

# THE REPATRIATION OF AFGHAN REFUGEES: IMPACT ON PAK- AFGHAN RELATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The repatriation of the Afghan Refugees to Afghanistan has been viewed with great concern by the government of Pakistan. The Soviet intervention of 1979 in Afghanistan brought about the influx of the Afghan refugees to Pakistan who tried to provide all possible support to the Afghani brethren in the hour of need. Now, since Afghanistan is free of all foreign interference, the government of Pakistan urged the refugees to return to their parent country. The move of Pakistani government did not receive positive response from all the refugees and in consequence had to initiate action against the refugees through proper arrangement of a deadline, deportation and arrest and detention in the areas of great concern. This article aims at exploring the repatriation of the Afghan Refugees to Afghanistan and its impact on the Pak-Afghan Relations.

**Keywords:** Repatriation, Refugees, Issues, Impact, Afghan

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of Afghan refugees is one of the chronic problems in the relations of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The issue dates back to 1979 when the Soviet Union intervened in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, resulting in the huge influx of the Afghan refugees to Pakistan and Iran. Initially the government of Pakistan provided all facilities to the Afghan brethren but on the normalization of relations, the Afghan people were unwilling to go back to their country and even now they are showing resistance on their repatriation. The issue of repatriation has caused great tension in the relations of the two countries. The history of the strained relations is not only due to the issue of refugees but also the issues of security, and presence of long and porous border. After a period

of more than four decades, the issues of conflict and instability has become rampant resulting in the estimated 23.7 million refugees; over half of the Afghan population comprising the women and girls are in need of humanitarian and protection assistance (UNHCR, 2025). By the end of 2024, the strength of Afghan refugees amounted to 5.8 million, accounting for one of the largest protracted refugee situations in the world (UN, 2025). The sufferings of Afghan have been for the last four decades, mostly due to natural calamities, extreme poverty, insecurity of food, the pandemic of COVID-19 and recently the retake of the country by Taliban in August 2021 are some of the contributory factors leading towards political instability and violence of the

country (UN, 2025).

### **The Issue of Afghan Refugees**

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan has led to protracted displacement of generations of Afghans, with Pakistan currently hosting about 1.5 million registered Afghan Refugees including men, women, and children (UNHCR, The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is among the largest refugee-hosting countries globally, showing remarkable generosity for over 40 years to those in search of safety., 2026). The government of Pakistan estimates that round about 600,000 additional Afghan Refugees sought refuge in Pakistan in the Aftermath of August 2021 when the Afghan Taliban retook the country. This made further burden on the exchequer of the government of Pakistan besides, burden of space, education and health facilities and other requirements of daily commodities. Many refugees fearing arrest by the Pakistani officials have returned to Afghanistan but the humanitarian situation for women and children remain dire in Afghanistan. According to the estimates of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees that Pakistan and Iran host an estimated 5.7 million Afghan refugees in refuge like situations.

The government of Pakistan has been urging the Afghan refugees to return to their country since the war is now over and their presence in Pakistan is a great burden on the exchequer. Pakistan started to emphasize upon the refugees to return to their country in September 2023 and has been struggling hard to the issue of their repatriation. The United Nations Refugee Agency reports that at least 2.8 million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan during 2025 after being deported from both Pakistan and Iran (International, 2025). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Annual report states that about 1.8 million Afghan refugees were expelled from Iran while 930, 000 from Pakistan. The report says that the deportation of the Afghan refugees from the two countries increased by 62% as compared to 2024. The highest number of returns were recorded in Iran during July 2025 where 373, 000 Afghans were expelled. UNHCR also testifies that women and girls face serious protection risks given the current human rights situation in the Taliban-

ruled Afghanistan (International, 2025).

