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# OPINION

## Navigating Afghan Refugee Dilemma in Pakistan, Post Taliban: 2021-2024

Puspa Kumari\*

### *Abstract*

*Pakistan, long a host for Afghan refugees, faces increasing challenges due to economic, political, and security pressures. The Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP) has accelerated repatriations, leaving deportees struggling to reintegrate in Afghanistan. The Taliban, constrained by limited resources and aid, is ill-equipped to support the influx, worsening the crisis. This article reviews Afghan refugees' historical and current struggles in Pakistan, the regional dynamics driving forced repatriations, and the impacts on Taliban-led Afghanistan's governance. It calls for a coordinated effort among Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and global actors to address socio-economic issues and promote regional stability.*

**Keywords:** Afghan Refugees, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Deportation, Repatriation, Taliban.



### Introduction

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan has surged to over 3 million.<sup>1</sup> Over the last four decades, Pakistan has been one of the largest host countries for Afghan refugees. Given that Pakistan is

undergoing a severe economic crisis, political instability and security issues, the increasing number of refugees has become a serious concern. Pakistani authorities have linked Afghan refugees, either directly or indirectly, to incidents involving increasing crime rates, economic pressure, drug abuse and trafficking, as well as posing a threat to national security.<sup>2</sup> To deal with the

*\*Puspa Kumari is a Pashto language expert and researcher on Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. She has contributed to the field immensely with several publications.*

rising refugee influx, in October 2023, Pakistan implemented the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP).<sup>3</sup> The IFRP aimed to facilitate the repatriation of undocumented foreign residents in Pakistan. Afghan refugees constitute the largest portion of the refugee population in Pakistan and have often been accused of contributing to the country's deteriorating security situation. Consequently, the deportation and forced repatriations disproportionately affected the Afghan refugees.

By the end of December 2023, following Phase-I of the IFRP plan, Pakistan had expelled approximately 500,000 Afghan refugees.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Iran, which currently hosts the largest population of Afghan refugees, had begun repatriating them to Afghanistan before Pakistan enforced its deportation policy. As both Pakistan and Iran adopt stricter deportation policies, the Taliban government's capacity to reintegrate the large influx of returnees remains uncertain, exacerbating serious humanitarian challenges for the returnees. However, Afghanistan, at the moment, lacks economic resources to assist and reintegrate them, coupled with international sanctions and frozen assets which has worsened the situation. Amidst the talks of implementation of Phase-

II of Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan, the Pakistan government has extended the validity of Proof of Residence (PoR) Cards till 30 June 2025.<sup>5</sup> This move will give legal immunity to Afghan refugees for staying in Pakistan for another year.

### **Historical Account of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan**

Afghanistan has faced one of the most extensive refugee crises in modern history. By the end of 2023, there were 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees globally, making it one of the world's largest displaced populations.<sup>6</sup> A combination of recurring natural disasters, including earthquakes and droughts, chronic poverty, ethnic and religious discrimination and persecution, and more importantly, more than four decades of continuous conflict have driven millions of Afghans to seek refuge in other countries. According to the Forced Migration Review, from 1979 to the present day, one in four Afghans has been a refugee.<sup>7</sup> They migrated to neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan, making these two nations the largest hosts of Afghan refugees, with Iran accommodating 4.5 million and Pakistan 3.1 million, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The 1951 Convention of the United Nation defines "a refugee as a person living in the fear of being persecuted

for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of (their) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail (them self) of the protection of that country.”<sup>9</sup>

Between the 1970s and 2024, Pakistan has witnessed four major

waves of Afghan refugee influxes. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the first wave of Afghan refugees entered Pakistan when the United States of America (USA) and the then Soviet Union (now Russia) engaged in the Cold War. Approximately one million Afghans fled to Pakistan, among which rural farmers constituted the majority of people displaced.<sup>10</sup> The second wave of

**Table 1:**  
**Total Number of Afghan refugees in**  
**Pakistan: 2021-2024**

Year	Total Number of Afghan Refugees
2021	1.5 million (250,000 arrived in 2021 alone after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul)
2022	1.7 million
2023	2 million
2024 (till June)	3.1 million

