

Repatriation of third Generation Afghan Refugees: Major Concerns and Potential Challenges

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Abstract

Presently Pakistan is hosting 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees since 1979 (UNHCR, 2018). The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan has happened in four phases. The earliest and massive influx started in 1979 after the Soviet invasion till 1989, the year marked with the disintegration of USSR. The second wave of afghan migration into Pakistan took place during the era of civil war between Dr. Najibullah and Mujahideen in 1989-92 while the third migrant influx happened during the civil war in Afghanistan between Taliban Government and the Northern Alliance from 1992 till 2000. The final wave of Afghan refugees came to Pakistan post 9/11 after United States of America attacked the Taliban led Afghanistan. The repatriation of afghan refugees started in 2002 when the Taliban led government was toppled by the US and followed by the establishment of Afghan government under Hamid Karzai. Between 2002 and 2012, some 5.7 million Afghans returned to their homes and whereas 4.6 million of them received financial assistance from UNHCR. (Marchand, Siegel, Kuschminder, Majidi, Vanore, & Buil, 2014, p. 287) leaving 1.5 million Afghans in Pakistan predominantly third generation Afghan refugees. This study is an attempt to know the potential challenges that the third generation Afghan refugees face in the wake of anticipated repatriation back to Afghanistan. Qualitative approach was adopted for the research in which in-depth interviews were conducted with third generation Afghan refugees as respondents who were randomly selected. The data was thematically analyzed while each theme denoting a potential challenge that the refugees are up against. The potential challenges include the element of uncertainty as far as the repatriation is concerned which is the outcome of the political nature of the issue and uncertain policy of the government of Pakistan. The other challenges include the identity crisis of the third generation Afghan refugees who are born in Pakistan, the political instability in Afghanistan,

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the unending war like situation in Afghanistan, lack of economic opportunities and the fact that the third generation is leaving their place of birth which makes the repatriation a kind of migration for them.

Key words: Migration, repatriation, Afghan refugees, third generation refugees, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Soviet Invasion, 9/11, Taliban, UNHCR, identity crisis,

Introduction

Geographically land locked Afghanistan is located in the heart of Asia. It is surrounded by the countries having rich culture, possessing ancient civilizations. To the east its subcontinent, to the north its central Asia, and to the west its Iranian plateau. The land of Afghanistan has witnessed great warriors, as it is the gateway from west to the east and to mention these were, Cyrus the great, Alexander the great, Changis Khan, Mehmood Ghazni and Tamer lane. Afghanistan remained part different empires including Persian Empire ruled from outside and from its own towns. Timurid prince Babur when lost his kingdom in 1501 in Samarqand, he moved to Badakhshan. He also conquered Kabul in 1504 but could no longer defend before the growing power of the Uzbeks.

Afghanistan is located in such a strategic geopolitical position from the time of the 'Great Game' during the nineteenth century when the Soviet Union and Great Britain struggled for the regional supremacy. The Soviet Union captured almost Central Asian countries sharing borders with Afghanistan. USSR extended economic assistance and funded many infrastructural projects in Afghanistan. Afghan students were granted scholarships for their higher education and assisted in military training in USSR (Wulf, D. (1994).

Migration of Afghan people into Pakistan

The migration of Afghani people into Pakistan is one of tragic events in the history of the world. The migration was not a happy or voluntarily but it was the outcome of an unavoidable circumstances. The number of people who migrated was not one, hundred or a thousand but they were in millions of whom some migrated to Iran and Europe while the major bulk of the refugees came into Pakistan after the soviet invasion and during the time of civil war in Afghanistan. (Kronenfeld, D. A. 2008).

The migration of Afghan people into Pakistan can be viewed in a series of events from early volunteer migration to later forced or compelled migration due to wars.

Early migration

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a huge bordering area popularly known as Durand line which is some 1900 miles and the cross migration of people has a long history (Omran, B. 2009). History of Pashtuns living in Pakistan's province Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa is very long and is of their mobility. It is the case with Pashtuns living in eastern parts of Afghanistan and South Balochistan. Most of them particularly nomads namely Kochis or Powindahs in both Pakistan and Afghanistan do not recognize the existence of international border between the two neighboring states. This is the reason that those refugees who initially migrated to Pakistan in late 1970s had relatives in Pakistan.

