



**Afghanistan Research & Evaluation Unit  
and the Ministry of Refugee Affairs**



# **Conference on Afghan Population Movements**

**Intercontinental Hotel, Kabul**

**27 April 2005**

- Theme** Afghans in neighbouring countries: issues, concerns and solutions
- Key objectives** To present stakeholders and policymakers with the emerging findings of AREU's transnational networks research
- To initiate a discussion about a comprehensive policy solution to Afghan migration to neighbouring countries.
- Supported by** The European Commission (EC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Stichting Vluchteling. 
- Key participants**
- Ministries**  
Ministry of Economics, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Refugee Affairs, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
- Donors / UN**  
European Commission, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration, International Labour Organization, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the UK Department for International Development.
- Embassies**  
The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the British Embassy, the Canadian Embassy, the Danish Embassy, the Dutch Embassy, Special Representative of the European Union in Afghanistan, the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the Russian Embassy and the US Embassy.
- The conference was also attended by Afghan and international print and electronic media, Kabul University, the Academy of Science, Afghan and international NGOs, and the International Security Assistance Force.

## **Afghan Cross-border Movements: Social, Political and Economic Realities**

*Dr Alessandro Monsutti, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*

There are three main points that form the basis of this introduction:

- the prior existence of transnational networks beyond Afghanistan (for centuries Afghans have travelled within the country and the region, while this movement has taken on a new dimension in light of the recent war);
- the relevance of the transnational networks for the social and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan (each year hundreds of millions of dollars reaches Afghanistan through remittances, contributing directly to family support and, indirectly, to national recovery);
- the necessity to bring the transnational networks onto the government's policy agenda (this must be addressed both at the regional level, but also in multilateral discussions between donor agencies etc).

**Context:** From 1978-92, Afghans (mostly rural) were quite welcome in both Pakistan and Iran. They received cards and access to basic services. The first wave of return was in the early 90s: up to a million Afghans returned. Then again many Afghans left (this time mostly urban) during the 90s. External assistance to Afghan refugees in Pakistan diminished considerably after the major repatriation of 1992-93.

Since the fall of the Taliban nearly 3 million refugees have returned. The majority of these returnees just left Afghanistan in the last 5 years (during Taliban)—ie recent movements or recent arrivals. Despite this massive wave of return, the number of Afghans in Pakistan and it is still significant. There is ongoing movement—people are coming back to Afghanistan, but people are also leaving for different purposes. In Iran there are about 1 million refugees registered in Iran—mostly families. But we have at least half a million single men who are moving constantly between the two countries.

**Who is migrating?** Individuals and families from all ethnic groups and all social classes migrate. Recent migration from Afghanistan to Iran and Pakistan is mostly composed of single men. Mostly single men go to Iran and Pakistan, in recent times. They are following their preexisting social networks—providing information on destinations. These social networks are also providing protection for those family members who are left at home. Transnational networks are crucial to understanding migration.

**Who is deciding?** Often the women are playing a much more important role than is usually acknowledged. Although women are less mobile in recent times, in the absence of men, women are conquering new boundaries in doing men's work. The absence of male family members can serve to some degree to empower women.

**Smuggling:** The huge majority of migrants traveling to Iran use illegal smuggling networks. People are able to move without having any money—from smuggler to smuggler all the way to Iran. Does this make them a prisoner of the smuggler? Or is it a way of people to migrate without having access to any money first? Sometimes the smugglers can provide money, advice etc. It's a private enterprise. Borrowing from

friends when a migrant arrives in the country without money, it is negative but it can also be seen as positive in building solidarity and networks between people.

**How are remittances sent back home?** Reliance on informal networks—the *hawala* system: a very strong tool for survival and a coping strategy. Afghans go through *hawaladars* directly, or through middlemen/brokers. The money is arriving in Afghanistan in the form of food and commodities, and it is very effectively distributed around the country.

Mostly the money is coming from the work of single men, not families. The amount is huge—possibly hundreds of millions of dollars.

