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AFGHANISTAN

Cross-border return to internal displacement

SPOT LIGHT

Continuous armed conflict, insecurity, human rights violations and recurrent disasters mean that flight and mobility have become a familiar coping strategy for many Afghans for almost four decades. Large numbers of people have experienced some form of displacement in their lives.

There are currently around 1.6 million IDPs in the country and their number continues to grow, primarily as a result of conflict. There are also millions of registered and undocumented Afghan refugees living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, and a significant number who have sought international protection elsewhere, mainly in Europe and Australia. Overall, Afghanistan continues to be the second largest source country for refugees, behind Syria.²⁴¹

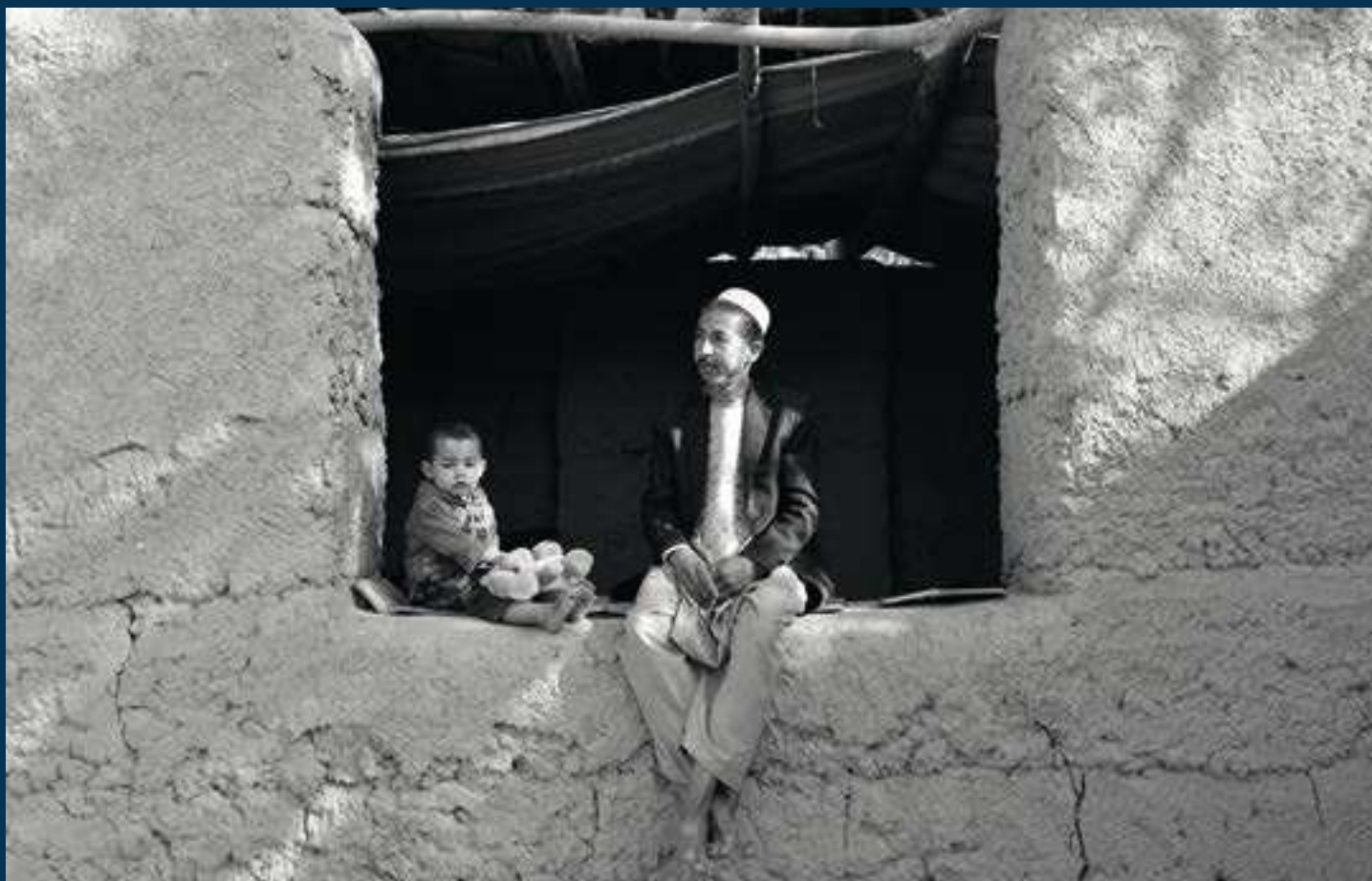
Many Afghans have been displaced more than once, whether within their own country or by

becoming refugees and then returning to find they are unable to resettle sustainably at home. The reasons for their plight are manifold, but those most commonly cited are the struggle to find a place to live, a lack of livelihood opportunities and pervasive insecurity.

