



Exploring Socio-Economic Challenges In The Repatriation Of Afghan Refugees From Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Kp), Pakistan

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, Pakistan has remained home to Afghan refugees due to the protracted wars caused either by the Superpowers' military interventions or internal conflicts. Even though Pakistan's has generously Afghanistan has been host to a protracted conflict and political instability since the last three decades. Pakistan, owing to the increasing political turmoil, economic burden and poor law and order situation warrant the return of huge bulk of refugees. The present research has identified the factors or constraints in the orderly repatriation of Afghan refugees both in home and host country. This research has utilized semi-structured interview guide to collect primary data. The

qualitative research and relevant data was collected in the three cities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa namely; Abbottabad, Mingora, and Peshawar from Afghan Refugees and host community. Thus, 45 respondents were interviewed in these three cities based on snowball sampling technique including five officials of Commissionerate for Afghan. The responses of the Afghan Refugees revealed that majority of refugees were reluctant to return to their country of origin due to the prevailing insecurity and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. It is derived from the analysis of the data that the creation of employment opportunities, provision of basic health and education and the provision of skill development opportunities in Afghanistan can be the major factors to attract the refugees back to Afghanistan. It shows that the absence of these socio-economic opportunities in the home country has significantly affected the repatriation process of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Moreover, it was found that most refugees urged the government of Pakistan to cease the forceful return of Afghans until the socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan comes to normalcy. Furthermore, for repatriation to be successful, the government of Afghanistan, Pakistan as well as the UNHCR should come up with a holistic strategy to facilitate the dignified return of Afghan refugees to their home country.

Key words: Afghan Refugees; Repatriation; Socio-economic Challenges; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Introduction

Afghan refugees' repatriation to their home country is a challenging issue being faced by the government of Pakistan. The first large-scale migration of Afghan refugees to Pakistan started after the USSR invasion of Afghanistan, where more than 5 million Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan (Alam, 2012). Pakistan has provided shelter to millions of Afghans refugees who have been living in Pakistan as asylum seekers (UNHCR, 1997). In fact, many of the Afghan refugees were either born in Pakistan or have been living here for decades (Sadat, 2008). Refugees' influx is a temporary phenomenon and they are assumed to return to their home country, which is contingent upon the normalcy of socio-economic conditions on the ground (Turton and Marsden, 2002). Literature on refugees across the globe shows that refugees usually return, when they perceive an end to violence and conflict, restoration of law and order and rebuilding basic infrastructure (Ghufran, 2012). However, the protracted nature of violence in Afghanistan is considered as a major barrier in facilitating voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan (Christensen, 1989, Sadat, 2008). It means that durable peace and political stability in Afghanistan is prerequisite for peaceful repatriation and sustainable reintegration of Afghan refugees (UNHCR, 2012).

Presently, Pakistan seeks smooth and orderly repatriation of Afghan refugees, but confronts several challenges and issues in this process such as, sporadic border skirmishes

between the security forces of both countries, reduction in foreign aid to Pakistan, security threats coupled with the internal political instability, economic crisis and poor law and order situation (UNHCR, 2013; (Christensen, 1989; Sadat, 2008). Additionally, majority of the Afghan refugees are reluctant to return to their home country due to persistent conflict, political instability and non-availability of socio-economic opportunities in Afghanistan. Consequently, these issues have compelled the government of Pakistan to seriously think and devise a strategy for refugees to return to their home country (Zieck, 2008; HRCP, 2009). According to Stigter (2006) repatriation of refugees to their home country has been viewed by scholarly cohorts and international humanitarian agencies as a basis human right and most feasible solution. The international community recognizes the fact that large scale refugee population have negatively affected the social, economic and political life of host communities in Pakistan (UNHCR, 1998; Schmeidl, 2008).

Empirical literature suggests a strong relationship between repatriation and socio-economic opportunities law and order as well as improved security situation (Kuschminder & Dora, 2009; UNHCR, 2004). According to UNHCR's report on Issues Faced by Afghan Refugees during Repatriation, majority of the refugees want to return but they are reluctant due to the prevailing security conditions in Afghanistan. Khan (2014) maintained that the provision of social services both in home and host countries significantly affects the decisions of refugees to stay or to return. Similarly, refugees with livelihood skills are more likely to repatriate than those with no skills (UNHCR, 2012).

