

Interview with Mojib Rahman Atal

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Q1: Do you expect an exodus of Afghans since the takeover of power by the Taliban?

Mojib Rahman Atal (MRA): Well, this should be answered in the context of the current situation. The Taliban are lacking international recognition, the US has frozen Afghanistan Central Bank's assets, and amid an economic slump, people are uncertain about the future. Additionally, targeted killings are reported in different provinces, and retaliation attempts have questioned the Taliban's amnesty and control over its forces. Taliban born out of the rural clergy occupied most of the governmental positions and consider former public servants as those who worked for a puppet regime supporting invaders, the US and its allies in Afghanistan.

Thus, it is not surprising why many Afghans who used to work for the previous government and Western countries or institutions, mostly from the urban and educated class, leave the country. However, the borders are still closed, issuance of new passports is delayed, and winter has already approached, which makes mobility very difficult, particularly in a country like Afghanistan, which has poor transportation infrastructures.

Thus, in continuation of the above problems and lack of humanitarian assistance, uncertainty about the future will grow further, and a mixture of urban and rural displacement and migration are expected to occur in summer and coming years. However, the number of people arriving in Europe will not be similar to what the EU experienced in 2015 during the so called 'refugee crisis which was exacerbated by the rapid movement of Afghans from Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey trying to reach Europe. It is for sure that the number of Afghans who leave Afghanistan will increase gradually in Pakistan, Iran and finally Turkey expecting to reach Europe. Thus, this suggests that the EU needs to get ready for the new arrivals in summer as well as upcoming years unless the situation improves drastically in Afghanistan.

Q2: Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Germany have a considerable amount of Afghan refugees: What are the commonalities and differences Afghan refugees are facing in these three countries?

MRA: Pakistan and Iran share a long border with Afghanistan and host the largest number of registered and unregistered Afghan refugees in the world. Because of linguistic and religious commonalities, Pakistan has been a favourite destination mostly for Pashtuns who also migrated afterwards to Gulf countries from Pakistan. However, for the Tajiks and particularly for the Hazara, Iran has been one of the main destinations both before and after the Soviet Union occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. Migration to both countries was predominantly from rural areas where the Afghan fighters resisted the Red Army.

Reaching Turkish soil through Iran has never been easy for Afghans, and only those who could afford this journey financially and in terms of social networks could reach Turkey in the past. Turkey has remained traditionally an attractive destination for the Uzbek and Turkmen of Afghanistan, who share a Turkish heritage.

In addition to the political situation, religious and ethno-linguistic commonalities also played a significant role in regional movements of the Afghans. At the beginning of the Soviet Union's occupation, the Afghan refugees were welcomed in Pakistan and Iran, which are predominantly Muslim countries, and their reception was considered as an Islamic obligation as well as humanitarian act. However, as the Afghans provided cheap labour, their presence also became part of economic policy for these countries in the long term. Both Pakistan and Iran had instrumentalized Afghan refugees in political bargaining with the previous Afghan government. On the contrary, the urban class of Afghans mostly migrated to Germany, whether as businesspersons, students and politically persecuted before and after the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan. In recent years, urban and rural Afghan migrants have arrived in Germany, particularly during the so-called 'Refugee Crisis'. Fewer restrictions on borders made many first and second generation of Afghans leave Iran and head to Europe and Germany.

Today, in Germany, we see Afghans from almost every ethnic group, the number of men outweighs females, and the Afghan population in Germany is relatively younger. In comparison to Iran and Pakistan, where Afghans face plenty of legal restrictions, Afghans face fewer challenges in Germany. A major difference can be observed in the approach of these countries to naturalization. It seems that most Afghans have already become or would become part of German society, and there is little chance that they would return to Afghanistan, but this does not hold true for the majority of Afghans who live in Pakistan and Iran.

Q3: What should the international community, particularly the European Union, do to improve the situation in Afghanistan and the Afghan refugees?

MRA: I believe the current situation is widely influenced by the previous US and its allies' false approach towards the Taliban that undermined the Afghan government. Post-2001, the EU and its member states played an important role in democratic

state-building but failed to understand the complexity of the situation on the ground. The EU and its member states failed to support the Afghan government and maintain their influence without US military presence in Afghanistan. As a result, the previous government collapsed, and the international community as a whole put itself in an extremely difficult position.

Now, on the one hand, the international community is unwilling to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government and on the other, a humanitarian crisis urges the international community's urgent intervention to prevent disastrous future scenarios of hunger and forced migration. Taliban have also realized that without international recognition and cooperation, they will be isolated further and public discontent would increase that destabilizes their government. Thus, it is not surprising that the Taliban have frequently called on the international community to recognize them as new rulers of Afghanistan and maintain their financial assistance to the Afghan people. Under the current circumstance, what seems to be appropriate is to continue with humanitarian assistance through international organizations such as UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, etc., while keeping pressure on the Taliban to get ready to establish an inclusive government representing all Afghan ethnic groups and respect basic rights of Afghan citizens.

This requires the international community's active political role as well as readiness for humanitarian assistance channelled through international organizations to mitigate the consequences of previous failures and avoid further exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis in the country. Meanwhile, the international community should not forget Pakistan and Iran's roles both as immediate hosts of Afghan refugees and involved actors in Afghanistan's affairs in the future.

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