

UN Urges Afghan Refugees to Stay Put

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Afghan refugees in Pakistan are eager to return home but the UN believes they should wait it out a little longer.

The UN is urging hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees preparing to return from camps in Pakistan to delay their repatriation till the spring.

By then, the UN says it will be better equipped to deal with such a large-scale operation and would also feel happier about the security situation in Afghanistan which is emerging from nearly twenty five years of conflict.

It's easy to appreciate the impatience of the refugees, some of whom have spent over two decades in extremely primitive conditions. Now that a neutral government is in place, most just want to get on with their lives and believe that the security situation in their country is nothing to worry about.

However, many of the refugees might well be persuaded to remain in situ until March as the UN assistance they need for repatriation is not yet available.

"If people feel that their safety is guaranteed then we anticipate that a large number of people will opt to return," UNHCR spokesman Yusuf Hassan told journalists in Islamabad on January 7.

UNHCR says it is making plans to provide assistance for around a million individuals from Pakistan, but needs more time to organise an operation on such a scale.

Another UNHCR spokesman in Islamabad, Abdul Qayoum Karim, said that, besides safety considerations, a delayed return was preferable to allow time for both devastated property and infrastructure to be repaired and essential facilities for refugees to be set up.

Of the four million displaced Afghans - the largest refugee population in the world - half are in Pakistan and half in Iran, most living in camps along the border with Afghanistan.

Around a quarter of those in Pakistan left their homes during the soviet occupation in the Eighties, while the rest drifted over to escape the civil conflicts of the Nineties.

The camps - most of which are clustered around the city of Peshawar and Quetta - offer the refugees few comforts. Fed up with basic living conditions, many would settle for the chance to return home and start a new life.

Mohammad Nabi has lived the past five years on the outskirts of Peshawar and is hoping that he will get back his old government job in Kabul. He left Afghanistan so that his daughters could get an education - something impossible under the former Taleban regime. Now they have finished their college education, he thinks the family will enjoy a better standard of living in the Afghan capital.

Many left Afghanistan with nothing and are waiting for UN assistance. What form that will take is not yet clear. "The repatriation package," said Hassan, "may include a cash grant, food and maybe some other materials."

A teacher in one of Peshawar's Afghan schools, Shala, feels she is owed some sort of help. She lost everything she owned to looters in 1991 and then had to bring up her four children alone after her husband died. Now she doesn't even know how she will transport the possessions she has accumulated since then.

Jailani, a spokesman for refugees in the Shamshatoo camp near Peshawar, says he knows many refugees will be reluctant to start again from scratch without help. Describing the hardships endured in the camp, he points at the mud houses and shacks which used up the little bit of money they managed to earn or save.

Azim, a cobbler, who has struggled to provide for a family of ten, says that he won't return unless the government rebuilds his house in the Char Asib district of Kabul. Rebuilding projects will be funded by the UN or another international organisation.

Guljan, a widow in the Jalozei camp close to Peshawar, looks to UN help as her only hope. She depends on her daughter to beg for money on the streets but thinks that in Afghanistan she will be hard-pressed to earn the 20 rupees a day she gets in Pakistan. There'll be too many beggars on the streets of Kabul, she believes.

Islamabad, meanwhile, cannot wait to see the back of the refugees. Already in December the Pakistani government had approved plans to start moving the displaced Afghans out of urban centres into refugee camps prior to their return home.

The presence of two million refugees has been a constant drain on the country's finances and has fuelled security fears over the years. Now that its neighbour is at peace, Pakistan can only hope that the UN gets on with the job of helping to empty the camps and tails off the humanitarian aid still flowing into the country which, the Islamabad authorities believe, provides an incentive for many of the refugees to stay.

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