Hurting the Host: The Rationale of the Afghan Exodus

By Siegfried O. Wolf, Oct 8 2015

Afghanistan has experienced close to four decades of perpetual violence wars, political upheavals, and religious and ethnic clashes, resulting in millions of Afghans fleeing to neighbouring countries for protection. Facing the Soviet invasion after the Saur revolution and the ensuing civil conflict, between 1979 and the early 1990s approximately [1] six million escaped to Pakistan and Iran, marking the first exodus of Afghan refugees. After Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, around two million refugees decided to return to their country. However, beginning in the mid-1990s, factional clashes led to an outbreak of civil war and the rise of the Taliban, who were able to gain control of major areas and ensued by the establishment of an extraordinary cruel autocratic terror regime. The widespread violations of human and fundamental rights at the hands of the Taliban, and the on-going military conflict with armed oppositional forces (especially in the North of the country with the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, popular known as the Northern Alliance, led to new waves of refugees. The US-led military intervention in late 2001 against the Taliban regime initially caused further displacement. However, the engagement of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) after the downfall of the Taliban regime, and the establishment of the Afghan Interim Administration (after 2002 Afghan Transitional Administration) of Hamid Karzai following the 2001 Bonn agreement aroused hope for peaceful and socio-economic prospects. In result, some 5.7 million Afghan refugees returned home, almost one quarter of the entire population. Nevertheless, during the last decades Afghans not only turned into the largest global refugee population but also created one of the world's longest refugee situations. This changed only last year, with the upsurge in violence in Iraq and as the Islamic State (Daesh) started its 'Jihadist genocide' in Syria and the local multi-dimensional armed conflicts reached a regional unprecedented level of intensity and brutality. However, the fact that today the Afghans cease to be the greatest refugee community does not indicate an improvement of their situation. The 'Costs of War project' of the Watson Institute at the Brown University and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated recently that Afghanistan still remains the world's second largest source of refugees: in 2014, with more than 3.7 million as of July 2014, 700,000-plus of which are internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This pertinent issue raises some crucial questions: First, why again has an extraordinary huge number of Afghans decided to flee their country? Second, what steps does the Afghan government and the international community need to take to stop even more Afghans from leaving their country?

Basically there are several mutually enforcing reasons that sum up why Afghans are again entering the refugees trail in a large scale.

First, Afghanistan suffers from a sharply deteriorating security situation. This is mainly due to the massive return of the Taliban and the expanding activities of ISIS and other Jihadist groups, which led to a tremendous increase in terrorist attacks causing several civilian casualties.

Secondly, there is a rising influence of Islamic fundamentalist clerics in state and society, pushing towards Islamization and the eradication of all achievements made in the last decade in terms of Women and Girls' rights, Human/Fundamental rights and the general situation of civil society.

Thirdly, the people are disenchanted about the democratic and economic performance of the country. Those in control of Afghanistan since October 2001, namely the US-backed Kabul elite, have failed to establish an inclusive, legitimate and accountable political system. Instead the country's democratic transition and state-building process were featured by the return of autocratic, decentralised warlord rule, high level of tolerance for impunity regarding war crimes, pervasive corruption, torture and other human rights' violations as well as the exclusion or marginalization of certain, disadvantaged communities. Especially the corrupt and nepotistic governments of former President Hamid Karzai truncated and violated any notions and fundamental principles of 'liberal democracy'. Additionally the remarkable uncertainty and heightened risk of tensions over the election period in 2014 convinced many refugees not to return to Afghanistan and was an incentive for people inside the country to leave .

Fourthly, Western engagement in the country produced a new generation of Afghans, which are not only skilled and educated, but also socio-politically much more aware. Inspired by the new potential opportunities, these Afghans have high hopes for a better life and high expectations with regards to an economic, social and politically prosperous Afghanistan, free of past shackles. Subsequently, Afghans are not only deeply afraid but also very disappointed

about socio-political and economic prospects of the country. In other words, the people fear a fall back into the erstwhile living conditions as suffered under the Taliban regime.

