

Jobless Face Grim Future

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Unfulfilled hopes of economic growth and security create a growing pool long-term unemployed, many of them returning refugees.

On several squares in central Kabul, hundreds of people are milling around in hope that someone will give them a day's work. When prospective employers show up - and they are few and far between - a crowd immediately gathers around them.

"Please take me. I'm a hard worker," said one hopeful at this informal hiring market for "muzdorkar" or day labourers. "In the name of God, I haven't been able to find any work for the past week."

Analysts argue about how much the state is directly responsible for providing its citizens with jobs, but they agree that people at the bottom of the heap - many of whom have recently returned from years in exile - have been let down by flawed policies and empty promises.

Unemployment data is hard to come by in a country where government institutions are still emerging and have limited reach. Government estimates say about 33 per cent of the working-age population are jobless.

Most of the unemployed are returning refugees from Pakistan and Iran, left stranded by the failure of the Afghan economy to pick up. Others swelling the jobless ranks include school and university leavers.

At a May 29 press briefing in Kabul, Shengjie Li, the International Labour Organisation's liaison officer, said that many of those without work are women or people with disabilities.

NO WORK FOR RETURNEES

When the Taliban regime fell in late 2001 and a new administration led by President Hamed Karzai was installed, the hope was that economic recovery helped along by billions of US dollars in international assistance and, down the line, foreign investment made possible by increased stability, would create workplaces to provide decent livelihoods for returning refugees as well as for those who never left the country.

Efforts began to encourage Afghans to return from Pakistan, Iran and further afield where several million had lived for years after escaping successive waves of conflict - Soviet invasion, the internecine strife that followed, and Taleban rule.

The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, in Kabul says over 4.5 million people have returned to Afghanistan since the agency began a voluntary repatriation programme in March 2002. The number includes three million from Pakistan and more than a million from Iran.

While Kabul presents a veneer of rapid economic development, with smart new houses and shopping centres springing up in fashionable areas, the changes are largely skin-deep and have not generated large

numbers of jobs. In urban centres outside the capital, employment opportunities are even thinner on the ground.

IS THE GOVERNMENT PART OF THE PROBLEM?

The problem, say analysts, is that the government has not done enough to create the right economic and security environment in which new jobs will appear.

Until security is in place, there can be little economic development, said Abdul Ghafoor Liwal, a political analyst who heads the Centre for Regional Studies in Afghanistan.

"Economy and security are very closely connected with one another. Both need to be in place. Their absence causes unemployment, which [in turn] fuels the lack of security," he said.

Fazul Rahman Orya, a political analyst and chief editor of the Payam magazine, reeled off a list of areas where in his view the government has contributed to high unemployment - the failure to secure the country in the face of continuing violence, slow reconstruction efforts, the lack of support for domestic and foreign investors, corruption in the government bureaucracy, and the influence of warlords and drug barons inside the administration as well as outside it.

All these factors are interlinked, but according to Orya, "The factor that has made this government an ailing one is Karzai's wrong-headed policy and his inappropriate tactic of consulting with war- and drug-lords. This policy has made the security situation worse and has deterred domestic and foreign investors and traders from putting money into the country."

Liwal does not agree that it is for central government to create jobs for everyone in society.

But he too believes government policies - and failures - have contributed to maintaining and increasing the unemployment crisis.

"It's the government's responsibility to ensure security, create a safe working environment, and maintain the national interest. What should have been done in this regard has not been done," said Liwal.

"There is no strategy for using public property. Energy - the lifeblood of the economy - is non-existent. All of this is the job of government, which it should have carried out."

Liwal also said the international community has not done enough to assist economic growth at a nationwide level.

"If the international community wants to rebuild Afghanistan, why doesn't each country work in one Afghan province, putting the people there to work and eradicating unemployment?" he asked.

OFFICIALS PRESCRIBE INVESTMENT AND TRAINING

Deputy Economy Minister Nazir Ahmad Shahidi said the kind of unemployment seen in Afghanistan was a feature of countries recently in conflict. But he said the fact that unemployment was now on the rise was a worrying sign.

