

Kabul Suffering Acute Housing Shortage

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Thousands of refugees expected to return to the Afghan capital over the next year are likely to find themselves homeless

Kabul is being placed under growing strain by a wave of humanity flooding

into the Afghan capital as twenty years of war is replaced by the

prospect of peace and a return to normality.

Those coming to the city include many displaced from homes in other parts of Afghanistan, as well as refugees returning from countries such as Pakistan and Iran after years in exile.

Government officials say that without international help an already critical

housing crisis will only get worse as Kabul struggles to provide accommodation for its ever growing population.

Indeed, Kabul is still struggling to deal with the destruction wrought a decade ago by the Mujahedin, who reduced 80 per cent of the city to ruins.

In the south, eastern, western and north-western parts of the capital, many former homes are little more than heaps of rubbles.

In other parts, the water supply, electricity and other social services systems have been destroyed. Only the areas of Khaikhana, Parwan Maina, Shahr-e-Nau and Nadershah Maina have undamaged homes, but lack the capacity to accommodate even Kabul's current population.

Thus the options facing those looking for homes in Kabul are bleak. Sher

Wali returned to Kabul recently after over twenty years in Pakistan.

Although he has a job, he is unable to bring his family from Peshawar because he can't find anywhere to put them up. "As soon as I get a place I will bring my family," he said.

Akhter Mohammad, a Kabul resident, visited the state accommodation agency in the Khaikhana in a vain attempt to rent a house. His own home in the Kart-e-Char neighbourhood, a relatively posh area, was ruined during recent fighting. "I have no money to rebuild my house and now my family of eight people live in one room, with no water nor electricity," he said.

Another factor aggravating the capital's housing problems are disputes over property ownership, particularly of government built-flats. This stems from the Mujahedin and Taleban periods when the authorities evicted tenants and handed their flats over to friends and allies.

Such problems are evident on a housing complex belonging to the police

department. There are 308 flats, originally meant for the widows, orphans and needy interior ministry employees.

Bibi Negarah was a long-term tenant but now sits with her belongings

in front of her old apartment, currently occupied by an army officer. "This is my flat, look at my purchase-deed and other documents," she said, pointing to a new government order giving her permission to reclaim her flat, which was "useless to me unless it is enforced".

It is thought that with the coming of spring even more Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran will arrive, joining government employees, students and other Kabulees desperate for accommodation.

Afghanistan's minister for rehabilitation, Mohammad Amin Farhang, told IWPR that there are no immediate plans to start providing extra houses in the city, although he said there was a possibility some new homes could be built in the central province of Bamyan.

In the absence of government assistance, many Kabulees are eager to begin reconstruction themselves. Abdul Aleem Aazami, the president of the Properties Department of Kabul Municipality, said, "Up to now, we have received seventy thousand applications for plots of land."

But many observers believe that without help from the interim

authority, the UN and donor countries, little head way can be made in rebuilding residential areas of the city. Provision of accommodation is crucial to the nation-building process, for refugees will only be persuaded to return if they know they'll have a roof over their heads.

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