Source: UNHCR ( <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak> )

refugee influx took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, people continued to be displaced due to the internal power struggle between various factions in Afghanistan such as Hezb-e-Islami, Jamaat-e-Islami and the Taliban.<sup>11</sup> This period of internal conflict eventually led to the rise of the Taliban, which took control of Kabul in 1996. By that time, the number of registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan had risen to 3.2 million.<sup>12</sup>

The third wave of Afghan refugee influx in Pakistan occurred during the first rule of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. The fight between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance led by Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Masood, combined with the regime's harsh policies and its treatment of women, were major causes behind population displacement. Later when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 following the attack of 9/11, migration from Afghanistan intensified as US military intervention and the ensuing 'War on Terror' escalated bombing campaigns, killing hundreds of innocent Afghans including women and children. The fourth and most recent wave of refugee influx occurred after the Taliban captured Kabul and re-established the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan in August 2021.<sup>13</sup> The fear of the return of

Sharia-based governance and repetition of the previously experienced repressive policies imposed by the Taliban triggered many Afghans to leave the country and find their way into Pakistan.

### **Pakistan's Treatment of Afghan Refugees**

Both Iran and Pakistan have played pivotal roles in hosting Afghan refugees, particularly in the wake of Afghanistan's political turmoil. Pakistan despite being neither a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol,<sup>14</sup> initially pursued an open arms approach towards migrants coming from Afghanistan, driven by regional dynamics. This led to a drastic increase in the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, reaching 3.2 million between 1981 and 1990.<sup>15</sup>

In order to manage the huge influx of refugees, Pakistan established the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR) in 1980 under the subdivision of the Ministry of State and Frontier Regions (SAFRON).<sup>16</sup> The CAR plays a pivotal role in managing and supporting Afghan refugees through collaboration and coordination with International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other refugee related organisations. However, in the

absence of a comprehensive legal framework for refugees, the Foreigners Act of 1946 serves as the primary legislative framework governing foreign nationals within its borders. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Pakistan is the primary organisation which is responsible for the process to determine refugee status for foreigners on behalf of the Pakistan Government.<sup>17</sup>

When the Taliban seized control of Kabul in 1996, international aid diminished significantly, hindering Pakistan's capacity to support Afghan refugees. As a result, Pakistan's policy shifted from hospitality to hostility towards these refugees. Following the 1999 military coup, General Musharraf implemented a preventive strategy, ordering the closure of borders and citing the country's financial constraints in accommodating refugees without international assistance.<sup>18</sup> However, people crossed the border informally, even after the blockade order.

The geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically after 9/11, with both Afghanistan and Pakistan coming under international scrutiny for providing safe haven to various terrorist groups. In an effort to align itself with western powers and avoid further accusations, Pakistan decided to document refugees with the support of the UNHCR. The

registration of Afghan refugees began in 2006, during which PoR cards were issued to registered refugees living in Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> This card grants refugees the right to legally reside in Pakistan and allow them to move freely throughout the country, protecting them from being arrested under the Foreigners Act. Currently, there are 1.34 million PoR card holders living in Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> In another move, Pakistan initiated the documentation of unregistered Afghan nationals in 2017 by issuing them Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC).<sup>21</sup> This card was provided to individuals who do not have PoR cards and were originally from Afghanistan and helped them to get access to basic facilities.

In the same year, the Pakistan cabinet adopted the 'Comprehensive Policy on Voluntary Repatriation and Management of Afghan Nationals'. This policy introduced several key measures, including the continuation of voluntary repatriation under the tripartite agreement, the extension of the validity of PoR cards, the drafting of national refugee legislation, improved border management, registration of undocumented Afghan refugees, and the introduction of a flexible visa regime for PoR cardholders.<sup>22</sup> Although this policy aimed at bringing about positive changes in existing refugee management, its implementation is



still in its nascent stage. However, some progress has been made in finalisation of visa regime, improved border management at key entry points such as Torkham and Chaman, and extending the validity of PoR cards. In 2019, the government of Pakistan took a significant step by providing registered Afghan refugees to open bank accounts.<sup>23</sup> This policy aimed to facilitate financial inclusion for refugees, allowing them to participate formally in the economic system of the country. The decision, probably, has been taken to formalise the informal financial transactions made by refugees, thereby reducing the risk of grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Iran started to deport Afghan refugees in September 2023 citing security concerns as well as accusing them for causing a high economic burden on the country.<sup>24</sup> It is likely that Pakistan took a leaf out of the Iranian refugees' management book and started to deport Afghan refugees just after Iran commenced its repatriation plan. This was done through the IFRP plan, implemented by Pakistan in October 2023. Following the implementation of the deportation plan, Iran has prohibited millions of Afghan refugees and migrants from living in, travelling to, or seeking employment in at least 16 provinces.<sup>25</sup> To show its determination, Iran has recently