"Unemployment is increasing day by day. The government needs to find a solution, because this is a major problem that affects the security situation," he said.

Shahidi said the answer lay in creating a more investor-friendly business environment.

A senior official at the ministry of labour and social affairs, Abdul Karim Hamid, pointed out that the de-skilling of the Afghan labour force over a quarter of a century of instability and conflict had also played a role, and had even prompted companies to import better-qualified labour.

"If we recognise that the government is 80 per cent to blame, we must also admit that the people themselves are 20 per cent to blame because they have not acquired skills," said Hamid. "Those who need workers try to hire foreign workers because they have adequate skills."

Hamid said that to redress the situation, the labour ministry had set up vocational training centres in specialisms such as tailoring, masonry and carpentry in 16 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and similar schemes would soon be started in other regions. He also noted that in the last four years, his ministry had found jobs in government agencies and organisations for more than 120,000 people.

Finally, he said, the government plans to send people to work in other countries.

JOB SITUATION REDUCES INCENTIVE TO RETURN

There are still approximately 2.6 million Afghans still living in Pakistan and 900,000 more in Iran, according to UNHCR, and the intention is to encourage most of them to come back. But despite the hardships they face in those countries, the poor employment situation in Afghanistan may now be deterring them from returning.

In May, the Associated Press news agency reported that only 1,000 people had come back from Iran so far in 2006. The UN had predicted that around 600,000 refugees would return in the course of the year, including 150,000 from Iran.

As Ismail Khan, a journalist for the Dawn newspaper in Pakistan, told the BBC recently, "The Pakistani authorities and UN officials admit that these Afghans are not political refugees, because there is security in most parts of Afghanistan, but they cannot return to their country because of the unemployment there."

SOME RETURNEES LEAVING AGAIN

One of the most worrying indications of the difficulty of earning a living is that some of the refugees who did come back are now planning to leave again.

Outside the Pakistani and Iranian embassies, and at the Afghan passport office, hundreds of people can be seen queuing up every day.

Ali Yawar, 27, standing in a long queue outside the passport agency, spoke for many others when he said life in Iran was far from easy, but he felt his own country had nothing to offer him.

"Karzai cheated us three years ago when he said, 'Come to Afghanistan - there is security and work.' We came to Afghanistan and sold all what we had gathered over the three years [in Iran], but I didn't find work. Now I want to go back to Iran with my family," he said.

"The Iranians don't treat Afghan refugees well, especially the police for whom it's easy to beat and kill refugees. But we have to endure it in order to earn our daily bread."

Because obtaining a passport and visa is a cumbersome process that can take a month and a half, many people leave the country with no documents and become illegal migrants.

The costs are high, and so is the risk of arrest and injury along the way. At the end of May, 30 Afghans were among 40 illegal migrants killed when the truck they were packed into crashed on a motorway from Osmaniye to Gaziantep in southeastern Turkey.

DESPERATION COULD FEED UNREST

Another risk of high unemployment is that marginalised groups could be drawn into violence and crime. According to political analyst Orya, such people are ready source of recruits for the armed insurgency or the drug trafficking trade.

Sulaiman, 28, has applied for many public-sector jobs without success, and now finds himself at a day-labourer market in Kabul's Baharistan Cinema area. Standing aside from the crowd, he told IWPR that he usually managed to work one day a week but needed to support ten family members.

Leaning against a tree, he spoke angrily about his circumstances but said he would not demean himself by chasing after prospective employers like the other labourers did.

"I'm sick of this life. I don't know how much they pay a suicide bomber. I don't know how to get in touch with them. I am ready to carry out a suicide attack because then some money will be left to my family," he said.

Sulaiman said many of his young male relatives were involved in various illegal activities, but added, "It

isn't their fault - they're unemployed and they have to feed their children."

Hafizullah Gardesh is IWPR's editor in Afghanistan.

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