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Pakistan threatens new wave of Afghan deportations

‘We have no clue where to go or what to do.’



Pakistan is set to begin a new phase of Afghan deportations as tensions between the two countries intensify, following a first wave of more than half a million returns that has piled more pressure on the Taliban government and on aid agencies struggling to meet spiralling humanitarian needs.

Among those facing deportation are many girls and women who would now be unable to study beyond the sixth grade in Afghanistan. Former members of the previous Western-backed government’s security forces – and those who worked alongside them – also fear [retaliatory attacks](#) from the ruling Taliban.

The [latest directive](#) comes six months after Pakistan [said](#) it would deport “all illegal foreigners”. That push resulted in more than [515,000](#) Afghans returning to the Taliban-controlled country, either through deportations carried out by Pakistani officials or on their own to avoid being detained and eventually forced to leave.

The next phase – expected to start any time after the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr on 10 April – officially extends those at risk of deportation to holders of the Afghan Citizen Card, a legal document that allows Afghans to live and travel across Pakistan. Afghan returnees have told the media that people with legal documents were already being deported in the previous round, but this marks the first instance of Islamabad publicly acknowledging that an ACC is not necessarily a safeguard.

Shortly after the first mass expulsions began, Human Rights Watch accused Pakistani officials of employing abusive practices to push Afghans out of the country. “Police and other officials have carried out mass detentions, seized property and livestock, and destroyed identity documents to expel thousands of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers,” the group [reported](#) in late November.

Already cold relations between Islamabad and the Taliban government in Kabul have turned frostier in recent months due to [growing insecurity](#) in Pakistan. Last month, Afghan officials accused Pakistan of killing [eight civilians](#), including children, in a series of airstrikes in Afghanistan’s southeastern Paktika and Khost provinces – a claim [backed up](#) by Washington.



Lutfullah Samim Sherzai/TNH

Aid workers who have assisted returnee families say those who have been away for decades, often spending their entire lives in Pakistan, are facing the greatest difficulty in rebuilding their lives in Afghanistan.

The newly elected coalition government in Islamabad said the airstrikes were in retaliation for a March truck bombing and gun attack in Waziristan that killed [seven soldiers](#). Pakistani authorities said the attack was orchestrated by members of the armed [Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan](#) (TTP) opposition group who were hiding out in Afghanistan.

Amnesty International, which has long documented the difficulties faced by returnees and displaced people in Afghanistan, also [criticised](#) reports of a new round of returns, saying it is “extremely concerned by the decision of the new government to continue deportations of Afghan refugees”.

It says at least [800,000](#) more Afghans are now at risk of being detained, abused, and eventually deported due to the new order’s inclusion of ACC holders. The London-based organisation says Islamabad has been acting with impunity ever since its initial 3 October announcement of the so-called “Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan”.

There has been “a complete lack of transparency, due process and accountability in the detentions and unlawful deportations of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, which was exacerbated by increased harassment and hostility towards them”, Amnesty’s 4 April report reads.

Humanitarian strains

Earlier returns, which began in earnest last November, have already placed a great strain on the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate government. Kabul is currently trying to avoid a situation where thousands of people are left stranded in makeshift camps for years, or even decades, as has been the [case](#) for many returnees and other [displaced](#) people over Afghanistan’s tumultuous past 20 years.

According to the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#), the more than half a million Afghan returnees have already faced difficulties procuring everything from proper long-term shelter to warm winter clothing, food, and work opportunities.

“Forced deportation, under any name and by any country, is illegal and against the accepted norms of the world and should not happen”

Even those who were able to reach Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, Kandahar, and other cities must compete for jobs and housing with an already needy population. Half of the country is currently [living in poverty](#) and 15 million people are experiencing food insecurity.

Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Islamic Emirate, referenced such challenges in his response to the reports of a new wave of expulsions.

“Forced deportation, under any name and by any country, is illegal and against the accepted norms of the world and should not happen,” he [said](#). “The people of Afghanistan, especially migrants, have seen many problems and should not face more.”