announced its plan to deport approximately 2 million undocumented foreign nationals by the end of the current Persian year, March 2025.<sup>26</sup> In an effort to enhance border security and control illegal crossings across Iran-Afghanistan border, Iran has fenced its border along Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan has also started to fence its border in 2017, a step to control border movement and curb illegal crossings.

### **Voluntary Repatriation and Forced Deportation**

In Pakistan, the UNHCR has become a key partner of the government to manage and assist refugees by establishing several refugee camps. To deal with the rising refugee population, a tripartite agreement was signed by UNHCR with Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2002 in order to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees.<sup>28</sup> This agreement has extended multiple times, notably in 2007, 2010 and most recently in 2019.<sup>29</sup>

As mentioned earlier, in accordance with its IFRP plan of 2023, Pakistan has initiated the forced return of almost 500,000 Afghan refugees.<sup>30</sup> Though, this is not the first time that Pakistan has done so. In 2016, the Pakistani government declared its intention to deport Afghan refugees by announcing its intention of not extending the validity of PoR cards. From September 2016 to December

**Table 2:**  
**Number of Voluntarily Repatriated**  
**Afghan Refugees from Pakistan: 2021-2024**

Year	Voluntarily Repatriated Refugees
2021	1429
2022	6506
2023	54,873
2024 (till June)	35,548

*Source:* UNHCR (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg>)

2016, more than 600,000 Afghans were forcefully repatriated to their homeland.<sup>31</sup> The primary motive behind these deportations was the financial constraints faced by Pakistan, which limits its capacity to assist such a large number of refugees.

More recently, due to a surge in terror attacks in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan has accused the direct or indirect involvement of Afghan refugees in those attacks.<sup>32</sup> According to Pakistani officials, there has also been a rise in attacks by

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in several Northern provinces of Pakistan. The authorities have accused the Taliban for providing a safe haven to the TTP and letting them use their soil to launch attacks on Pakistan.<sup>33</sup> The fear of refugees supporting non-state actors such as the TTP behind this move by Pakistan. This can also give Pakistan an upper hand in using them as a bargaining tool with the Taliban to control the activity of the groups in Pakistan.

Afghanistan has long been recognised as the world's largest

**Table 3:**  
**Major Phases of Forced Return of**  
**Afghan Refugees from Pakistan**

Year	Number of Forced Returnees
September 2016 - December 2016	600,000 (370, 102 Registered and 244, 309 Unregistered)*
October 2023 - December 2023	500,000
2024 (till September)	29, 599

*Source:* UNHCR, (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>)

( \*UNHCR Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan, September 2016 - December 2016 )

producer and exporter of opium. Despite the Taliban's imposition of a comprehensive ban on the cultivation and marketing of drugs, neighbouring countries continue to report incidents of drug trafficking within their borders. Recent statistics indicate that Pakistan is home to approximately 7 million drug addicts, with the highest number of opiate abusers reported in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>34</sup> For a long time, Pakistan has attributed the proliferation of the drug trade and consumption in the region to

Afghans, accusing them of transforming the area into a hub for drug abuse and narcotics trafficking.

### **Taliban Policies towards Refugee Returnees**

In Afghanistan, the returnees are majorly rehabilitated in provinces like Nangarhar, Kandahar, Kabul, Laghman and Helmand.<sup>35</sup> Soon after the announcement of the IFRP plan by Pakistan, the interim government established the 'High Commission for Facilitation of Returning Refugees' in October 2023.<sup>36</sup> The

commission consists of 31 members which is led by the Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi. Its primary responsibilities are to look after financial assistance, education, health and relocation of refugee returnees. The commission regularly published its daily activities report. However, there have been no updates on its accountability and effectiveness since December 2023.