Are remittances a tool of development for Afghanistan? It is an efficient tool of survival, but how can we transform it into a tool of development? How do we use this money in the country? It should be invested in production, workshops, factories. Not just construction; it must provide jobs for people. The *hawala* system is an efficient transferrer of money, but it is not a credit system.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the fact that ongoing migration is a tool of reconstruction and a constitutive feature of Afghan social life, there is a real necessity to go beyond the three solutions to the refugee problems usually recommended and promoted by UNHCR:

1. voluntary repatriation in the country of origin;
2. integration in the host country;
3. resettlement in a third country.

These three solutions are based on the idea that solutions are found when movements stop. However, mobility has always been a key livelihood strategy for Afghans. A more comprehensive approach that takes into account the full range of strategies and responses developed by the Afghan population, including the back-and-forth movements between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, must be promoted.

## **Afghan Refugees in Iran: Socioeconomic Realities and Policy Concerns**

*Dr Mohammad Jalal Abbasi, University of Tehran*

### **Number of Afghans in Iran**

In November 2004, a little over one million *registered* Afghans (190,201 families) remained in Iran, including 113,201 single Afghans. The ethnicity of registered Afghans in Iran: Hazara (377,036), Tajik (270,552), Pashtun (129,807), Baluch (46,622), Uzbek (20,438) and other (27,976).

### **Afghan livelihood strategies in Tehran**

In spite of government regulations making it illegal to employ Afghan nationals without work permits, labour migrants are still being employed often through recommendations or introductions by relatives or friends.

Eighty per cent of migrants in Iran had cousins, uncles, brothers, and brothers-in-law living there, suggesting channels of pre-established transnational networks that facilitate the migration of subsequent family members.

Respondents participated actively in regional social networks that functioned as safety nets. Money was borrowed for: illness, accident, funeral costs, housing bond or *rahn*, marriage costs, smuggling fees of relatives. Almost half of the respondents said that they, or their relatives in Iran, had brought Afghan women from Afghanistan to Iran as brides for Afghan men.

### **Reasons for households remaining based in Iran**

The longer the time of residence in Iran, the less likely respondents want to return to Afghanistan. Respondents who assessed their household's economic situation to have improved in Iran were significantly more willing to remain in Iran than those respondents who assessed their economic situation to have not changed, or to have deteriorated. The majority (66%) of respondents did not intend to return to Afghanistan in the short-term, and planned to remain in Iran in the medium term if they were permitted to do so. Over one-third of labour migrant respondents said they would return to Iran, and the same number again said that their return to Iran was conditional on the work situation in Afghanistan .

### **Future intentions in terms of return/mobility**

Pre-requisites for voluntary return to Afghanistan included: peace and security, stronger economy/labour market, improved welfare facilities including health and education. Kabul was clearly the preferred place of resettlement due to presence of family members, perceived work opportunities, and better infrastructure and welfare facilities. Respondents from places other than Kabul expressed a clear preference for returning directly to the place of their family household and land, and making secondary movement onward to Kabul only if there was no work locally and they had financial needs. This contrasted the majority of Afghan households in Iran (of whom very few had house or land in Afghanistan) who preferred to return from Iran to Kabul even if they had not originated from Kabul .

## PRESENTATION NOTES

# **Afghan Migrants in Pakistan: A Case Study of Karachi**

*Ms Ayesha Khan, Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR)*

There are some significant presumptions regarding the Afghan population:

- The policy framework assumes Afghans are primarily refugees displaced through direct effects of war who will be sufficiently induced to return through end of active hostilities.
- The host government and communities presume the population poses particular problems, engages in socially and economically marginalised activities such as smuggling, trading in small arms and drugs.
- Therefore they believe Afghans in Karachi are predominantly refugees, Pashtun, residing on city fringes in make-shift settlements, mostly engaged in socially and economically marginalised activities including cross-border smuggling, arms and drugs trade.

