

Pakistan's Expulsion of Afghans Could Fuel New Refugee Crisis in Europe

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Pakistan's caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti ordered on October 4 for "illegal immigrants" to vacate the country by the end of the month, a move which threatens to spark another migration crisis in Europe. Although Europe is focused on dealing with refugees from Ukraine and Palestine, it is naïve to the looming refugee crisis that Pakistan can cause if it goes ahead with the mass deportations of Afghans, many of whom fled Taliban rule.

Although Pakistan announced on November 10, after receiving backlash from human rights organisations, that it had extended the legal residence status of about 1.4 million Afghan refugees until year-end, it again rejected calls to halt deportations of the millions of Afghans.

On November 8, Pakistani caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar announced that more than 250,000 Afghans had voluntarily returned home despite the threat from Taliban rule. Although Kabul denounced the deportations and demanded Islamabad reconsider it, in addition to criticism from the UN and human rights groups which cited a humanitarian crisis and expressed fears that the move could expose returnees to retribution and abuses by Taliban authorities, Pakistan appears unmoved in its decision to expel millions of illegal immigrants.

"Afghan refugees are not involved in Pakistan's security problem. As long as they [Afghans] leave Pakistan voluntarily, that country should tolerate them," Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid [wrote](#) on X (formerly Twitter), adding that Pakistani authorities should reconsider this "unacceptable" policy.

The behavior of Pakistan against Afghan refugees is unacceptable. The Pakistani side should reconsider its plan. Afghan refugees are not involved in Pakistan's security problems. As long as they leave Pakistan voluntarily, that

country should tolerate them.

— Zabihullah (ذبیح الله م..) (@Zabehulah_M33) [October 4, 2023](#)

From the Taliban's perspective, they are already dealing with enormous challenges to provide for the population, and the return of millions more Afghans, mostly hostile to their rule, will only compound their desperate situation.

At the same time, though, Afghan refugees in Pakistan have complained of waves of arbitrary detentions, harassment, and forcible deportation. Pakistani authorities said they would confiscate money and property belonging to "illegal foreigners," and the interior ministry opened a hotline for Pakistanis to report any "illegal foreigners" they are aware of.

Police also warned that landlords and firms renting to and employing Afghans lacking proper documents would receive fines. Registered refugees have also reported that police raided their homes, confiscated property, destroyed Proof of Registration cards, arrested without charge and demanded [bribes](#).

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) condemned Islamabad's decision to evict over one million illegal foreign residents within 30 days, especially for the reason given - Afghans in the country have links to criminal groups and terrorist organisations.

"This decision also contravenes international human rights law and must be reversed immediately," the rights body said in a [statement](#), adding that holding every Afghan refugee accountable "reflects not only an absence of compassion but also a myopic and narrow view of national security."

"The large majority of such people are vulnerable Afghan refugees and stateless persons for whom Pakistan has been home for several generations," the HRCP said on [X](#).

The government's decision to evict over one million 'illegal' foreign residents within 30 days - allegedly because they have links to terrorist and criminal groups - reflects not only an absence of compassion but also a myopic and narrow view of national security. The large...

— Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (@HRCP87) [October 4, 2023](#)

With European eyes on Israel-Palestine, and now to a lesser degree on Ukraine, if millions of Afghans were booted out of Pakistan and unwilling or unable to return to Afghanistan, it can be expected that a new refugee crisis will start at the borders of the European Union akin to the one triggered at the peak of the Syrian War and without the bloc being sufficiently prepared for it. In effect, this crisis in Pakistan could become a European problem since neighbouring Iran or the next country in line, Turkey, will be unwilling to host millions more refugees and will instead push them onward to Europe. Being hosted in neighbouring China is also out of the question.

However, some European conservatives are already noting the potentiality of this scenario and are calling for Pakistan to act since they bear responsibility for much of the war and

destabilisation in the country. Pakistan first started funding, training, and supporting Islamist groups in Afghanistan to oppose the secular and progressive Soviet-backed Republic of Afghanistan from 1979-1989, helped bring the Taliban to power in 1996, and continued to support Islamist groups during the American occupation from 2001 to 2021. Therefore, in their view, it is a problem for Pakistan to deal with Afghans and not Europe.

US-based research and polling organisation [Gallup](#) warned on November 10 that economic uncertainty awaits returnees in Afghanistan, where women's rights have eroded as they are forced out of the workplace.

"As thousands of Afghans are forced to cross the border from Pakistan, they face an economy unable to accommodate them, where job prospects are bleak, household incomes are squeezed, and millions are unable to afford the basic necessities of food and shelter," the organisation said.

Since Pakistan is expelling them and it is unlikely Afghanistan will absorb and/or accept the millions of refugees, it can be expected that many of them will try their luck in making it to Europe since few other options remain for them. It seemingly appears that Europe is not prepared for this as Gaza and Ukraine consume all their attention.

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