Repatriating Afghan Refugees

STEVEN S. LAPHAM

IF THE 21-YEAR-LONG CIVIL WAR does end in Afghanistan, the return and reintegration of over 3.5 million Afghan refugees and internally displaced people will be crucial to building long-term peace in Afghanistan and stability in Central Asia. How can such an enormous task be launched?

Helping people return to their cities and villages will be a great challenge for the new government and international relief agencies. Landmines litter the roads and countryside, where live U.S. cluster bombs are also present. Mountainous villages cannot be reached by trucks when snowdrifts close the roads. Food convoys are occasionally delayed or looted by lawless militia. Despite these difficulties, various nations have pledged $740 million to date, and mass starvation has been averted in Afghanistan this winter.

If reconstruction is to succeed, the world’s wealthiest nations will have to commit tens of billions of dollars for weapons turn-in programs, mine clearance, restarting non-opium poppy agriculture, building water and sanitation systems, and education.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) states that particular attention must be paid to the protection needs of displaced refugee women and children. These include protection against physical, sexual, and domestic violence and abuse; full and unimpeded access to food, shelter, water, health care, and education for children; and the full participation of women in refugee policy-making.

Supporting refugee populations over the last 21 years has been an enormous economic and social burden on neighboring countries. In Pakistan, for example, more than 150 refugee camps engender hopelessness and militancy, destabilizing Pakistani politics. The map on the next page shows where many Afghan refugees are located today.

A frequently updated, online collection of links to many maps of Afghanistan (showing geography, resources, ethnic groups, military action, etc.) can be found at www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/afghanistan.html.

Timeline
September 11 and Its Aftermath: The War in Afghanistan until December 31, 2001

SEPTEMBER
11. Terrorists hijack 4 jetliners. Two crash into the World Trade Center in New York City; one hits the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia; and one crashes in rural Pennsylvania as passengers thwart terrorists. Thousands are killed.
12. U.S. President George W. Bush requests support from NATO and logistical backing from Pakistan in possible future military action against Osama bin Laden and his terrorist organization, al Qaeda, centered in Afghanistan.
14. The U.S. Senate approves use of military force and unanimously sets aside $20 billion to go to war.
15. In the House, there is only one dissenting vote.
16. Residents of the Afghan capital of Kabul, and of other cities, begin fleeing in anticipation of U.S. bombing.
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18. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell pledges support for India in its conflict with Pakistan.
20. Bush addresses the U.S. Congress, saying to the world, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” in a “war on terrorism.”
21. Taliban, the Muslim fundamentalist militia that rules over 80 percent of Afghanistan, refuses to surrender Osama bin Laden to the United States.
22. Saudi Arabia balks at allowing U.S. planes to use airbases, but severs relations with the Taliban.
23. UN Security Council calls on all member countries to sever financial, political, and military ties to named terrorist groups.
24. Exiled Afghan monarch Mohammed Zahir Shah meets in Rome with Afghan tribal leaders and members of the U.S. Congress to forge a common front against the Taliban.

OCTOBER
1. Car bomb set by Muslim Kashmiri separatists kills 38 people at the state legislature in Kashmir.
3. Ahmad Shah Massoud is killed by a roadside bomb in Panjshir.
4. Bush commits an additional $300 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.
5. Taliban soldiers seize UN food warehouses, disrupting distribution.
6. Bomb explodes on a street in Khost, Saudi Arabia, killing one American and several other foreigners.
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Afghan Refugees

1,500,000 Refugees
Most refugees in Iran are living in urban areas

1,000,000 Internally Displaced

2,020,000 Refugees
More than 150 camps

Note: Refugee numbers, as of December 2001, are approximate.

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), www.unhcr.ch
Forging a New Afghanistan

An Interim Government
On December 22, 2001, an interim government, led by Hamid Karzai, officially became the government of Afghanistan. A 30-member executive council will rule the country for the next six months. Some members of the council will serve as ministers.

In mid-2002, a loya jirga, a traditional grand council with hundreds of representatives, will meet to establish a more structured transitional government. Finally, within two years, it is hoped that a new constitution will be drafted and elections held. That’s the plan—but if it is to succeed, the allegiances of ethnically diverse, well-armed militia must be secured and billions of dollars in foreign aid must be obtained.

