

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

People and Places

Crackdown in Peshawar

by Aamer Ahmed Khan

Once viewed as heroic fighters for the Afghan jihad, the Arabs who poured into Peshawar through the '80s are today being labelled terrorists and subjected to an indiscriminate crackdown by the Pakistani authorities. Worse, many of them come from countries which fully backed their Afghan adventure but are now unwilling to take them back. Here is a special report on the Arabs stranded in the Frontier capital awaiting deportation, by arrangement with the *Herald*, Karachi

In dozens of indiscriminate raids since October 1992, when the IJI government of Mian Nawaz Sharif first enacted its "clean-up policy" against Arabs based in Peshawar, the police has picked up over 300 Arabs for interrogation. Most of them, however, were later released because no evidence could be found of their alleged militancy.

At first, Peshawar's Arab community chose to take the drubbing quietly. By nature, and in some cases out of compulsion, an extremely secretive lot, most of the Arabs arrested by the police resolutely resisted going to the press with their side of the story. Irrespective of whether they were genuine aid agency workers, war veterans or simply those who opted to live in Pakistan because its Islamic character was more acceptable to them, the Arabs avoided publicity largely for fear of being misunderstood and misrepresented.

It was partly this silence and absence of any kind of retaliation which encouraged a crackdown on the Arabs by the police — the efficiency of which in dealing with crime can otherwise be seen from the fact that many Afghans run easily accessible heroin dens for Punjabi addicts in the middle of Hayatabad. It became worse for the Arabs earlier this year when the US floated the bogey of the mythical "terrorist watch list".

Becoming more and more frequent with every passing day after this event, these raids were initiated following a directive to the NWFP home department from the interior ministry in Islamabad that it demanded the immediate extermination of some 230 Arabs who were found to be "involved in undesirable activities". Ostensibly, these orders were aimed at arrest and expulsion of the members of certain international terrorist organisations who are using Peshawar and the adjoining areas in Afghanistan to carry out their operations in other Muslim and western countries. In effect, the effort proved to be little more than a dance in the dark, mostly at the expense of those Arabs who themselves speak bitterly against such organisations because "they have done nothing so far except to enable the western media to slap the label of terrorist against all Muslim fundamentalists in general."

A senior police official in Peshawar says that starting with the Arab NGOs was the obvious course of action since many of the fighters had later joined these NGOs to find a pretext for staying on in Pakistan. "Even such indiscriminate raids which made no distinction between one Arab and the next could have helped in conveying the desired impression to the West. As far as the West is concerned, every Arab living in Peshawar is a terrorist," says Arab Dost Mohammad, a former commissioner for Afghan refugees. If that is the case, then the West, or the Peshawar police for that matter, cannot be more wrong. While there are dozens of war veterans living in

Peshawar today, a wholly invisible minority of whom may have links with terrorist organisations, an overwhelming majority of the city's visible Arab community has had nothing to do with militancy or violence, except by way of relief operations.

However, it is exactly this visible community which has attracted the attention, and wrath, of the Peshawar police.

"Some of our workers were

badly beaten up, their houses were ransacked (by the police)", says Zahid Al Shaikh, chairman of the Islamic Co-ordination Council (ICC) and regional manager of Lajnat, one of the largest Muslim relief organisations in Peshawar. "Some of them were sent from one police department to another even after they had produced their documents."

There are 17 Muslim relief agencies currently working in Peshawar which together employ over 600 workers. A majority of these workers come from various Arab countries around the world. By far the most accessible of the lot, these relief workers caught the brunt of the clean-up operation as the police repeatedly failed to find its real targets.

To a small extent, the relief workers had their own negligence to blame for their trouble. During the Soviet-Afghan conflict, every Arab entering Pakistan was given a security clearance card known as the Yellow Card which they were required to produce on request anywhere in Pakistan. Given the laxity of the local administration, many Arabs stopped taking the card seriously once they had stayed in Peshawar long enough. Some lost their cards during relief operations inside Afghanistan. During its raids, the city police laid down a simple criteria for identifying suspects. It simply locked up all those who didn't have a Yellow Card, even if an employer agency testified to their credentials.