Fifthly, the fact that more and more areas are under control of the Jihadists which shows clearly the fruitlessness of peace negotiations determines additional worries of the Afghan people. The Afghan government's willingness to continue the peace negotiations (despite all former failures) with the Taliban is making Afghans extremely insecure. Here, it seems that Pakistan's government and especially its security agents are continuing their traditional support for the Taliban. This will make it even more complicated for the Afghan armed forces -which achieved some success in fighting the Taliban (and other militant groups) but are still nascent and insufficiently equipped- to guarantee security.

Sixthly, it became increasingly clear that the transfer of power from the NATO/ISAF to Afghan authorities looks rather like shirking than shifting of responsibilities. By having said that, one can identify much frustration among the people that the new government has no capacities to improve the security situation and no political will to reduce the influence of the fundamentalist Islamic clerics in the political-administrative state structure.

Seventhly, it is important to be aware of the situation of internally displaced persons and of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries is severely deteriorating. In this context, one must mention that Iran still has more than 950.000 registered refugees (and 1.4 million undocumented ones) and Pakistan continues to host around 1.5 million registered refugees (and estimated 1.5 million undocumented ones). Since early this year, it seems that both countries are no longer willing to accept this tremendous amount of migrants. Pakistan and Iran started to expel thousands of refugees (since January 2015 around 130.000 from Pakistan and around 200,000 from Iran) and have pushed them back into Afghanistan. This is gaining importance, because 5.8 million Afghans have already returned to their country under the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), turning the general economic opportunities for returnees and IDPs in Afghanistan from bad to worse. Consequently, additional returnees from Iran and Pakistan will further aggravate the already extremely tense 'domestic refugee situation' in Afghanistan. After returning to Afghanistan, the returnees (and the IDPs) find themselves in meagre and hopeless living conditions determined by war, poverty, malnourishment [2], and lawlessness. Most of the migrants are unable to go back to their original place of origin and are often doomed to languish in informal settlements, where many people have died due to cold and illness combined with insufficient access to basic healthcare.

In order to escape from this environment that is hostile to life, the voluntary returnees as well as the 'deported' ones from Pakistan and Iran will lead add to and increase the refugee movement to Europe.

It is interesting to note, that the SSAR is a voluntary return programme initiated by the Afghan, Pakistani, and Iranian governments and launched in 2002 with the assistance of the UNHCR. In order to secure the funding for this scheme, all three governments "agreed to work towards providing a minimum standard of living and livelihood opportunities for returnees and towards preserving asylum space for refugees, among other things". Since its implementation, the SSAR constitutes the main regional policy framework for sustainable reintegration of refugees returning to Afghanistan. However, it seems that the SSAR did not help at all to change the mind-set and practice of Pakistani and Iranian authorities towards Afghan refugees 'informal deportation' and or facing harsh treatments. Against this backdrop, UNHCR estimates that there are approximately 23,000 deaths among Afghan refugees in Pakistan each year [3].

Finally, against the backdrop of the dramatic situation of the refugees trying to enter Europe as well as the internally displaced persons who are on the edge to leave the country, it is extremely crucial to deal with the puzzle of necessary steps that need to be taken in order to stop the exodus of Afghan people.

From a short-term perspective, there is not much the government of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah can do to stop the speedy flight of the Afghans from the country. However, it must work towards the fulfillment of its agreed international conventions, especially, regarding human rights, protection of women, and civil society organizations. These commitments were mostly ignored by the Karzai administrations, which added to the lack of trust of the people in the government and gave Jihadists much room to entrench their influence in the country. In this direction, the Afghan government needs to take a much harder stand to protect the constitution as well as to ensure the rule of law, and spend much more effort to contain the influence of the Islamists within state and society.

Against this backdrop, it is also clear that peace with the Taliban is not possible and that they are not willing to accept any democratic principles or procedures. Therefore, the administration should stop any negotiations with the Taliban, which adds to the fear of the people about the Taliban seizing more power, outside as well as inside the state structure. The

recent announcement that the international leadership dispute within the Afghan Taliban movement is solved led to more concerns than creating hope for a substantial peace process.