Some Afghan refugees still live in Pakistan and wit for their resettlement in the United States as per report of the Nations. The report says 19,973 Afghan refugees awaiting relocation to the United States are currently in Pakistan, and their information will be shared with relevant authorities to begin deportation procedures (International A. , Pakistan Plans Deportation Of Nearly 20,000 Afghans Awaiting US Resettlement, 2026). The collapse of the former government in Afghanistan in August 2021 and resultant control of the country by the Afghan Taliban, tens of thousands of Afghan refugees fled to the neighboring countries including Pakistan (International A. , Pakistan Plans Deportation Of Nearly 20,000 Afghans Awaiting US Resettlement, 2026). Many of them have spent more than four years waiting for their resettlement in the United States but have not yet been successful in their objective. The US President, Donald Trump has also expressed his views that those Afghan immigrants who have recently entered the US would be reviewed (International A. , Pakistan Plans Deportation Of Nearly 20,000 Afghans Awaiting US Resettlement, 2026). The US government has also suspended the issuance of visas for Afghan passport holders for an indefinite period of time while further adding that no time limit has been fixed for the issuance of visas (International A. , Pakistan Plans Deportation Of Nearly 20,000 Afghans Awaiting US Resettlement, 2026).

### **Obstacles in the way of Refugees' Repatriation**

The Afghan Refugees who have been residing in Pakistan since 1979 with almost young generation growing old are not willing to go back to their parent country. Most of the Afghan people have flourished their businesses and properties in Pakistan with job opportunities and facilities of life. Now, during the last two years, the government of Pakistan took stringent measures for their repatriation to Afghanistan at all costs. As per the estimates of the UN report, about 10.3 million Afghan people are struck by displacement either in their own country, or in the neighboring countries on account of conflict, violence and poverty (UN, 2025). Amongst these issues, poverty

and hunger are some of the other issues faced by the people of Afghanistan posing a great challenge to the Afghan Taliban. In terms of refugees, Afghan refugees are one of the largest populations in the world, as per the statistical data of 2024 of UNHCR report. By the end of 2024, the number of Afghan refugees was reported to be globally decreased by 10% to reach 5.8 million, showing the returns of the refugees from Iran, and Pakistan (UN, 2025). The war-stricken Afghanistan on account of foreign intervention during 1979 and 2001 coupled with civil war, leadership vacuum, struggle for power between the various stakeholders and the issue of lacking of basic facilities of life coupled with poverty have compelled the people to opt for residing in the neighboring countries.

Of the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, both Iran and Pakistan are the two major countries for housing the Afghan Refugees since the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1979. The former serves to host 3.5 million refugees while the latter hosts 1.6 million refugees. As a move of repatriation to the parent country, nearly a quarter of 3.5 million refugees from Iran have returned to Afghanistan while from Pakistan approximately 126, 800 Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan (UN, 2025). In continuation of the repatriation move, more than 3 million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan since September 2023 while in 2025 alone, a total of 2.5 million Afghan refugees are estimated to have returned to their countries (UN, 2025) from the neighboring countries. It is pertinent to mention here that the Taliban regime has proved to be a sign of good omen and accommodative for the repatriation of the Afghan refugees that faced displacement as a result of the two successive interventions once during 1979 by the Soviet Union and the other during 2001 by the United States. Since the Taliban retake in August 2021 greater number of refugees has returned to the country showing a good sign of accommodation within the parent state. The repatriation of Afghan refugees, on one hand, will provide the leaving states the opportunities to lessen the burden on their treasury but on the other hand, will put pressure and burden on the exchequer of the

Taliban government. The displacement of the Afghan refugees is one of the largest and most protracted refugee's problems in the world covering a period of almost 47 years with the third generation of Afghan's being born in exile (UN, 2025) as per the statement of UN High Commissioner for Refugees, FilipooGrandi.

### Basic Health Issues in Afghanistan

The decade's long history of war, poverty, civil war, leadership vacuum, political instability and recurrent foreign intervention has crippled the entire edifice of Afghanistan. Most of the people of the country are struck by poverty, hunger and lack of basic health facilities of life. As per the data of May 2024, 6.5 million children in Afghanistan making for about 3/10 of the people are faced with the issues of crisis of the nature of emergency, hunger since the people feel the immediate impact of floods, drought and the return of the Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran (UN, 2025). About 28% of the population equivalent to about 12.4 million people is faced with the issues of acute food insecurity. Hunger and starvation are the two other major problems faced by the people of Afghanistan and makes about 2.4 million people have to face the experience of emergency level of hunger; which counts for one level below than the famine (UN, 2025). Poverty is one of the most determining factors in adding to the worries of Afghanistan since the issues of hunger, drought and repatriation of the Afghan refugees have to also be done on emergency basis by the Afghan Taliban government who are still to face the issues of political stability and overcoming other issues faced by the common man.