The existing socio-economic and political condition in Afghanistan has still not been favorable to the extent to absorb all the refugees in the country (UNHCR, 2012). It is obvious, that refugees do not opt for return unless they see improvements on the ground (ibid). Voluntary repatriation of refugees remains the most preferred solution to all stakeholders. However, refugees returned in massive numbers during 2002-2008, it has slowed down after 2012. The largest repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan started in 2002, as a result of which more than 5 million Afghans have returned home with the assistance of UNHCR. Evidence suggests that most of the refugees have been forced to return to Afghanistan despite the unsafe and unfavorable conditions (Hiegemann, 2014). Subsequently, some 60% of returnees encountering difficulties in reintegrating in their home communities and indicate that limited livelihood opportunities, lack of access to basic necessities of life and security are the main reasons for not voluntarily returning to Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2012).

In the wake of these issues and challenges, Pakistan has always insisted on the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees (Zieck, 2008). However due to the recent border tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, security threats and reduction in the foreign aid, Pakistan has pushed for the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees by creating harsh conditions for them (HRCP, 2009). With the increase in the number of refugees returning are

associated multiple challenges to integration such as access to basic amenities, land and inheritance rights, and the provision of satisfactory shelter and employment.

Research Methods

The research intends to identify the factors both in Afghanistan and Pakistan which influence repatriation process of Afghan refugees to their home country. This chapter deals with the methods chosen, identification of the study area, sampling techniques and proposed processes for data analysis. Social issues demand utilizing research procedure different from natural issues (Bryman and bell, 2007). This is mostly qualitative research and follows interpretivist epistemological approach, based on the subjective interpretations of the social world by respondents. This study employed open-ended interviews to encourage the respondents to freely express their opinion and to get better insight of the issue in hand. In-depth interview is a method of data collection as well as a design of study in qualitative research and interview guide is a tool of data collection in this design as also proposed by (Kumar, 2011). Thus, depending upon the nature of the problem, this study depends on the interview method to explore the perceptions of respondents. The interviews were process oriented, and the interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' subjective experiences of their socio-economic situation both in home and host countries.

The Study Area

Selection of the research site is an important step (Creswell, 2007). This study was conducted in three regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa namely; Abbottabad and Mingora and Peshawar were covered for the collection of primary data. In Peshawar district, primary data was collected from the Kababian refugee camp located in the vicinity of the Peshawar city, set up in 1981 and currently housing approximately 800 Afghan families. One of the main reasons behind the selection of this camp was feasibility for the researcher to collect data in an easy manner and the suggestions of officials of Commissionerate of Afghan Refugees (CAR). While in Abbottabad and Mingora city, refugees living in the city and engage in different businesses, were the main target population. These two areas of KP province hosts Afghan refugees with greater diversity in their ethnic and regional background in Afghanistan.

Sampling

The study relied on snowball sampling technique to draw the relevant sample from the study area. It is a technique in which initial contacts are established with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then used these contacts to establish more (Bryman, 2008). Moreover, this research did not depend on the pre-determined sample size,

but data was collected till the data saturation point. Data saturation point is a stage where the researcher realize that he/she is not getting new information from the respondents or where the new themes stop emerging. The age of interviewee was between 28 to 60, who belonged to the same country but different regions to get an in-depth insight into the issue and who had participated in the previous repatriation initiatives. Thus, a total of 45 in-depth interviews were conducted including five interviews with the officials of Afghan Commissionerate in Peshawar in order to get an insight into the services and incentives provided by the government to facilitate the repatriation process.

Data Analysis

This study depended on the thematic representation of the data (Hycner, 1985). Qualitative data was analyzed under various themes based on the triangulation of methods, i.e. the focus groups and interviews. These themes were developed from the field notes or transcription of in-depth interviews, also the main themes were quantified in order to provide their prevalence and thus significance. Then, codes were assigned to each theme and the responses are classified under the main themes as proposed by (Bryman, 2008). This method is known as interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) comprised of six steps analytic process proposed by (Smith et al., 2009). This method is significant in highlighting the issues of marginalized and specific segments and trying to comprehend their life experiences and how they make sense of them.

Findings

In this section, we present thematic analysis on the “Factors Affecting Voluntary Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan” based on the perceptions and subjective interpretations of Afghan refugees. The respondents were not specifically asked to discuss the challenges they were facing in their repatriation process, however throughout the data collection and analysis of the data, few major challenges as highlighted in the themes below were significantly prevalent. Despite emphasizing various aspects of their life experiences, clear thematic trends across the stories of refugees were identified which were mainly connected to socio-economic, political and security issues.

