

Afghan Refugees Abandoned

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Several thousand Afghan refugees have been marooned on the Tajik border for nearly a year

The first Afghan refugees began to appear on islands along the Pyandj river, dividing Tajikistan from its southern neighbour, in September last year.

Within a month, 5,000 people, fleeing fighting in Afghanistan, were sheltering in the area. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR, and the Afghan embassy in Dushanbe, the figure has now reached 17,000.

Most of the refugees are ethnic Tajik women, children and elderly people from Imam-Sakhb, Kunduz, Dashti Archi and Khodjagar.

Between September last year and March, Taleban forces, using grenade launchers and heavy artillery, shelled the camps. Two people were killed and more than ten wounded, including three children. Tents and reed houses were damaged and valuable food reserves destroyed.

Muhammed Solekh Registoni, press attache at Afghan embassy in Tajikistan, said some refugees died during the winter from starvation, exposure and disease. Non-government organisations estimate more than 40 people perished.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's special representative visited Afghanistan and Tajikistan several times in recent months, expressing concern at conditions in the camps. The Dushanbe authorities are adamant, however, that the refugees will not be allowed to cross into Tajik territory.

Taleban shelling and the presence within the camps of armed groups caused international organisations to suspend their small-scale assistance programmes for a time. In February and March, however, over 2,000 children were immunised against measles and medication against typhoid, malaria, diarrhoea, together with water purifying tablets, were supplied.

Taslimur Rakhman, head of the UNHCR office in Tajikistan, has appealed to the Tajik president Emomali Rakhmonov to allow the refugees to move to safer ground inside his country, where, he said, international agencies would provide full-scale assistance.

But Tajik deputy prime minister Saidamir Zakhurov ruled this out in a recent interview with the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*. "Tajikistan cannot receive Afghan refugees - our country has not yet recovered from civil war," he said. "We still can't find shelter for our own refugees and to provide acceptable conditions for them. Billions of dollars would be needed to cater for the Afghans."

Zakhurov said Tajikistan was also opposed to taking in the displaced because of fears that terrorists, trained in special camps in Afghanistan, could smuggle themselves into the country as refugees.

Independent military experts estimate some 400 armed supporters of the Northern Alliance are among the refugees marooned on the Pyandj river. The Afghan embassy in Dushanbe says the fighters were there to protect the camps from Taleban attack.

A member of the Russian border guards based on the Tajik frontier told IWPR that refugees made several attempts to cross into Tajikistan, especially after the Taleban shelled the camps. Although under orders to prevent them entering the republic, the officer said soldiers did not stand in their way. "We're not beasts and we will not open fire against unarmed people," he said.

Small groups of three to five, mostly women and children, he went on, were sometimes allowed through. Unofficial sources estimate around 100 refugees entered Tajikistan in this way. Most made their way into the Khatlon region, and some even reached Dushanbe.

The situation along the Tajik-Afghan border has become increasingly tense since September 2000. With the exception of the mountainous Badakhshan area, almost the entire Afghan frontier is under Taleban control.

Tajik and Russian officials claim the volume of drug-trafficking has increased significantly, with new routes being set up all the time. Border guards seized around 800 kilos of heroin last year. In the first four months of 2001 alone, over 500 kilos have been confiscated and 25 traffickers killed.

At the same time, the security situation along the border has deteriorated. In February, the Taleban began shelling Tajik territory, hitting not only refugee camps, but Russian and Tajik border posts. Power and communication cables were also destroyed.

Russian border guards reported that fighting between the warring groups in Afghanistan was occurring on a daily basis, only two to three kilometres from the border.

In mid-April, four motorised and specially equipped units, numbering between 250 and 400 men, arrived to bolster the Russian border guard presence. Military experts believe the reinforcements have contributed to the relative quiet along the frontier in the latter part of April.

Meanwhile, Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud says his forces are poised to strike back against the Taleban. Speaking on April 9 in Dushanbe, he said talks to bring together disparate anti-Taleban forces were underway.

Leader of Afghanistan's ethnic Uzbeks, General Abdur Rashid Dostam, who led resistance against the Taleban in Afghanistan's northern region, is already in Faizabad in central Badakhshan province. And supporters of Karim Khalili, leader of the Afghan Shi'ites, are active in central parts of the country.

On May 1, Northern Alliance forces launched an offensive to secure the strategically important river port of Sherkhan on the Pyandj river. Should Massoud's forces seize the town, the refugees sheltering in the area should be able to return home.

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