

Peshawar, Pakistan  
June 15, 1991

**MAKING THE MOVE**  
Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

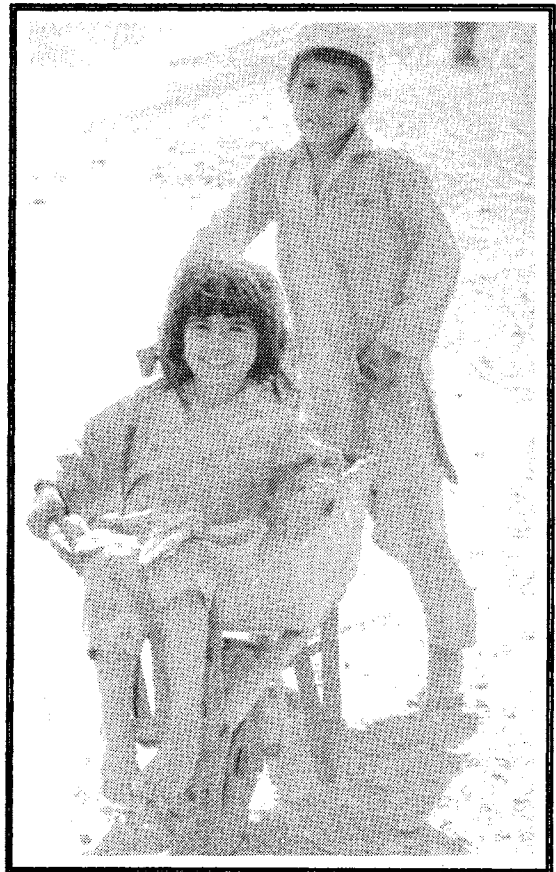
by Carol Rose

Ask an Afghan refugee whether she or he wants to return home, and the answer you will get is "malumdar" -- or "that's obvious." But more than two years after the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, it is not at all obvious that the refugees are going anywhere soon.

"We are missing our country, everything about it. The heat here is terrible and the water supply to our camp has been cut," said an Uzbek farmer living in a refugee village near Peshawar. "But how can we go back when our homes are destroyed and our fields are mined?"

How, indeed. Efforts at reconstruction are hampered by continued fighting between the Kabul government and the mujahideen, as well as infighting among the various mujahideen commanders. As a result, assistance organizations that rebuild roads, schools or medical clinics inside Afghanistan are fighting a losing battle against the war itself. Meanwhile, programs to maintain refugee camps in Pakistan face drastic budget cuts.

This stagnating situation has sparked a debate over which should come first: reconstruction of Afghanistan or repatriation of the refugees.



Nowhere to go: Afghan refugee children at a camp in Pakistan.

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The Japanese government has declared that its assistance funds will be frozen until there is evidence that the refugees are going home. In contrast, the United Nations, the United States and other aid organizations are pouring millions of dollars into projects to rebuild Afghanistan, ostensibly to encourage at least some of the Afghans to return.

As the aid pie shrinks, assistance organizations are forced to balance the demands of the refugees still living in camps in Pakistan against the need to begin rebuilding Afghanistan.

At the same time, growing resentment among Pakistanis against the refugees has raised the specter of forced exodus. And what possibly may be the most sensible solution -- integrating the refugees with Pakistani society -- is an idea that people here speak of only in whispers.

### Reconstruction versus Repatriation

In the heady days after the 1988 Geneva Accords and Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the world community pledged more than \$1 billion to help the Afghans return home and rebuild their country. The agency created to distribute this money was the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA.)

After two years with no sign of significant repatriation,



Afghan men escape the summer heat at a tea shop built in a refugee camp, Swabi

however, donor countries became disillusioned. The Japanese government announced it was freezing its contributions, and UNOCA fell \$80 million short of its \$240 million target budget for 1991.

The drop in international assistance has fueled a debate over whether reconstruction should take place before there are signs of widespread repatriation. Some argue that money spent now into Afghanistan is being wasted.

