

A harsh homecoming for Afghans

Refugees begin streaming back with a few resources or prospects...

CARLOTTA GALL

THOUSANDS of refugees have begun returning to northern Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran, often without even enough money to get home to their villages, and all the while disregarding the bleak winter that lies ahead.

While the numbers are not yet overwhelming, aid officials warn that the return of tens of thousands of families to the areas that have been hardest hit by fighting, drought and poverty will ultimately intensify the need for aid at a time when the delivery of food remains blocked or woefully inadequate. Mohammed Qaim, 50, and his family climbed down from a bus Tuesday after a four-day trip from Karachi, the Pakistan port city where they had sought refuge from the Taliban.

"We came back because there is peace here now and also because I ran out of money in Pakistan," Mr. Qaim said. He was borrowing money from a relative to finish the journey to his hometown, Shebarghan, still a two-hour drive away.

Hundreds of thousands of people like Mr. Qaim left northern Afghanistan in recent years to find work and safety in neighboring Iran and Pakistan.

Many fled the fighting or the repressive Taliban regime, which was particularly harsh on the ethnic minorities in the north of Afghanistan.

But most fled poverty, as the drought ate away their savings and cut into jobs and livelihoods. They swelled the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan to more than 2 million and in Iran to 1.5 million.

In recent days, more than 1,000 refugees have arrived from Pakistan in 83 minibuses and trucks at the bus station in Mazar-i-Sharif, said the supervisor of the station, Amidullah Popal. Most said that they were returning because they had lost their jobs in Pakistan.

Others complained that they had encountered increasing police harassment or violence by Pakistanis, especially in the border regions, where many residents supported the Taliban and had lost relatives who had fought on the side of the Taliban.

Mr. Qaim said that he was working as a clothes packer in Karachi but was laid off a month ago, so he decided to come home. "The main reason is there is no work," he said. "People have used up all their money. Most people had to borrow money for the journey."

But he also said that Karachi had become dangerous. "During the U.S. bombing, the Pakistanis changed their attitude towards the Afghan people,"

he said. "They have never liked us northerners, they say we are not Muslim."

Those returning to Afghanistan could also face harsh treatment on several fronts. Mr. Qaim hopes to return to a state-owned store and regain his job there, which he lost under the Taliban. But others will return to looted or damaged homes, and may join the vast masses of unemployed in an economy crippled by war and uncertainty.

Sitting in a teahouse during a truck stop, Abdul Salam, 32, said that his house had been destroyed and he would have to live with relatives in his village, in the far northwest, near the Turkmenistan border.

"What will I do? I don't know," he said. "I hope to borrow money to fix my house."

He and many people in his village, where carpet weaving is the main source of income, had been hurt by the collapse of the market since U.S. forces began bombing Afghanistan. Ghulam Haidar, 21, spent two years in Peshawar, Pakistan, washing carpets for an Afghan company, but lost his job after Sept. 11. Back home now, he is philosophical. "Here I am jobless, but when my country is peaceful, why should I stay in another country?" he said.

But the returning Afghans will stretch already thin resources. In many villages, people have only enough wheat to last them a few months, and few

residents have seed grain to sow a new crop in the spring. Afghanistan already has nearly 1 million displaced people, who fled their homes because of war or drought and are living a precarious existence in camps or in overcrowded houses with relatives. Northern Afghanistan, and in particular the provinces west of Mazar-i-Sharif, have been the hardest hit by the drought.

"They are coming back and they need all sorts of assistance," said Vladimir Smoljan, who works with the United Nations refugee agency in Mazar-i-Sharif, "food, nonfood items, shelter and quick-start projects." He said that his agency, which only recently came back to Mazar-i-Sharif after being forced out by the Taliban, did not know how many refugees had recently returned and was trying to assess the impact.

A system for distributing food is still not in place, and aid agencies are increasingly concerned that more people will flood into the cities in search of food and aid.

Courtesy: International Herald Tribune.

The impact of Afghan developments in the Asia Pacific

DR SUBHASH KAPILA

THE Asia Pacific's political landscape has changed significantly after the Islamic Jehadi terrorist bombings in US on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent American military operations in Afghanistan.

This region, particularly China, had been in the global focus during the last nine months following the US-China dispute over the Hainan spy plane incident, Chinese saber-rattling over Taiwan and its strong opposition to the US NMD plans. In one swift stroke on September 11, the global focus has shifted from the Asia Pacific region and China to the Afghanistan-Pakistan complex and its support to international terrorism.

