

Afghan Refugees and Migrants: Humanitarian Response in Pakistan

Pakistan has been the host country in a protracted refugee situation, with Afghans first crossing the border in large numbers in the early 1980s. Yet, the country has no formal policy to deal with refugees and asylum seekers and is not a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention or Protocol. Pakistan started issuing Proof of Registration (POR) cards to refugees in 2006-07 with the assistance of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs) in 2017, as a means of identification for Afghan migrants in Pakistan. However, there is no clear path to permanent settlement or citizenship. Some of the key issues faced by Afghans living in Pakistan, both long-standing residents and new arrivals, include documentation, schooling and health, and advocacy.

POR card holders and those holding ACCs are in a relatively secure position, but until recently their cards had outdated expiry dates on them, which caused problems for them with Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs). The POR cards provide right of residence, and access to basic services, but refugees are not allowed to own businesses, property, and until recently, were not allowed to open bank accounts or hold driving licenses. In any event, there are many migrants who do not have POR cards or indeed any documentation. Those coming into Pakistan post-August 2021 are either undocumented, or are on short-term visas, many of which are expiring now. In either case, their stay in Pakistan can be questioned. Without documentation of some kind, earning a livelihood is difficult for relatively better off migrants. The poorest families have tried to enter the informal sector, although they risk day to day harassment from LEAs.

With expired or no documentation, and/or with a potentially illegal status, it is very difficult to gain access to basic services. There are contradictory reports about Afghans with POR cards getting admission for their children in Pakistani educational institutions – although the government encourages enrolment, school authorities are often wary. Health access is generally better across the country. Some facilities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (particularly Quetta) cater mainly to Afghans.

The government needs to move towards finding a long-term solution which would enable Afghans who have been here for decades to fully participate in the economy by being able to own businesses and assets, obtain driving licenses and open bank accounts, among other things. There is a need to formulate a policy which recognises that movement across the border will continue and may even pick up pace given Pakistan's unstable neighbourhood. For the

immediate future, it is crucial to register and count Afghan nationals who are currently in Pakistan within the framework of a clear policy on migration. This session will explore the above issues and propose a way forward.

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