

平成 15-18 年度 日本学術振興会 科学研究費補助金 基盤研究(A)
「紛争と開発：平和構築のための国際開発協力の研究」(編) [*1]

Discussion Paper for Peace-building Studies, No.06 [Spring 2005]

No.06

Afghan Refugees and Migrants in Iran:
Who is responsible for empowering them?

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Spring 2005

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Afghan Refugees and Migrants in Iran: Who is responsible for empowering them?

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Introduction

Since the Afghan War in November 2001, many Afghan refugees returned home during the year of 2002. It is estimated that at least 2.1 million refugees being assisted by the UNHCR returned from Pakistan and Iran in 2002 and the first half of 2003. However, it is said that only 10 to 15% of the returnees were actually from Iran. It is estimated for example that 900,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan as opposed to only 100,000 people from Iran between November 2001 and August 2002.

With no reliable statistics available, it is difficult to know the actual number of undocumented Afghan refugees. However, UNICEF estimates that there could be up to 500,000 Afghan children aged 6-15 years in Iran, among those whom are undocumented.

One of the most significant tasks for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is the capacity building of Afghans in various sectors of society. The capacity building of Afghans is needed in the administration of Government, in the fields of education, technological improvement for socio-economic infrastructure of society, the construction of new industries, and so on. Yet, it goes without saying that providing primary education is one of the most significant and vital tasks in capacity building. To be more specific, to improve the level of literacy is a key for the reconstruction of Afghanistan where the current literacy rate is estimated at 30%.

The objective of this paper is to examine how primary education and/or literacy programs have been provided for Afghan refugee children in contemporary Iran. Through my field research conducted in the summer of 2002 and 2003, this study investigates the interaction between Iran's policy toward Afghan exiles, the UNHCR, and Iranian local NGOs in shaping Afghan children's opportunities for primary education. Furthermore, an attempt is made to analyze the impact of the so-called

“Repatriation Program for Afghan refugees” on Afghan children’s access to primary education, and to delineate a complicity of the relationship between Afghan children’s rights to basic education in their place of exiles and the aid policies of both Iran and the UNHCR toward Afghan refugees and migrants. This study ultimately argues that the status of refugees and migrants is politically determined in a hosting country and thus it is extremely difficult for an international donor like the UNHCR to formulate aid policies for refugees and migrants.

This study consists of three parts. First, it provides an overview of the current situation of the presence of Afghans in Iran. Second, the paper examines the effectiveness of the so-called “Repatriation Program” for Afghan refugees. Third, attention is paid to the changing policies of the Iranian government and that of the UNHCR on granting primary education and/or assistance to Afghan students.

1. An overview of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran

Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran have been estimated to number approximately 2 million. It has been said that the number of Afghans was as large as 2.5 million at its peak. Given this astronomical figure, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has stumbled into the position of being host to the largest number of refugees and migrants in the world.

The history of Afghan refugees and migrants dates back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979. The influx of Afghans into Iran continued to increase during the Soviet military from 1980 until 1992. It has been said that the number of Afghans entering Iran continued to grow between 1994 and 2000 when the Taliban captured Kandahar and later Kabul, expanding their territory of influence in Afghanistan. It is hard to estimate how many Afghans entered Iran and continued to stay there before and after 1994 until September 2001. The results of my research at Tehran UNHCR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, local NGOs in Tehran however suggest that the number of Afghans who came to Iran dramatically increased in 2000, a year before September 2001.

What the presence of Afghans in Iran has meant for the Iranian society is an extremely complex issue. During Iran-Iraq war, the government of Iran stressed the significance of the unity of the oppressed (Mostazafin) and accepted Afghans, particularly Shi’i Afghans (mainly Hazaras). Iran also needed extra manpower as the population of Iran was only 35 million at the time, and thus welcomed Afghans who worked in various sectors and industries and also served in the military.

The continued presence of Afghans in Iran however, has been considered a substantial economic burden for Iran over the last decade. The population of Iran has become doubled since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the problem of unemployment has continued to become increasingly serious year by year, particularly

among young people. It is estimated that there are about 2 million Iranians who are unemployed and thus, some criticism has emerged in Iran society against Afghan workers, who are accused of occupying jobs, which Iranians should otherwise fill. Criticism has been also leveled against the assistance of some sections of Iran's government and other international donors toward Afghan refugees and migrants. On the other hand, Iranian employers generally conceive Afghan laborers to be hard workers and many Afghans laborers usually undertake hard, dangerous and dirty jobs, which Iranians would hesitate to take.