### **The migration process**

is not:

- Initiated by war alone
- Uni-directional
- Free from specific expectations about Karachi city

is:

- Based on economic, historical, ethnic, political, and environmental patterns, followed by other migrants in Pakistan too
- Characterised by complex patterns of repeated migration and repatriation
- Strongly influenced by ethnic/political identity
- Karachi as destination for those going through types of transition—into permanent settlement, eventual further migration, or repatriation. Karachi signified better opportunities

### **Afghan communities in Karachi**

The profile of Afghan communities is much more diverse than expected.

Lack of tenure security means that ability to make decisions about the future are not very strong. Likewise, licensed Afghan schools exist in Karachi but are not enough to ensure onward return to Afghanistan.

There is no cross-community integration in Karachi. While there is profound integration and diversity within communities, these don't apply between them. Communities are independent and self-sufficient, divided by ethnicity/religion, etc.

ID cards don't work anymore; they are not being issued to Afghans or are no longer valid. Therefore Afghans have no access to passports or formal sector jobs, even if born in Pakistan. How can Afghans born in Pakistan be expected to have allegiance to a nation state they have never seen and aren't even allowed legal status in the country they have?

It is unlikely that Afghans who repatriate are not going to still have links to Pakistan—those links between two places will remain and policy needs to account for this.

Education and training in Pakistan needs to translate into clear credentials in the formal sector in Afghanistan. This is potentially a major problem for second generation migrants.

Karachi may be a prosperous city compared to other parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, but compared to Iran it falls short. There is still a large human smuggling network onward to Iran and even Turkey. People will only take the risk to try to get to Iran if they have relatives there.

## PRESENTATION NOTES

# A Study of Cross-Border Migration between Afghanistan and Pakistan

Mr Jobst Koehler, IOM, Geneva

The study of the border at Torkham is part of a joint effort to understand the characteristics of migration movements of Afghans. Cross-border movements of Afghans to neighbouring countries are considered to be regular and no longer in response to crisis.

**Gender:** 99.5% male, partly due to gender bias

**Age:** Average age is 35.9 years.  
Largest group of the travellers between 21-20 years old (31.6%).

**Marital status:** Majority of the travellers are married (82.3%).

**Ethnic composition:** The majority of the travellers are Pashtun (94.3%)

**Age:** Average age is 35.5 years.  
Largest group of the travelers between 21-31 years old (31.6%).

**Ethnic composition:** 91.1% is Pashtun

**Destination:** Peshawar (78.4%), Islamabad (17.1%). Destination selected on the basis of employment opportunities (83%) and presence of relatives (9.4%).

## Conclusion

Cross-border movements are normalising and there are substantial, recurrent movements in both directions. Migration constitutes a livelihood strategy, and is motivated by lack of employment opportunities. Many travelers were traveling in order to access medical services.

## Cross-border migration between Afghanistan and Pakistan at Torkham:

**Substantial in both directions and recurrent:** the majority of travellers return within a week or month, often due to inadequate health care in Afghanistan.

**Motivated by social and family-related reasons:** considerable proportion consists of Afghans who live in Pakistan and consider it their home.

**Significant number of labour migrants:** lack of employment opportunities at home and social networks in place of destination.

## Next Steps

Currently undertaking another survey of Torkham to see if the findings of the previous survey can be confirmed. Plus studies in other parts of the country (eg bus stand in Kandahar) to see the extent to which the Torkham findings are representative.

Two surveys of cross-border Migration and counting exercises:

- **Torkham** in late spring: to see whether the findings of the previous study can be replicated
- **Chaman** in summer: to examine the extent to which the findings of the Torkham study are representative

# Key Responses

## Dr Haidar Reza, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs

- We are pleased that the refugee returns so far have been conducted on an entirely voluntary basis.
- We are confident that those Afghans who remain abroad do so not because they are afraid to return, but because they have valid social and economic reasons for remaining where they are. AREU's research work has shown that those leaving Afghanistan are doing so of their own free will, to assist their families and communities.
- We know that labour mobility, including seasonal migration, is—and always has been—an important characteristic and capability of the Afghan people. With the development of the country, we hope that people will be able to stay in Afghanistan and not have the need to move outside just for economic reasons.
- As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs we must ensure that these migration trends are properly understood by other governments and peoples in the region, and it is our intention to work towards further improvement of the opportunities and conditions of work for Afghans abroad.

