



Afghan Refugees: Current Status and Future Prospects

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Summary

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has helped 3.69 million Afghan refugees return to Afghanistan since March 2002, marking the largest assisted return operation in its history. In addition, more than 1.11 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan without availing themselves of UNHCR's assistance, bringing the total number of returnees to at least 4.8 million. Despite the massive returns, possibly 3.5 million registered and unregistered Afghans still remain in these two countries of asylum—up to 2.46 million in Pakistan and more than 900,000 in Iran—making Afghans the second-largest refugee population in the world. These numbers are far greater than the initial working assumption in 2002 of 3.5 million refugees; in fact, the total is believed to be more than 8 million. The United States spent approximately \$332.37 million between FY 2002 and FY 2005 on humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees and returnees through the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). It continues to provide support to refugees and returnees.

The 110th Congress faces several relevant challenges. The safe and voluntary return of refugees to Afghanistan is not only a major part of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, but also an important indicator of its success. To the extent that refugees continue to return, it can be seen that Afghans are taking part in the future of their country. It is becoming more difficult, however, to encourage refugees to return. Those who were most capable of returning did so in the early years; those who remain have progressively less to return to—houses, livelihoods, family—in Afghanistan. Furthermore, maintaining the high pace of returns will require greater levels of reintegration assistance to anchor returnees in their homes and help them reestablish their lives in Afghanistan. Security will also be a major factor in population displacement within and across borders.

The status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran has also been somewhat controversial in recent years as these governments want all Afghan refugees to return to Afghanistan. Officials in Pakistan have become concerned that the concentrations of Afghans in the country pose a security and crime risk, as individuals and goods are smuggled across the border. At the same time, however, many observers argue that Afghan labor migration may be beneficial to both Iran and Pakistan—which take advantage of cheap and effective immigrant labor—as well as Afghanistan, whose citizens benefit heavily from remittances sent in from abroad. To cut off this source of income for many poor Afghans could have disastrous consequences—not only humanitarian, but in the security sphere as well, as more than a million Afghans along the Afghan-Pakistan border are deprived of livelihoods and resort to other means to feed their families. Reportedly, many Afghans cross the border regularly, without documentation, and Islamabad does not appear to have the resources to control this flow. A future challenge will thus be to balance reasonable concerns about security with the importance of Afghanistan's labor plans in the regional economies and the forces that drive its migration patterns. It remains to be seen what effect the Pakistani government's recently announced plans for controlling and securing the Afghan border, through the construction of fences and planting of landmines, will have on refugee movements. This report will be updated.

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Overview¹

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has helped over 3.69 million Afghan refugees return to Afghanistan since March of 2002, marking the largest assisted return operation in UNHCR’s history.² In addition, more than a million refugees have returned to Afghanistan without availing themselves of UNHCR’s assistance (also known as “spontaneous returns”) bringing the total number of returnees to 4.8 million or more. Almost all of these Afghans have returned from neighboring Iran and Pakistan, where the vast majority of Afghan refugees have lived for well over two decades (see **Table 1**).³

Table 1. Refugee Returns Since March 2002

Year	Pakistan assisted	Pakistan unassisted ^a	Iran assisted	Iran unassisted ^a	Other Countries ^b	Total
2002 ^c	1,532,664	194,127	259,662	155,248	9,679	2,151,380
2003	341,066	45,125	131,778	119,604	1,176	638,749
2004	381,251	41,103	375,619	76,231	627	874,831
2005	452,658	11,597	65,526	225,662	1,454*	756,897
2006	133,338	9,681	5,264	238,384	1,202	387,869
Totals	2,840,977	301,633	837,849	815,129	14,138	4,809,726

Source: “Afghan Repatriation Operation 2006 Weekly Statistics Report,” UNHCR, December 31, 2006.

- a. Unassisted “spontaneous returns” totals are UNHCR estimates based on border monitor reports. These numbers should be considered as rough estimates for several reasons: (1) border monitors were not in place at all times due to security concerns; (2) many Afghans, as discussed below, likely crossed at unofficial crossings; and (3) it is not always possible to distinguish returning refugees from other border-crossers.
- b. All “Other” figures are UNHCR-assisted, except for 2005, which includes 350 unassisted returnees.
- c. Figures for 2002 include an unknown number of “recyclers”—i.e., refugees who crossed the border more than twice in order to receive multiple repatriation packages. Beginning in 2003, UNHCR instituted biometric identification of returnees, virtually eliminating “recycling.”

Issues of particular concern to the 110th Congress are 1) continuing and sustaining refugee returns as part of Afghanistan’s overall reconstruction; 2) developing funding strategies for the next phase of Afghanistan’s remaining refugees; and 3) examining the refugee situation in light of border security issues, particularly with regard to Pakistan’s recently announced plan to lay land mines and build a fence along its border with Afghanistan.⁴ In the long term, the impact of

¹ A first draft of this report was co-authored with (name redacted), a research associate at CRS on rotation from the State Department.

² UNHCR is the U.N. agency dedicated to the protection of refugees and other populations displaced by conflict, famine, and natural disasters. It provides legal protections, implements long-term solutions, and coordinates emergency humanitarian relief for refugees and other displaced persons. For more information see CRS Report RL31690, *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted). See also, UNHCR “Afghanistan Situation Operational Update,” September 2006.

³ In vastly smaller numbers, populations of Afghan refugees are also in other countries, notably Russia, other Central Asian Republics, Europe, North America, Australia, and India.

⁴ “Pakistan Plans to Reinforce Long Afghan Border,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2006.

Afghan migration trends may need to be better understood in light of its potential impact on political arrangements in South Asia.

