



A life plucked clean

As Pakistan begins expelling Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan, **Luavut Zahid** reports on the on-ground realities....

The Taliban takeover of February 2020 kicked off a new, perilous time for Afghanistan. In *CRJ* 16:4, I examined what life looked like for Afghans at the end of the year. The country was struggling with: “Price hikes, food shortages, healthcare issues, agricultural insecurity, and cash shortages,” as I had reported back then. Two years later, this is another December issue, and the situation has raced further down the proverbial hill.

Afghanistan’s most recent challenge now also includes abruptly expelled Afghan refugees. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), there are around 3.7 million Afghans in Pakistan. In October, a notification was issued alerting 1.7 million undocumented refugees to leave the country by November 1.

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) notes that there are three categories

of Afghan refugees in Pakistan: temporary migrants who live in border towns, transit refugees who arrived to flee to other countries, and resident card holders. The present policy is pushing out any and all Afghans indiscriminately.

Over 97 per cent of the people in the country are living in poverty, and six million are a step away from famine (*CRJ* 17:4). Where will the people being told to return fit in?

Samar Abbas, a lawyer and human rights activist, has been working on Afghan refugee cases for a year alongside his colleague Moniza Kakkar. Their work has helped more

than 200 Afghans remain in Pakistan.

“The ones being pushed out are mostly those who came to Pakistan after the Taliban takeover. While people who had more money or resources went to the capital city of Islamabad and then left for other countries, those without similar economic circumstances are the ones who are being thrown in these detention centres,” Abbas told me.

Pakistan’s government has used both the economic burden of hosting refugees and the security threats at play to push them out. However, according to Obaidullah Baheer, lecturer of Transitional Justice at the American University in Afghanistan: “It is very clear that this move was done out of pressure tactics on the Taliban to comply with Pakistan’s demands with regards to the *Tehreek-e-Taliban* Pakistan.”

He noted that the argument does not hold because many believe that:

“Just as Palestinians are stuck in Gaza, we too are besieged here. We are trapped in this country” - Afghan refugee

“The Taliban are trying to facilitate talks between the TTP and Pakistani authorities. These pressure tactics only serve to create more distance and distrust between the Taliban and Pakistan.”

A 2015 South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) report noted that between 2005 and 2013, more than 80,000 people had been killed in the country because of the war on terror. It is unsurprising that the fear tactics are working on the Pakistani public, which overwhelmingly supports the expulsions. “Even senior human rights



activists are starting to agree with the deportations because the security element is so deeply penetrated. Many refugees are seen as the Taliban by default,” Abbas said.

Detention centres that were set up are closed to outsiders, including journalists and lawyers, such as Abbas and his colleagues. They have worked by creating a complaint desk for refugees outside the premises. “The detention centre is like a blackhole. There is no transparency or properly defined process,” Abbas informed me.

This has opened up not just refugees to all manner of abuse, but Pashtoon Pakistanis as well. “People cannot tell the difference between a Pakistani Pashtoon and an Afghani Pashtoon. Security officials are bagging up anyone of this particular ethnicity,” Abbas told me.

“This is racial profiling; the police had a quota at the start where they had to bring in a certain number of people each day,” Abbas added. Security officials, who chose not to be named, have admitted that there was no proper system in place, and anyone who looked ‘Pashtoon enough’ was taken.

In one case, Abbas spoke about a father who had come with documents proving his 16-year-old was a Pakistani. He didn’t have an ID card because of his age, but he had other documents confirming his identification. However, it wasn’t until he had been taken across the Chaman border that he was able to call his father to tell him he had been deported. “In some cases, we do not know where these people are going. Were they deported or trafficked? The 16-year-old boy’s father has now backed off and asked us to leave him alone. He’s afraid talking to the authorities will mean his son will never return.”

Pakistan has seen a steady number of Afghans trickle into the country since the 1970s, post-Soviet invasion. The numbers saw an uptick after the September 11, 2011, attacks that took down the Twin Towers, and then again when Kabul fell. A good chunk of these people have documentation in the form of Proof of Residence (POR) cards or the Afghan Citizen Card (ACC). Those who fled Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul only have a slip of paper from the UNHCR (referred to as a token), which is meant to guarantee that their process to seek asylum has begun. “However, courts here do not deem this to have any legal standing, and so far the majority of deportations have happened to token holders,” Abbas said.

“Despite the decades we have hosted them and the staggering numbers (with close to four million refugees), there is no legal framework to deal with them or their needs. They are being brought in under the *Foreigners Act of 1946* – a law that the British left behind,” Abbas informed me, noting that the provisions are draconian and redundant. “There is no provision for asylums; refugees are expected to come with a visa.”

Things have been running on an *ad hoc* basis over the years, a pattern that can be observed with the expulsions themselves. Lawyers trying to work on refugee cases do so while using international laws in their arguments.

“The Pakistani Government does not recognise the Taliban Government. It has signed onto several conventions that disallow this operation. The deportations do not have a sound legal basis,” Abbas argued.

Sources also confirm that there is intense corruption at every step of the process. Many refugees are daily wagers. Police officers who want money in exchange for letting people go, harass them if they attempt to go to work.

In 2015, *CRJ* covered the condition of Afghan daily wagers who had to pay policemen bribes to survive. The situation is even more precarious now for those left behind. Whether they have the right documents allowing them to stay has become irrelevant.

