

Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan

By Abid Aslam

Not a shot has been fired—yet—at Afghanistan’s Taliban, but the country’s beleaguered population already is paying a heavy price for the ruling militia’s pariah status as host to alleged terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.

Neighbors have closed their borders, trapping refugees and, in the case of Pakistan, cutting off the main source of food purchases. Inside Afghanistan, many shops have closed, and the price of wheat, the country’s staple, has soared.

“In Mazar-e-Sharif [northern Afghanistan], the price of wheat has increased by 35% over the last two days,” World Food Program (WFP) spokesman Khaled Mansour told the UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (www.irin.org) on September 21. “Other areas have also seen sharp increases. These prices are beyond the means of the poorest, such as widows.”

To some extent, the hyperinflation is the result of stockpiling by traders, Mansour said. But, he explained, “Trucks are now being used to ferry people instead of commodities, and the cost of what transport is available has increased sharply.”

UN and other aid agencies have evacuated their international staff, handing over operations to local employees. The Taliban reportedly has told these staffers—including some 700 on the UN payroll—they face imprisonment or death if they communicate with the outside world.

Coupled with Taliban-imposed restrictions, closure of the Afghan-Pakistan border in particular has effectively isolated local aid workers and destroyed the UN’s ability to deliver relief food to more than five million Afghans at risk of famine. In some parts of Afghanistan, locals reportedly have resorted to eating a mix of locusts and animal fodder; some are believed to

have fallen ill and possibly died after eating poisoned grass.

Large numbers of Afghans continue to flee their homes for the countryside, or toward Pakistan and other neighboring countries amid fears of U.S. strikes. Aid agencies are urging Washington and its allies to adopt special measures to ensure the safety of the civilian population.

Human rights groups, however, are exhorting Afghanistan’s neighbors to open their borders to refugees. Human Rights Watch (HRW, www.hrw.org) has rejected the idea of setting up “safe haven” camps within Afghanistan’s borders.

“Past experience from Bosnia, Rwanda, and Northern Iraq tells us that safe havens have proved to be anything but safe,” said Rachael Reilly, HRW’s refugee policy director. “Instead, any refugee camps established should be outside the territory of Afghanistan.”

The nongovernmental U.S. Committee for Refugees, in a September 18 statement, said the Afghan civilians trapped in what soon could become a war zone are “ordinary men, women, and children who cannot be held responsible for the actions of those who rule them.”

Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have fled toward Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran, HRW said, only to be penned in at the border. Afghanistan’s three other neighbors, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China, also have closed their borders with Afghanistan.

Some 3.7 million Afghan refugees who fled the conflict in Afghanistan over the past two decades now live in neighboring countries—1.5 million in Iran and more than 2 million in Pakistan.

Some 1.1 million people are internally displaced within Afghanistan. Fear of U.S. retaliation has prompted the flight of as many as 100,000 more from Qandahar alone, the Taliban's seat, according to Amnesty International (AI, www.amnesty.org). The total Afghan population is estimated at around 24 million people.

Frustrated by the large scale and protracted nature of the refugee crisis and the lack of international attention to their plight, both Iran and Pakistan have officially closed their borders to refugees for the past year. In the past week, however, Pakistani security forces have sealed the border with barbed wire in a number of places, despite appeals from the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) not to turn back refugees. Only those with valid visas are allowed to enter, but Pakistani authorities have ceased issuing permits altogether, AI said. Pakistan's decision to shut down the border was in direct response to a U.S. request to strengthen security.

Despite border restrictions, some 15,000 Afghan refugees managed to enter Pakistan last week, most of them arriving in Baluchistan province on the southwest border. A further 5,000 refugees, who were massed for several days at the Chaman border crossing near the Baluchistan city of Quetta, finally entered the country

and are now encamped on the Pakistan side, HRW said.

The Iranian government, while reiterating that it is unable to admit any new refugees, has offered to assist Afghans through cross-border assistance operations.

An estimated 10,000 Afghan refugees have been camped on several islands in the Pyanj River at the Tajikistan border since the Tajik government closed its borders a year ago and stationed 10,000 Russian troops to prevent refugees from entering, according to HRW.

"Afghanistan's neighbors face real security concerns at this time," said Reilly. "But these countries have international obligations to meet their security concerns by screening out armed elements so that borders remain open for refugees."

Her organization noted further that "Western governments, including the U.S., Australia, and European Union member states, are also tightening immigration controls in a way that could further deny protection to Afghan refugees."

As a result, "Afghans with a valid fear of persecution seeking asylum overseas, particularly in Western countries, may face prolonged immigration detention or deportation," HRW said.

Instead, the group called on Western and other wealthy states to "explore emergency resettlement possibilities for Afghan refugees" and to ensure that tougher immigration controls do not infringe upon the rights of all asylum seekers to access "fair and efficient asylum determination procedures."

AI also called on rich nations to chip in money, saying Afghanistan's neighbors "should not bear a disproportionate cost" of caring for refugees.

"The people of Afghanistan have suffered conflict and famine for decades. The international community must offer protection and relief immediately and provide adequate resources to the UNHCR for it to carry out its mandate in an effective manner," AI said.

HRW noted that "the right of refugees not to be returned to a country where their lives or freedom are threatened is a fundamental principle of international customary law and is enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and China are all parties."

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<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>