

Finding Schools for Afghan Returnees

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An influx of former refugees returning from Pakistan has put intense pressure on services.

When Qareeb-ul-Rahman returned to Afghanistan after years living in the Akora Khatak area of Pakistan, his primary concern was how his six children would be able to continue their education.

Like many other recent returnees from Pakistan, he settled in Jalalabad, the provincial capital of the neighbouring province of Nangarhar.

“When I returned, I faced many problems and thought life would be difficult and my children would be deprived of education,” he told IWPR.

But to ul-Rahman’s surprise, he soon found school places for his children.

“Now life is good,” he continued, “After returning to Afghanistan my four daughters and two sons started going to school and now they are studying happily.”

Pakistan hosts some three million Afghan refugees, of whom nearly half are undocumented. Some have been living there for decades.

Last year, Islamabad announced that that all registered Afghan refugees would have to leave, despite UN warnings that this policy might have severe consequences.

According to the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) more than 600,000 Afghan refugees left Pakistan last year. The initial deadline of March 15, 2017, has been extended to the end of the year, but hundreds of people are still passing through the Torkham border crossing every day on their way back to eastern Afghanistan.

The influx of refugees returning from Pakistan has put intense pressure on services in Nangarhar, already subject to ongoing insurgent attacks, with Islamic State-affiliated groups believed to be operating in the province.

Ghulam Haidar Faqirzai, director of the repatriation and refugees department in Nangarhar, estimated that a good three-quarters of all the returnees had settled there and acknowledged that this presented a serious challenge.

Faqirzai said that their aim was to begin delivering aid as soon as the returnees crossed the border.

“The refugee families are helped by being given foodstuffs [and other basic goods] at the Torkham crossing and each family member is allocated 300-450 dollars in cash,” he said, adding, “We have started building a town in Nangarhar for those families who have returned from Pakistan and when it’s complete about 30,000 families will settle there.”

Mohammad Asif Shenwari, the spokesman of Nangarhar’s education department, said that they were also trying to ensure that returning families knew what services were available.

“Nangarhar’s department of education is distributing information brochures to the refugee families travelling on the Torkham highway [the route from Pakistan] and other main arteries so that the families are properly informed and encouraged to send their children to schools.”

He added, “We also included the contact numbers of education department officials so that the refugee families who have returned to Afghanistan can directly contact them if they encounter any problems.”

With around 900 schools across the province, he said they had prepared capacity to absorb 32,000 children returning from Pakistan. New facilities were being set up wherever necessary.

“You can’t find any child who has been deprived of education,” he said, adding, “We have even built a school in an area where only ten refugee families have settled.”

Nangarhar social activist Sharifullah Hayat told IWPR that he was pleased with the progress so far to address numerous concerns about the logistics of absorbing so many returnees, particularly when it came to child welfare.

“The return of so many Afghan refugees at once raises worries about the condition of their children,” he said, adding, “We have had many meeting with Nangarhar’s department of education to prepare the

ground for refugees' children to study. That's why thousands of these children have began able to start going to school."

More needed to be done, he continued.

"There are some problems in the more remote areas and districts," Hayat said. "For example, schools are very far away from where people live, but education department officials have promised me that they will solve this problem."

Educationalists also noted that it was crucial for the children are treated with sensitivity so as to help ease the transition to living and studying in Afghanistan.

"I am happy that I am teaching kids who have returned from other countries to Afghanistan," said Amanullah, a teacher at the Tajrabawi high school in Jalalabad city. "I try to encourage students who have returned from Pakistan. I'm very pleased with these children, especially about the fact that they are now studying in their own country."

Children also say that they feel a new sense of belonging since their return, even though many have spent their whole lives in Pakistan.

"I am very happy that I can study in my native language Pashto," said Lutfullah, a pupil at the Mohmmadi Sahibaza high school in Nangarhar's Behsud district. "We studied in Urdu at school in Pakistan, but here our lessons are in our own language which we understand much better."

Sahil, 13, is in 5th grade at Lalma high school in Chaparhar district and says that his own transition has been smooth.

"When we came back to Afghanistan, my father got me admitted to school just 20 days after our return," he said. "I am so happy about going to school every day in my own country."

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