Then there was the problem of Arab passports. Some Arab countries do not issue passports to minors, whose photographs are pasted on to their parents' passports instead. The Peshawar police, however, completely disregarded this fact and hauled up even minors as "illegal residents" if their parents were away at the time of the raid. "We are under pressure from Islamabad. There were strict instructions to the police not to spare anyone who did not have complete documents," says a senior official in the NWFP. "Some mistakes might have been made, but there was no other way of going about it."

The failure of the Peshawar police was evident from the fact that it was taken to court for most of the arrests it made, and the people nabbed by the police had to be subsequently released on orders from the Peshawar High Court.

"Our stay here has now become a political issue and the pressure on us to leave is mostly external," says Zahid. Police officials in Peshawar

admit that there existed no local reason for the Pakistan government to ask these Arabs to leave. "They were almost invisible throughout their stay here. As far as we are concerned, they never created administrative problems for us," says this official. According to police sources, there have been only three reported cases inside Peshawar in which Arabs have been involved in criminal ac-

tivities like theft and robbery over the past ten years.

Zahid admits that there may have been some criminal elements or even terrorists amongst these Arabs. But he argues that they could have been picked up one by one without targeting the entire Arab community. "How do they expect us to work in these conditions? And if we decide to pack up and leave, it will be the

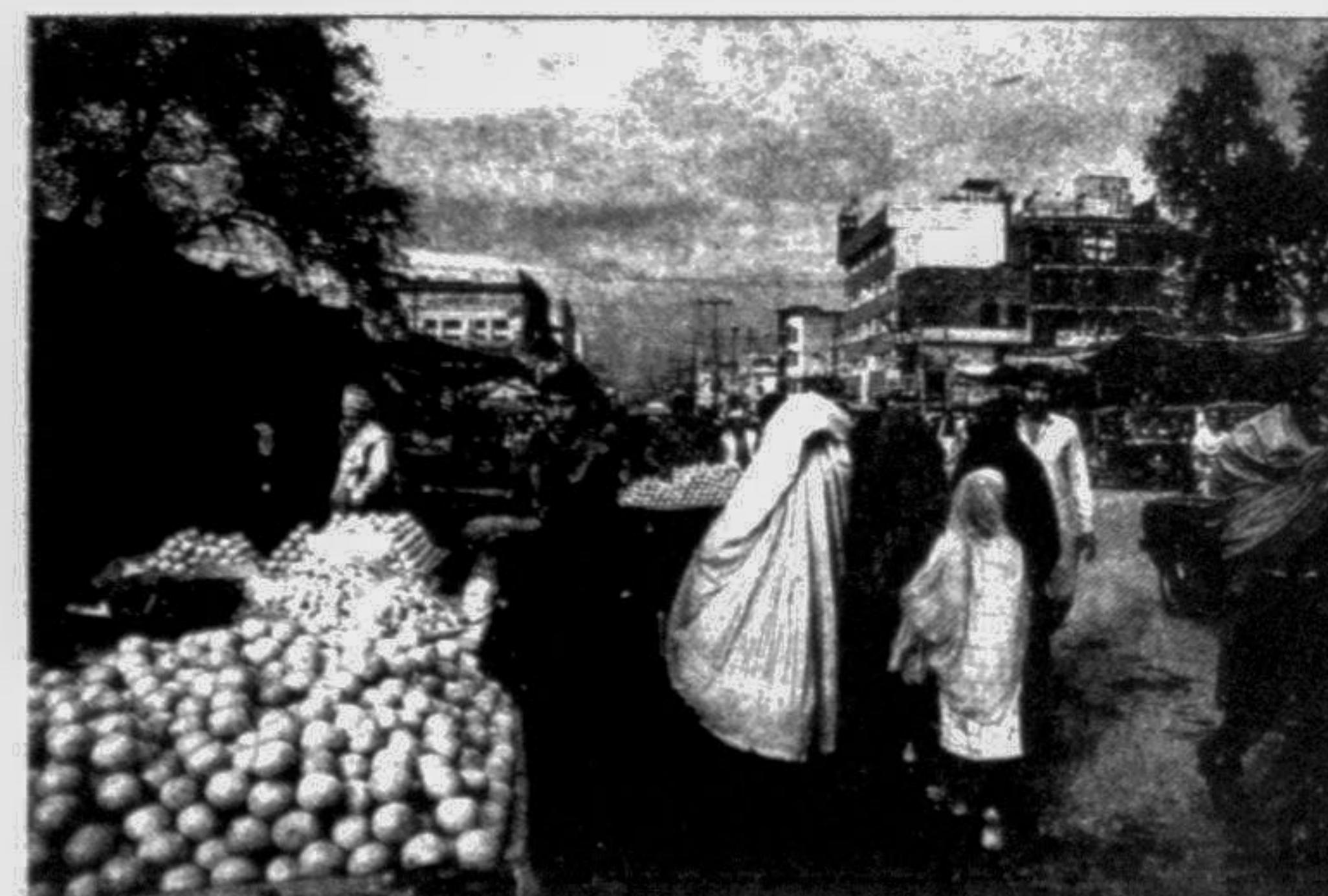
Afghans who will suffer," he says.