China has been affected by the Afghan developments in several ways:

China's main protégé and ally in South Asia Pakistan built up as a nuclear weapons and missile power with its assistance, buckled overnight under American pressure and changed its policies.

China was supportive of the Taliban role in Afghanistan because of the Pakistani factor. The Taliban stands liquidated today and Pakistan's policies are in tatters.

China faces the unwelcome prospect of an American military presence in areas contiguous to its strategic but turbulent periphery of Xinjiang and Tibet.

China would also be concerned over the strategic congruence between the US and Russia over Afghanistan. Russia gave a nod to the Central Asian Republics to permit use of their airspace and bases by the US military. It is unlikely that any consultations on this issue took place under the auspices of the Shanghai Five.

China was also forced by these developments to take a stand on international terrorism at the Shanghai Summit of the APEC countries. Its declarations were limited, however, to legally correct and precise prose.

Japan, as expected of an enduring and strong ally of the United



States, came out strongly against the Islamic Jehadi bombings in the US. The international terrorist empires thriving in the Afghanistan-Pakistan complex brought home to Japan the vulnerabilities of free and democratic countries, however military strong. Japan, in any case, is not military strong due to its current defence policies.

Japan has brought about a significant switch in its defence policies following Afghan developments. They facilitated the passage of legislation in the Japanese Parliament to permit the use of the country's Armed Forces in multinational operations and UN operations, short of combat operations. Japanese Naval ships and ancillary vessels have sailed into the Indian Ocean to assist the coalition forces, which is a path-breaking precedent for Japan. It could also be the precursor for a more active Japanese patrolling of the sea lanes vital for Japan's survival. Earlier, these developments would have sent China into a frenzy of accusations of Japanese military revivalism, but the present circumstance has muted Chinese responses for the time being.

South Korea, the other major ally of the United States in the region, has not figured much in the news in regard to Afghan developments. During the Vietnam War, two South Korean Army Divisions fought alongside American troops. Its current low profile could be due to

the military environment prevailing on the Korean peninsula or an ebb in US-South Korea current relations, as the current US administration is not supportive of South Korea's 'Sunshine policies' toward North Korea.

North Korea, however, has been put on notice by President Bush to open up its nuclear facilities to international inspections. Flowing from Afghan developments, this is a serious development with the possibility of military intervention to enforce inspections. Its impact will be felt by North Korea, and also China and Pakistan.

Unnoticed by the world, the equivalent of Article 5 of NATO was invoked in the ANZUS Pact (Australia, New Zealand and US) calling for the committal of troops, if required by the United States, for Afghanistan-related military operations.

Two major observations emerge from this analysis, namely:

Current US strategies in Afghanistan and its campaign against international terrorism enjoy strong support in the Asia Pacific region.

China will have to re-orient its policies to adapt to the changes in political equations and attitudes in the Asia Pacific and contiguous regions.

Courtesy: The IPCS website.

Afghanistan's peace prospect

KHALID MAHMUD ARIF

Despite Afghanistan's chillingly notorious history of ethnic troubles, turbulence, turmoil and treachery the prospect of a durable peace in this war-ravaged country has improved after the UN-sponsored Bonn accord and the defeat of the Taliban by the US-led military forces.

Christina Rocca, the US assistant secretary of state, said that 'the Bonn Accord on the interim government (effective from December 22) in Afghanistan could not have occurred without the help of Pakistan.' Hamid Karzai, the head of the interim government in Afghanistan, deserves support in the difficult task that lies ahead during his mandated rule.

The Bonn accord is the first vital step in the long and arduous journey to peace, rehabilitation and reconstruction in Afghanistan for which foreign aid worth at least \$20 billion would be needed. The aid flow may commence after an internationally acceptable level of peace and security returns to the country destroyed by two decades of inter-Afghan infighting and war. President Pervez Musharraf has promised full cooperation to the interim administration 'for the gigantic tasks' faced by it.

Hamid Karzai-led interim government is Tajik dominated, a tribe that is barely 27% of the population of Afghanistan. On the other end of the spectrum, the largest ethnic group, Pakhtuns - 47% of the population - are under-represented in the interim government largely owing to the follies of the now vanquished Pakhtun-dominated Taliban.

Additionally, the public acceptability of the ministers nominated by former King Zahir Shah in the interim government remains uncertain. Also, some smaller ethnic groups have voiced concern about their non-representation in the interim government.

