

COMMENT 263

The forgotten victims of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy

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24 November 2023– DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C263](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C263)



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Largely ignored by western media and decision makers, the Pakistani government started a repatriation process of unregistered ‘[illegal foreigners](#)’ ‘that could pressure [‘millions of Afghans back to their crisis-wrecked home country.’](#) In a [joint statement](#), the United Nations High Commissioner (UNHCR) for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) classified these repatriations as forceful returns.

Pakistan hosts an estimated [three](#) to [four](#) million Afghan refugees and migrants with various legal status. According to Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti, some [1.73 million](#) Afghan nationals in Pakistan lacked the required legal documents. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission [assumes](#) that there are over two million undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan. At least [600,000](#)¹ left Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power for a second time in August 2021. Besides Afghans illegally residing on Pakistani soil, it is [documented](#) that ‘1.3 million are registered as legal refugees, holding Proof of Registration cards [PoR], while an additional 850,000 have received Afghan Citizen Cards [ACC] from the Pakistani authorities, giving them some protections.’ A problematic fact is that these PoR cards are subject to periodic renewal (every six months). This ‘[lack of permanence](#)’ in PoR status ‘has fostered a perennial sense of insecurity and uncertainty among Afghan refugees regarding their prospects in exile.’

¹ The actual figures are much higher. The UNHCR estimates (unofficially) that 303,000 Afghans approached them for registration but ‘[have not been permitted to register new arrivals.](#)’

On [26 September 2023](#), the Pakistani government issued the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP), which came into effect on 1 November 2023. According to the IFRP, the authorities intend to ‘regulate foreigners in Pakistan and ensure that foreigners staying illegally or overstaying their visa validity are deported back to their parent countries.’ Concretely, every undocumented foreigner must leave Pakistan ‘[by 1 November or face arrest and deportation](#).’ It is [reported](#) that since the announcement of the IFRP, over 250,000 opted for ‘voluntary departure’; however, ten thousands of refugees were still on the road at the time of the deadline. It is interesting to note that Pakistan rejected a [US-presented list of 25,000 Afghans](#) residing in the country whose protection Washington asked Islamabad to ensure, arguing that the list was ‘[flawed and incomplete](#).’ The [listed Afghans were supposed](#) to ‘be eligible for relocation to the United States under a special immigration programme for their services during the two-decade-long presence of American forces in Afghanistan.’ Although the Biden administration stated it a ‘[priority](#)’ to ensure ‘[the safe and efficient](#)’ resettlement of Pakistan-based eligible Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, it did nothing decisive to protect Afghans from getting handed over to the Taliban regime. After cutting a deal with the Afghan Taliban, the US hastily withdrew from Afghanistan and maintained military aid to Islamabad. The US’ indifference in the face of misery among Afghan refugees is another major failure of US policy in the Afghan-Pakistan region.

The [IFRP contains](#) the basic procedures for the proposed return [deportation] of non-citizens who reside in the country and lack a valid visa. [According to media reports](#), the Plan was created in response to ‘growing terrorist threats, engagement by foreigners in criminality, and negative associated impacts to the economy.’

In response to [international criticisms](#), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [stated](#) that the IFRP applies to all illegal foreigners residing in Pakistan, irrespective of their nationality and country of origin. However, according to experts, [the state targets all Afghans](#), both undocumented and registered. The Pakistani state is obviously scapegoating Afghan refugees for the deteriorating security situation in the country, especially the rapid increase of terrorist attacks. Parallel to the announcement by the IFRP, the authorities [revealed](#) ‘that 14 of 24 suicide bombings in the country this year were carried out by Afghan nationals.’ The Pakistani state has also [accused](#) ‘Afghan refugees for a series of other crimes, including smuggling.’

The process of repatriation is meant to be '[phased and orderly](#)'. In Phase 1 of the plan, the [state targets "illegal" migrants](#), 'meaning those with no documentation, those with fake Pakistani papers and those who have overstayed their visas.' This will include all foreigners but will primarily affect Afghans. In the next phases, Pakistani authorities aim to repatriate/deport Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders ("Phase 2"), followed by the repatriation of PoR card holders ("Phase 3"). Most PoR cards are already expired. Currently, it does not seem that Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will reach an agreement on renewing the cardholders' status. Future protection to holders of ACC cards is also in doubt. The fact that not only unregistered but also PoR and ACC card holders face systematic harassment indicates that authorities aim at a mass expulsion of Afghan citizens from their soil.