According to ICC figures, the 17 Arab NGOs involved in relief and rehabilitation work for the Afghan refugees have spent over 200 million US dollars in Afghanistan and the refugee camps in the Frontier over the past five years. All this money, says Zahid, came from private donations. Aainat Al-Dawa Al-Islami, a Kuwaiti NGO, alone

runs ten surgical hospitals, 100 basic health centers, 200 Quarantine centers, 380 tubewells, 150 mosques and four huge orphanages which have so far provided shelter to over 15,000 homeless children.

The figures collected from other Muslim NGOs indicate that their total humanitarian work in Afghanistan and the Frontier-based camps over the past ten years may be worth well over half-a-billion dollars. This sum is greater than the total commitment of some 85 Western and Afghan NGOs who moved into Peshawar in the latter half of the '80s.

The ICC has held several meetings with local administration officials over the past three months to sort out some mutually acceptable way of screening the Arabs working for the various NGOs. Each time, the ICC has been assured that genuine aid workers would not be harassed. However, in every fresh raid, some aid workers are invariably hauled up and humiliated. When Afghans working for the western NGOs were being targeted by militants from the Hezbi and other factions some three years ago, the event made headline news all over the world. But the plight of these Arabs has not found any significant mention even inside Pakistan — despite the fact that they are being harassed by the same people who are supposed to protect them.



Peshawar city: The government sweeps clean.

The Forsaken Warriors

Holed up in a suburb of Peshawar, the Arab fighters and NGO workers speak out bitterly about the cruel irony of fate which has left them with nowhere to go. As many of them are on the run from the local authorities as well as on the hit list of their home governments, their names have been changed to protect their identity unless otherwise stated....

WITH every passing day, the world is getting smaller for the few hundred Arab fundamentalists holed up in Peshawar since the end of the Afghan-Soviet conflict some three years ago. The declared policy of the Pakistani government is that since these Arabs came here for the Afghan jihad, they have no role left to play any more and should leave Pakistan immediately for any other country of their choice.

This policy has continued undisturbed despite the recent changes in Islamabad, and the new caretaker set-up of Prime Minister Moeen Qureshi has tenaciously kept this small Arab community on its toes.

And then there was the problem of Arab passports. Some Arab countries do not issue passports to minors, whose photographs are pasted on to their parents' passports instead. The Peshawar police, however, completely disregarded this fact and hauled up even minors as "illegal residents" if their parents were away at the time of the raid. "We are under pressure from Islamabad. There were strict instructions to the police not to spare anyone who did not have complete documents," says a senior official in the NWFP. "Some mistakes might have been made, but there was no other way of going about it."

The failure of the Peshawar police was evident from the fact that it was taken to court for most of the arrests it made, and the people nabbed by the police had to be subsequently released on orders from the Peshawar High Court.

"Our stay here has now become a political issue and the pressure on us to leave is mostly external," says Zahid. Police officials in Peshawar

could be further from the truth. And any neutral visitor to any one of these houses will be more inclined towards their point of view than the relentless propaganda unleashed against them by the all-powerful media of the United States.