Afghan Refugees: Historical Background

Afghans began fleeing their country in April 1978, when the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), overthrew the government of Muhammad Daoud (who had himself seized power from his cousin Afghan king Zahir Shah in a bloodless coup in 1973). The trickle of refugees accelerated when the Soviet Union invaded in December 1979, ostensibly to restore order to the country as the PDPA became increasingly splintered. While political infighting was certainly a problem, some observers also noted that Afghanistan's leadership had begun irking Moscow by making decisions without Soviet approval. The Soviet attempt to subjugate the Afghans was at times particularly brutal, including the alleged use of torture and collective punishment.⁵ By the beginning of 1981, some 3.7 million refugees had fled to Iran and Pakistan.⁶

Smaller numbers of refugees continued to flee Afghanistan for the next decade, as the Soviets fought an insurgency mounted by a loosely allied group of *mujahideen*, or holy warriors. In 1988, the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan, and UNHCR and the international assistance community prepared for the massive repatriation of refugees.⁷ Large-scale returns did not begin until 1992, however, when the Soviet-installed leader Najibullah was finally forced from power. No sooner had some million and a half refugees returned, however, than Kabul descended into armed disorder as various *mujahideen* factions began fighting for control of the capital and the surrounding area. A new wave of people was displaced (possibly up to a million), a majority of whom remained within Afghanistan's borders as internally displaced people (IDPs).⁸ After a year-long siege, the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, and had gained control of most of the country by 1998. Although they brought a measure of peace to the areas they captured, many Afghans, especially the educated, fled the Taliban's particularly austere vision of Islamic propriety, with its severe restrictions on women's activities, education, and social and cultural life.⁹

A final wave of refugees numbering 200,000 to 300,000 left Afghanistan during the U.S.-led invasion of October 2001. With the defeat of the Taliban a month later, UNHCR led consultations with the three governments centrally involved in the Afghan refugee issues—Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—and began planning for another mass repatriation.¹⁰ Beginning in 2002, UNHCR along with Afghanistan, established separate Tripartite Agreements with Pakistan and Iran to provide a legal and operational framework for voluntary repatriations from each country. These

⁵ Kakar, M. Hasan, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, ch. 1.

⁶ Turton, David, and Peter Marsden, *Taking Refugees for a Ride? The Politics of Refugee Return to Afghanistan*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), December 2002, p. 11.

⁷ UNHCR was involved in massive camp management in Pakistan in the 1980s but there was no assisted repatriation until 1989.

⁸ *Repatriation Under Conflict: A Review of the Encashment Programme for Afghan Refugees in Pakistan*. Geneva: UNHCR Research and Evaluation Division, 1994.

⁹ For more on the Afghanistan under the Taliban, see Rashid, Ahmed, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ See UNHCR "Afghanistan Situation Operational Update," September 2006.

agreements have been renewed several times since then.¹¹ The working assumption at the time was that there were approximately 2 million refugees in Pakistan and 1.5 million in Iran. Almost everyone was caught off-guard, when subsequently 2.15 million Afghans returned in 2002, and yet most of the camps in Pakistan (and to some extent the cities in Iran) continued to house large numbers of Afghan refugees. It turned out that there were far more Afghans living in Pakistan than most analysts had thought. Although the numbers of returns declined in subsequent years, it can be seen from **Table 1** that through 2005 the pace remained very strong.¹²

Profile of Remaining Refugees

UNHCR estimates that, as of December 2006, perhaps 2.46 million registered and unregistered Afghans are currently living in Pakistan and more than 900,000 in Iran. Who among these Afghans is a refugee and who is not is a matter of debate in each country. Still, perhaps as many as 3.5 million registered and unregistered Afghans still live in exile. In Pakistan, 80 percent of those remaining have been there for more than two decades; 50 percent were born in exile.¹³

Refugees in Pakistan¹⁴

Population Breakdown

A census was completed by UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan (GoP) in March of 2002 that provided a clear picture, for the first time in years, of the Afghan population in Pakistan. The census found 3,049,268 Afghans living in Pakistan, 42% of them in camps and 58% in urban areas. Over 81% of the Afghans were Pashtuns, with much smaller percentages of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and other ethnic groups (see **Figure 1**).

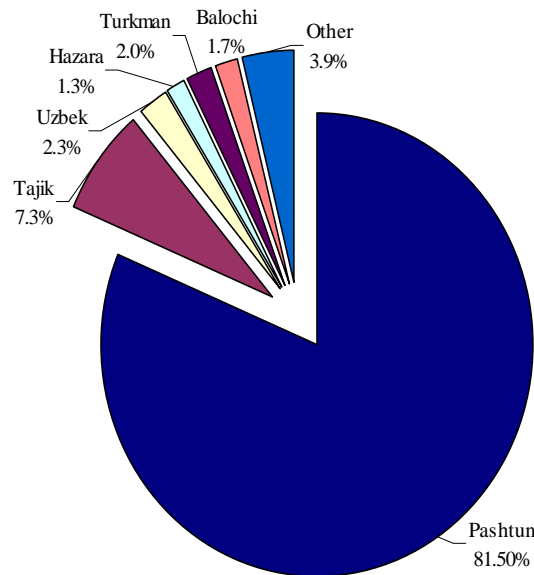
¹¹ Refugee issues have also been incorporated in broader discussions, for example, in the 2006 London Compact, which focuses on stability, reconstruction, and development issues. For background information and recent developments on Afghanistan, see CRS Report RL30588, *Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted).

¹² By contrast, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan is estimated to be 150,000. Some figures suggest that up to 500,000 IDPs have returned to their homes since 2002.

¹³ UNHCR report, *Afghanistan Situation: Operational Update*, September 2006.

¹⁴ For more general information on Pakistan, see CRS Report RL33498, *Pakistan-U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted).