2. The Repatriation Program of Afghans in Iran

2-1. Before November 2001

Under the above-mentioned circumstances, the government of Iran attempted to encourage the repatriation of Afghans first in 1993-1994. It is reported that about one million Afghans were repatriated to Afghanistan. Another attempt was made by the Iranian government in 2000 under a joint program with the UNHCR. However, owing to severe drought, continued and escalating hostilities between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, a massive influx of Afghans into Iran was seen in the first six months of 2001. It is reported that more than 100,000 displaced Afghans were accommodated in the centers for displaced in Eastern Iran and Western Afghanistan by early April, 2001. Moreover, it is said that 1,000 Afghans entered into Iran every day during the month of April of that year. There was another slight increase in the number of displaced Afghans at the time of the Afghan War in November 2001. Yet, it is said that the increase of Afghan refugees who received emergency assistance was rather temporary, and the majority of those who lived in the camps located along the Iranian border as well as at the camps inside Afghanistan were later disbanded.

It is to be noted that the problem of Afghans in Iran was not just an outcome of the Afghan War in 2001 nor was it the emergence of the Taliban. The presence of Afghans in Iran has more than two decades of history commencing in 1979. It is also said that a large segment of Afghans had existed in big cities and their surrounding areas within Iran before the US attack on the Taliban in 2001 as they had fled from the threat of the Taliban. Some Afghans came and lived (and often still live) alone with their family remaining behind in Afghanistan. Others came with a family and have stayed (and still stay) in Iran. However, it is observed that more single Afghans than those accompanied by family members have lived and continue to live in Iran. Thus, a distinction should be made between the "refugee" and the "migrant" to examine the real status of Afghans in Iran.

2-2. After November 2001

Refugees vs. Migrants

At present, at least 1.8 million Afghan refugees and migrants still reside in Iran. According to my analysis of a report commissioned by UNESCO-Tehran, there are three categories of Afghans in terms of their legal status. The first is the so-called “blue card” holder, a status granted to those who arrived before 1992. They have the right of residence and access to government services such as education and health. They are allowed to “work in a limited number of sectors (mainly low-paid, hazardous or labouring jobs).”

The second category of Afghans are those who came to Iran between 1992 and 1994 and obtained temporary cards at the end of 1994. The cards were often renewed however finally expired in 1996. Many of these temporary cardholders have continued to stay in Iran.

The third category encompasses those who came after 1996 and were not granted any document. It is generally the case that the limited number of Afghans who arrived after 1996 were legally granted permission to stay for a short period of time. Since the fall of Mazar-e Sharif to the Taleban in 1998, there has been a large influx of Afghans who fled the oppression of the Taleban. It is said however, that only a small number of the Afghans were actually issued temporary cards.

The above-mentioned explanation of these three categories of Afghans considered, it is clear that only a limited number of Afghans should actually be classified as “refugees”, while international donors and NGOs often consider almost all Afghans in Iran as refugees. Legally speaking, from the Iranian government’s point of view, blue card holders are, more or less, identified as “migrants”, and thus are allowed to remain in Iran. This is clearly evident in the cardholders’ documents, which state that, they are given permission to remain in Iran as “migrants.” On the other hand, from the viewpoint of refugee status seekers, blue card holders were the ones who originally made a claim of “refugees” as they took refuge from the Soviet military.

The question thus becomes; “who is a refugee?” Those who arrived after 1998 and received temporary IDs are most likely qualified as refugees both from the point of view of Afghans – the claimers – and the Iranian government, which granted temporary permission of stay. In particular, in March 2000, about 50% of requests by Afghan refugees were granted permission for temporary stay of up to 6 months in Iran, after screening centers were set up in various provinces in Iran to determine the status of those claiming to be refugees.

3. Refugee Children and Education

There is almost no dependable data, historical nor current, showing the number of undocumented Afghans in Iran. As mentioned earlier, documented Afghans have access to government social services, and are allowed to work. Undocumented Afghans are legally not allowed to be in Iran, and thus the policy of the Iranian government has been that undocumented Afghan children have no right to receive formal education while all documented refugee children have the right to a free education just like Iranian children.

Faced with a growing unemployment rate in Iran and the criticism against the government regarding the presence of Afghans, the Iranian government has launched a campaign to promote the repatriation of Afghans as well as to deport undocumented Afghans. The Iranian government considers that assisting Afghan children in primary education would contradict the government's efforts to send Afghans back home, which have been underway since the end of the Afghan War in November 2001.

After a long period of deliberation between the Iranian government's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs which commenced in 2000, the UNHCR assisted repatriation program started operations in April, 2002. The statistics provided by the UNHCR demonstrates that the cumulative number of UNHCR assisted and spontaneous returnees from April 2002 reached 370,000 Afghans at the end of 2002. The first half of 2003 however witnessed a considerable drop in the number of Afghan returnees, seeing only 80,000 return during this period. Faced with this reality, the Iranian government has been pressuring the UNHCR to speed up the repatriation program.