Later Migration, Russian invasion and Mujahedeen civil war

The mass migration of people from Afghanistan started after the invasion of Soviet Union into Afghanistan in 1979. The invasion of the Soviet Union and the later stages of war compelled many people to leave Afghanistan and settle in other parts of the world. The wealthy migrants preferred to migrate to Europe and America while those who could not afford this, Pakistan was a comfortable destination for them.

Since Soviet invasion in 1979 Afghanistan has been facing unceasing disturbance and lack of peace. People of Afghanistan are witnessing nonstop war for almost four decades in shape of foreign invasions or civil riots. More than 5.5 million Afghans abandoned their homes amid war to save their lives. That is why Pakistan offered unconditional support and around 3.3 million people migrated to Pakistan and more than 02 million took refuge in Iran (Wulf, D. (1994).

Soviet invaded Afghanistan in late December 1979 followed by intensified conflicts among different factions for control over state machinery. Soviet Union initially sent not huge army but later stance was changed due to heavy resistance from the opponents. Soviet fell in the situation of guerrilla war. Soviet Union for some time retained the control of major cities including Kabul but mujahedeen showed intense resistance in rural areas. Mujahadeen were never unified group but the one point agenda that kept them intact was to drive out Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The loose alignment of the ideas of different factions of Mujahadeen at various points like ethnic background, diverse groups led by different commanders of different school of thought, sects and in terms of capability and size kept them not to absorb in unified faction.

The imposed war cost an estimated 870, 000 lives of Afghanistan killed between 1978 and 1987. This comes to an average of 240 per day. Indiscriminate bombing cost 800 to 1000 lives reported in one day in the Faryab province. Irrigation system of the country was divested and agriculture production fell down due to displacement of the civilians. Land mines and conflicts caused an estimated 1.2 million Afghans disabled. Around 03 million wounded. Only land mines claimed 25000 lives. As estimated that up to 50 Afghans got injured each week (Centlivres, P., & Centlivres-Demont, M. 1988).

Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

In October 1978 UNHCR opened its office in Islamabad. Initially it sent two missions for assessment and raised 15 million dollars to help refugees in the camps. They were kept in refugees camps based in Pakistan but problem arise in 1990s when funding from the internationally community was halted. In 1995 the World Food Program and UNHCR stopped funding including other donor agencies claiming that refugees are self-sufficient and in response Pakistan discontinued accepting refugees who entered after 1995. In the year 2000 more than 170000 refugees entered Pakistan and that was fourth wave of refugees but Islamabad did not considered them rather called them economic migrants and urged that they shall return as the 90 % territory was peaceful then. In November 2000 Pakistan claimed that it cannot further absorb newly arrived refugees due to lack of funds.

Despite the fear of the evacuees, in 2002 an enormous repatriation occurred and almost 1.6 million Afghans came back to Afghanistan from Pakistan. However, the issues as the returnees faced were difficult conditions in Afghanistan because of insurgency and the impacts of destruction all-around. In addition, the return of countless individuals put pressure on assistance organizations working in the war zone. Thus, an extensive number of returnees returned to Pakistan. The UNHCR understood that swift repatriation was not a rational arrangement. Accordingly, on 17 March 2003, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the UNHCR consented to a tripartite agreement in Brussels for Voluntary and staged repatriation of Afghan refugees. The main aim of the agreement was that the greater part of the refugees be repatriated by 2005. The agreement was later extended up to December 2006. Under the agreement, returnees are eligible for transportation help running from 4-37 dollars relying upon their target and an extra amount of 12 dollars were given to help them for survival in Afghanistan. It was expected that this plan can be misused by the returnees who could return back to Pakistan once this facility is availed, as had occurred in the 1980s.

To maintain a strategic output from this, iris filter machines were introduced at voluntary repatriation centers (VRCs). All refugees more than six years old need to go through the iris acknowledgment test to ensure that nobody gets the individual assistance package more than once. The arrangement to repatriate 60,000 refugees in 2003 was amended after a halfhearted reaction. The unwillingness of the displaced people to return rose as another key test going up against Pakistan and the refugee offices. To adjust to this, the UNHCR announced facilitated group return (FGR) initiative for coping up the issues that refugees might face.