## Mr Abdurrazeq Samadi, Deputy Minister for Finance

- AREU's research has drawn our attention to an important component of our economy—remittances from Afghans abroad and the important contributions that they can make to our recovery and future development.
- The Ministry of Finance is committed to developing a more attractive climate for business and investment in Afghanistan. We are conscious that the most likely investors are our own countrymen, but the research on transnational networks and migration has also shown that there is another potential source of support and financing for our country. Whilst we appreciate enormously the contributions of the donor countries, as Afghans, we are especially supportive of any efforts and assistance that comes from our own people. We believe that with the right policies and support we can find ways and means to ensure that remittances from Afghans abroad play an even more influential role in future.
- We are committed to building an economy that is open to trade, business, and investment. It is therefore important that we develop positive relations with our neighbours in the region. We hope that such cooperation can be extended to our workers abroad.

## Dr Azam Dadfar, Minister for Refugees and Repatriation

- The successful reintegration of returned Afghans is a high priority of the Ministry.
- However, there are many Afghans who do not wish to return, not because they have something to fear, but because they have developed strong links to the places they are living in.
- The Afghan government together with the international community and in particular UNHCR has been struggling to offer reintegration assistance. The task is enormous and we have been able to respond only to some of the needs of the many Afghans returning home since 2002.

- It must be acknowledged that Afghans in Iran and Pakistan have become an economic reality in some sectors, and that they make a valuable contribution to the economy of those countries.
- From the perspective of my Ministry I see three important aspects:
  1. Migration is an effective coping strategy way for many Afghan families. This has been the case in the past, and continues to be so today. We have to make sure that we both preserve and develop this mechanism. We must also recognise that migration can make an important contribution to the reconstruction and development process.
  2. The development of effective government policy on migration is important in maintaining good relations with the countries of the region. We look to international agencies like IOM and ILO to help us develop a strategy for addressing the challenges of border management and labour migration.
  3. AREU's findings show that Afghan migrants suffer considerable hardship either because they are exposed to unscrupulous traffickers or because they are subject to detention and deportation. Working conditions for Afghans abroad are also insecure. The answer to these problems lies not with control or suppression, but in identifying ways to manage it better through developing positive interventions and minimising risks and problems.

**Mr Sayed Ikram Massoumi, Minister for Labour and Social Affairs**

- The government of Afghanistan has some difficulties in meeting the needs of the workforce in the country. In order to identify employment opportunities, particularly for returned refugees, the Ministry has established nine employment services in nine provinces. Despite limited resources we have established vocational training centres in some provinces with the aim of providing training particularly for returnees, to teach them trades so that they may assist in the reconstruction of the country in the future.
- With our neighbouring country Iran, we are trying to establish a formal agreement for the Afghan workforce there, in order for them to benefit from proper legal status in the host country.
- We recognise that Afghans who have been working in other countries are contributing significantly to their families and to Afghanistan. We know from international experience that supporting migrant labour can be a valuable source of foreign exchange.
- As the Ministry of Labour we must ensure that there is greater understanding and cooperation with the governments of the countries where our citizens are working. We must also make sure that our citizens are better informed of employment opportunities, of the risks of irregular movement, and of their rights and entitlements as workers.

**Mr Maqool, representing the Ministry of Interior**

- AREU's research has shown us that there is a positive side to the movements and presence of Afghans abroad, but it has also shown that these movements are occurring outside any formal regulation or documentation.

- We believe that it is in our national interest, and in the interest of our people, that we establish a better documented and registered system for managing the movements of our population.
- We certainly do not seek to impede these movements; during this recovery period we need to find the right balance between regulation and encouraging access to employment and economic opportunities.
- We also need to ensure that these movements do not become a source of friction with our neighbours.