And with good reason. Most Arab fighters currently based in Peshawar appear to be a dedicated and somewhat disappointed lot who, at least at this stage, are quite confused about what the future holds for them. The end of the Soviet-Afghan conflict has turned their world upside down. A little over three years ago, they were the "heroes of the Afghan jihad" morally and materially supported by the entire Muslim and western world. Today, they are labelled terrorists not only by the West but by their own governments as well, which at one time were going out of their way to send them to Pakistan.

In the early '80s, the organisational and financial support lent to these fighters by their respective regimes was phenomenal. Praised for their courage and commitment to Islam, they only had to walk into their foreign offices to secure a passage to Peshawar. There was tremendous propaganda in our national dailies for recruitment of fighters for the Afghan jihad," says Mohammad Ibrahim Al-Makkawali (real name), a former colonel in the Egyptian Army who is now a sworn enemy of the Hosni Mubarak regime. "Every day, there would be many ads from kafils (sponsors) willing to finance anyone interested in going for jihad."

The kafil system, in fact, was the most successful method of recruitment especially in the more affluent Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia.

"Every Friday, the Khatiba in the mosques would urge the more affluent to finance those who were willing to go for jihad."

Many of them also came from western countries mostly Britain and the United States. Some of the fighters interviewed by the Herald were either living or studying in these two countries in the early '80s before they joined the jihad. "There was tremendous propaganda in support of the jihad in America," says Ahmed, who was studying at an American university at that time. One Libyan fighter interviewed by the Herald was a highly qualified professional working in America before he decided to move to Pakistan.

Once in Pakistan, they were given red carpet treatment, courtesy mainly the Jamaat-i-Islami, which opened up dozens of Baitul Ansar (transit houses) all over Peshawar to re-

turn the kafil system was the most successful method of recruitment especially in the more affluent Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia. "Every Friday, the Khatiba in the mosques would urge the more affluent to finance those who were willing to go for jihad."

The system was made popular all over the Muslim world through a massive propaganda campaign organised by the Rabita Al-Alam Islami and the Ikhwan, international Muslim organisations with worldwide relief and operations networks.

It was mainly through their efforts that the kafil system spread even in non-Arab Muslim countries. Between 1983 and 1986, the period

when the Pakistani authorities claim saw the highest rate of influx, over 5,000 Arabs are estimated to have entered Pakistan financed by the kafil system. As many, if not more, are estimated to have come here on their own. They journeyed from as far away as Senegal, Sudan, Somalia, Tunisia, Upper Volta, Algeria, Philippines as well as from the Middle East, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey.

Its senior citizens. She said: "For the 20 years I have been sick, the government has never helped me, particularly with transport from my village (Kanags) to town for treatment... I have suffered a lot and for many days and nights I had to sleep in the bush as I was too weak to walk to the nearest health centre for treatment.

The Hereros (better known in Botswana as Baherero) first told the Botswana authorities, through their chiefs, that they wanted to return way back in 1935.

In those days Botswana was the British protectorate of Bechuanaland and could not allow them to resettle since Namibia, then known as South West Africa, was a South African colony. Bechuanaland expressed support for the idea in 1946.

During a war between the Germans and the Hereros, from 1904 to 1907, about 80,000 Hereros — about 80 per cent of the Herero nation at that time — were massacred by German soldiers following the "extermination order" of General Von Trotha.

The repatriation process started on April 28. One of the first to move, 78-year-old Kalipaperua Tjikurame, said: "In spite of all the difficulties we faced in trying to convince the Bostwana authorities to allow us to return home, I am at least now happy that the hour has come for us to return to the promised land.

"Although it was not the Bostwana Government's policy on paper to discriminate against us, the Hereros, most of our educated youth do not get jobs and none of us holds senior positions in Government institutions." They had no representation in the National Assembly or the House of Chiefs. Unlike in other parts of the country, no food aid was given to them in the Ngami district during the recent drought and the Bostwana always refer to them as mutsawako, or the outsider.