Their inability to re-establish their lives in their places of origin has led many to undertake dangerous journeys further afield. More than half of those who entered Europe via Greece in the first three months of 2016 said they had initially been displaced internally, and another quarter were first or second generation refugees who had never lived in Afghanistan.²⁴²

More recently, however, Afghans' migration options have narrowed considerably. The adoption of restrictive border control measures and deterrence policies in 2016 means that Europe

An internally displaced man, having returned from Pakistan three years ago, works on full-day duty in a government school as a watchman and earns \$70 dollars per month. Photo: NRC/ Enayatullah Azad, October 2016



is no longer seen as a viable option for those seeking protection abroad. Asylum acceptance rates have also dropped sharply and an EU declaration signed in October 2016 has paved the way for at least 80,000 Afghans who have had their applications rejected to be returned.²⁴³

A major campaign has also been underway in Pakistan to push Afghan refugees back home. More than 600,000 registered and undocumented returnees arrived in eastern Afghanistan between July and December 2016. Asylum space in Pakistan and Iran has been shrinking for some time, and new refugee registration exercises have not been conducted in either country since 2007.²⁴⁴

These large-scale returns, whether forced, spontaneous or assisted, have prompted UN agencies and NGOs to warn that significant secondary displacement is likely, and the humanitarian country team for Afghanistan has said this will create considerable needs.²⁴⁵ Undocumented and involuntary returnees are at particular risk, because they tend not to be monitored or assisted, but rather fall off humanitarian agencies' radar soon after returning. As such they are far less likely to reintegrate into their communities.²⁴⁶

Afghanistan's national policy on IDPs is clear that returnees, including those coming back from outside the country, should be counted as internally displaced unless they are able to settle sustainably in their places of origin.²⁴⁷ So far, however, there has been no concerted effort to assess the impact of large scale returns on the number of IDPs in the country, nor has it been possible to record the true extent of secondary displacement more generally.

There has also been a sharp increase in the number of IDPs in Afghanistan in recent years. Every province currently either produces or is hosting IDPs, and the country is already struggling to respond to their protection and assistance needs.²⁴⁸ Addressing those of the huge influx of returning refugees in the east of the country and a predicted surge in 2017 in the number of refused asylum seekers coming back from Europe will be a major challenge.

For those who do return, it is often a process of trying to build new lives in a transformed environment rather than re-establishing their previous existence.²²⁷ Many do not go back to their places of origin, moving instead to urban centres in search of security, livelihoods and educational opportunities. This was true for almost two million South Sudanese from largely rural backgrounds who returned following signature of the peace agreement to end the second Sudanese civil war, doubling the population of Juba between 2005 and 2011.

From Kabul to Monrovia and Abidjan, returning refugees have joined large numbers of IDPs from rural areas in rapidly expanding urban areas.²²⁸ They face many of the same problems as the urban poor, but the trauma of being uprooted (often more than once), discrimination, lack of documentation, fractured support networks and poor employment prospects all combine to make them more vulnerable still.²²⁹ The scale of urban returns is not clear. It is difficult to differentiate between those who return to live as IDPs and those who migrate internally in search of better opportunities.

Despite the emphasis in the 1951 Refugee Convention on the principle of *non-refoulement*, which is recognised as the cornerstone of repatriation policy, large-scale returns are often politically driven and less than voluntary.²³⁰ In South Sudan, the impetus was to have as many returnees as possible back in time for the 2008 census that paved the way for the referendum on independence. In Cambodia, the motivation was people's participation in the 1993 elections. In Europe, political pressure from European Union (EU) countries hosting Bosnian refugees played an important role in early returns in the 1990s.

In such circumstances, return is often prioritised over other courses of action that may be more conducive to durable solutions. It tends to be rushed and under-resourced, which reduces the likelihood of returnees being able to rebuild their lives and contribute to society.²³¹

Large-scale repatriation schemes are usually managed under assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes, but there are doubts about how voluntary such initiatives are when they are undertaken in close partnership with host governments that have an interest in reducing refugee numbers. Whether repatriation undertaken under the threat of forcible removal can be deemed voluntary is clearly questionable.²³²

The US, EU and other countries have increasingly used deportation as a tool to manage migration.²³³ The practice mushroomed in the US between 2009 and 2015, when around 2.5 million people were expelled, mainly to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Research suggests that many of the deportees faced severe social stigma on their return and struggled to meet their basic needs in terms of shelter, health-care, food and employment.²³⁴ Others were exposed to exploitation and extreme danger.²³⁵

The EU signed a multilateral "readmission" agreement with the Afghan government in October 2016 that focussed on deportation. Afghans were the second-largest group of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015, with almost 200,000 applications. The EU is said to have threatened to strip Afghanistan of aid if it failed to cooperate.²³⁶ The use of aid as a lever is part of a growing migration management strategy, the most controversial example being the March 2016 deal the EU struck with Turkey to take asylum seekers and migrants (mostly of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi origin) back from Greece and improve border controls in exchange for 6 billion Euros. Bilateral deals are also increasingly common in Europe. Finland deported just under 3,000 Iraqi asylum seekers in 2016.²³⁷

If deportees are forced to return before they choose or are ready to do so, their reintegration is likely to be difficult, if not impossible. They face deepening economic losses, growing debt that they are unable to pay off, a lack of social networks and the stigma of failure and suspicion in the eyes of the communities they return to.²³⁸ Research suggests there is often a revolving door of migration amongst these groups, in which they tend to move on again whether within or beyond their borders.²³⁹

Refugees and migrants who become internally displaced when they return home eke out a living in squatter camps or shanty towns, and may be compelled to move again in an effort to meet their basic needs or escape fresh rounds of fighting. They clearly cannot be considered to have found a lasting solution to their displacement, and much more research is needed to understand, document and respond to their plight.²⁴⁰