[According to Amnesty International](#), 'since the expiry of the 1 November deadline imposed by the Government of Pakistan, the police have moved from registering cases under the Foreigners Act, 1946 which among other things criminalizes illegal entry into Pakistan, to directly detaining refugees deemed 'illegal' at deportation centers.' These deportation centers, also known as "holding" or "transit centers", which started operating on the November 1st deadline as well - are places in which '[Afghans would be held for one or two days for processing](#)'. Amnesty International reports that the Pakistani government established 49 of these centers, and more are in planning. The human rights organisation is [concerned](#) that '[t]hese deportation centers have not been constructed under a specified law and run parallel to the legal system.' Amnesty International further [stresses](#) 'that in at least seven detention centers, no legal rights are extended to detainees such as the right to a lawyer or communication with family members. Such centers are in violation of right to liberty and a fair trial.'

The IFRP exposes many Afghans to retribution and abuses. Apparently, Pakistan does not want an orderly repatriation which considers the interests and concerns of Afghan citizens. Instead, the authorities are interested to create maximum fear among Afghans on Pakistani soil. The authorities are not providing undocumented Afghans enough time to prepare for their departure. Moreover, there are claims that authorities are [confiscating properties](#), especially cash and jewellery. A [report](#)

by the International Crisis Group further states that the ‘police allegedly asks for sexual favours from Afghan women looking to avoid detention.’ It is crucial to note that even registered Afghans are facing humiliations. Ibraheem Bahiss from the International Crisis Group notes that ‘registered refugees have reported police raids on their homes, confiscation of property, destruction of Proof of Registration cards, arrests without charge and demands for bribes.’ In other words, even valid documents do not protect Afghans in Pakistan from police harassment.

The Afghan Taliban also criticized the IFRP, asking Islamabad [to halt deportations](#) and describing the actions by Pakistani authorities ‘as acts of cruelty.’ [Afghan](#) refugees in Pakistan have [faced forced repatriations in the past](#), but never on this scale. Afghans [are terrified](#). Many fled their home country after the Taliban retook control in 2021. Some are living in Pakistan for decades. Moreover, given the current disastrous economic situation and living conditions of the common people in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that the Taliban are able (or willing) to provide enough shelter, health care, food, and other basic services to returnees. Dispossessed Afghans are also forced to return home [at the worst time](#), as the harsh winter is beginning. [Back in Afghanistan](#), ‘their life and physical integrity could be at risk amidst an intensified crackdown on human rights and an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe.’ [According to](#) Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman of the UN's human rights office, many Afghans when deported back to Afghanistan ‘will be at grave risk of human rights violations [...], including arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, cruel and other inhuman treatment.’ Besides those who worked as journalists or collaborated with the former Government of the Islamic Republic, especially women and girls will face severe suppression under the Taliban rule.

This is all the more politically delicate since Pakistan is largely responsible for the whole refugee crisis to start with. Pakistan has interfered into the domestic affairs of Afghanistan for decades. The Pakistani security forces, especially its intelligence, supported Afghan Mujahedeen forces in their fight against the communist regime and Russian occupation. Islamabad also persistently intervened into the rivalry between the different Mujahedeen groups and other regional power centres in Afghanistan, always aiming at the establishment of a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul. Later, Pakistan offered its full support to the Taliban fighting US and NATO

missions. Pakistan also undermined any attempts by the international community to bring substantial, sustainable development – thus preventing a peaceful transition, stability, and security in Afghanistan. suffers continuous violence and armed conflicts for decades. The emergence of Jihadism, the arrival of globally acting terrorist groups, leading to the tremendous suffering of the Afghan people – cost of human lives, destruction of livelihoods, all sorts of suppression and humiliation – naturally created large waves of refugees. Many of these became stranded in Pakistan, where they now face new humiliations and systematic persecution by Islamabad. The new repatriation of Afghan refugees marks just another peak in the long history of the mistreatment of Afghan citizens by the Pakistani government. As a result, South Asia is experiencing one of the greatest refugee disasters of the last decades, only overshadowed by the Bengal famine of 1943, the bloody partition of the Indian subcontinent of 1947, and the genocide of the Bengali people of 1971.

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