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PERSPECTIVE

WILL THE REFUGEES RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN?

[REDACTED]

Afghan refugees, with rare exceptions, plan to return to their homeland when the Soviets leave. This is a point of great pride to the exiled Afghan community, despite their increasing integration into Pakistani society. How many will actually go back, however, will depend on their perception of the situation in Afghanistan, the attitude of the Pakistanis, and on how long the refugees have been in Pakistan. [REDACTED]

Economic Integration

The Afghan refugees are becoming surprisingly well integrated into the Pakistani economy, according to two United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 1983 reports. One UNHCR survey found that 72 percent of the males surveyed are working in the local Pakistani economy in some type of job and that 87 percent of the camp households have at least one member employed. Involvement in the local economy does not necessarily indicate whether the refugees will return to Afghanistan, but it is an indication that there is incentive to stay, at least in the short run. [REDACTED]

The other study indicates that the refugees have brought with them over 4,000 commercial vehicles, about half of which are heavy trucks. Since there is a shortage of heavy trucks in Pakistan, these vehicles are in great demand; each provides a good living for several families. In addition, the refugees have brought with them thousands of donkeys and camels that also provide income. [REDACTED]

Time Element

Studies of refugee movements show an inverse correlation between the duration of refugee exile and their desire to return home. These studies divide the time into roughly four periods: the first year or so, when the trauma and bitterness of recent tragic events overwhelm other feelings; the next two or three years, when the refugee works with particular vigor to maintain contacts and connections with the original

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country; then comes a period of depression and the feeling of hopelessness; and finally, after roughly a decade, resignation to living in the host country. Most of these studies agree that the fourth or fifth year is especially important. As the refugee's exile continues into this period and beyond, the chances that he will have become fully integrated into Pakistani society grow. Meanwhile, contact with Afghanistan diminishes, refugee children enter Pakistani schools, and camp life becomes routine. [REDACTED]

Some reports from Pakistan suggest that a new kind of refugee leader is emerging--one whose power no longer depends on the traditional tribal or village structure, but on the realities of camp life. Leaders who can acquire and control ration cards and deal with the Pakistani bureaucracy come to the forefront. These leaders have little to gain by encouraging their people to return to Afghanistan since their power grows out of the camp environment. [REDACTED]

Reasons for Returning Home

The Pakistanis have provided incentives for repatriation. By restricting the distribution of UN rations to refugees living in camps, Islamabad discourages integration into the local society. Afghans are also forbidden to own businesses and land and discouraged from attending school. This has not worked perfectly, however; many Afghans have bought property and opened businesses. [REDACTED]

Many refugees continue to own property in Afghanistan. Fifteen percent of the refugee farmers interviewed in the camps have returned to Afghanistan part of the year to farm. Among the urban refugees interviewed, over 50 percent had property in Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

From a political perspective, it will not be the form of government that will be most important to the refugees, nor whether or not it is pro-Soviet. Rather, it will be the individuals who are included in the government and their ability to convince the refugees to return. The refugees, both in the camps and those living outside, will return when life in Afghanistan appears more attractive than life in the camps in Pakistan. A negotiated settlement likely will call for camps to be dismantled and the structure of support and services that make camp life desirable ended. [REDACTED]

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To maximize repatriation, the refugees also will need to be reassured that they can return safely to their farms, work, and homes. If their villages are still being bombed, their houses destroyed, and their irrigation canals ruined, they will be less likely to return. Even if they do return to Afghanistan, they may not return to their farms but crowd into the cities, primarily Kabul. [REDACTED]

Afghan Decisionmaking

Traditionally, Afghans have made decisions in highly structured local tribal or village units, not as individuals. These traditional units in turn are tied to larger national political units that eventually have ties with the seven mujahadeen guerrilla organizations, and to some degree with Pakistani national political groups. Not every refugee is directly under the control of one of the guerrilla groups, but most refugees inevitably have linkages to one of the seven groups. A political solution that will insure the return of most of the refugees will have to include the participation, or at least the blessing, of the major political leaders. Alternatively, a new leader (ex-King Zahir Shah, for example) or an organizational structure (some type of Loya Jirga--Afghan assembly) must emerge that can supercede their authority. [REDACTED]

Outlook

Given an "acceptable" settlement, most of the refugees probably will return to Afghanistan. The refugees are deeply suspicious that Pakistan is about to sell them out, however, and force them to return to an unacceptable and perhaps dangerous situation. A solution that will allay these fears and convince the refugees to return will be difficult to find. [REDACTED]

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