tens of thousands of children are born to Afghan families in Pakistan, which often outweighs the number of people leaving. Another concern for the Pakistani government is that the number of Afghans returning home is slowing, said the head of the United Nations' refugee agency in Pakistan, Neill Wright. Last year 52,096 Afghans were repatriated under a U.N.-run program, according to U.N. figures. That was the second lowest number since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. So far this year about 42,000 Afghans have returned.

The government has grumbled in the past about renewing the cards. The new warnings could be an attempt to play to public opinion or to pressure the international community for more help.

But if it carries out the threat, Afghans could face more difficulty getting services and greater day-to-day troubles. Afghans complain that police stop them for their papers and if they don't have them, demand bribes not to detain them.

"Now we have only four months before the expiration of the cards, and after that the police and official authorities will try to harass us," said Ehsanullah Elaj, who came to Pakistan 16 years ago just as the Taliban was taking over his homeland. He was injured on three separate occasions during bombings in his home province of Kunduz.

If the cards are not renewed, the Afghans would still be considered refugees by the U.N., Wright said. The agency could issue its own identity documentation but it's unclear how much weight those would carry in Pakistan.

At a windswept encampment on Islamabad's outskirts, a group of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan has built huts out of mud and straw. There is no school for their kids, and the local food stall sells only a few goods, such as packets of tea and mosquito repellent.

Still, many said they want to stay.

"If they are serious about pushing us back to Afghanistan, then we will have to go," Mohammed, who goes by one name like many Afghans, said. His only request to the Pakistan government? "Leave us here."