The provision of socio-economic opportunities to the returnees in their home country are pivotal to ensure safe and dignified repatriation of refugees as well as their sustainable reintegration. Improvement in the security situation, law and order and the provision of social services i.e. education and health etc. in the home country upon return are considered pre-requisites for successful repatriation process. This section shed light on the views of the respondents regarding the provision of socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan and its impact on the repatriation process.

Security Conditions in the Home Country

Lack of security in their respective regions was cited by most refugees as the primary factors hampering the repatriation process. Majority of the refugees particularly in camps hailed from the hotspots of conflict, violence and militancy in Afghanistan. Afghan refugees in Pakistan perceive that the security condition in Afghanistan is bad and are reluctant to return.

In the words of a respondent interviewed in Peshawar:

“When we have shelter, and our life is secured we are happy”.

In spite of improvement in the security situation in few regions, refugees were still reluctant to return due to perceived violence. Similarly, it was observed that few refugees were of the view that security and law and order was even worse than before. This evidence is also supported by report released by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), in April 2016, “Afghanistan is worse off today than it was before 2001”.

Another refugee hailing from Kabul stated that:

“Our home country is like a heaven for us and everyone should return to his/her country of origin and participate in the development and nation building process but in current situation, no one is willing to return due to risks associated with life”.

The presence of Taliban and militants as well as military operations and suicide attacks in the hometowns of refugees were crucial source of concerns for refugees aiming to return. In this regard, one of the respondents said:

“The presence of Taliban and other militant groups has created panic in our areas. There are still military operations and suicide attacks. In such condition I cannot put the lives of my family at risk”. An elder from Afghan Community interviewed in Peshawar City.

Refugees returned in 2002 faced difficulties. UNHCR has repeatedly voiced satisfaction with the return of large numbers of refugees but expressed concern that more is needed to be done to ensure their successful repatriation. Refugee women also face insecurity in Afghanistan. They are of the view, that their children and girls are unable to go to schools for fear of violence and fighting as well as lack of basic amenities of life like education, health, water and electricity.

“A refugee woman interviewed in Kababian camp expressed her concerns about home and told that the fighting between Taliban and NATO forces in their hometown (Kanduz) have threatened and endangered the lives of the people”.

One of the respondents expressed his views about the security and instability as follows:

“I returned to Afghanistan during the initial phase of 2016 repatriation process, I had to spend three months in an open space without proper home and witnessing bombings, militancy and suicide attacks on regular basis. This compelled me to return back to Pakistan”.

The experiences of refugees in camps indicates that they were happy in Pakistan than in their home country. One of the elders at Kababian camp in KP expressed his views in the following words:

“I have spent almost entire life in Pakistan, my children are born and raised here. We cannot even imagine of going back to Afghanistan. Pakistan is our home, because we live here with dignity, respect and feel secure”.

It means voluntary repatriation is the solution of choice for many refugees. In a repatriation phase, this require the restoration of national protection through the reintegration process, the ability of refugees to sustain their livelihoods, access to social services and fully reintegrate into communities and home countries. The repatriation and reintegration programs of UNHCR should lie in the wider context of transition from conflict to peace by bridging the gap between response, relief and development to reduce the dependence of returnees on humanitarian assistance and to ensure returnees' early and sustainable reintegration. Afghan refugees, who fled to Pakistan many years back with no or very few belongings, are now facing harsh conditions created by the Pakistani government to return to Afghanistan, a country that is still experiencing violent conflict.

“My two uncles were killed in bomb blast, and the soldiers took away my two younger brothers to fight for them”. said, 29 years old Ghani from Helmand.

The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 resulted into the fall of Taliban regime and creation of new government as well as the injection of massive funds into the economy of Afghanistan. This was seen by refugees as a harbinger of change. Subsequently, repatriation process received boost after 2002, because refugees perceived an opportunity of making economic gains as a result of creation of job opportunities. Thus, the return process in this period was primarily motivated by the desire to get productively absorbed in a new, expanding economy. Repatriation of Afghan refugees is closely linked to the security and law and order situation in Afghanistan. Repatriation occurs when a situation improves in the home

country; unless the refugees themselves perceive an improvement in ground realities, they do not opt for return. In the case of Afghans, the political and economic situation has still not improved to the extent where all refugees would want to return. Therefore, alternative strategies need to be worked out to manage the remaining refugee population. This evidence is also confirmed by the responses of majority of respondents. Despite 15 years of international presence, Afghanistan continues to be confronted by violence and instability, weak and ineffective governance and poverty. This state of protracted violence and instability in Afghanistan is viewed by most of the refugees as a major obstacle for their repatriation and reintegration process.