About 70 per cent of the 35,000 Hereros in Botswana live in the Ngami district. Tjikurame said good relations between the old generation of Baherero and Bostwana are not evident among the younger generation. He added: "We used to help each other in farming activities, in many other things in life, but now this has all changed."

An elderly Herero woman, Yaviruka Kanangure, was concerned at the way Bostwana has been neglecting the elderly, although it claims to provide adequate health provision to all

its senior citizens. She said: "For the 20 years I have been sick, the government has never helped me, particularly with transport from my village (Kanags) to town for treatment... I have suffered a lot and for many days and nights I had to sleep in the bush as I was too weak to walk to the nearest health centre for treatment.

"I do not know how Namibia will treat me. I have never been here before, but at least I will be happy to suffer and die in my own country rather than in a foreign country."

Her brother, 95-year-old Kalkawa Keryamba, was, at the age of six, one of the 1,500 Hereros who crossed the border in Botswana with Chief Samuel Maherero in 1904. He said: "Although I am too old now, I would love to see my people... the people for whom my parents suffered and died during the war."

Other repatriated Baherero are going back because Botswana does not provide pensions for the elderly and Namibia does.

The Baherero also say the state-owned mass media in Botswana, especially the radio, has no service in the Ojibherero language, and they are forced to listen to an English and Setswana.

Another elderly Herero, Rundje Tjumino, has a different view: "I am very happy here and I do not care about the pension money people get in Namibia."

Veketa Kazenambo, 75, said that although he does not like certain things in Botswana, such as the education system which teaches children to communicate in Setswana and English only, he does not want to return to Namibia because he regards Botswana as his home where he was born and bred.

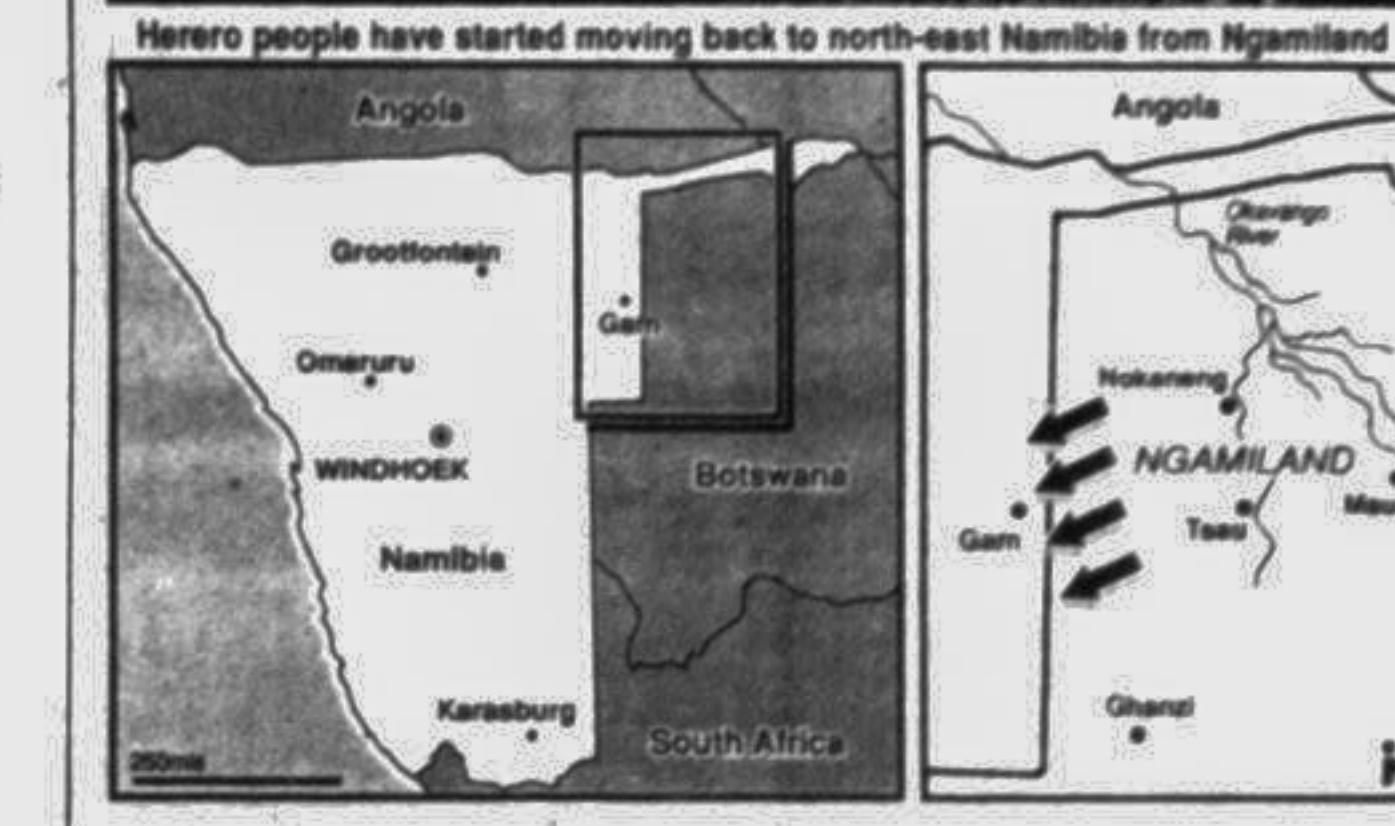
While the repatriation of the Baherero with their 35,000 head of cattle might bring joy to those being repatriated, others believe that it will affect the Botswana economy, which is boosted by the production of beef.