Afghans deported by Pakistan are now in danger of falling into the ranks of the country’s [six million internally displaced people](#), most of whom have lost their homes due to conflict and natural disasters and had to brave freezing temperatures this winter in unsuitable shelters.

The Taliban government has also had to contend with constant streams of Afghans being deported or returning from Iran and [Turkey](#). Between September and December alone, Tehran reportedly deported more than [345,000](#) Afghan nationals. This meant several provinces in eastern, southern, and western Afghanistan were inundated by tens of thousands of new arrivals, all looking for work and shelter at a time when [hundreds of thousands](#) of Afghans remain out of work.

‘We have nothing’

No one knows the hardships that new returnees have had to endure better than the handful of families who were still living in flimsy tents in a makeshift camp along a dusty sideroad of Sorkhakan – a town in the eastern Afghan province of Laghman – when The New Humanitarian visited in February.

Mohammad Naeem, his wife, and their six children crossed the Durand Line – separating Afghanistan and Pakistan – and entered Nangarhar province last November. The family made a hasty exit once they received word that Pakistani police were going [house-to-house](#) looking for Afghans.

Naeem, 57, had spent his entire life in the Pakistani port city of Karachi – although he never managed to obtain official papers – so he had few direct contacts in Afghanistan who could help his family find suitable housing and employment.

Afghans who wish to remain in Pakistan must have a Proof of Registration (PoR) card, which is issued by the government in collaboration with UNHCR. However, Islamabad hasn’t issued new PoRs since 2007. In 2017, the Pakistani government began issuing the ACC, but that lasted for only one year. Afghans have long accused Pakistan and international authorities of making it too difficult and expensive – often due to corruption – to obtain ACCs and UNHCR registration.

With rents skyrocketing in the nation’s cities, Naeem and his family eventually had to settle in the Sorkhakan camp – one of several the Islamic Emirate established as short-term relief for the returnees, who, towards the end of 2023 at least, were entering at a rate of 20,000 each day.

“Everyone else had assistance from their families and got out, but we have nothing,” Naeem said.

Rent for houses on the outskirts of Jalalabad has jumped from about 1,000 afghanis (\$13.57), to 8,000 afghanis (\$108) a month, he explained.





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The UN estimates that 60% of Afghans returning from Pakistan are children. For young girls, who are barred from formal education above the sixth grade by the Taliban-led government, a return to Afghanistan presents many additional challenges.

Although he used to work as a truck driver in Pakistan, Naeem's lack of ties to the Afghan trucking industry, and the general downturn of Afghanistan's economy, made it really hard for him to find a job.

Manon Radosta, an access and advocacy coordinator at the Danish Refugee Council who visited returnee families in Nangarhar and Kunar in late November, told The New Humanitarian that the problems Naeem and his family are going through reflect the larger struggle faced by nearly all returnees. “So many of them would tell us, ‘We have no clue where to go or what to do’,” she said.

Radosta said most families have no land or shelter to return to as they have been outside the country for years or decades, and most have only enough money to rent temporary shelters for a few months or even weeks. The UN’s migration agency, IOM, gave families 10,000 afghanis when they entered the country, but that doesn’t last long as the sheer number of returnees has seen such a spike in demand – and therefore costs – for transportation and housing.

Families like Naeem’s who have been in Pakistan for 30 or 40 years face particularly dire situations, but Radosta said even those that have maintained strong connections in Afghanistan are struggling to get back on their feet.

“They left with very few of their belongings, and almost no money, as they were forced to leave in a rush, and often faced extortion along the way”

“Just because they have families to help them, doesn’t mean they’re in good condition. It doesn’t lessen the burden,” Radosta said. “They usually end up in very small houses that are close to crumbling and have almost zero ways of earning an income.”

Naeem said a handful of remaining families in Sorkhakan had already been told by officials that they must vacate the camp: The Islamic Emirate only intended the facility to be temporary.