Figure 1. Afghans in Pakistan: Ethnicity

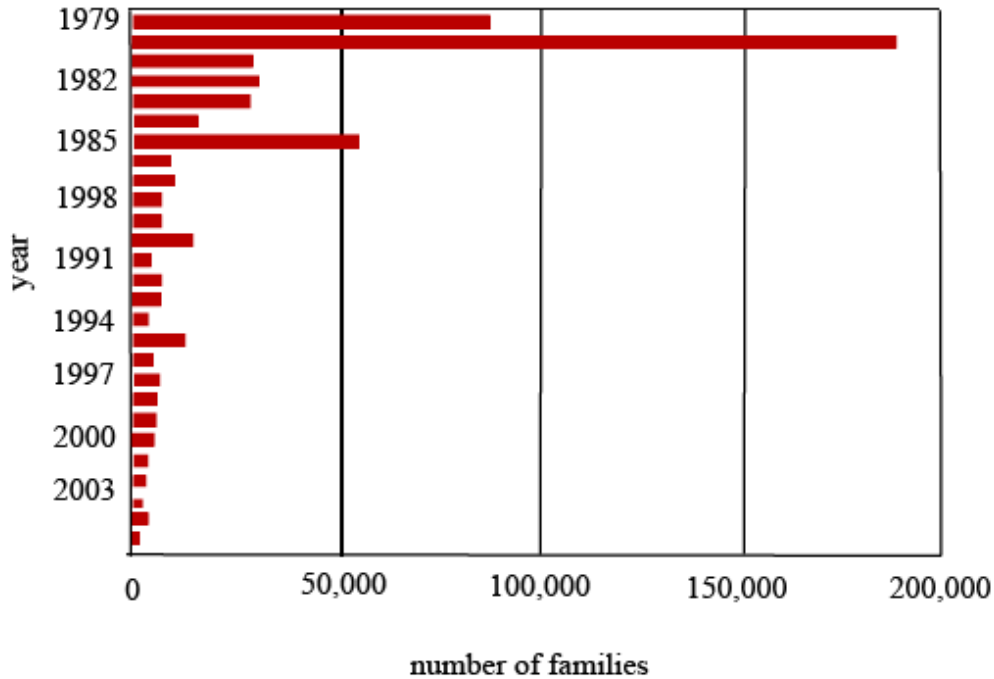


Source: *Census of Afghans in Pakistan, 2005*, Ministry of States and Frontier Regions, Government of Pakistan, p. 9.

The census revealed two related factors that could have profound implications for the future of repatriation from Pakistan. First, the vast majority of Afghan families in Pakistan arrived in the first years of the refugee crisis; over 50% arrived in 1979 and 1980 alone. Second, it appears that a very substantial number of the Afghans remaining in Pakistan were in fact born in Pakistan—not Afghanistan (see **Figure 2**).¹⁵ Encouraging Afghans who have been living for two and a half decades outside their country—some of whom, in fact, may never have even set foot in Afghanistan—to repatriate may be a distinct challenge in the coming months and years.

¹⁵ The census estimates that 56.2% of the Afghan refugee population is under the age of eighteen. Since the census directly assessed only the number of respondents under the age of five (19.1%), the overall age profile of the population is estimated by extrapolation based on detailed demographic information available from repatriation data. According to the census, 80.6% of the Afghan families in Pakistan arrived over eighteen years ago. Applying this percentage to the under-eighteen population, it may roughly be estimated at least 45% of Afghans in Pakistan were born in Pakistan. (Census, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-19)

Figure 2. Afghans in Pakistan: Year of First Arrival



Source: *Census of Afghans in Pakistan, 2005*, Ministry of States and Frontier Regions, Government of Pakistan, p. 9.

Historical Background and Status of Afghans

Although most Afghans in Pakistan date their arrival to the early years of the Soviet occupation, agricultural and economic instability have long been a feature of life in the highlands of Afghanistan, and for centuries Afghans have migrated in response to crop failures, drought, and other problems, often across international borders, to look for temporary work.¹⁶ While the numbers crossing into Pakistan in 1979 and 1980 probably dwarfed any previous population flows, many of the fleeing Afghans had connections—social networks, kinship ties, economic contacts—in Pakistan that helped ease their transition.

For the first decade and a half of the refugee crisis, the GoP, although it has never signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol,¹⁷ was relatively tolerant in its treatment of Afghan

¹⁶ Kakar, M. Hasan. *Government and Society in Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979, pp. 122-126; Smith, Harvey Henry *et al.*, *Area Handbook for Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1969, pp. 65, 311; Collective for Social Science Research, *Afghans in Karachi: Migration, Settlement and Social Networks*, Kabul: AREU, March 2005, p. 8.

¹⁷ The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, signed by 143 states, is the principal legal document establishing who is a refugee, what rights they have, and what legal obligations states have. The 1967 Protocol, designed to update the original Convention by, among other things, broadening its scope beyond the implicitly European focus of the original document, is considered to have the same legal force as the 1951 Convention. The United States is one of three countries that is a signatory to the Protocol but not the Convention. The most recent signatory to both documents is Afghanistan, which signed on August 30, 2005. For the text of the Convention and other information, see <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect?id=3c0762ea4>.

refugees.¹⁸ Several dozen camps were set up beginning in 1979, most of them in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and a few in Balochistan. Although the GoP did not allow the primarily rural Afghans to own or work the land, it did permit them to freely move and work within the country. Nevertheless, it was assumed at the time that most Afghans remained in the camps, where they received food rations, along with basic health and educational services. (The subsequent realization that there were far more Afghans in Pakistan than anyone knew suggests that urbanization was far more extensive during this period.)¹⁹ The camps were, and are, overseen by UNHCR and the Pakistani Chief Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CCAR), a division of the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON). UNHCR and CCAR contracted with a number of international and local NGOs to provide health, education, water, and sanitation services in the camps. These have included major U.S.-based NGOs, including Mercy Corps, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, American Refugee Committee, Church World Service, and others.

In 1995, the World Food Programme (WFP) determined that Afghans were capable of providing for their own food needs, and it ceased providing rations to the camps. The GoP's position toward the refugees began to harden as the flow of international aid began to diminish, and more Afghans were driven into cities to look for work.²⁰ With the cessation of food aid, the sole identity document given to Afghans, a refugee passbook, became meaningless; therefore, Afghans (until very recently) had no identification in Pakistan, a factor that doubtless contributed to the general uncertainty about their numbers.

Pakistan's Economic and Security Concerns

With the defeat of the Taliban, the GoP began strongly advocating that conditions were appropriate for the return of all Afghans to Afghanistan.²¹ The GoP appears to have both economic and security concerns about the Afghan population in Pakistan. On the economic level, some Pakistani politicians believe that Afghans are taking jobs that might otherwise go to Pakistanis. Additionally, Afghans are reportedly willing to work for lower wages than Pakistanis, causing some Pakistanis to believe that wage levels are being depressed. Some recent research has shown that several business sectors—particularly transport and construction—make heavy use of Afghan labor.²² Economic worries about the Afghan population have become more persistent in recent years, as the overall level of international funding for refugees in Pakistan has decreased. The census provided more fuel for this concern when it revealed that, despite the record repatriation, millions of Afghans still remain in Pakistan.