3.8 million Refugees have gone back to Afghanistan since 2002. Currently, the number of registered and unregistered Afghan refugees are 3 million, however, the unregistered Afghan refugees are believed to be even more because the migration to and for the border has occurred unregulated and unmonitored. (Khan, 2015)

“With the voluntary return of approximately 3.9 million Afghan refugees since 2002 until to date, Pakistan remains home to some 1.5 million Afghan refugees which is the world’s largest protracted refugee population”. (Khan, 2015)

The repatriation of Afghan refugees, which was resulted by the close door policy of Pakistan Government against its open door policy, started an era of movement of Afghan people back to Afghanistan from Pakistan in the first decade of the 21st century. The repatriation was not an easy movement for the Afghan refugees on several grounds. These people had lived most of their lives in Pakistan and had settled here long ago. Currently, the repatriation of the third generation Afghan refugees “those refugees who are born in Pakistan after the migration of their parents and grandparents into Pakistan”, is on several grounds different from their parents’ repatriation. Majority of the third generation Afghan refugees have not been to Afghanistan before which makes them in difficult situation when asked to repatriate. It becomes important to explore that what potential challenges the third generation Afghan refugees expect to face when repatriated.

Objectives

This third generation face certain challenges as far as repatriation is concerned which makes them fearful of repatriation. This paper explores the major concerns and potential challenges that the third generation Afghan refugees are fearful of and expect them to face.

Methodology:

The nature of the study is qualitative because it allows deep insights and in-depth understanding and exploration of this particular phenomenon which is the repatriation of third afghan refugees from Pakistan. In-depth interviews were conducted from the third generation afghan refugees as respondents who were selected using random sampling from different regions of Quetta city. Open ended questions were asked from the respondents using interview guide/questionnaire. The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis.

Data analysis

The repatriation of third generation Afghan refugees from Pakistan is unique and different from the repatriation of other first and second generation Afghan refugees. For the later Afghanistan is a familiar place, a place of their birth or a place they have spent many days and nights of their lives but for the third generation Afghan refugees things are different and likely difficult as far as their repatriation is concerned.

Concerns and Challenges for the third generation Afghan refugees:

The collected data is categorized in various themes, while each theme represents a potential challenge that the third generation Afghan refugees in Pakistan face in the wake of their anticipated repatriation from Pakistan. Each theme is discussed in details respectively below.

Repatriation and clouds of uncertainty:

One of the major concerns of the third generation Afghan refugees is the fact that the issue of repatriation has become so political now in Pakistan which has led to uncertainty as far as repatriation is concerned. There seems to be a state of indecision from the government of Pakistan while deciding the fate of afghan refugees. As Zartaj Gul, a third generation Afghan refugee states that

“There are some (in government of Pakistan) who want us to stay in Pakistan while there are others who want us to leave and go to Afghanistan, there is uncertainty , nothing is sure anything can be decided anytime for us”.

This fact is very obvious from the latest development in the repatriation process. There have been the demands of repatriation from the Baloch Nationalist parties who want these refugees to return back to Afghanistan since the presence of Afghan refugees are challenging their numerical and political strength. The six points of Sardar Akhter Jan Mengal, a nationalist

Baloch leader, that he demands from the central government contains the point of the repatriation of afghan refugees from Pakistan.

On the other hand the Prime Minister of Pakistan promised issuing the muhjir cards to the Afghan refugees which gives the impression that the government wants them to stay inside Pakistan and not repatriated. This schism in the political cadre has given rise to situation of uncertainty for the third generation Afghan refugees to make a firm and final decision to repatriate or not.

Migration rather repatriation

The third generation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan consists of those Afghans who are born in Pakistan after their parents and grandparents migrated from Afghanistan which started in 1979 after the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. These Afghans are predominantly the youth which constitutes the bulk of the remaining Afghan refugees in Pakistan. They have spent all their lives in Pakistan or only visited Afghanistan once or twice. As one respondent stated:

“Here in Pakistan I was born, in these streets I played Kaaki (a Pashtoon game), in here I started going to school and in here I started working at market, I’ve never been to Afghanistan though relatives of my parents live there and they often visit us but I’ve never been there.. For me Pakistan is my country, my friends are in here and it’s hard for me when I think of leaving it”.

Literally, the word repatriation means the process of sending the refugees back to their native place, the place of their origin and birth. Interestingly this term is ill applied on the third generation Afghan refugees who are born in Pakistan and have never been out of Pakistan in their life. There is not only few such instance but such third generation Afghan refugees are in hundreds of thousands across Pakistan.

For such Afghans, it is not repatriation but a migration since they are asked to leave the place of their birth and go to a new country where they have never been before. Though there are not such stark differences in the culture of Afghanistan and the Pashtun belt Pakistan, still Afghanistan is not native to these third generation Afghans.