The exclusion of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and General Rasheed Dostum from the interim set-up brought sulking response from both. The Hazara tribe is indignant. The Taliban representative calls it a puppet government.

Notwithstanding such reservations the Bonn accord, a compromise of conflicting interests of many ethnic groups, is a well-conceived document and a step in the right direction. The world welcomes it. So does Pakistan. It deserves a fair trial.

Some ministers nominated in the interim Afghan government showed impropriety by travelling to India (even before the government was formed) where they made public statements accusing Pakistan on

self-serving frivolous grounds. The expression of personal views on controversial issues in a third country exposed their ignorance of diplomatic etiquette and behaviour. Pakistan is not unaware of the reasons of their exuberance and has shown maturity by ignoring their undignified outbursts.

Looking ahead, Pakistan should provide land-locked Afghanistan with generous moral, material and

the internal and external affairs of their country.

The friendly nations, Pakistan included, can help the people of Afghanistan in cementing their ethnic ties for the common good of the people of this country. The fighting ability of Afghans is proverbial and well recorded in history. It does not need fresh introduction. Let the people of Afghanistan demonstrate by their conduct and deeds

openly and without reservations.

The recognition of Taliban government by Pakistan was a hasty and a loosely coordinated decision. Even at this belated date we must find out the reasons for ignoring the rules of business and for not taking into confidence all those organs of the state that should have been normally consulted when this important decision was made.

Secondly, Jihad ended in

defend for themselves. A few Pakistanis managed to trek back home. Others were gunned down.

With Mulla Muhammad Omar hiding and Osama bin Laden untraceable, the war in Afghanistan is not yet over. Mulla Omar, if alive, may eventually seek refuge with the people of his tribe who, in accordance with Afghan traditions, shall be honour bound to protect him. Osama bin Laden falls in a different category. If alive, he will be fished out sooner or later. With his Al-Qaeda outfit in Afghanistan in a shambles and no country willing to give him refuge, Osama bin Laden is already a diminished person, if not a cripple. He will face immediate arrest if he makes the blunder of entering Pakistan.

Afghanistan has turned a new page in history, or so it appears. But nothing can be taken for granted in this country. The war may not be over unless the Pakhtuns are brought back to the mainstream of Afghanistan's national politics. The government in the post-interim period should seriously address this situation. The best way of promoting peace and security in this region is to start the rehabilitation and reconstruction of destroyed Afghanistan to divert the attention of the people from war to peace. The cycle of war and internal insurgency must end. Let the process of peace take charge.

The writer is a retired general of Pakistan Army. This piece first appeared in the Dawn of Pakistan.

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economic support for its recovery and development plans besides giving transit facilities for normal imports and trade. It should not meddle in Afghanistan's internal politics. It is for the people of Afghanistan and its leadership to live with their ethnic and tribal diversity. We must never fish in Afghanistan's troubled waters. Instead, we must play a visibly positive and constructive role in enabling the Afghan government and the people of this country in creating unity out of their diversity.

Many Pakhtuns in Afghanistan reside in the border belt along the Durand Line. Some tribes are stretched on either side of this international border. It is natural for the people of Pakistan to sympathize with the Pakhtuns and other Afghans who suffered because of the rigid and bigoted policies adopted by the now-defeated Taliban government. Such policies earned the ire of the world, brought miseries to the people of Afghanistan and caused the defeat of the Taliban government.

Under-representation of the Pakhtuns in the interim government is the price paid by them for their defeat in war. It may be prudent for the Pakhtuns to accept the fait accompli gracefully and prove to the world by their conduct and response that they as much suffered from the tunnel vision of top Taliban hierarchy as the rest of the Afghan groups did.

Sooner than later ground realities will take charge in Afghanistan and it will become obvious to one and all that no government can survive in this country on a durable basis if it ignores the reality of the Pakhtuns representing nearly one-half of its total population. Pragmatically speaking the Pakhtuns suffered heavily and bore the brunt of foreign diplomatic pressure and military onslaught. Such a realization will enable the Pakhtuns to join the mainstream of politics and earn a rightful place for themselves to play their full role in

Developments in Afghanistan have taught a lesson or two to the people and government of Pakistan. It may be wise for this country to reflect on them fully,

After their surrender the Pakhtun members of Taliban found refuge in their country but the non-Afghan personnel were left in the lurch to