¹⁸ Under the 1951 Convention, a refugee is legally defined as a person fleeing his or her country because of persecution or "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." Chapter 1, Article 1 (A) 2.

¹⁹ Until 2001, UNHCR believed there were approximately 2 million refugees in Pakistan (see, for instance, UNHCR-Pakistan's website at <http://www.un.org/pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.html>). Since that time over 3.69 million have returned, causing observers to question earlier estimates (see Turton and Marsden, *op. cit.*).

²⁰ Turton and Marsden, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-16.

²¹ See, for instance, the statement by Pakistani Secretary of States and Frontier Regions Sajid Hussain Chattha, delivered at the Strategic Consultations on Afghan Refugees and Population Movements to and from Afghanistan in Geneva, October 7, 2005.

²² Collective for Social Science Research, *op. cit.*

In addition to their economic impact, some Pakistani leaders are concerned that Afghans represent a security risk for Pakistan. These fears concern lawlessness, terrorism, and anti-government activity. There is a perception among many Pakistanis, including government officials, that Afghans are responsible for a great deal of the smuggling of stolen goods, narcotics, and weaponry across Pakistan's western border. The so-called "smugglers' markets" on the outskirts of Peshawar and Quetta, for instance, where one can allegedly buy anything from counterfeit passports to heroin to Kalashnikovs, are alleged to be run by Afghans and to flourish because of their proximity to Afghanistan.²³ Pakistani police, in justifying their sweeps through Afghan areas, have cited the imperative to crack down on crime.²⁴

One of the reasons the smugglers' markets have been difficult for Islamabad to deal with is that they exist in the so-called Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where the central government's writ is weak.²⁵ Although each of the FATA's seven agencies is ostensibly governed by a "political agent" appointed by the government in Islamabad, in practice the tribal areas are ruled by traditional Pashtun leaders, exercising a blend of personal decree, Islamic law (*sharia*), and traditional Pashtun legal practices known collectively as *pushtunwali*. Despite Islamic proscriptions against drugs and alcohol, the smugglers' markets have been an important source of revenue for some FATA leaders, who continue to permit this operation.²⁶

It is not merely lost economic revenue or local law and order that concerns Pakistani government officials. Many experts and officials believe that the FATA is being used as a staging area for militant activity, some of it directed against coalition forces in neighboring Afghanistan and some against the Pakistani government. This worry has grown more acute in the wake of several assassination attempts against Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf. In light of the difficult to verify but nevertheless oft-stated presumption that Osama bin Laden and other senior members of Al Qaeda are hiding in the mountainous tribal areas of Pakistan, perhaps with the knowledge of local leaders, the government's efforts to gain control over these areas have gained urgency.²⁷

Security was considered to be one of the reasons behind the GoP's decision to close all of the remaining refugee camps in the FATA. The GoP had for at least two years declared its desire to clear out the FATA camps, but only began the operation in summer 2005 when it closed refugee camps in South Waziristan Agency. Camps in North Waziristan were next with the most recent

²³ The perception that the market is run by Afghans was prevalent among many Pakistanis in Islamabad and Peshawar, including officials of NGOs, the GoP, and the USG. For reports on the smugglers' markets see Behar, Richard, "Kidnapped Nation," *Fortune*, April 29, 2002, p. 84. Observers point out the GoP's role in tolerating—and perhaps even profiting from—the smugglers' markets. See Bukhari, Huzaima and Ikramul Haq, "Rampant Corruption and Role of NAB," *Business Recorder*, February 18, 2005.

²⁴ D. Kronenfeld's interviews with returned Afghan refugees at UNHCR's Kabul Encashment/Transition Center, August and September 2005. See also "Political Administrations Asked to Maintain Peace in FATA," *Balochistan Times* (Pakistan), October 5, 2005; and "400,000 Afghan Refugees Repatriated from Pakistan This Year," *Pakistan Press International Information Services*, September 26, 2005.

²⁵ See Ivan Watson, "Pakistani Government's Attempt to Gain Control of Lawless Tribal Regions," *All Things Considered*, aired on National Public Radio on November 4, 2004; and Michael A. Lev, "Bazaar Provides Clues to How Bin Laden Might Flee," *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 2001, p. 14.

²⁶ For a report on the difficulties in cracking down on smuggling, see "New Anti-Smuggling Policy to be Formulated," *Business Recorder*, November 16, 2005.

²⁷ See, among hundreds of reports speculating that bin Laden is hiding in Pakistan, Henry Shuster, "Bin Laden: Alive or Dead—And How Would We Know?" *CNN*, December 8, 2005; and John Lancaster, "Musharraf Says Forces Nearly Nabbed Bin Laden," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2005. For a hypothesized connection between the smugglers' markets and bin Laden, see Lev, *op. cit.*

closures occurring in Bajaur and Kurram agencies in autumn 2005. All told, close to 200,000 refugees were displaced in the closures, the majority of them electing to repatriate to Afghanistan.²⁸ The GoP received some criticism during each closure operation for failing to identify suitable relocation alternatives for Afghans unable to repatriate because they lacked shelter or the means to earn a living in Afghanistan, or other reasons. According to some reports, this resulted in many Afghans crossing the border into Afghanistan without the desire to do so and without adequate preparation, support, or security on either side of the border. According to the terms of the Tripartite Agreement between the GoP, the government of Afghanistan (GoA) and UNHCR, which was signed in March 2002 (and extended several times since), all returns must be voluntary. While there have been isolated reports of forced deportations, most observers believe that the GoP has largely abided by the agreement.²⁹

On January 17, 2007, Pakistan's government announced the pending closure of four Afghan refugee camps in the border areas, stating it was doing so in order to ensure security. Two camps will reportedly be closed in March 2007 with another two to follow later in the year. The camps are located in the provinces of Balochistan and North West Frontier. Some closures had been announced several years ago, but were postponed until 2007. The move could affect as many as 250,000 Afghan refugees. The United Nations and other humanitarian organizations have expressed their concerns for the wellbeing of the refugees affected.³⁰

