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Afghans Find Their Welcome Running Out in Pakistan

By Ashfaq Yusufzai

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan – The number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan who will return to their homeland this year is expected to be double the 2009 figure, but it's not only a longing for their native soil that is fueling the Afghans' departure.

Many of the refugees say Pakistanis – officials and local folk alike – have made it clear that they are unwelcome, and have increasingly made life here difficult for them.

“Everything is being done by the government to harass the Afghan refugees,” says Dost Mohammad, an acknowledged leader of Afghans who used to live at the Shamshalo refugee camp here in Peshawar, near the Pakistani border with Afghanistan. “We are poor people, and the international community should not leave us in a lurch.”

Forty-four-year-old Jamila Bibi even says that she fears her children would starve to death and that she would soon be reduced to begging for a living. “I had been working as a home servant,” says Bibi. “But now the local communities are reluctant to offer jobs to Afghan women.”

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had triggered a massive migration of Afghans to Pakistan, which found itself a reluctant host to more than 5 million Afghans at one point. Up until three years ago, there were 24 camps providing shelter to the refugees, but

these were shut down by the Pakistani government after the withdrawal of support from the international community.

United Nations data reveal that since 2002, more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan have returned home. This year, 130,000 more are expected to head for Afghanistan under the United Nations-facilitated voluntary repatriation program, or twice the number last year.

It is no secret that Pakistan, which is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, is not keen on playing host to the refugees for too long. The country, however, has a tripartite agreement with Afghanistan and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to let registered Afghan refugees to stay in the country until December 2012.

Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NDRA), with financial and technical assistance from UNHCR, was able to register some two million Afghan refugees in 2007.

According to the United Nations, Pakistan still has about 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees. Most of them live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which used to be called the North West Frontier Province, but there are also Afghan refugees in Pakistan's urban centers.

A UNHCR spokesperson here in Peshawar says the refugees have already been informed of the extension of their legal stay in Pakistan so long as they possess registration cards.

Najamuddin Khan, a federal minister for the Frontier Regions, also told IPS: "We are not going to force them [to return home]."

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Minister Mian Iftikhar Hussain meanwhile says that it is not true that Afghans are being maltreated. "We have been suffering due to the presence of Afghans," he says, "but would not take any action against those having valid documents to stay here."

By "suffering," Hussain is apparently referring partly to the popular perception that the Afghan refugees have been taking far too many jobs away from the locals because the migrants ask for lower wages. Hussain, however, also says, "We would not allow the criminals to stay here."

"We have statistics that [show] 45 percent of the crimes [as being] committed by Afghans," says police officer Mohammed Rafiq. "They do crimes and run away to Afghanistan where they cannot be traced."

Crimes allegedly committed by Afghan refugees in Pakistan range from robbery to murder.

Many refugees, though, feel like they are being punished even if they have not done any crime.

They say that since the refugee camps were closed down in 2007, the police have been constantly harassing them regarding their papers. Most refugees have also been forced to live in makeshift huts and to take just about any job they can find to be able to eat.

Rehmat Shat, for instance, says that the \$55 he earns monthly as a night watchman for a local family is not enough to provide for his family. “My two children sell vegetables to complement my income,” he says.

Mirza Mohammad’s three daughters – Samia, 10, Rabia, eight, and Jaweria, six – tag along whenever she makes her rounds of the neighborhood at sunrise to collect trash.

“Some people give us cash and left-over bread and ice,” says barefoot Rabia. “But others don’t.”

Yet despite the difficulties of refugee life in Pakistan, many Afghans here say they would rather stay in this country for as long as they can. Says Shah: “We cannot go due to lawlessness, joblessness, poor education, and health facilities back home.”

Jalawan Khan, a 35-year-old taxi driver, even asserts, “The government should take pity on us.” He adds, “We [came] here to escape successive years of war, famine, and drought.”

Some members of Khan’s family, however, have gone back to Afghanistan. In fact, Khan says he sends part of his earnings to his mother, who is now living in their native Khost province in Afghanistan.

But he says it becoming harder and harder just to provide his wife and children with at least two meals a day. “My father ran a very good [carpet] business in Kacha Garhi camp,” says Khan. “But now the situation is extremely bad.”

Still, he says, “I am staying here anyway because I want to educate my son here in Peshawar.”