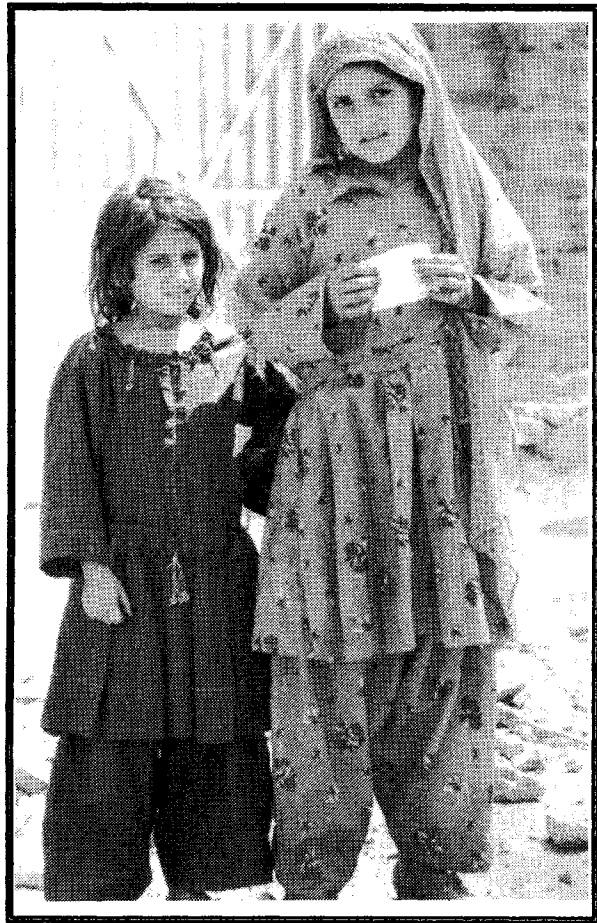
"The Japanese have a valid concern," says one United Nations official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "We repair roads only to have them bombed, we build new health clinics and they are destroyed, we clean carezes [underground irrigation canals] and they are not used. When the war finally ends, Afghanistan is really going to need that money, so it makes a certain amount of sense to save it now."

A different view is voiced by Shamsuddin, former agriculture project manager with Save the Children (USA): "The Afghans don't want to stay in Peshawar, but there is little choice for them if they have no shelter or electricity inside Afghanistan."

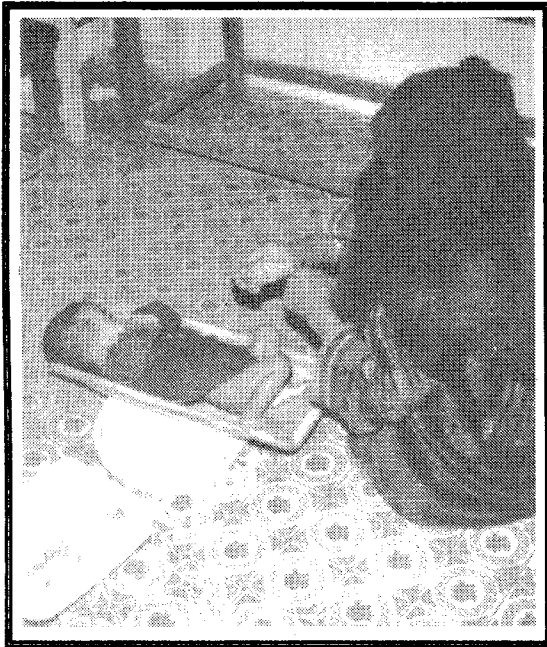
Save the Children's Peshawar office is running projects in three districts inside Afghanistan, building schools and distributing improved wheat seed and fertilizer to local farmers. Shamsuddin estimates that thousands of people have returned to Afghanistan because of these development projects.