Registration

In order to gather more information on Afghans in Pakistan, and ultimately to sort out those who have legitimate protection concerns from others, the GoP conducted a census in February and March 2005 that has become the basis for the registration program developed with UNHCR and the government of Afghanistan. Registration of Afghans began on October 15, 2006, and is being conducted by Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) with the support of UNHCR and the government's Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees. To encourage Afghans to come forward for the registration, those who are registered are given a new identity document entitling them to live and work in Pakistan for three years. The validity period of the documentation is still being negotiated among UNHCR, the GoP, and the government of Afghanistan. Initially, only those Afghans counted in the census (about 2.5 million) could register, but in December 2006, the list was expanded to include all Afghans who could show documented evidence as proof that they were living in Pakistan at the time the census was conducted.³¹ The idea was to provide for a transition period during which Afghans may reconnect with Afghanistan and ultimately return home. As of January 17, 2007, 1.5 million had registered.³² The registration was supposed to end on December 31 but has been extended twice—the first time until January 19, 2007, and then again to February 2, 2007.

²⁸ Despite the camp closures, the recent census indicates that tens – and perhaps hundreds – of thousands of Afghans continue to live in non-camp settlements in the FATA.

²⁹ The Tripartite Agreement is available online at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd/rsddocvie~.pdf?tbl=RSDLEGAL&id=42fb2b7be>.

³⁰ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Pakistan: UN Cautions on Afghan Refugee Camp Closures," January 17, 2007.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² UNOCHA, United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "Pakistan: Afghan Registration Deadline Extended until 19 January," December 29, 2006.

Future Prospects

With each passing year, however, it may become more difficult to encourage refugees to return voluntarily to Afghanistan. According to UNHCR data, the refugees who have already returned to Afghanistan have spent, on average, less time in Pakistan than those who remain.³³ This may suggest that those who left in the early years did so because it was easier for them: they still had connections with Afghanistan. Those who remain, by contrast, may find it especially difficult to return to a country to which they have, relatively speaking, few ties. UNHCR, the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and the Pakistani authorities are developing a needs assessment to address these ongoing refugee issues.³⁴

Refugees in Iran

Population Breakdown

In contrast to Pakistan, there are almost no refugee settlements in Iran. Instead, Afghans tend to occupy urban areas, where, as long as they have official refugee status (see below) they are entitled to basic government-subsidized services such as health care and education.³⁵ According to recent government statistics, and based on a registration initiative undertaken by the government in November 2005, there were approximately 920,000 registered Afghans in Iran as of May 2006. This figure includes only officially registered refugees, however.³⁶ It is likely that additional hundreds of thousands (the Government of Iran (GoI) estimates perhaps close to one million) Afghans are living in Iran as undocumented workers.³⁷ It is estimated that 60% of the registered Afghan refugees have been living in Iran for at least 15 years.³⁸

Historical Background and Status of Afghans

As with Pakistan, the history of Afghan migration to Iran long predates the refugee crisis. Thousands of ethnic Turkmen, for instance, sought work in Iran in the 19th century, and received official recognition from the Persian government. The flow continued a century later, when many

³³ D. Kronenfeld's interviews with UNHCR officials in Islamabad, August 2005. Profiles of assisted returnees are also published on Afghanistan Information Management Services' website: <http://www.aims.org.af>, which is a project now solely administered by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to help develop information management capability within the government of Afghanistan.

³⁴ UNHCR report, *Afghanistan Situation: Operational Update*, September 2006.

³⁵ Although some eighty camps were set up, only 2.5% of the refugee population lived in them; the percentage never rose above 5%. It has been estimated that Iranian expenditures on education, health care, transport, fuel, and basic goods for Afghans peaked at \$10 million per day. See Abbasi-Shavazi, et al., *Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Tehran*, Kabul: AREU, June 2005, pp. 2, 9, 16.

³⁶ UNHCR's major role is to assist in repatriation. Beyond that, they have a protection role as Iran has been accused of forced deportations. During the 1990s, well before the Taliban was ousted, Iran allegedly was trying to push out some Afghan refugees.

³⁷ There is no reliable estimate for the number of undocumented Afghans in Iran. Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.* (*op. cit.*, p. 2) estimate that as many as 500,000 Afghans move back and forth between Afghanistan and Iran in search of labor, but the fact that the GoI annually deports thousands of Afghans provides some indication of the numbers.

³⁸ "Afghanistan-Iran: Tripartite Refugee Agreement Signed," News, June 30, 2005, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=47897&SelectRegion=Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN-IRAN>. At times, the GoI has tried to force—or forcibly persuade—Afghans to leave and go back to Afghanistan.

Afghans sought work in Iran during the oil crisis of the 1970s, and when, because of increasing international demand and high oil prices, Iran both needed and could afford foreign workers.³⁹ The cross-border flow picked up dramatically, however, after the Soviet invasion of 1979. By 1981, some 1.5 million Afghans were estimated to have fled to Iran. The number would expand to over 3 million by 1990.⁴⁰

The status of Afghans in Iran went through several changes over the course of the refugee crisis. Although Iran is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Afghans fleeing the Soviet invasion were initially greeted not as refugees (*panahandegan*) but as “involuntary religious migrants” (*mohajerin*). While this category, based on Islamic principles, was technically not an international legal designation, it was considered a higher-status term than “refugee” in post-revolutionary Iran.⁴¹ *Mohajerin* were given indefinite permission to reside in Iran and had access to free education and subsidized health care and food.⁴²

After the Soviet withdrawal, however, the status of Afghans began to change. Although 1.4 million Afghans are estimated to have repatriated in 1992, well over a million remained in Iran. Beginning in 1993, new migrants were no longer deemed to be fleeing religious persecution and were categorized as refugees (*panahandegan*); instead of being granted indefinite residency status, they were issued with temporary registration cards. After the fall of the Taliban, Afghans once again began to return in large numbers to Afghanistan (see **Table 1**).