In videos shared with *CRJ* by the civilian-led Joint Action Committee for Refugees, stranded Afghans can be seen lamenting their plight. “Just as Palestinians are stuck in Gaza, we too are besieged here. We are trapped in this country. We don’t have gas or water. There’s no wood to light a fire. We don’t have food. If we don’t go to work, our children will starve.

“We can’t go to our shops or our jobs. We have been begging the authorities to help. We keep getting told to wait. UNHCR comes and tells us it will be fine but we do not see any relief,” an unnamed refugee said.

Turbulence is normal

Refugees who are being sent back to their homeland are not being allowed to take more than PKR50,000 (approximately £140). Over 400,000 individuals have undergone forced deportation, departing with scant possessions. The transport vehicles ushering people back into Afghanistan are densely packed, with individuals and belongings tightly intertwined. The absence of breathing room is palpable; where would an entire life built in another country find space?

In a widely criticised move, the Pakistani Government is also forcing Afghans who have found asylum elsewhere to pay US\$830 to leave the country. Many of those who left Afghanistan after the takeover did so because they were

eligible for help. Hundreds, if not thousands, worked with foreign organisations that quickly ceased operations once the Taliban took over, leaving local staff behind.

The fact that the country is trying to benefit from fleeing refugees is abysmal. The fee is meant to be paid through a credit card; most of the refugees do not even have bank accounts, let alone credit cards, which aren't easy to acquire in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, officials are bent on calling the people leaving for western countries migrants instead of refugees. Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, a spokesperson for Pakistan's Foreign Ministry, told *The Guardian* the policy would not be changing: "These individuals have been here for the last two years, and they are not refugees, but immigrants with overstays in their visas and a lack of documents. We expect the concerned countries to expedite the visa and approval process so that they can leave for their destination as early as possible." It is almost as if those seeking asylum are being held hostage.

But the other side of the picture doesn't look any easier for those leaving. Baheer said: "Economically, this is the worst time possible because of the winter, and the country is already going through a crisis of food insecurity and a lack of money flow because of the frozen reserves and all of the other sanctions that are crippling the economy further."

Abdul Mutalib Haqqani, the Taliban spokesperson for Afghanistan's Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, told me: "There is no doubt about the fact that anyone who has spent such a long time in a country – and has built a life in that country and earned a living there – if they are forced to leave in such a manner, it is a very painful process."

Those arriving are staying in temporary camps around the border before they can be processed. "We are working on settling these people and giving them a place to live. We need to help them find a way to earn a livelihood as well," he added, explaining that returning Afghans are registered at the border gates. Their documents are compiled, recording details about their previous places of residence. Information is collected regarding their skills and education. After this process, they are permitted to return to their respective destinations.

The majority of returning Afghans own ancestral land and residences, while a small number have no land or village to return to. For such individuals, the plan is for them to reside in camps until suitable arrangements are made, according to Haqqani.

Legal with a twist

It isn't just the people authorities have managed to deport in error; the 'operation' against Afghans has also put some Pakistanis under fire.

Chaudhry Shoaib Saleem, a Lahore-based advocate, has been fighting refugee cases for several years. Since 2018, he's been working on the case of Daray Khan, whose national identity card (NIC), along with his mother and two brothers, was cancelled.

Documents shared with *CRJ* include official forms that the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) uses to process such cases. There is no deep research or diligence, and instead the form has blanks for an official to fill out.

"Can the state just wake up and say you aren't a citizen to anyone at any time?" Saleem questioned as he pointed out a ready-made list of reasons one's ID card can be cancelled. On



Khan's form, a check mark decorates a line notes that he is not a Pakistani, based on information from security agencies.

Khan has since fought and won his case in a civil court, proving his background and identity. However, his NIC was reissued, only for it to be promptly cancelled once more. Without this, he is unable to run a business, get a phone, rent a house, and do anything. Khan's case is even more peculiar because he's the president of the local press club.

"I have not used my resources to raise my voice because I'm afraid they will label me an Afghan instead of supporting me," Khan told me. The journalist used to be a tax filer up until 2018. He has been on the voter's list that goes back as far as 2002. He has been tumbling from one court to another because of the slow-paced pace of the Pakistani legal system. "I have nothing to do with Afghanistan; I have never seen it. What am I supposed to do if they force me to go? Even my grandparents are Pakistanis," he lamented.

An anonymous source has shared with *CRJ* that there are certain officials who are asking for bribes to make such cases go away. With the crackdown on refugees, such abuse is expected to rise. Khan himself was asked to pay PKR 2.5 million (approximately £7,500), which is a sum large enough to buy a house.

The condition for Afghans is no different. People who owe them money are no longer interested in making payments. The land or meagre possessions that they own are being eyed by those around them. "They are unable to take much of anything with them, so everything they leave behind will be up for grabs," Abbas noted.

For the Afghans, the biggest challenge right now is how people will survive upon their return. "Afghans are used to such hardships. We are welcoming our people back warmly," Haqqani insisted, despite having no real answer to how the upcoming challenges will be tackled.

At the border, when buses, trucks and lorries carrying refugees trudge forward into Afghanistan, the locals can be seen cheering for those returning. But once the dust settles, it remains to be seen what the lives of those being unceremoniously sent across the border will look like in the longer run. [CRJ](#)

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Afghan refugee children imprisoned in a Pakistani jail for more than two months, awaiting deportation orders, blissfully unaware of their predicament

Photo:
Samar Abbas