**Mr Adam Khan, Counsellor for Cultural Heritage and Humanitarian Affairs,  
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan**

- Pakistan has granted asylum generously to Afghan refugees during the years of the Soviet occupation.
- We have allowed refugees free access to business and employment in Pakistan.
- We currently issue about 200 visas in Kabul daily.
- We remain committed to the repatriation of Afghan refugees.
- Despite economic pressure we have continued to sustain Afghan refugees, but the world community should realise that Pakistan needs help in providing this assistance.
- When access to services such as shelter, education and health improves in Afghanistan, refugees will be encouraged to return. In many cases, Afghan refugees do not see any good reason to return to Afghanistan since these services are not available in their homeland. In some cases their property has been damaged and looted by those who stayed behind. The international community should focus on sufficiently compensating these refugees and assisting their return home.

**Mr Hashem Ashja Zadeh, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

- Iran has played host to more than 2.5 million Afghan refugees since 1979.
- The Iranian government has been sympathetic to the difficult situation in Afghanistan during the jihad and civil war—Afghan refugees have enjoyed the benefits of health, education etc.
- In cooperation with UNHCR, Iran has participated in the voluntary repatriation of Afghans to their homeland; since then 750,000 Afghans have returned.
- With these figures, it shows that the Afghan refugees are ready to return to their country: the necessity of Afghans seeking refuge in other countries has ceased. It also implies that the services required by refugees have been provided by their government. Iran wishes to continue to assist voluntary repatriation until its end. Of course, according to UNHCR, the return of the refugees will be consistent with the tripartite framework.
- With the increase in unemployment in Iran, it is necessary to re-assess the occupation of foreign nationals in jobs in Iran.
- The Ministry of Interior of Iran has divided Afghans living in Iran into two groups:

1. Those who will return under the tripartite agreement with the assistance of UNHCR.
  2. Those who have illegally entered the country, and those who are continuing to work in Iran—they are refugees but they are also criminals. Their crime is entering the country illegally, and they will be treated accordingly. Mainly single men who are found to be illegal are fined.
- New policies that the Iranian government has adopted include: not issuing permits for families to accompany them seasonal labourers, and maximising the number of visas issued by Iran in Afghanistan.

**Mr Jean Francois Cautain, Head of Operations Section, EC Delegation to Afghanistan**

- The EC is very keen to see regional cooperation around reintegration of Afghan refugees. We believe that Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan must cooperate around the migration issue, among others.
- It is the responsibility of each government to build an appropriate framework for regional cooperation. The Iranian representative put it succinctly when he said that refugees need to return to Afghanistan, but there still needs to be attention to migration as an ongoing phenomenon, with appropriate regulations.
- The EC is ready to help manage transnational movements. Expertise will be needed and we are ready to contribute to that. It is also important for donors to recognise the importance of regional integration, and take into consideration the regional dimension.
- The EC is already factoring migration into its planning for 2007 to 2013. We know many Afghans have had positive impacts on labour segments of Pakistan but there have also been negative impacts. We are thinking of working with Pakistan to develop specific economic and social activities around this.

**Mr Jacques Mouchet, UNHCR Chief of Mission, Afghanistan**

- For the past 25 years we've seen Afghan movement in the region as a refugee problem. The situation has changed dramatically, and we've seen the return of 3.8 million with difficulties and successes, and the challenges of employment and land tenure are still ahead of us. AREU's research shows us that we should look at movement of population in a framework that goes beyond looking at it as simply refugee movements.
- The generosity of the host countries and communities where Afghans lived for long periods of exile impresses us. Pakistan especially has shown admirable qualities in accepting high numbers of foreigners without animosity.
- The level of integration that refugee communities have had over the years is impressive. The proximity of cultures and languages has helped, but the level of interactions with local populations at the personal and family level is extremely important and should not be underestimated. At the same time, we must recognise that the Afghans who have been living in Iran and Pakistan have contributed greatly to these two societies, both socially and economically.
- The free movement of people is an integral part of regional cooperation. In Europe we have learned this and this case serves as a good example. It is important to foster better bilateral relations.