Labor Migration

As in Pakistan, there is ample evidence that Afghan labor migration now plays an important role in both the Afghan and Iranian economies. Remittances from Afghans working in Iran bring a good deal of revenue to their families in Afghanistan, and Afghans continue to be an important source of labor in Iran, where they are particularly prevalent in construction and agriculture.⁴³ One measure of the continuing importance of Afghan labor in Iran is the fact that the GoI has recently offered to permit some 200,000 Afghans to work in Iran as guest workers.⁴⁴ A key aspect of this offer is that the Afghan workers will be required to leave their families in Afghanistan, presumably to ensure that they will not attempt to emigrate. In fact, however, a number of recent research papers commissioned and published by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) show that this migration pattern has already been a model for some time. Many young Afghan men travel to Iran for a period of months or even years to supplement their family income, while the women and other men remain in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ This contrasts with many of the

³⁹ Stigter, Elca, and Alessandro Monsutti, *Transnational Networks: Recognizing a Regional Reality*, Kabul: AREU, April 2005, p. 3; and Abbassi-Shavazi et al., *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Turton and Marsden, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-11.

⁴¹ It has been suggested that nascent Islamic regime in Tehran employed this term to increase its prestige in the Islamic world. The term for refugees (*panahandegan*) is, by contrast, relatively low-status, implying impoverishment. See Abbassi-Shavazi et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 12-18.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Iranian economists warned that the repatriation of Afghans could cost the country a vital part of its workforce,” *World Refugee Survey 2005*, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, available at <http://www.refugees.org>.

⁴⁴ Statement by G. Ali Khoshroo, Deputy Foreign Minister for International and Legal Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, delivered at the Strategic Consultations on Afghan Refugees and Population Movements to and from Afghanistan in Geneva, October 7, 2005.

⁴⁵ In addition to Turton and Marsden, *op. cit.* Abbassi-Shavazi et al., *Tehran*, *op. cit.*, and Stigter and Monsutti, *op. cit.*, see Stigter, Elca, *Transnational Networks and Migration from Faryab to Iran*, Kabul: AREU, February 2005; and (continued...)

Afghans in Pakistan, who emigrated with their entire extended families or even whole tribal groups. Indeed, there may be something of a reverse migration of single Afghan men in Pakistan, who, leaving their families in Pakistan, return to Afghanistan in search of higher-paying seasonal work and to look after family assets.⁴⁶

Although there has not yet been a systematic study of population movement across the Afghan-Iranian border similar to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) study of the Afghan-Pakistani border, it is clear that since 1979 the volume and frequency of Afghan migration to Iran is much less than it is into Pakistan. To begin with, traffic across the Iranian border is more tightly regulated than it is across the Pakistani border; it is not possible to simply walk from Afghanistan into Iran. Furthermore, Afghans crossing into Iran must pay for a passport and a visa. Obtaining these legally is expensive and time-consuming; obtaining them illegally is even more expensive. In addition, there is much less settlement along Afghanistan's rather arid border with Iran than there is along the border with Pakistan. Afghans wishing to work in Iran must travel fairly deeply into the country before reaching the major population centers of Tehran and Isfahan; even Iran's eastern city of Mashad is over 200 miles from Herat in Afghanistan. The cost of transportation can be prohibitive for many Afghans. For these reasons, Afghan migration to and from Iran does not happen as frequently or as casually as it does along Afghanistan's eastern border.⁴⁷

Concerns and Future Prospects

While Afghan refugees in Pakistan have, for at least a decade, gone relatively undocumented, the GoI through the Ministry of Interior's Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA) has maintained a fairly detailed list of Afghans whom it has accepted as refugees.⁴⁸ Afghans on this "Amayesh" list⁴⁹ have been entitled to basic health and education services provided by the Iranian government. The list is updated periodically, at which time Afghans must re-register with Iranian authorities in order to remain in the country legally.

Afghans who are not on the list are subject to deportation; since the beginning of the assisted repatriation program in Spring of 2002, the GoI has deported some Afghans often to protests by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies.⁵⁰ It has been reported that some of the deported Afghans do, in fact, have *prima facie* refugee status. Hundreds of deported Afghans allegedly

(...continued)

Transnational Networks and Migration from Herat to Iran, Kabul: AREU, January 2005. See also Abbassi-Shavazi et al., *A Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Zahedan*, Kabul: AREU, October 2005 and *Continued Protection, Sustainable Reintegration: Afghan Refugees and Migrants in Iran*, Kabul: AREU, May 2006. All titles are available for download at <http://www.areu.org.af>.

⁴⁶ D. Kronenfeld's interviews with UNHCR officials in Islamabad and Peshawar, Pakistan, February 2004 and February 2005.

⁴⁷ Stitger and Monsutti, *op.cit.*, pp. 6-7; see also Abbassi-Shavazi et al., *Tehran*, *op. cit.* It should be noted that rural to urban labor migration is not simply an international phenomenon. Recent research has shown that many Afghans also move within the country to urban areas in search of work. See Opel, Aftab, *Bound for the City: A Study of Rural to Urban Labour Migration in Afghanistan*, Kabul: AREU, April 2005.

⁴⁸ "Return: Information Update," Issue 43, UNHCR Kabul, October 15, 2003.