Women and children are the two strata of the society who have been greatly affected by the issues of conflict and hunger besides being faced with the threat of being out of school. Thus, both the girls and children seem to be the most deprived class of the society who would not have the basic right of getting education in the modern day world. Access to clean food, pure water and other commodities of daily life are the areas of concern leading to malnutrition of 2.9 million children below the age of five years, projected to suffer from nuisance in 2024. Coupled with these are the issues of natural disasters such as droughts, floods,

and earthquakes have also greatly affected Afghanistan. In the month of May and July 2024, heavy floods affected some areas in the northeastern, north and western regions of the country (UN, 2025). This was followed by some heavy rains resulting in the displacement of thousands of people while leaving them to their fate for need and assistance.

### Challenges before the Taliban Government

The drawdown of the US forces from Afghanistan that started in 2014 encompassing different phases for the withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan led to the rebirth of the government of the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. The drawdown scenario of the NATO forces, if on one hand, provided the opportunity of the withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan but on the other hand, faced the country with certain severe challenges and issues leading towards the weakness and fragility of the government. Some of these challenges include the severe economic downturn adding further to the vulnerability of population in a dilemma. Coupled with these are the challenges of the accommodation of the refugees that had to be adjusted after repatriation from both Pakistan and the Iran, the issues of poverty, hunger, unemployment and the natural disasters in the form of food insecurity, COVID-19, and earthquakes. In order to tackle the issues, the government of Taliban needs to focus on the collective efforts by the various stakeholders and help the needy people irrespective of religion, caste, creed, language, race and culture (AFGHANISTAN'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS, 2021)

In continuation of the Afghan refugees repatriation move, the government of Pakistan has been making all possible arrangements for sending them back to their country. Since late 2023, more than 665,000 Afghan refugees have been forced back to their country as part of the campaign (Hassan, 2025). Many of these refugees have been living in Pakistan for decades or have been born here (Tariq & Hameed, 2025). It is important to note that three generations of the Afghan refugees have been residing over here and are not ready to leave Pakistan. Those who have reached their parent country have been faced with

severe problems of finances, lack of housing facilities and access to the schools and education facilities (Tariq, Ikramullah, & Gul, 2025).

The repatriation move of the Afghan refugees were further given impetus by the de-notification of Afghan Refugee Camps by the government of Pakistan whereby 28 Afghan Refugee Camps were de-notified in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa bringing to an end the 46- years old history of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Dawn, Curtains for Afghan refugee camps in KP as Centre de-notifies last 28, 2025). The de-notified camps are situated in different parts of the country out of which eight are located in the Peshawar, five in Hangu, four in Kohat, three each in Nowshera and Dir, two each in Mardan and Swabi and one in Buner (Dawn, Curtains for Afghan refugee camps in KP as Centre de-notifies last 28, 2025). The notification has also clarified that the property and non-movable assets as mentioned in the de-notified areas would be handed over to the Commissioner of Afghan Refugees. An official of the Afghan Refugees Commissioner states that the number of Afghan camps in the province is 43 out of which five were de-notified in September 2025, ten were de-notified on October 13, 2025 and the remaining 28 on October 15, 2025 (Tariq & Hameed, 2025).

The de-notification of the Afghan Refugees Camps aims at sending back approximately 350, 000 Afghan Refugees to their parent country. According to a report of the International Organization for Migration states that Pakistan has been able in returning 702, 643 refugees to Afghanistan since April 2025 while 90, 302 of them have been deported. A comparative analysis of the repatriation and deportations shows that a decrease of 28% has been noted in the former while an increase of 82% has been recorded in the latter. According to the statistics of the government about 1,5 million had returned to Afghanistan since September 15, 2023 while 750, 685 had reached the country since January 1, 2025. In the current scenario, even the Taliban regime is not in favor of Pakistan and the Taliban are hurting the interest of Pakistan by opening up to India (Katju, 2025). The repatriation move has been facing certain problems partly because the refugees are not willing to return to their country



after spending almost 46 years in Pakistan and partly due to problems faced by the parent country for making proper arrangement and their accommodation facilities (Tariq & Hameed, 2025).