When repatriation started some families were torn apart over whether to go to Namibia. Katini Katjiteo, 73, said she nearly divorced her husband, who is waiting to see how the situation progresses in Namibia before he can join them. They eventually reached an agreement to visit each other regularly. Enoch Naane, acting district commissioner of Ngamiland, said the repatriation might ease pressure on those areas being overgrazed.

Continued on page 11

The trek home

Herero people have started moving back to north-east Namibia from Ngamiland



A Century after, a People Return Home to Namibia

After nearly a century in exile the Baherero people are returning to their home, Namibia. They have been living in neighbouring Botswana since the days when Namibia was a German colony. At the beginning of the century 80 per cent of the Herero nation were massacred by the Germans. Now that Namibia is independent, their descendants are moving back home in a five-year repatriation.

Brian-Bethuel Katjimune

writes from Windhoek

Kai Kauakeryamba, 89.
He fled Namibia with his parents in 1904 from war with the Germans. Now he is going home

Over the border to home



A new chapter in the history of Namibia has opened with the decision by many of the Baherero people to end 89 years of exile in neighbouring Botswana. The two governments are to repatriate them to their motherland, settling them in the remote north-eastern village of Gam.

The Hereros (better known in Botswana as Baherero) first told the Botswana authorities, through their chiefs, that they wanted to return way back in 1935.

In those days Botswana was the British protectorate of Bechuanaland and could not allow them to resettle since Namibia, then known as South West Africa, was a South African colony. He said: "Although I am too old now, I would love to see my people... the people for whom my parents suffered and died during the war."

The Baherero also say the state-owned mass media in Botswana, especially the radio, has no service in the Ojibherero language, and they are forced to listen to an English and Setswana.

Another elderly Herero, Rundje Tjumino, has a different view: "I am very happy here and I do not care about the pension money people get in Namibia."

Veketa Kazenambo, 75, said that although he does not like certain things in Botswana, such as the education system which teaches children to communicate in Setswana and English only, he does not want to return to Namibia because he regards Botswana as his home where he was born and bred.

While the repatriation of the Baherero with their 35,000 head of cattle might bring joy to those being repatriated, others believe that it will affect the Botswana economy, which is boosted by the production of beef.

When repatriation started some families were torn apart over whether to go to Namibia. Katini Katjiteo, 73, said she nearly divorced her husband, who is waiting to see how the situation progresses in Namibia before he can join them. They eventually reached an agreement to visit each other regularly. Enoch Naane, acting district commissioner of Ngamiland, said the repatriation might ease pressure on those areas being overgrazed.

Continued on page 11



Moved by local officials: Arab NGOs in Peshawar.