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The perfect scapegoat

Pakistan wants to deport 1.7 million Afghans. Tense relations between Pakistan and the Taliban regime are likely to play a role

What is currently being discussed in Germany is already a reality in Pakistan. On 3 October, the interim government under Prime Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar announced that irregular migrants are to voluntarily leave the country. Those who do not comply with the request must expect to be deported as of 1 November. Despite the call having been general, it was clear that it mainly addressed the approximately 1.7 million Afghans who entered the country irregularly. Some 170 000 Afghans had left Pakistan by the time the deadline expired. On 8 November, the government announced that a total of 250 000 irregular migrants had already left Pakistan. Those who remain in the country and can evade deportation are at risk of losing their jobs and homes, as the government has announced that it will also prosecute landlords and employers of irregular migrants.

The fact that the government seems to be taking its deportation offensive seriously, unlike in the past, is reflected by reports of violent police operations in recent days. Police and security authorities are intensively searching for refugees without valid documents. If apprehended, they are deported to Afghanistan after they have been identified and they have been registered in the Pakistani population database and potentially detained. Currently, more than 5 000 people, including many children, cross the Pakistani-Afghan border in this way every day. The media reports chaotic conditions in improvised camps both on the Pakistani and Afghan side of the border at the overcrowded Torkham border crossing.

Many of the Afghans now being deported were born and raised in Pakistan — entering their home country for the first time. The Taliban government levels sharp criticism at Pakistan for the deportation offensive, even though the Afghan rulers have made aggressive calls for the return of Afghans since seizing power in August 2021. Yet, the regime appears overwhelmed when faced with caring for a large number of people at the border crossing. The already rampant humanitarian

catastrophe in Afghanistan, owing to civil war, sanctions and natural disasters, is at risk of intensifying with the mass exodus this coming winter.

A long history of Afghan migration and flight

Pakistan's new tough approach towards Afghan refugees is the often-announced, albeit rarely consistently implemented, departure from its decades-long liberal handling of refugees from its neighbouring country in the north. The origins of migration movements between Pakistan and Afghanistan go back a long way. After all, the border between both countries, drawn by the British colonial rulers, cuts across ethnic settlement areas, particularly of the Pashtun in the region. This meant that the state border was always highly permeable, even though the governments in the capitals had sought to undermine this.

However, it was not until the late 1970s, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, that major refugee movements took place. Since then, Pakistan has been home to a large number of Afghan refugees. At that time, the government and population in Pakistan sympathised with their fellow Muslims from the north in the fight against Soviet invaders. The reception of refugees was considered natural in light of this. At the time of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, there were an estimated four million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Some returned to Afghanistan following the end of hostilities. However, more than half remained in Pakistan, and since then, Pakistan's cities have been strongly characterised by Afghan life.

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The onset of the Afghan civil war in 1989 and the Taliban's first seizure of power in 1996 triggered a renewed movement of refugees to Pakistan. The UN Refugee Agency estimated that there were some two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan in the year 2000. The overthrow of the Taliban by the US-led coalition in 2001 and the subsequent period of relative stability once again enabled a greater number of Afghan refugees to return. However, once the Taliban seized power again in August 2021, this movement headed back towards Pakistan. The influx of Afghan refugees has continued since then. The UN Refugee Agency speaks of 3.7 million Afghans who live in

Pakistan. The Pakistani government estimates that there are 4.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 1.7 million of whom are thought to have entered irregularly.

Whereas Afghan refugees in Pakistan were originally assigned to designated settlements, some two-thirds of registered Afghans in Pakistan are now living outside the refugee settlements in mostly squalid conditions, especially in urban areas. Without a secure legal status, most Afghans in Pakistan rely on the informal economy to gain access to work, healthcare, education and housing. Pakistani employers exploit Afghans as cheap labour, particularly in unskilled occupations such as the transport sector, as day-workers and rag pickers or in simple handicraft businesses.

A dangerous mix

Many Afghans live in similar conditions and in the same neighbourhoods as Pakistanis, and they usually co-exist without any major conflicts. Many marriages between Pakistani and Afghan citizens have taken place in recent decades, and that is especially the case for Pashtuns and Hazara. Yet, it also needs to be noted that Pakistan has neither signed the UN Refugee Convention nor has it formulated its own official refugee and migration policy. National legislation, such as the possibility of naturalisation for children born in Pakistan to Afghan refugees, is usually interpreted restrictively, especially with regard to Afghans. The Pakistani government provides a registration document to Afghan refugees that entered Pakistan through regulated means; although this grants them access to special educational facilities, it does not constitute a residence status and offers only scant protection against deportation or arbitrary treatment by officials.