Availability of Shelter and Housing in the Home Country

Another important determinant of voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan is the availability of shelter and housing in the home country. Interviews and focus group discussions with refugees confirmed that repatriation would result into re-migration to Pakistan due to lack of proper shelter and homes. Additionally, the assistance and cash grants provided by UNHCR and government agencies was not enough to enable them to reintegrate in their home country and native communities. As one of the respondents interviewed in Mingora city, who hailed from Paktia region, said that:

“He will have to stay with relatives in Qandahar or Kabul, because we have no shelter in our hometown”.

In addition, returnees who belonged to those regions where conflict and militancy had affected their homes and shelter preferred to live in rented houses in urban slums and cities where they have easy access to jobs and employment opportunities. The UNHCR and other human rights watch-dogs have confirmed that about one million returnees from Pakistan and Iran have settled in Kabul. The lack of proper housing is viewed as one of the main reasons by Afghan refugees opting to return to their country of origin. UNHCR’s report on refugees stated, that in 2016, about 18 percent of the families did not want to return voluntarily to Afghanistan due to lack of shelter and housing. Similarly, it was expressed that returnees and deportees usually re-migrate when they have no shelter and housing in Afghanistan. In such situation,

“We had to live like nomads in Afghanistan”. Said one of the elders from Afghan refugees at Kababian Camp in Peshawar.

Thus, most of the refugees in camps were at least satisfied from the housing conditions in Pakistan because they were being treated with dignity and respect, while they had genuine fear of insecurity and shelter in their native towns in Afghanistan due to the ongoing war between NATO/ US forces and Al Qaeda/Taliban insurgents. Consequently, they preferred

to go and live somewhere else rather than to go to their own villages. According to one of the refugees, who was born and socialized in Pakistan,

“He doesn't intend and wish to go back to Afghanistan, a place where he had never gone before”.

The conditions of registered Afghan refugees, most of whom are living in camps and are offered with special protection needs hangs in balance, as the situation in Afghanistan is still not favorable to meet their special needs after repatriation. While interviewing in camps, it was observed that the attitudes of Afghan refugees had changed after living for a long time in Pakistan and they preferred to go to the cities to find shelter and jobs instead of going back to their home country, where the conflict is still going on. This has led most of the refugees to become internally displaced persons (IDPs) and were staying with relatives or in camps rather than going back to their villages.

"I have spent my entire life in Pakistan. Here, I know people and people know me. In Afghanistan, I am having no home, no friends, no family". expresses Noroz, a fifty years old man from kanduz province.

"This is my birth-place, this is the place I know. I have business here. In Afghanistan; I am like an outsider". says Lakki Ali, whose family came to Pakistan in 1979 and currently living in Abbottabad.

One of the determinants of a durable repatriation and reintegration of refugees is ensuring access to proper shelter and homes in the home country. A successful repatriation means not only return but also re-entering the mainstream of life- economically, politically, socially in Afghanistan. This requires incentives for refugees to go back and resettle without any fear of insecurity. Monetary and material incentives are not enough by themselves to guarantee a durable and sustainable repatriation. One of the basic challenges expressed by refugees was the lack of shelter and housing in the areas of return. This is one of the main reasons due to which most of the refugees want to return but are reluctant due to fear of insecurity and lack of access to the basic necessities of life. It was revealed from the analysis of primary data that most of the refugees viewed lack of shelter, security and livelihood opportunities would be the most daunting challenges in Afghanistan. During a focus group discussion with refugee elders in Kababian camp, one of the elders told that,

“I recently visited Afghanistan to find a place for my family and regain lost property, but he could not do it, we are having only one option and that is to live in Dasht (an open place) or in tents.... nothing is there in Afghanistan for us but Taliban looting and dacoiting”.

Although, UNHCR has launched Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees in May 2012, which aim at ensuring protection of refugees, facilitating their voluntary repatriation and the reintegration of refugees in their home communities. But according to majority of the refugees, there are still big hurdles on the ground related to security, housing, and livelihood opportunities in the country of origin. According to one of the respondents interviewed,

“Shelter in Afghanistan is a big issue for returnees as well as the residing population, and about 80 percent of the population (including returnees) are living in slums and open settlements”.