"If the money is frozen, activities inside Afghanistan will stop and the people will come back to Pakistan," says Shamsuddin, who, like most Afghans, has only one name. "If you freeze the money, then you are freezing the people inside refugee camps."

Perhaps the "reconstruction versus repatriation" debate misses the main point: that neither rebuilding nor return can take place until there is peace in Afghanistan. After all, the Afghans left their homes, their possessions and their way of life in order to escape a war. It is unlikely that money alone -- whether given to projects inside Afghanistan or withheld from refugee camps -- will convince them to return home as long as the war continues.



Women and children are hardest-hit by the drop in foreign assistance.



Weighing a malnourished baby at a clinic run by Medecins Sans Frontiers. Diarrhea and malaria are the biggest killers in the refugee camps.

### Choosing Who to Help

As foreign assistance diminishes, aid organizations are being forced to decide whether to continue programs in the refugee camps or instead divert their resources into rebuilding Afghanistan. Many have chosen the latter course, shifting away from "emergency relief" that sustains refugees in the camps toward "community development" projects inside Afghanistan.

This shift has created a sort of schizophrenia among the international aid organizations, as they struggle to balance their time and money between Pakistan refugee camps and Afghan villages. Often, such projects are in conflict.

"Afghan teachers in the refugee camps get a monthly salary of 1,200 rupees [\$U.S.

50], but there are no salaries for teachers working in Afghanistan," says Rob Fuderich, a basic education advisor for the United Nations. "Under these circumstances, how can we convince teachers to go back?"

"Linking money to repatriation confuses the issues," he adds. "There are a lot of people in Afghanistan waiting for services, people who never left and never benefitted from refugees assistance. I think we should put our money inside [Afghanistan] and let people go home if they want to."

Ironically, assistance programs in the refugee camps may actually hinder repatriation efforts by raising expectations among many refugees about the duty of government to provide public services. Many refugees now have access to education for their children, medical care for the sick, and electricity in their houses. In contrast, there are few schools in rural Afghanistan, a dearth of medical clinics, and widespread destruction of village infrastructure.

To what are the Afghans returning?

"Their home areas have sustained substantial destruction from the war," says a report prepared by the UNHCR office in

Peshawar. "They are simply not prepared to irrevocably cut the ties with the physical, economic, and political security of their Pakistan camp until they are sure that conditions will permit a full resumption of family life and subsistence in their home areas."<sup>1</sup>

A report of refugee women in Baluchistan adds that: "They are longing for their home country but their first condition for going back is that there must be peace."

"The women have experienced what a society can offer their family, and especially their children, in terms of health and educational facilities. It is a strong wish from the women that the same facilities should be developed in Afghanistan as soon as possible," says the report. "The women and their families had to leave their homes and to start from the very beginning to build up their material standard step by step [in Pakistan]. The women now express their worries about [having to start] from scratch once more, now in Afghanistan."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the danger of creating false expectation among refugees, relief programs continue to play a crucial role in sustaining the Afghans who still live in the camps. At health clinics run by *Medicins Sans Frontiers*--Belgium in Baluchistan and by the Austrian Relief Committee in Swabi, I have seen dozens of women and children lining up for medical assistance. Many of the children looked



Loading a cement latrine-cover onto a truck at a refugee camp. Sanitation is a key focus of many foreign relief projects in the refugee camps.

<sup>1</sup> "Repatriation Report 1990", submitted by Repatriation Unit, UNHCR, sub-office, Peshawar.

<sup>2</sup> "Changes in Female Attitudes and Social Well-Being Preparing for Repatriation: A Pilot Study of Two Afghan Refugee Villages in Balochistan," by UNHCR Sub-office, Quetta, and Radda Barnen/Swedish Save the Children. June 1990.

malnourished, others had malaria and typhoid. If such programs are closed down it will have a devastating impact on the refugee community. Women and children, who make up the bulk of the refugees, would be particularly hard-hit if such assistance is eliminated. They have the lowest income-earning potential among the refugees, and many are unable to leave their homes because of strict Islamic rules of purdah. Without foreign assistance, these women could be shut off from all access to medical care and other means of basic survival.