Notwithstanding the long history of Afghan migration to Pakistan, the mood has noticeably deteriorated in recent months. The dramatically worsened security situation in the Pakistani-Afghan border regions and Pakistan's ongoing severe economic crisis have contributed to this above all else. The government and the security establishment in Pakistan primarily blame Afghan refugees for Islamist terror. According to interim Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti, Afghan nationals were directly involved in 14 out of 24 suicide attacks in Pakistan this year. On the highly competitive labour and housing markets, Afghans are considered to be major competition, especially by the poorer population. Added to this are reports that foreign currency smuggling into Afghanistan, which is sanctioned by the international community, is destabilising the Pakistani currency and has thus contributed to rising living costs in the country.

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What's more, tense relations between Pakistan and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan are likely to play a role. Pakistan accuses the Taliban of not taking enough action against extremists who, from Afghan territory, are planning attacks and assaults in Pakistan. The Taliban, on the other hand, are upset about a border fence that was erected by Pakistan along a state border that is not recognised by Afghanistan. Recently, there have been repeated fire exchanges between Pakistani and Afghan border troops. Through the large-scale deportation of Afghans, Pakistan can exert pressure on the Taliban, who are already facing a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Taken together, these developments and recriminations make for a dangerous mix. Critics from both inside and outside the country connect the Pakistani deportation offensive to the parliamentary elections scheduled for February 2024. The elections made it appear opportune for government decision-makers and those in the security establishment to use draconian measures to focus public attention on irregular migration of Afghans to Pakistan in order to detract from the domestic political polarisation caused by the dismissal and arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, as well as home-grown economic problems. Afghan refugees and their often-dramatic fate are, according to critical observers, being instrumentalised by Pakistan's political elite as a domestic policy scapegoat and foreign policy bargaining chip *vis-à-vis* the Afghan Taliban. The only moderate criticism of the ruthless deportation policy in Pakistan suggests that this calculation could prove successful.

A responsibility of the international community

The government in Islamabad thus feels confident. Illegal immigrants played a major role in spreading turmoil in the country and, therefore, Pakistan is both legally and morally in the right when deporting them, interim Prime Minister Kakar told the press on 8 November. Yet, despite the demonstrated hard line, observers doubt whether Pakistan is actually willing and able to maintain pressure on Afghan refugees over a period of weeks and months in order to deport all 1.7 million people. The associated logistics and resources are a mammoth task, which the country that has been hit hard economically cannot really afford. In the past, comparable initiatives have invariably petered out after some time. Nevertheless, the Pakistani government's actions have been subject to

strong international criticism. The authorities' uncompromising hard line is criticised, as is the lack of consideration for cases of hardship such as children and young people born in Pakistan or persecuted activists and journalists. There are also reports that even Afghans registered in Pakistan and those in reception programmes in Western countries (including former local staff of German organisations) are being persecuted and put under pressure by the police. The United Nations and human rights organisations also warn against a humanitarian crisis at the overcrowded border crossings.

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There has, however, been a lack of concrete offers and initiatives from the international side, so as to dissuade the Pakistani government from its tough stance. One option, for instance, would be to provide greater financial support to Pakistan for the accommodation and care of Afghan refugees. From Pakistan's perspective, such burden-sharing would surely be justified, as Pakistan places the blame for the current situation primarily on the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Pakistan, as Islamabad sees it, is left alone with the repercussions of the West's failed experiment in Afghanistan.

This touches a raw nerve, because since the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the new wars and crises in Ukraine or Gaza have clearly eliminated the fate of Afghanistan not only from the news but also from the consciousness of many politicians and citizens in the West. Having said that, the situation in Afghanistan continues to be dramatic, and the fate of Afghan refugees in the region (in addition to Pakistan, especially in Iran, which is also increasingly deporting Afghan refugees) must therefore not be overlooked. New political and humanitarian initiatives for the protection of Afghans fleeing from violence and poverty are urgently needed, and existing commitments, such as the *UNHCR's Regional Refugee Response Plan*, must finally be honoured.

And not least, in light of current German discussions on large-scale deportations and a shift towards a more restrictive migration policy, it should also be in the German and European governments' own interest to enable Afghan refugees to lead a humane existence as close to their homeland as possible.



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