Furthermore, the responses of the refugees revealed that there were disputes and conflicts over land ownership and majority of the returnees who owned land in their native communities in Afghanistan have found their land occupied; lacking any documentation to prove their ownership. In this context, refugees from Mazar Sharif in Afghanistan expressed that,

“Shelter and housing among other factors like access to education, health and livelihood are the key factors which motivates or discourage refugees to return”.

Pakistan has been asking international community’s help to create the necessary conditions and economic opportunities in order to motivate refugees to return to Afghanistan. In other words, the inability to create strong pull factors would less likely to attract refugees back to their home country. In an effort to resolve some of the shelter related problems, in 2005, the Afghan government began an ambitious land distribution to over 300,000 returnees. Some 13,000 plots of land were distributed, mostly in the provinces of Farah, Logar, Faryab and Parwan. In provinces where government land is not available for distribution, eligible returnees are to be provided land in a neighboring province that can absorb them. The government of Afghanistan has only assisted the most marginalized and vulnerable groups among the returning refugees.

Livelihood Opportunities in the Home Country

Majority of Afghan refugees living in KP did not welcome repatriation. They were of the view that for a successful repatriation, there is a need of improvement in the security and law and order conditions as well as increase in the availability of jobs and adequate facilities of education and health inside Afghanistan. Refugees residing in KP, especially in camps responded that the two areas which can serve as the major pull factors in Afghanistan and to attract the refugees back are the provision of adequate skill development opportunities and availability of employment to generate incomes. The experiences of the refugees indicate that they want a dignified return to their home country to regain their property and other belongings.

One of the respondents interviewed in Abbottabad stated that,

“I work in a restaurant and lived for a very long time in Pakistan and I have social networks in my home community which could help me secure jobs and livelihood opportunities”.

“We would only go back to our country when we know that the situation is normal, and it is not yet. In such situation the government of Afghanistan cannot afford to provide jobs and employment opportunities to the returnees, so we do not intend to go back until we see improvements on the ground”. An Afghan refugee in Kababian camp.

Another refugee from Kandahar province told that,

“My nephew who was searching for a job in Afghanistan was kidnapped by the Taliban for ransom and was threatened to leave his home town”.

The evidence that a lack of employment opportunities and basic services as well as poor socio-economic conditions are discouraging refugees from going back to Afghanistan is also supported by UNHCR and aid agencies. An interview with a refugee hailed from Mazar Sharif revealed that,

“His son who was working for an international non-governmental organization was killed by Taliban. Another friend was killed in suicide blast, such incidents make us reluctant to return to Afghanistan”.

Since the beginning of a massive repatriation program by UNHCR in 2002, return rates to Afghanistan have dropped at a rapid pace over the years, primarily due to the deteriorating socio-economic opportunities and security condition. Resultantly, it is observed that refugees who returned to Afghanistan came back to Pakistan and simply increased the number of illegal migrants in Pakistan. It also results in secondary displacement due to lack of security, rural livelihoods and land/property disputes.

Another refugee revealed that,

“People who left Pakistan are now facing difficulties in their home country. Many among our relatives faced losses because they end up their businesses here and went to Afghanistan. They are having no houses, earning source and are in debt now”.

Another refugee who was the father of three sons and one daughter expressed that,

“I am willing to return but I believe that UNHCR and CAR are unable to provide information related to job markets and the conditions of other social services. If my sons cannot find jobs in the absence of any land or house, it will be very difficult for us to survive”.

It clearly shows the relationship between availability of livelihood opportunities and the decision of refugees to return to Afghanistan or stay in the host country. Thus, majority of refugees who returned to Afghanistan and remained there, are either struggling for survival, under-employed or are living below the poverty line. It is evident from the information provided by the respondents that, reintegration of returnees in Afghanistan is only possible through creation of opportunities in economic and social sectors. In addition to conflict, insecurity and lack of shelter; access to jobs and employment opportunities in Afghanistan are crucial to attract refugees back to their home country. The experiences of the refugees indicate that they want a dignified return to their home country to regain their property and other belongings. Accessing income-earning opportunities is among returnees’ greatest difficulties upon return. Unemployment among returnees and IDPs is high because of their limited social connections and other factors. In addition, many returnees lack capital to invest in informal sector activities or to buy assets to reestablish livelihoods after their return. Afghanistan’s National Human Development Report (NDHR) 2007 depicts the same picture of country’s deteriorating socio-economic indicators. Afghanistan ranks 174 out of 178 countries in UN Human Development Index- ahead of only Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone and Niger. 35