### Encashment and Repatriation

Since July 1990, UNHCR has operated a pilot project to assist refugees who want to repatriate voluntarily. It functions as an "encashment program" in which refugees can exchange their ration books for 3,300 Pakistani rupees [\$U.S. 135] and 300 kilos [660 pounds] of wheat. In return, they are "deregistered" and

become ineligible for further U.N. assistance. Nonetheless, they are free to remain in Pakistan.



Born and raised in Pakistan, she still calls Afghanistan her home.

"There is no requirement that anyone go back to Afghanistan," says Robert Breen, repatriation officer for UNHCR in Peshawar. "Repatriation is strictly voluntary. There is nothing to stop a refugee from taking the money and going to the Punjab to buy a cow. We are not encouraging people to cash in their cards if it isn't safe, but merely giving them an opportunity to go back if they want to."

"Is there a link between encashment and return?" he asked. "I think there is a significant link, perhaps as high as 60-70 percent. But that is simply an impressionistic view."

The encashment program has been strongly opposed by many of the mujahideen political leaders, who argue

that it undermines the "jihad" -- or holy war -- to encourage return while the communist leader, Najibullah, still rules in Kabul. At some encashment centers in Pakistan refugees attempting to cash in their ration cards have been harassed by members of the mujahideen and, allegedly, the Pakistani secret service.

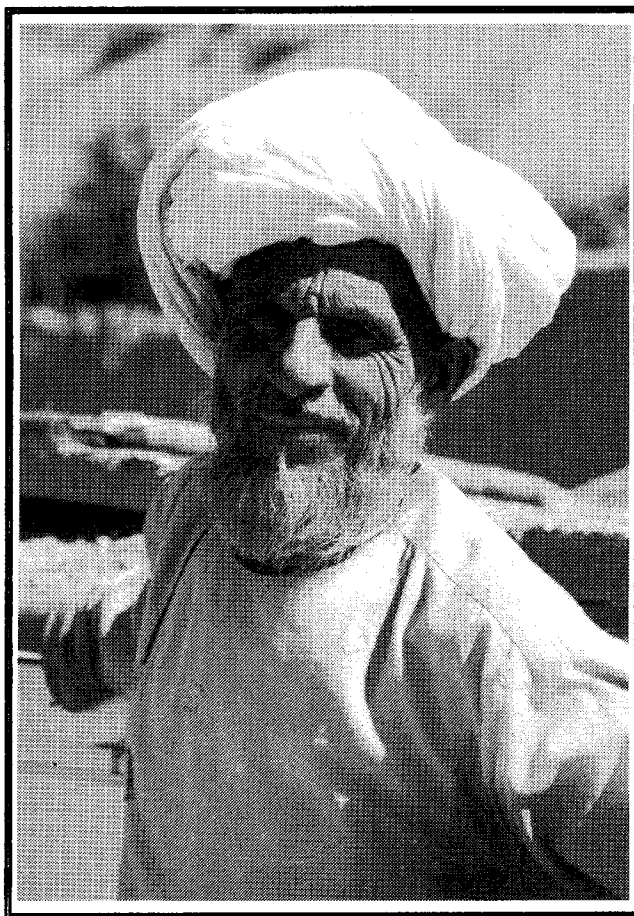
"The [mujahideen political] parties don't want the refugees to leave, because if they return it tends to legitimize Najib and give him a propaganda advantage," says Breen. "The mujahideen parties came out unanimously opposed to the program."

Despite opposition, UNHCR estimates that some 17,503 ration books -- representing nearly 100,000 individuals -- have been turned in for cash as of May 20, 1991.