Last but not least, the Afghan government with the support of the international community especially, China, which developed over the last years a keen interest in Afghan domestic politics, must come to an agreement with Islamabad to stop the intimidation of Afghan refugees to force them out of the country. A potential way forward in this direction is that the Government of Pakistan continues to grant Afghan refugees the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards (temporary visa) issued by the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra). Since the validity of the PoR cards are always restricted to two years, and extension is not guaranteed , this could lead to an extreme increase of deportations. In this context, it will be significant to convince Islamabad to extend the PoR cards. Here, the Afghan government was already successfully active and negotiated with Pakistan the extension of the validity of PoR cards from the end of 2015 until December 31, 2017. It is of utmost importance that this positive trend continues and that Pakistan's authorities will maintain the instrument of PoR to give refugees a legal status and to control the flow of migrants and to reduce the refugee pressure on Afghanistan. Nevertheless, despite the PoR cards, intimidation or the threat that refugee camps might be shut down is accelerating the flow of refugees from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the new Washington-Tehran rapprochement should be utilized to convince Iran to loosen its tough rules to discourage more arrival of refugees while pressurizing their current refugees to leave the country. In this context, the UNHCR should strictly apply the conditions of its SSAR. The violations of the notion of voluntary repatriation[4] possess the imminent threat that this repatriation scheme is supporting the anti-refugee practices of Islamabad and Tehran. In other words, the refugees are forcefully cast out from their host countries without ensuring their sufficient protection and sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan, making any successful implementation of SSAR initiatives impossible. The UNHCR clearly states that 'voluntariness' means the "absence of measures which push the refugee to repatriate". Furthermore, the host countries (like Iran and Pakistan) are "bound by the fundamental principle of non-refoulement not to return refugees in any manner whatsoever to territories, or to the frontiers of territories, where their life or freedom would be threatened". In the given context, an increase of 'returning refugees' would worsen the overall situation for internally displaced persons in Afghanistan and subsequently enforcing the exodus of Afghans.

Finally, besides the severe bureaucratic problems for Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, also in Afghanistan all types of refugees have to suffer from ominous challenges created by the country's authorities. Foremost, the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR) [5], has been plagued by corruption, nepotism, forgery and lack of capacities. In consequence, despite international assistance MORR is <u>unable to make significant progress</u> towards an improvement of the socio-economic conditions. Subsequently the Afghan government has failed to implement any crucial domestic initiative, like the urgent redistribution of land to returnees, or the establishment of an adequate legal framework for refugees.

In sum one must state, that besides efforts of the international community and some attempts of local governments not one of the <u>core components of voluntary repatriation</u>, as defined by the UNHCT has been adequately matched, namely physical, legal and material safety, and reconciliation. Thus, the Afghan refugees' crisis will rather intensify than calm down; leading to an increase of refugees, from the East to West.

Notes

[1] There are no independent confirmed data available regarding the numbers of refugees in Pakistan and Iran available.

[2] According to a 2012 <u>report</u> by the Feinstein International Center, one in three Afghan children are malnourished, with rates far higher in conflict-affected regions.

[3] In contrast, Pakistani authorities reported only <u>nine total deaths</u> among Afghan refugees from January 2008 through June 2014.

[4] Voluntary repatriation, as defined in <u>UNHRC Handbook for Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection</u> and the <u>UNHCR's Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities (2004),</u> entails a process beginning with return and the restoration of national protection and culminating, through the reintegration' process, in the ability of returnees to maintain sustainable livelihoods, access basic services and fully reintegrate into communities and countries of origin.

[5] This ministry main task is to coordinate refugee and returnee affairs with other ministries and international organizations.

About The Author (<u>Siegfried O. Wolf</u>):

Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf is a Senior Researcher at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, and Director of Research at South Asia Democratic Forum, a Brussels based think tank. Additionally he is a visiting fellow at the National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, affiliated researcher at the Pakistan Security Research Unit, Durham University, and a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi. He has worked as a consultant for the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany and is member of the external expert group of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force, Federal Foreign Office, Germany. He is the co-author of 'A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia' (Routledge; London 2006), co-editor of 'Politics in South Asia. Culture, Rationality and Conceptual Flow' (Springer: Heidelberg, 2015), 'The Merits of Regionalisation. The Case of South Asia' (Springer: Heidelberg, 2014) and 'State and Foreign Policy in South Asia' (Samskriti: New Delhi, 2010), and Deputy Editor of the 'Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics' (HPSACP).