At the beginning, Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada appeared responsive to the crisis, releasing an audio message on 3 November 2023, expressing distress over the treatment of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and announcing comprehensive support for the returnees.<sup>37</sup> Other Taliban officials, including Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob, Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi have condemned the steps taken by Pakistan.<sup>38</sup> Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid has called Pakistan's decision merely a technique of exerting pressure on Afghanistan to address ongoing TTP militancy in Pakistan. He had called the TTP an internal issue of Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>

In a step towards collaborative effort, the Housing and Urban Development Ministry announced a committee to provide land and permanent houses to returning

refugees.<sup>40</sup> However, the returnees have complained continuously about bad living conditions and lack of basic facilities at the camps. The Taliban defence Ministry also announced the supply of 2000 military trucks to transport the refugees' belongings from the border to their designated destinations, and passenger buses to carry the returning refugees.<sup>41</sup> Since coming back to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the interim government in Afghanistan has been facing several challenges including the freezing of financial resources and major cuts in foreign aid. This has made it difficult for the government to assist and help the Afghan refugee returnees by providing them with necessary living and health facilities.

### **Challenges Faced by the Refugees**

The return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, while framed as a practical move, has raised significant challenges due to strict conditions imposed by Pakistan on the returning refugees. When Pakistan started its IFRP plan in the latter half of 2023, it restricted returnees from carrying substantial belongings and capped the amount of cash they could take to 50,000 Pakistani rupees (\$170).<sup>42</sup> This has intensified the financial burden on refugees to start their life afresh without sufficient financial resources for their families.

The Joint Multi-Sector Needs Assessment observed that over 50 per cent of Afghan refugees were born in Pakistan.<sup>43</sup> Many of these returnees were living in Pakistan for more than 30 years, making them second or third generation refugees with no property, family or support systems in Afghanistan. Apart from this, these returnees have been facing severe challenges related to access to healthcare, food security, and employment opportunities.<sup>44</sup> Cash trapped Taliban are very unlikely to be able to even take care of basic facilities of the returnees. Disputes over property ownership have also surged, as many refugees fled their homes decades ago without securing their property rights, resulting in conflicts with residents who have occupied their land in their absence.<sup>45</sup> Another significant challenge faced by the returnees is the lack of necessary documentation to enroll their children in schools. Additionally, young adults struggle to find employment due to the absence of official identification.<sup>46</sup>

International organisations and aid groups, which once played a crucial role in supporting Afghan populations, have scaled back their operation due to shortage of funds.<sup>47</sup> Acknowledging the need, the Taliban has urged the private sector to help and support Afghan refugee returnees. Given the complex

situation, the Taliban efforts are unlikely to be sufficient in tackling the refugee issue. It needs to engage with the international community in a more meaningful and accepting manner, which could help them get the maximum support required.

In Pakistan, Afghan refugees have been continuously urging the Pakistan government to make a national refugee framework that would provide them with some legal protection in the country. Amidst the uncertainty and problems arising from the delay in extension of PoR cards by the host government, the refugees have also demanded that its validity should be extended initially for more than three years.

Among those most affected by the forced repatriation are Afghan women and girls. Since the return to power, the Taliban have issued decrees and imposed severe restrictions on the movement and education of women. In the latest move, the supreme leader has ordered women to refrain from speaking in public.<sup>48</sup> Forceful deportation by Pakistan is going to be more detrimental for the returning Afghan girls and women refugees, leaving them with the choice of nothing but to endure the harsh and discriminatory policies imposed by the Afghan government.

## Conclusion

The ongoing Afghan refugee crisis in Pakistan, worsened by the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, has placed significant pressure on Pakistan's already fragile economy and alleged security environment. Refugees face immense challenges, financial and social, especially in terms of reintegration into Afghanistan. The Taliban government lacks the necessary resources and infrastructure to support the return of refugees, raising serious concerns about their future. As Pakistan and Iran continue to deport Afghan refugees, as well as Iran announcing to implement its second phase of deportation plan, the humanitarian situation remains dire.

For the Taliban, a comprehensive plan is essential to facilitate the returnees, especially for women, who are disproportionately affected by restrictive policies, as the interim government seems to be falling short of its commitment made under the Doha Agreement. While returning to the country might seem to be a viable option for many, the lack of health facilities and employment opportunities, combined with severe restrictions on freedom of movement and work, keep refugees in a precarious situation. The Taliban need to engage with the international community in a more accepting manner to secure aid and support necessary for managing the returnees effectively. ■

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