⁴⁹ "Amayesh" literally means logistics; the *amayesh* project was implemented by the Iranian authorities to identify regional and infrastructure potentials to accommodate refugees in Iran; the *amayesh* project for Afghan refugees was conducted during July 2003 and February 2004. Abbassi-Shavazi *et al.*, *Zahedan*, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

⁵⁰ Information from UNHCR (Kabul), Data Unit, in response to author's e-mailed request. Specific numbers not available.

were held in detention facilities for days where they were beaten before being sent back to Afghanistan.⁵¹ Although deporting Afghan refugees is contrary to the terms of the Tripartite Agreement signed with UNHCR and Afghanistan, Iran holds that the deportees are illegal immigrants, and not refugees, and that Tehran is thus legally permitted to send them back to Afghanistan.⁵²

Afghans who are clearly on the Amayesh list have encountered increasing difficulties in recent years. Whereas Afghan refugees in the past have received subsidized—or even free—education, health care, and food rations, the GoI has begun implementing measures to force Afghans to pay for these resources. These efforts reached a peak in February 2004, when the GoI announced Afghans would lose their exemption to paying school fees and have to pay increased health care premiums. Additionally, the GoI announced in early 2005 that Afghans would be subject to a nominal tax. Previously, Afghans had received free education and paid the same amounts as Iranians for health care.⁵³ UNHCR, which felt that the service reductions were particularly draconian considering its own budget cuts in Iran, has reported that the GoI has not been overly fastidious in enforcing the new rules.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Iran’s position, like that of Pakistan, has generally been that it is time for Afghans to return home, and these efforts are part of an explicit effort to encourage Afghans to return to Afghanistan.⁵⁵ In both cases, GoI and GoP argue that relative stability has returned to Afghanistan, and there are no further reasons that Afghans require protection abroad. Indeed, the GoI’s Director-General of the Interior Ministry’s Department for Immigrants and Foreign Nationals Amad Hoseyni recently announced in early 2006 that Iran plans to “voluntarily repatriate” all Afghans—no matter what their status is—by March 2007.⁵⁶ There is a certain implicit contradiction in this and other such statements by both Tehran and Islamabad: if repatriation is indeed to be voluntary, many Afghans may choose to remain in countries of asylum, thus rendering somewhat questionable the government’s assertion that all Afghans will leave.⁵⁷ The GoI’s announcement that it is considering extending a limited number of work visas to Afghans suggests that the GoI is remaining flexible in its planning—or that there may be some disagreement among leaders.

U.S. Assistance for Afghan Refugees

The United States government (USG) has provided humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees since the early 1980s. Funding for Afghan refugees declined rapidly since it peaked after the U.S.-led invasion in October 2001. Almost all assistance has been provided through the Migration

⁵¹ *World Refugee Survey 2005*, op. cit.

⁵² The text of the Tripartite Agreement is available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd/rsddocview.pdf?tbl=RSDLEGAL&id=42fb47e54>.

⁵³ *World Refugee Survey 2005*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Author’s discussions with UNHCR officials in Kabul, February 2005.

⁵⁵ *World Refugee Survey 2005*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ “Iran Plans to Repatriate All Remaining Afghan Refugees—Official,” *IRNA* (Islamic Republic News Agency), as reported by *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, January 1, 2006. See also, “Iran Seeks Funds to Return Afghan Refugees,” *RFE/RL*, October 10, 2006.

⁵⁷ Officials at UNHCR have informed the author that such pronouncements from both Iran and Pakistan are not uncommon.

and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account, and has been programmed by the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM).⁵⁸ This funding is used not only for the protection and care of refugees in countries of asylum, but also for the reintegration of Afghan returnees in Afghanistan. **Table 2** presents USG assistance to Afghan refugees and returnees since the U.S.-led invasion in October 2001. Since the majority of PRM funding is provided to regional projects, it is not possible to provide a breakdown of assistance by country.

Table 2. USG Assistance to Afghan Refugees and Returnees
(in millions of dollars)

Year	Total MRA	Amount for Afghans
FY2002	\$702.0	\$160.47 ^a
FY2003	\$781.9	\$61.5
FY2004	\$780.7	\$63.3
FY2005	\$763.8	\$47.1
FY2006	\$892.7	Figure not yet available

Sources: Information provided by PRM's Office of Assistance to Asia and the Near East (PRM/ANE).

a. Includes \$25 million from ERMA and \$100 million from the Emergency Response Fund (ERF).

Funding Partners

The majority of PRM's assistance for Afghans is provided to international organizations (IOs), principally UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), both of which have been active in Afghanistan since the 1980s. In past years, some funding has also been provided to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), IOM, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). PRM also provides funding directly to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for targeted projects. Proposals are selected by a panel of PRM experts based on the NGO's track record, the cost-effectiveness of the proposal, and the extent to which the work meets PRM's stated guidelines.⁵⁹

Supported Activities

USG assistance to Afghan refugees and returnees through PRM is generally intended to meet the most basic humanitarian needs, including food, shelter, protection, water and sanitation, health care, and primary education. In addition, PRM helps support the assisted repatriation of refugees back to Afghanistan. Much of this activity is carried out by PRM's principal IO partners. UNHCR, in addition to managing the massive repatriation operation, also oversees shelter construction and water and sanitation activities in Afghanistan. In Pakistan and Iran, UNHCR is responsible for refugee protection and camp management, including provision of health care,

⁵⁸ In addition to the MRA account there is also an Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance (ERMA) account, which carries over from year to year. For more on PRM and the MRA and ERMA accounts, see CRS Report RL33769, *International Crises and Disasters: U.S. Humanitarian Assistance, Budget Trends, and Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

⁵⁹ Examples of PRM's current NGO guidelines may be seen at http://www.state.gov/g/prm/fund/c_14284.htm.

primary education, and adequate water and sanitation to refugees. Many of these activities are actually conducted by international and local NGOs with oversight and funding from UNHCR.⁶⁰ UNHCR has also taken on a leading role in the humanitarian response to the South Asia earthquake of October 2005. Although most of the earthquake's victims were not refugees, because of its experience and assets in Pakistan, UNHCR was designated the lead agency for the camp management cluster, which officially ended on August 31, 2006.⁶¹

Although it has offices in Iran and Pakistan, the ICRC is more active in Afghanistan, where it supports health care, demining, water and sanitation, family reunification, promotion of international humanitarian law, and detention visits.⁶² In addition to supporting the activities of IOs, PRM directly funds NGOs to carry out humanitarian projects, such as shelter construction for returnees, refugee education, skills training for women, and refugee and returnee health care. These projects are designed to complement the activity of the IOs. In keeping with humanitarian practice, PRM does not single out refugees and returnees alone for assistance. Most PRM-funded projects also benefit host communities as well as the target population.