Education and Health Facilities in the Home Country

Access to education and health services are considered as the major pull factors in Afghanistan to attract refugees to return. Unfortunately, the deteriorating law and order has made the education inaccessible for the existing population and returnees from Pakistan. Household head of Afghan family living in Abbottabad argued that,

“My children especially girls could not attend classes after unidentified militants attacked their school”.

Another respondent revealed that,

“Schools and educational institutions built by international agencies and partners are more prone to attacks by militants and radical elements than those built by local authorities”.

Another refugee who used to work in a construction company expressed that,

“I cannot return to Afghanistan, because it will take many years to start a fresh life there. I see no prospects of finding any decent work, there is no house, no hospitals and schools. These issues make me reluctant to go back to Afghanistan”.

“We would go there when the conditions become conducive”. said one refugee.

“Children’s education is a big issue in our home country. There are restrictions on women education from the Taliban as well as many other issues, such as lack of teaching staff particularly female teachers and quality education”. said an Afghan woman from Jalalabad living in Mingora city.

Resultantly, majority of the refugees are not willing to return, they feel pressured from the authorities to leave camps. Furthermore, there are also refugees who are having good jobs prospects and businesses in Pakistan and are unwilling to leave their livelihoods and return to Afghanistan. On account of health facilities in Afghanistan, one of the respondents expressed from war torn Kunar province that,

“My cousin went back to Afghanistan with his old mother who was heart patient and other family members, his mother died to the lack of basic health facilities and medicines. This has compelled us to prolong our stay in Pakistan, because we are continuously informed by our relatives and friends that the state of provision of social services in Watan (Home Country) is still non-conducive to return”.

Another refugee from a town in Laghman revealed during focus group discussion that,

“There were very few basic health units and hospitals in their town which lack the basic facilities, medicines and other equipment. Only hospitals in the major cities had basic facilities and people living here in camps could not afford it”.

Repatriation of Afghan refugees remains to be a daunting task both for Pakistani and Afghan governments, and there is multiplicity of challenges associated with this process, particularly in Afghanistan. Thus, both governments and UNHCR should come up with the holistic strategy in order to facilitate smooth and successful repatriation of refugees. As a durable solution to the problem of refugees, successful repatriation must be followed by establishing the social networks as well as reintegration of refugees into the mainstream development processes. It means government and non-government agencies should ensure refugees’ access to the essential social services such as education and health. Thus, in addition to security, law and order and livelihood opportunities, the provision of education and health facilities to refugees are considered as the major pull factors to attract the refugees back to their home country. It is also remarked by most of the refugees.

Consequently, schools particularly for girls have come under frequent attacks from the militants causing panic among the students and parents. Thus, parents are unwilling to send children to school for fear of security. It means lack of access to education and restrictions on women's education are perceived to be the main reasons by refugees which make them unwilling to return to Afghanistan. Therefore, majority of the refugees expressed their concerns about the recent repatriation process that the conditions in Paktia and Helmand (Provinces of Afghanistan) are not conducive for safe and dignified return. In addition to the lack of education, lack of access to health services significantly affect the prospects of successful repatriation for most of the refugees.

Role of Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations

The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as international agencies have always made their efforts to assist refugees in their voluntary return to Afghanistan. As a part of its mandate to facilitate voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees, UNHCR has provided comprehensive durable solutions. Since 1979, UNHCR has been assisting Afghan refugees in their voluntary, safe and dignified return to Afghanistan. In 2002, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assisted more than 3 million Afghan refugees in their repatriation process, marking it the largest assisted repatriation process in UNHCR's history. Additionally, millions of refugees have returned to Afghanistan without the assistance of UNHCR which brings the total number of returnees to 4.8 million or more.