Tremendous increase in arrest and detention of the Afghan refugees marked January 2026 touching almost 18% as compared to the report of a week ago (period between January 1, 2026 to January 10, 2026) meaning thereby a very rapid increase during the beginning of 2026 (Ahmed K. , 2026). Three main areas of concern during the period included Chaghi, Pishin and Islamabad (Ahmed K. , 2026). The UN Refugee Agency, the UNHCR, and the UN Migration Office, IOM opine that during January 4 to January 10, 2026, of the total reported arrests and detentions about 73% came from Balochistan while 16% came from Islamabad. Moreover, of all the arrested and detained people during the period, Afghan Citizen Card holders and undocumented Afghan represented 87% of the total arrest and detentions while the number of Proof Registration holders stood a 13% (Tariq , Raza, & Raja , The Issue of Pak-Afghan Border Closure: Implications for Stakeholders, 2026). According to the data released by UNHCR and IOM showing that a total of 130, 999 Afghan Nationals were arrested during September 15, 2025 to January 10, 2026 (Ahmed K. , 2026). Of these arrests, most of these were made in Balochistan amounting to 68%, followed by Islamabad amounting to 19%, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 6%, Punjab 4% and Sindh 3% (Ahmed K. , 2026).

The International Federation of Red Crescent (IFRC) opines that the period between the beginning of 2025 till the end of November 2025, Afghanistan witnessed the return of 5.2 million refugees (deportees and returnees) from both Iran and Pakistan, adding further to the problems of a country already struck by severe humanitarian crisis (Ahmed K. , 2026). More than 3.6 million Afghan people have returned from Iran alone, out of which 1.2 million were deported. As per report of the Afghan Red Crescent Society data, the highest daily influx was recorded in November 2025. It is worth mentioning that most of the Afghan Refugees cross through the official crossing points of Torkham (Nangarhar) and Spin

Boldak (Kandahar), with smaller flows being observed through Angurada (Paktika) and through unofficial routes in Helmand (Tariq , Raza, & Raja, 2026). The repatriation of the refugees is still in progress and the government of Pakistan tries its level best to leave no stone unturned in sending them back to their country.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Pak-Afghan relations have always seen ups and downs in the history of the two neighboring countries. Since the interference of the Soviet Union in 1979 in Afghanistan, Pakistan faced the influx of the millions of Afghan refugees leading to the increase of burden on the exchequer of Pakistan, accommodation facility, utilization of Pakistani resources launching business enterprises inside Pakistan. The Afghan refugees came to Pakistan during the Soviet Intervention in 1979, during 2001 in the wake of US intervention in Afghanistan and during 2021 as a result of the retake of Afghan government by the Taliban. On all occasions, the government of Pakistan had to bear extra burden on its own resources causing many problems for Pakistan that has already been faced with the issues of poverty, low literacy rate, issues of security and economic degradation.

The refugees has almost spent 46 years in Pakistan but are in no mood to return to their country despite the fact that at the moment their homeland is neither in clutches of the foreign rulers nor is there any civil war in the country. They were given shelter, food and all basic facilities of life during their stay in Pakistan but when their number multiplied many fold as result of the growth of generations leading to the utilization of resources, which in itself, caused problems for Pakistan. The most agonizing thing was the 2001 scenario, when the US intervened in Afghanistan and where the Pak-Afghan border became the center of attention for the regional and the international community because the non-state actors sought refuge in the border areas and was used a safe haven for the insurgents and the terrorists. Military operations were conducted alongside the border area for clearing them up of the terrorists and the insurgents.

The evacuation of the Afghan refugees and action against them created rift between the law

enforcement agencies and governments of the two countries. The Afghan people are posting strong resistance in returning to their country and want to stay in Pakistan without any valid visa and proper documentation. The farming class and the business community who carry on business across both sides of the border have suffered a lot on account of the blockade of the routes and issuance of clearance certificate by the Customs Officials of Pakistan. Not only the business community and the poor class but also the people tied by blood relations have also suffered on for having no opportunity to meet their relatives. It is significant to mention that proper visa and valid documentation can lead to better understanding and improvement of relations between the two countries. Living without any valid permit and visa system damages the smooth functioning of bilateral relations and lead to worsening of security issues.

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