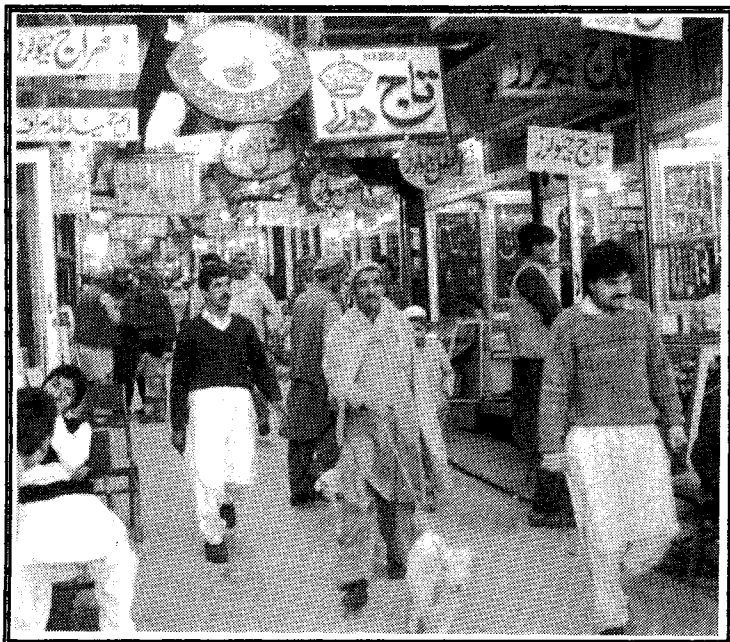
A key problem with the encashment program is that it allows people to exchange ration books that don't belong to them. As a result, there has been a rise in the number of ration books that have been stolen or forged, and then sold for cash. A refugee who loses his or her ration book has no recourse and, of course, no more rations.

"We never used to hear about ration books being stolen, but now I get reports of four to five books stolen each week," says Imrad Zid Khan, the district administrator for the Commission for Afghan Refugees in the city of Mardan, about an hour north of Peshawar. "The UN doesn't care about sending people back, only about collecting their ration books. Repatriation has become nothing more than selling passbooks.

"These refugees don't really require any assistance if they want to leave [for Afghanistan]," says Imrad. "Many are pressured by the parties or their neighbors not to do so. And if they do leave,



An Afghan trader...



Pakistanis and Afghans mingle with one another (and walk their goats) through the Gold Bazaar in Peshawar's Old City.

they have no choice but to do so on the Q.T."

The encashment program also does not benefit the thousands of refugees who arrived after 1986, the year that the United Nations stopped registering new refugees. As a result, many camps have thousands of unregistered refugees, who are not eligible for United Nations rations or the encashment program.

It is difficult to link the encashment program and repatriation. Open borders between Pakistan and Afghanistan permit

unconstrained traffic between the two countries and complicate attempts to monitor the repatriation flow. Moreover, thousands of refugees return to Afghanistan seasonally. They work their land in Afghanistan during the summer months, then return to Pakistan to find employment during the winter. Other refugees have sent back some family members to rebuild and restore the land, leaving behind part of their families -- mostly women and children -- in the camps in Pakistan.

In short, rather than a flood of refugees pouring into Afghanistan, there has been something more akin to a tidal flow, with refugees moving back and forth across the border each season.

### The Option of Forced Return

After 12 years of war, it seems the world has grown weary of the Afghan refugees. Dozens of assistance organizations already have pulled out of the region, and there are rumors that the United Nations is going to stop all aid to the refugees by the end of 1992. Already, UN rations of food and other relief items have been cut. Previously, the refugees got wheat, sugar, rice, tea, cooking oil and kerosene. In recent months, only wheat is distributed, and even that was cut-off for three months in early 1991.



Many refugees perceive reductions in assistance as an attempt to force them back to Afghanistan before the war is over. "Anyone who advocates freezing assistance is siding with the Russians," says Shamsuddin.