Issues for Congress

Establishing USG Funding

Even after four years of exceptionally high refugee return numbers, the population of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran remains the second-highest in the world.⁶³ If recent returnees—also central to PRM's mandate—are added to this number, Afghans represent by far the largest population of refugees and returnees in the world. Funding for Afghan refugees has, however, diminished both overall and as a percentage of PRM's total annual budget since FY2002. The United States thus faces the challenge of maintaining its crucial assistance in this area of the world despite competing priorities.

This challenge may become even more difficult in the near future, because maintaining the successful repatriation program is likely to become more, not less, expensive as time goes on. This is because the refugees remaining in Pakistan and Iran have fewer resources in and ties to Afghanistan than those who returned earlier. They have also, on average, spent far more time outside of Afghanistan than earlier returnees (see **Figure 2**).⁶⁴ As time goes on, it becomes increasingly more difficult—and expensive—to encourage remaining refugees to voluntarily return to Afghanistan. Thus, as funding is declining, its importance may be increasing. A related issue may be whether Pakistan and Iran would be receptive to encouragement to grant citizenship to Afghans who do not want to return to Afghanistan.

⁶⁰ See UNHCR, "Country Operations Plan 2007, Afghanistan," <http://www.unhcr.org/home/RSDCOI/4505323f2.pdf>.

⁶¹ For details on UNHCR activities in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, see <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/country?iso=afg>, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/country?iso=irn>, and <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/country?iso=pak>. See also CRS Report RL33196, *The Earthquake in South Asia: Humanitarian Assistance and Relief Operations*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

⁶² ICRC's activities in Afghanistan are detailed at <http://www.icrc.org>.

⁶³ Afghan refugees are outnumbered only by Palestinians (*World Refugee Survey 2005*, *op. cit.*, Table 8). See also UNHCR website: <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/country?iso=afg>.

⁶⁴ D. Kronenfeld's interviews with PRM staff and *Census*, *op. cit.*

Sustainability of Returns

Another factor influencing the success of the repatriation program is the sustainability of previous returns to Afghanistan—that is, the degree to which returnees are being adequately anchored in their communities, whether they are receiving health care, education, and opportunities to make a living. Integration of returnees increasingly is examined in both studies and reports and getting the attention of policymakers.⁶⁵ The success of the repatriation program thus depends on the success of the overall reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, including the extent to which returned refugees (and IDPs) are integrated into reconstruction efforts.

There is already evidence that many Afghan returnees do not remain in Afghanistan; traffic across the Pakistani border in particular—in both directions—is heavy.⁶⁶ To a certain extent, and as noted above, this is a historical pattern that pre-dates not only the repatriation program but the refugee crisis as well. A cause for concern may emerge, however, if it is concluded that many of the Afghans crossing back into Pakistan and Iran are doing so because they could not sustain themselves in Afghanistan. A renewed outward flow of Afghans, in addition to signaling the possible inadequacies of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, could increase tensions with host countries. Both the GoI and the GoP, indicate some possible flexibility on the future of Afghan migration, but have nevertheless made clear that they believe the refugee crisis in Afghanistan is over, and that there is no excuse for Afghans to remain in their countries on humanitarian grounds. Future study of the reasons for Afghan population movements is required in order to determine their reasons for migration.⁶⁷

It remains to be seen what effect the Pakistani government's recently announced plans for controlling and securing the Afghan border, through the construction of fences and planting of landmines, will have on refugee movements.⁶⁸ Humanitarian groups have voiced their concerns and condemned the plan. Pakistan is not a signatory to international conventions banning the use of landmines and the government says the plan is a necessary step to increase border security.⁶⁹ President Hamid Karzai apparently also objected strongly to the announcement not only for political and humanitarian reasons, but because he does not believe the plan will be effective in preventing terrorists from crossing the border into Afghanistan.⁷⁰

New Political Arrangements in South Asia

In the longer term, the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran may need to come to new political arrangements concerning the migration of Afghans in South Asia.⁷¹ New research indicates that Afghan labor migration may prove beneficial to both Afghanistan—in the form of

⁶⁵ UNHCR, “New Study Highlights Key Reintegration Challenges in Afghanistan,” December 5, 2006.

⁶⁶ See discussion of IOM border-crossing survey, above.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Alessandro Monsutti, *Afghan Transnational Networks: Looking Beyond Repatriation*, Kabul: AREU, August 2006.

⁶⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Pakistan: Humanitarian Groups Condemn Landmine Plan,” *IRIN News*, December 27, 2006.

⁶⁹ UNOCHA, “Pakistan: Humanitarian Groups Condemn Landmine Plan,” December 27, 2006.

⁷⁰ “Afghan Angry at Pakistan’s Plan for Mines and Fence on Border,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2006.

⁷¹ For more general information on regional issues, see CRS Report RL33458, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, by (name redacted).

remittances—and to countries of asylum—in the form of labor. Indeed, experts have noted that such migration is nothing new; many Afghans have for a long time migrated seasonally in search of livelihood opportunities. It remains to be seen what role the United States might take on this issue.

Despite its economic advantages, establishing such a “labor migration regime” in South Asia may prove politically difficult on the Pakistani and Iranian domestic fronts. Segments of both the GoI and GoP have indicated that they believe Afghans are a net drain on the economy. Maintaining security along the border with Afghanistan is also a concern. Afghans in Pakistan are blamed for a good deal of lawlessness in the country, and there are few down sides for authorities to engage in this kind of scapegoating.⁷² Ultimately, however, Afghans will likely continue to live and work outside of Afghanistan, regardless of the legality of doing so; understanding and regulating as much of this migration as possible may be one way to ensure that it is done so in a secure, humane, and effective manner.

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⁷² The recent eviction of Afghans from informal settlements in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, for example, was ordered because Afghans are an alleged security risk. “Pakistan wants the Afghans to return home or move to another camp in the country by Sept. 15 for ‘security reasons,’ though many of the refugees have been living in this sprawling neighborhood of mud-built homes on the outskirts of Islamabad for 20 years.” See Jan, Sadaqat, “Afghan Refugees near Pakistani Capital Ask to Stay Put a Little Longer,” *AP*, September 2, 2005. See also “Pakistan Authorities Demolish Illegal Afghan Settlements,” Associated Press of Pakistan (reported through BBC Monitoring International), August 29, 2005.

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