- We should move our thinking from traditional refugee movement into the more complex issue of management of population movement. We must put emphasis on the dignity and human dimension of these movements.

**Mr Abdul Moneim Mostafa Hassan, Senior Regional Adviser, Middle East and South West Asia, and Special Envoy to the Gulf States, IOM**

- IOM has been active in Afghanistan for almost 12 years. Our overall strategy is to facilitate return to and within Afghanistan, and to assist with sustainable reintegration. IOM's projects aim to establish an environment that is conducive to better reintegration of refugees. They go hand and hand with interests of donors and the government:
  1. *Establishment of migration management strategy for Afghanistan*—an exercise that IOM is developing at the request of the government of Afghanistan. This strategy is a broad document that is still in a first draft and covers different issues and challenges related to migration management, from smuggling, HIV/AIDS, labour migration, etc.
  2. *Trilateral dialogue on migration management*—a new initiative we have just shared in a letter to the three governments and we are waiting on their comments. In dealing with migration management, we need to build confidence and set up place where we can discuss freely issues. We hope to maximise benefits to all three countries.
- We also want to work hand in hand with the governments of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan to achieve consensus.

**Mr John Stewart, ILO**

- ILO has a mandate to protect workers in countries other than their own. A resolution adopted in June 2004 called upon the ILO to implement a plan on labour migration in collaboration with other organisations working in the region.
- ILO welcomes the thrust to move from a refugee to a migration framework.
- In line with its mandate, ILO is working closely with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to administer migration programmes, promote labour development linkages and protect the interests of migrants and their families.
- ILO is providing support to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in establishing employment service centres, improving personal training and skills development, establishing a labour market information system, and setting up a formal framework for ordinary labour migration.
- There are no simple solutions, and no single agency can claim to have simple solution. People should be able to migrate out of choice and ILO looks forward to the day when migration brings benefit to both Afghanistan and receiving countries.

## Concluding Remarks

Mr Paul Fishstein, Director, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The purpose of the Conference on Afghan Population Movements was to present some of the findings of recent research by AREU and its partners—to inform policies that must be developed to deal with new regional realities, and to encourage debate and discussion about these issues.

It will take some time to shift the policy paradigm in the region from ‘refugees’ to ‘migrants’, but the research presented is clear evidence of what is the new, complex reality of regional cross-border movements.

In summing up the day’s discussions, there are three common themes and points of consensus that warrant attention:

1. The research presented confirms the strong presence of transnational networks in the region. We have seen how important these links are for the people here in Afghanistan in terms of remittances, allowing them to recover from debt and meet their daily cost of living requirements. The studies conducted in Karachi, Tehran and Torkham indicate that there will be continued movement from Afghanistan to its neighbouring countries primarily for economic reasons, and future policy must take this into account.
2. As regional partners facing shared issues of labour migration, those involved in policymaking need to move away from the simplistic ‘refugee’ model. Although there is relative peace and stability now in Afghanistan, and many refugees have been repatriated, there are still large numbers of Afghans residing in Iran and Pakistan, and significant continued movement of individuals between the countries. As evidenced by research presented at this conference, Afghans use migration as a way of improving their lives. For many Afghans, livelihood opportunities are greater in Iran and Pakistan, and many Afghans living in those countries are reluctant to return home until the services and opportunities available there are comparable to what they have become used to.
3. There is a clear need for communication and open dialogue about migration issues between regional governments—addressing new agreements, mechanisms and instruments to manage these emerging realities. The benefits of rational, regional policymaking that focuses on *managing* migration rather than *controlling* people’s cross-border movements would include: better management of people’s movements between the countries; less corruption and therefore reduced costs to Afghan citizens and governments; returnees bringing back skills to assist in reconstruction; and a greater degree of dignity for Afghan migrants in their cross-border movements.