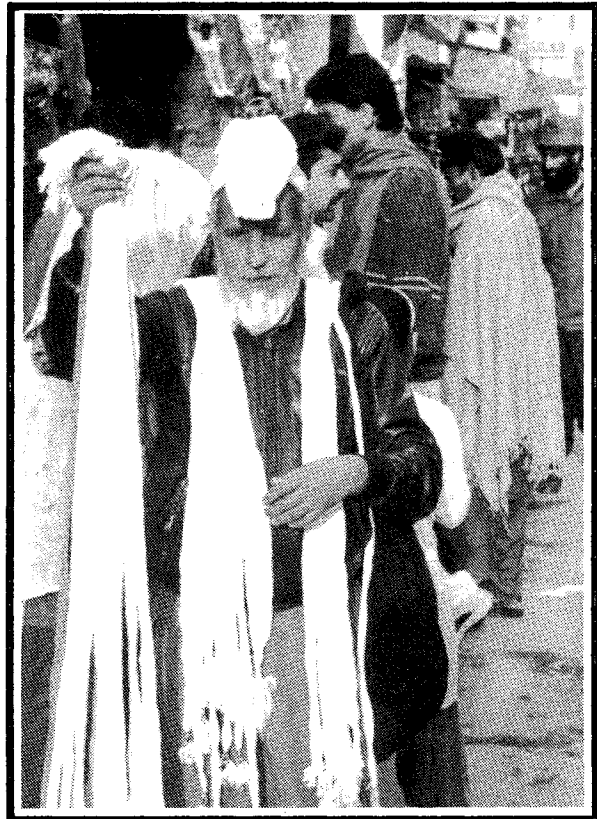
Perhaps more significant than world opinion, is the Pakistani response. Many Pakistanis are tired of playing host to some 3 million foreigners. Moreover, the recent suspension of U.S. aid to Pakistan -- ostensibly over the nuclear issue -- suggests that Washington is no longer willing to reward Pakistan for assisting in a proxy-war against Communism in Afghanistan. Pakistan's political and financial payoff for assisting the refugees thus has disappeared.

"The [Pakistani] people are fed up with the refugees," says A. Aziz Luni, home secretary for the province of Baluchistan. "In the beginning we were ashamed to throw them back, but now we are absolutely fed up. Our city has turned dirty. They throw their plastic everywhere. Their children shit everywhere."

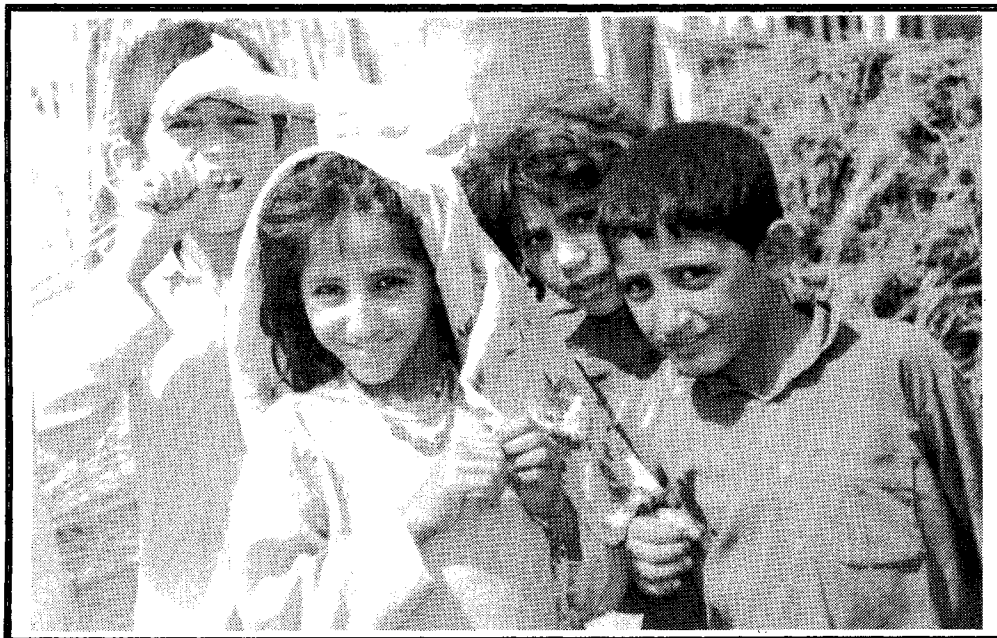
Quetta, the capital city of Baluchistan, has been transformed by the refugee influx. "This is a city built for 85,000, but now there are 500,000 people," says Luni. "I remember when Quetta was beautiful and clean. Now it is dirty and unmanageable, all because of the refugees."