In May 2012, the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran developed the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (Solutions Strategy) to address the problems that Afghan refugees and returnees face. According to the strategy, the three countries agreed to work towards providing a minimum standard of living and livelihood opportunities for returnees, and preserving asylum space for refugees, among other initiatives. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries is the culmination of an intensive, collaborative negotiation process. It represents the consensus of the three Governments concerned, the UNHCR country representation offices, as well as relevant UN agencies, to develop a multi-year approach to this Strategy. According to UNHCR report (2012) Afghan refugees have been returning to Afghanistan, looking for a safe environment to re-establish themselves and settle down. The Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees intend to improve the lives of these returnees and communities in which they live. The Afghan component of the solution strategy aims to improve the sustainable reintegration of returnees and to encourage Government ministries, international and non-governmental organizations and civil society to replicate a successful strategy.

As a component of UNHCR Pakistan's strategy towards comprehensive durable solutions for Afghans in Pakistan, the Refugee-Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) program

is a joint initiative between UNHCR and UNDP and other international organizations, in close collaboration with the Government of Pakistan. This five-year program, launched in 2009 targets locations that are currently hosting refugees, (Refugee Hosting Areas - RHAs) and areas that used to host substantive numbers of refugees (Refugee-Affected Areas - RAAs) and as a result have suffered in socio-economic terms. Pakistan has been hosting over 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees as well as about 1 million undocumented Afghans since 1980s. The Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative which forms a cornerstone of the implementation of the SSAR in Pakistan, remains the principal responsibility-sharing platform for maintaining temporary protection space, promoting social cohesion and enhancing community acceptance of Afghans in Pakistan. At present, UNHCR operates two Voluntary Repatriation Centers (VRC) in Peshawar and Quetta.

Policy Framework of Pakistan

Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol and has not enacted any national legislation for the protection and management of refugees. However, the new Government of Pakistan has accelerated progress on a number of key policy issues related to the management of Afghan refugees. In July 2013, the Federal Cabinet adopted the National Policy on the Management and Repatriation of Afghan Refugees beyond 30 June 2013. The Cabinet also approved the extension of the validity of the Proof of Registration (PoR) card and the Tripartite Agreement until 31 December 2015 (the PoR card regulates the temporary stay of registered Afghan nationals). The government of Pakistan issued Proof of Registration (PoR) cards to about 2.15 million Afghans with the support of UNHCR in 2006-07 (UNHCR, 2014). The Government of Pakistan is also considering a national refugee law, which would form part of the national policy on Afghan refugees and nationals.

Under the 1973 rules of business, the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) is a Federal Ministry of Pakistan which handle the matters related to Afghan. Additionally, Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees (CCAR) is also associated with SAFRON and the provincial Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees are entrusted with the task of implementation of policy and control of operations in the field. Moreover, the Afghan Management and Repatriation Strategy (MRSAR) 2007-2009 was revised in 2010-1012, which covered all aspects of refugees including protection of vulnerable groups, mixed migration, as well as repatriation and reintegration (PPVR Survey, 2011).

Refugees' Perceptions of the Assistance provision by government and non-government Organizations

Majority of the families wishing to repatriate posited that the assistance provided by government and non-governmental organizations was not enough to enable them to

reintegrate in their respective areas in home country. Most of them responded, that they will have to take loans to start fresh life in Afghanistan, where they perceive the socio-economic conditions on the ground is far from favorable.

One of the respondents expressed that,

“the amount upon repatriation was reduced from \$500 per family to \$180 in 2016, which was insufficient to facilitate them in their return process”.

These concerns were particularly acute in case of women refugees, who intended to repatriate, and complained that the assistance and monetary remuneration provided by UNHCR was not enough to facilitate them in fulfilling even their basic needs such as food and health on the way back to Afghanistan. Additionally, there were also complaints that refugees particularly women had to face numerous problems while getting financial package. While interviewing unregistered Afghan refugees, it was found that they were being harassed at the hands of law enforcement agencies and were facing difficulties in receiving the assistance package which make them more vulnerable both in host and home country. There are also families who once repatriated have returned to Pakistan, because of insecurity and poor socio-economic conditions back in their home country. Consequently, most of the refugees were of the view that they should be provided with the proper amenities of life in camp as well as in their home country. A dignified, safe and voluntary return is only possible when refugees perceive that peace has been restored to their home country. As it was suggested by one of the respondents that,

“return process to Afghanistan should be properly facilitated by both the government of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as international bodies to help meet basic needs of refugees during and after repatriation and facilitating the delivery of services by donors”.