The UN-sponsored conference that created the interim government aimed for a balance of ethnic and political groups. Nineteen of the filled government posts go to representatives of the ethnic groups united under the United Front (also known as the Northern Alliance): Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmenis, and Tajiks, the last being the most heavily represented, with eight posts. Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group, located in southern Afghanistan, hold eleven posts (including the chair). Some of the ethnic and political leaders who will likely play key roles in the challenging process of rehabilitating a nation are briefly described below.

Interim Leaders and their Posts
Hamid Karzai, head of the interim government, is a leader among the Pashtun—the ethnic group to which most of the Taliban belong, and from which most of Afghanistan’s national leaders in modern times have come. Karzai is the 43-year-old son of a prominent Afghan politician (his father was assassinated in 1999 while living in exile in Pakistan). Karzai is considered a political moderate and favors democracy and women’s rights. He served as deputy foreign minister of Afghanistan after the Soviets left in 1992 and speaks fluent English.

In 1994, Karzai worked with the Taliban when they first restored order in the face of feuding warlords, but he soon severed ties as Taliban rule turned brutal. In 2001, Karzai and his militia, aided by U.S. airstrikes, was on the front lines, battling the Taliban near Kandahar, when representatives from Afghanistan’s many factions (meeting in Germany) selected him, on December 5, to lead the interim government.

Karzai has asked the United States not to detach itself from Afghanistan as it did in 1989 after the Soviet occupation ended. Afghanistan could prove to be “a trusted friend and ally” in the future. He has also recently said, with regard to feuding ethnic groups, “The gun has to stop ruling the country.”

Karzai has awarded three key ministerial positions (defense, foreign, and interior) to ethnic Tajiks: to Mohammed Fahim, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, and Yonus Qanooni, respectively—which has caused some leaders of his own and other ethnic groups to complain. In another decision that is controversial among Afghans, he chose two women as vice chairs (out of five positions at that level). Suhaiala Seddiq, a Tajik, will head the Ministry of Public Health. A doctor and former general in the Afghan army (under both king and communists), her challenge is great because of Afghanistan’s dire poverty following years of war and drought. Sima Samar, of the Hazara ethnic group, will oversee women’s affairs.

It could be a challenge for Karzai to hold this coalition together. For example, Hussain Anwari, a Hazara leader and the minister for agriculture in the future government, said that foreign troops would be needed in Kabul and in provinces outside the capital to prevent a new round of infighting among the victors. Defense Minister Fahim, himself a militia commander, did not want peacekeeping forces to

26. Taliban capture and execute Abdul Haq, a prominent leader of the Afghan opposition in the south.
27. Iran allows U.S. to unload wheat at its ports and truck it through to refugees in western Afghanistan.
30. U.S. troops deployed in northern Afghanistan to coordinate airstrikes.

