

Afghanistan's long refugee emergency

Up to a third of Afghanistan's 18 million people fled the country following the Soviet military intervention in 1979. The overwhelming majority found refuge in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan (3.3 million in 1990) and Iran (3.1 million) (UNHCR, 2000: 119). For political, humanitarian, religious and cultural reasons, Pakistan and Iran were willing to provide refuge for extended periods. Pakistan received substantial military, economic and diplomatic support from the USA. Iran, on the other hand, received very little external assistance (UNHCR, 2000: 118). The different handling of the Vietnamese and Afghan cases show how refugee movements can become part of wider foreign policy considerations for major powers (Suhrke and Klink, 1987).

With the end of the Soviet intervention in 1989, about 1.5 million Afghan refugees returned home. However, the seizure of power by the fundamentalist Taliban, a four-year drought and the devastated condition of the country delayed the return of the rest. To help fund the costs of rebuilding their villages, increasing numbers of Afghans went to work in the Gulf states, while others sought asylum in Western countries (UNHCR, 1995: 182–3).

The events of 11 September 2001 made the world aware of the consequences of protracted situations of conflict. Afghanistan had become the centre of the global Al-Qaeda terrorist network. It was also the world's leading producer of heroin. The US-led invasion of Afghanistan was designed to destroy Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, establish a legitimate government and permit the return of the refugees. By July, more than 1.3 million Afghans had returned. This put severe strain on UNHCR finances (UNHCR, 2002), but Western countries – willing to spend billions on armed intervention – were not ready to top up relief funds. Meanwhile, the governments of Western countries began sending back Afghan asylum seekers, even though it was far from clear that conditions were safe in Afghanistan. The intensification of hostilities between the US-led forces and the Taliban from 2005 hindered further returns.

In 2013, the war dragged on, and, there was no sign of improvement in the humanitarian situation. The Western military coalition was planning to withdraw its troops by mid-2014, and members of vulnerable groups such as the Hazara ethnic

minority, as well as many people involved in public services and education, were leaving for fear of a renewed Taliban take-over.