UNHCR is playing the lead role in repatriating Afghans. The agency has been lauded for its services towards the largest repatriation program, but critics have decried the shortsightedness of its policies. Amongst the durable solutions of the refugee problem, repatriation has currently been overemphasized and publicized. Although there is no doubt that it remains the most preferred solution, it appears elusive in the case of Afghans; here, while over 4 million have repatriated since the beginning of the 2002 repatriation program, return has not been durable or sustainable and, therefore, the remaining refugees in the host countries are opting out. From the experience of the current repatriation process, it is obvious that there has been more emphasis on return than on the sustainability of refugees in their homeland. Return is important to both the home and the host country, but the latter

has reason to be apprehensive of a flow back if sustainability is not given priority. According to one of the women respondents interviewed in Kababian Camp,

“she was the sole bread earner of her family, with the support of RAHA, she got tailoring and sewing training which enabled her to fulfill the needs of her poor family”.

Assistance provided by government and non-governmental agencies plays crucial role in promoting durable repatriation and reintegration of refugees in their native communities in Afghanistan. However, the responses of refugees indicate that the assistance provided by UNHCR and other agencies was insufficient to facilitate them in their voluntary repatriation and reintegration in their respective areas in home country. As it was remarked by one refugee in Peshawar that,

“the amount upon repatriation was reduced from \$500 per family to \$180 in 2016, which was insufficient to facilitate them in their return process”.

Many refugees also responded that they had no homes or accommodation in Afghanistan, and they will have to rent a house there, for which they need more money. Most of them suggested that assistance package should be increased, or they should be provided with proper food, medicines and other items of daily use when they are returning to Afghanistan. The launch of Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) in 2012 intend to improve the lives of these returnees and communities in which they live. The Afghan component of the solution strategy aims to improve the sustainable reintegration of returnees and to encourage Government ministries, international and non-governmental organizations and civil society to replicate a successful strategy. Sustainable return happens when returnees’ physical and material security is assured and when a constructive relationship is consolidated between them, civil society and the state. If repatriation is to be successful, the emphasis should not remain solely on the numbers crossing the border; the sustainability and integration of the returnees should be taken as an equally important factor. Afghan refugee interviewed in Mingora city responded that,

“he established his own business of shawl weaving after attending three months training conducted by Refugees Affected and Hosting Areas Program. He further stated that it has not only enabled him to expand his business but also to gain financial stability to improve the lifestyle of his family”.

Conclusion

Repatriation of Afghan refugees is a serious issue being faced by governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Over the last three decades, long stay of refugees has affected socio economic conditions of Pakistan. Presently, owing to the impact of Afghan refugees on the

socio-economic opportunities in host communities, poor law and order situation and insecurity, Pakistan asking international community help repatriate Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan. Majority of the refugees are willing to return but are reluctant due to the instability, insecurity and violence and lack of socio-economic opportunities in the home country.

This research has revealed that for the repatriation process to be successful, the general conditions related to security, employment, education and health facilities in the receiving areas in Afghanistan needed to be improved. Most of the refugees wants to return, but they are reluctant to do so and prefer to stay in Pakistan till the conditions on the ground become favorable. Majority of the refugees consider the prevailing security condition in Afghanistan, the presence of coalition forces as the main reasons which hampers their repatriation process. Furthermore, it is derived from the analysis that the creation of employment opportunities, provision of basic health and education and the provision of skill development opportunities in Afghanistan can be the major factors to attract the refugees back to Afghanistan. It shows that the absence of these socio-economic opportunities in the home country has significantly affected the repatriation process of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. In addition, most refugees were satisfied from living conditions in Pakistan. They have established businesses here and are living as a local people. Thus, in the light of the prevailing conditions in Afghanistan, most of these refugees are not willing to return because of having comparatively better access to socio-economic opportunities in the host country. Moreover, the refugees were not satisfied with the incentives provided by the government and non-governmental organizations. Most of them opined that, the assistance package provided by the UNHCR was not enough to facilitate them in the repatriation process. Consequently, it results in the secondary displacement or re-migration to Pakistan creating more issues. Therefore, the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as UNHCR should come up with the holistic strategy which intends to meet the most basic humanitarian needs of refugees such as, food, shelter, clothing, protection, water and sanitation and the provision of basic health and education facilities to facilitate the repatriation process. Simultaneously, the international community should play its role and extend its support to the countries which host large number of refugees. Assistance should be provided to the refugees in order to empower them through the provision of adequate skill necessary to enable them to contribute to their host countries as well as to use these skills to earn an income upon return.

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