“I don’t feel a refugee here in Pakistan because I was born here. If you ask me how I will feel when the government would ask me to go to Afghanistan? So I would say that its migration and that you are asking me to migrate to a place where I have not been all my life”.

The third generation Afghans in Pakistan feel at home, they think that they are not refugees here in Pakistan but actually they are going to become refugees and migrants if repatriated to Afghanistan.

Unending political turmoil

The repatriation of refugees back to their country anywhere in the world is conditioned to the socio-economic and political stability in their native state. This fact has always played a significant role in the status and situation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. When repatriation of the Afghan refugees started in the early decade of the 21st century, majority of the refugees came back to Pakistan because of the instability and war like situation in Afghanistan. The political settlement is still a far dream in Afghanistan as situation is getting worsened with each passing day. The insurgent Taliban and the new faction of ISIS has gained significant success in Afghanistan which has resulted in the instability in Afghanistan.

“Since decades, the Afghan people have been suffering because of the unending political turmoil in Afghanistan and civil war characterized by serious human rights violations, mass murder, deteriorating economic conditions and the longest drought in modern times. Of all the warring factions in Afghanistan, none spared the civilian population from oppression. Sometimes a reign of terror was unleashed on people belonging to a certain group just because of their ethnic links with the opposite party. All these factors led to the mass migration of Afghans to escape hostile conditions and seek refuge in a foreign land”.

Afghan refugees think that amid these conditions in Afghanistan, it is a difficult ask from the Afghan refugees to repatriate back to Afghanistan, especially the third generation Afghan refugees find it a worrisome and horrible ask since they haven't been in such war like conditions before as their parents and grandparents have been through. Shah Wali says:

We live in peace here in Pakistan, we feel safe here. We read and listen to the stories of fights, skirmishes and bomb blast in Afghanistan each day. How can one go to a terrible place like Afghanistan when he/she is living in a relatively peaceful place such as Pakistan.

The security situation is one of the major concern of the Afghan refugees in general and the third generation Afghan refugees in particular. Despite other concerns the instability is the major one. Unless and until the situation is not peaceful in Afghanistan, repatriation would be a horrible incident for the third generation Afghan refugees.

Identity issues

Identity is central to the individual self as well as the collective self. One such identity is the political identity that one is ascribed by the state where he/she is born. This gives a person a political identity and recognition. Identity denotes to the social, national and international recognition which enables him/her to move across the borders and participate in the national and international socio economic activities. One of the major concerns of Afghans third generation is their Identity in Pakistan.

Conclusion

It is a matter of great debate whether Afghan refugees shall be pushed back to the native country or they shall be given citizenship with certain conditions. Prime Minister of Pakistan announced for provision of citizenship cards to be issued to Bangladeshi and Afghan refugees in order to get them involved in the socio economic fabric of the Pakistani society. According to that “In a surprise announcement on Sunday at a public event in Karachi, the Pakistani Prime Minister said: “Afghans whose children have been raised and born in Pakistan will be granted citizenship Inshallah (God willing) because this is the established practice in countries around the world”.(www.theguardian.com, 2018)

What must be taken into account is the future of Afghan refugees third generation. The rehabilitation in a war torn Afghanistan is a must done efforts and this issue now needs to address by the international community for the re-settlement in Afghan society. United States of America along with International Security Assistance Force (IASF) are planning for safe exit from Afghanistan. The security of Afghanistan is vulnerable and lays on marginal lines. Any misadventure from any side can create chaos and such events will add more miseries in the fate of Afghans. Present Afghan government seems serious and in collaboration with international and regional powers this issue can be addressed. There are models to be applied on Pakistan end for instance Arab countries do not allocate permanent nationality but they appreciate foreign participants to work and contribute in their economy. The Gulf States offer jobs and apply taxes on the individuals taking part in it. They encourage foreigners to flourish businesses and invest in property by allowing them security and surety.

Afghans in Pakistan do possess a smart chunk in the economy. They have flourished their businesses in Pakistan and abroad. Situation in Afghanistan is still uncertain. So this is an opportunity to plan and give them access to invest in Pakistan. Pakistan is in need of money and this channelization can

put positive impact on our economy. The devaluation of Pakistani Rupee is on lowest of ever. Monetary planners can better plan and execute a policy for such investments.

Lastly it is recommended that Afghans in Pakistan are facing several identity issues. With the consensus of Political elite this issue has to be taken up for the security and for the future of not only third generation Afghans but also for the better and for safe Pakistan.

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