NOVEMBER
1. UN World Food Program says up to 6 million Afghans will need emergency food this winter.
2. U.S. warplanes hit Taliban militia that are trying to capture Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun leader organizing resistance to the Taliban (many of whom are ethnic Pashtunts). Karzai’s uprising, aided by U.S. Special Forces, gains strength.
4. Six meetings, all aiming to establish a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan, are ongoing in different places around the world, including Cyprus, Rome, Geneva, and Peshawar in northern Pakistan.
5. Germany pledges troops to support U.S. action in Afghanistan.
6. Italy pledges troops.
7. Northern Alliance captures the northern city of Mazar-i Sharif. Taliban troops retreat or are scattered.
8. Friendship Bridge to Uzbekistan is opened.
9. Pakistan moves its nuclear weapons to secret locations to prevent sabotage or hijacking.
10. Osama bin Laden claims that he possesses chemical and nuclear weapons.
11. Pakistan President Musharraf warns that atrocities and anarchy would follow a Northern Alliance takeover of Kabul. Northern Alliance takes the town of Taloqan.
12. In a display of comity, U.S. Secretary of State Powell shakes hands with Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi.
13. Taliban suddenly retreat from Kabul, which is overrun by Northern Alliance militia. Special UN representative Khalid Brahimi sets plans for ethnic and militia leaders to meet and arrange a post-war transitional government for Afghanistan.
14. Northern Alliance leader Burhanuddin Rabbani returns to Kabul.
15. Karzai’s militia occupies Tarin Kot, a village 70 miles north of Kandahar.
16. Northern Alliance leaders agree to meet with other Afghan factions on neutral ground, in a foreign city. Unidentified gunmen kill four journalists on a highway between Jalalabad and Kabul.
17. Northern Alliance troops begin advance on Kunduz, supported by U.S. bombing.
18. Northern Alliance captures city of Kunduz, ending Taliban rule in the northern half of the country.
19. Taliban prisoners over power their guards near Mazar-i Sharif. U.S. air strikes and ground forces (with British troops) end the gun battle. First American war fatality in Afghanistan happens during the revolt.
20. Armed Russian troops arrive in Kabul to rehabilitate the embassy and deliver humanitarian aid. In Koenigswinter, Germany, representatives of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups and political parties call for unity in preparation for establishing a post-war government.
22. Fighting and bombing increase against al Qaeda stronghold at Tora Bora, a mountain fortress (with a complex of caves and tunnels) 45 miles southwest of Jalalabad. Refugee agencies protest force return of refugees by Iran and Pakistan, and warn that the absence of international security forces could prevent aid workers from delivering food.
2. U.S. Marines are deployed in southern Afghanistan and are soon joined by British and Australian troops.

4. Hundreds of residents flee Kandahar. Afghan militia begins ground assault on Tora Bora. Foreign ministers from 55 European, North American, and Central Asian countries unanimously adopt plans to fight terrorism by enhancing police cooperation and seizing suspect financial accounts. In pursuit of al Qaeda leaders, U.S. bombing error kills 5 of Karzai’s militia, 3 U.S. soldiers, and 36 residents of a village near Jalalabad; Karzai is slightly wounded.

5. New Afghan interim government is announced in Bonn, Germany, with Hamid Karzai as head. Karzai is to chair a 30-member executive council, representative of Afghan’s ethnic and political groups.

6. Afghan women’s conference in Belgium calls for their full participation in any new government.

7. Taliban forces surrender, some flee the southern city of Kandahar, their last urban stronghold. Looting erupts. Local tribal leaders vie for control of the city, airport, and villages nearby. Gul Agha Shirzai, exiled former governor of Kandahar, takes over the governor’s palace, forcing Naqibullah Alokozai (who had been appointed by Karzai) to flee.

8. General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a Northern Alliance general in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, threatens to boycott Karzai’s interim government over inadequate Uzbek representation.

9. The United States obtains a videotape of Osama bin Laden describing the World Trade Center damage as intensified search for al Qaeda leadership.

10. Karzai brokers a compromise, and Gul Agha Shirzai resumes his former position as governor of Kandahar.

11. Afghan forces overrun dozens of caves in which al Qaeda soldiers, leaders, and their families had been living in the area around Tora Bora.

12. In villages across the country, Taliban troops are surrendering and then returning home, but with “their guns and grievances intact.”

13. Five assailants and nine others are killed in an attack on India’s parliament, blamed on Muslim Kashmiri separatists based in Pakistan.

14. Karzai is paralyzed in the streets of Kabul as potential allies and foes alike pay homage to the new national leader who is head of the Ittihad-i-Islami [Islamic Unity] Party, Abdul-Rasul Sayyaf, wanted, but did not receive, the interior department, which controls domestic security. The Pashtun leader of the National Front of Afghanistan, Sayed Ahmad Gailani, expresses displeasure with the meeting of the 1980s.

15. India and Pakistan begin to amass thousands of troops and military hardware along their common border in Kashmir.

16. U.S. Embassy opens in Kabul for the first time in 12 years.

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30. brahimi, UN special representative for Afghanistan, brokered the agreement in Bonn to establish the interim government. The UN Security Council authorized the deployment of an international security force in Kabul (as described above). UN agencies have raised funds to launch that government and averted mass famine through record deliveries of wheat. The UN’s continued participation in reconstruction of the country—whose challenges range from helping Afghans create a national jurisprudence to promoting a peaceful and opium-free economy—may be crucial for the future of the nation.