"They have brought in their Kalashnikov culture and narcotics," says Luni. "These fundamentalist groups are running everything along the no-man's land between Pakistan and Afghanistan. They have automatic weapons and remote-control bombs. I fear for our future. We are a long way down the road toward destruction."

Some political parties in Pakistan have called for the forced removal of the refugees, but there are few signs that the Pakistani government will attempt it anytime soon. Instead, the government has taken a lead



Scraping by: An Afghan sells cloth belts for 1 rupee apiece (four for a penny) in the Saddar Bazaar, Peshawar.



Afghan children born and raised in exile

in brokering a political settlement to the Afghan war.

Nonetheless, a recent survey of Afghan women in two refugee camps in Baluchistan suggests that Pakistan will play a major role in promoting repatriation: "More than 85 percent of the women expressed that they are waiting for an order to return home from the Government of Pakistan to go back to Afghanistan. Either they expected the Government of Pakistan to force them or to help them to enable their return."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the survey found that less than 30 percent of the women said they expected an order from the mujahideen, and fewer than 10 percent thought there would be an order to return issued by an independent government of Afghanistan.

"If the Pakistani Government doesn't help us and doesn't arrange transportation we [will] never go back," one refugee woman told the survey team.

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<sup>3</sup> UNCHR and Radda Barnen/Swedish Save the Children, op. cit.

## Prospects for Integration

No one here wants to talk about integration. When you bring up the topic, voices drop to a whisper and people say that such things simply aren't to be discussed. Needless to say, there are no integration programs in place.

The reluctance to examine integration is grounded in the politics and history of this region. International organizations don't promote integration because the Government of Pakistan won't allow it. And the government resists the idea because Pakistan historically has been threatened by political pressures for an independent "Pushtunistan," a state that would encompass Pushtu-speaking tribes on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border. The government Pakistan is careful to avoid any move that could revive calls for an independent "Pushtunistan."

Nevertheless, these historical links between Pakistan and Afghanistan have promoted spontaneous integration between the refugees and the local population. Afghans dominate the trucking and transportation industry in Pakistan. They perform much of the manual labor in the border area. Afghan traders and smugglers bring fruits or black-market goods into Pakistan, where they trade them for cash and food-stuffs. Other Afghans have their own shops and restaurants.

"They are leaving the camps when the aid disappears, settling down in town and merging with our own culture," says Luni, the home secretary in Baluchistan. "They are opening shops here in town, or finding other ways to survive."

The process of informal integration is limited by the fact that Afghans are prohibited from getting commercial and export licenses for their businesses. Instead, they must rely on Pakistanis to conduct basic business transactions for them. In addition, most Afghans attend separate schools, which usually are inferior to Pakistani public schools.

This has led to a situation in which the Afghans exert a strong presence in the local culture, but remain economically and socially marginalized within Pakistani society. This has resulted in underlying tension between the two populations. The Pakistani<sup>s</sup> feel burdened by the refugees and the Afghans feel at a disadvantage in the Pakistan economy.

Unless and until there is peace in Afghanistan -- or a move toward formal integration -- the Afghans will remain locked in a terrible sort of limbo: dependent on dwindling foreign aid, unable to return home and unwelcome to stay.



**An Afghan truck painted with a picture of Saddam Hussein rolls toward the Pakistan-Afghan border in Baluchistan.**