Radosta was concerned for their future. “They left with very few of their belongings, and almost no money, as they were forced to leave in a rush, and often faced extortion along the way,” she said. “Back in Afghanistan, these people are just too poor and disconnected with social networks to have the means to pick up their lives somewhere.”

Finding a job

Radosta said the primary concern for all the families she spoke to was employment. “So much can be managed if they just have a source of income,” she explained.

But with Afghanistan having already lost more than [700,000 jobs](#) since 2021, the competition for work is high.

Zeer Gol, 45, knows this difficulty first-hand. He has spent the last six months since he was deported trying to get work in Mitalram, the capital of Laghman, but to no avail: “I went to two petrol stations asking to work as a night guard. They just said, ‘We don’t need anyone. We already have guards.’”

“Do you think anyone likes to send their wife and children out on the cold, dirty streets to beg. Of course not. But it’s all out of helplessness”

In Karachi, he worked as a bricklayer and porter, but even those jobs don’t come easy in Afghanistan, where the UN estimates half the population will [require aid](#) in 2024.

Poverty forced Zeer Gol to send his wife – educated in a Pakistani madrassa – and children to beg for money for medicine for his sick kids on the streets of Jalalabad. This too has proven fruitless, due to the Islamic Emirate’s [efforts](#) to try and clear the cities of thousands of beggars.

“Do you think anyone likes to send their wife and children out on the cold, dirty streets to beg. Of course not. But it’s all out of helplessness,” Zeer Gol told The New Humanitarian.

Filling the aid funding gap, and building for the longer term

When Naeem’s and Zeer Gol’s families first walked through the Torkham crossing last year, the Islamic Emirate had a [sizable presence](#) in the area, with several government [ministries stationed](#) near the crossing and military and police vehicles transporting families to other parts of the country.

In November, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation [said](#) it had established 12 committees to address the needs of the returnees. The ministry’s local authorities continue to register returnees and refer them to the IOM and aid agencies, but the needs outweigh the help available. At the time of publication, the UN’s \$3 billion 2024 humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan was only [7.3%](#) funded.

Due to the financial squeeze, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry [asked](#) the private sector to help in assistance efforts, urging Afghan investors to “take action because of the profound humanitarian disaster caused by the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of the poor and needy”.

However, much of the response effort has been hampered by financial and diplomatic restrictions.

The government has been hamstrung by a lack of official recognition, due in part to its own restrictive policies on women and girls. Those laws have led to Western-imposed sanctions, aid cutbacks, and banking freezes placed on the Islamic Emirate since it returned to power in August 2021. [Aid budgets](#) are under strain because of simultaneous crises in Gaza and Ukraine, as well as economic headwinds in Europe and budget battles in Washington.

Aid organisations working in Afghanistan are also finding themselves in a position where they must prove to donors that the country needs more than just emergency humanitarian assistance.

“We all saw huge budget reductions compared to previous years,” said Radosta. “It’s a protracted issue. There are already millions of Afghans in need of long-term, durable solutions.”

If funding shortfalls aren’t urgently addressed, the aid officials The New Humanitarian spoke to feared Afghanistan could end up in a repeat of the last two decades, when cities like Kabul and Herat became home to dozens of dilapidated [refugee camps](#) housing thousands of people fleeing [insecurity](#), [droughts](#), [floods](#), and earthquakes.

To avoid this, they said they were trying to compel international donors to provide longer-term, development assistance. In February, the Islamic Emirate’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a [statement](#) reiterating its call for “financing for development projects”, which it said would create much-needed new jobs.

Because the needs are “structural” in nature, Radosta said organisations like hers are pushing donors to look beyond immediate, emergency assistance as it doesn’t address the root causes of those needs.

The global politics and economics behind his deprivation matter little to Naeem. He simply wants to meet the daily needs of his family.

“We no longer have anything to eat. We boiled the beans we were given for our kids,” he said, looking at his children – all under the age of 14 – while tears welled up in his eyes. In Pakistan, two of his sons had memorised the Qur’an, but in Afghanistan, they, along with their sisters, are unable to study.