Incidentally, the UNHCR changed its education policy toward Afghans in Iran in early 1990's, the mid-90's, and again from 1996. In the early 1990's, it aimed at funding primary schools which targeted for refugee children and actually established schools for them. The first policy change occurred in 1996. The UNHCR decided to provide Iran's Ministry of Education and Training (MET) with a grant in accordance with the number of refugees who registered in the Iranian government schools. Thus, the UNHCR's policy was to alleviate the cost of the MET and let the MET maintain existing schools and conduct training programs for Afghan teachers.

Further change is now imminent. A fundamental policy of the UNHCR regarding the approval of the status of "refugee" is that those who came to Iran after November 2001 are not to be recognized as refugees. Behind this policy is the logic that repatriation should be promoted as long as the security in Afghanistan is such that Afghans are able to return.

Moreover, the UNHCR has a basic policy of providing "education for repatriation" to Afghan children. Along with this policy, the UNHCR and the MET have taken measures to make sure that the recipients of any education program will return to Afghanistan. For example, the MET provides scholarship to Afghan university students in exchange for their promise of their returning to Afghanistan upon the completion of their education. The same policy is employed for Afghans who undergo the MET's training program to become teachers in Afghanistan. The UNHCR policy of "education for repatriation" as implemented by the MET has in effect stripped from

both documented and undocumented Afghan children, their opportunity to access primary education.

However, even among documented children, certain restrictions were posed and have become harsher. Documented children as well as temporary card holders required travel permits if they attended government schools outside the area where their blue cards were issued. From 1998/99, even permanent cardholders were barred from attending schools in Qom and Tehran where the shortage of primary schools has been severe even for Iranian children. Blue cardholders were allowed only inside the districts where their cards were issued.

Clearly, the most seriously affected in terms of educational opportunity have been undocumented Afghan children. Furthermore, it is easy to assume that there have been more undocumented Afghans than documented.

The majority of Afghan children who came to Iran after 1996, as mentioned earlier, are undocumented, and thus can not attend government schools. There has been a growing demand from Afghans and international NGOs that even undocumented Afghans should be allowed to enroll in government schools. Yet, faced with the limited capacity of schooling even for Iranians, Iran's Ministry of Education has not expanded the enrolment of primary schools to undocumented children, at least until August 2003. Iran's Ministry of Education's decision to continue restrictions over undocumented Afghan children reflects the Government's general policy toward the Afghans.

A new approach, however, to support undocumented Afghan children was made in 2002. The Iranian government decided to allow undocumented children to receive free primary education at schools run by the Literacy Movement Organization of Iran (LMO), a quasi-nongovernmental organization. Those who attend such schools are officially recognized as equivalent to students who go through government schools. According to my research conducted in the summer of 2002 and 2003, Iranian local NGOs are active in schools run by the LMO.

There are some reasons for this. First, NGOs in Iran are in most cases not really NGOs, but rather close to Governmental Organizations. This is because Iranian NGOs have not been developed fully as independent organizations. In order for any NGO in Iran to carry out activities, it is necessary for a NGO to officially register at the Interior Ministry. Second, due to the first reason, only quasi-governmental organizations like the LMO are permitted by the MET to support undocumented children. Therefore, Iranian volunteers who are affiliated in one way or another with the LMO are major activists in operating LMO classes.

The fact that Iranian NGOs are under the control of the Government means that their activities are influenced by the Government's policy on Afghan refugees and migrants. Therefore, one should hold some degree of reservation about the extent to which LMO can play a sustainable role in expanding the education opportunity for undocumented Afghan children.

As a matter of fact, the Iranian government declared on May 24, 2003 that Iran would scrap Afghan refugees' permanent residence permits from September 23 2003. According to this new policy of Iran, blue cardholders are supposed to submit their

cards to the alien affairs office by this date, and those who are found to have difficulties in returning to Afghanistan may be given temporary cards. If this guideline of BAFIA is fully implemented, the Iranian government's education policy toward Afghan children will drastically change. Consequently, it is likely that even documented children will be excluded from formal education. It goes without saying that the LMO's literacy classes may close for undocumented children, even though LMO originally started the "Basic Education for All" program as an important facilitator of this scheme, which has been generally propagated by UNICEF in its policy toward children of developing countries. The issue then, is who can really facilitate the "Basic Education for All" program for Afghan children?

There are Afghan community schools, where undocumented children are studying. The UNHCR estimated about 40 Afghan schools in Tehran and the outskirts of Tehran. These schools are called informal schools because they do not have the official permission of the MET to run. Thus, those who go through primary education in such schools are unable not receive any certificate upon completion of education.

An agreement, however, was made between the Iranian government and the interim government of Afghanistan to recognize the validity of Afghan community schools when President Karzai visited Iran in September 2002. Consequently, those who graduate from community primary schools are now considered graduates of primary education. The names of the students who attended and finished schools are now submitted to Afghan Ambassador in Iran, who issues certificates to those students. Thus, these students are able to continue on to secondary schools when they return to Afghanistan without lapse.

One of the problems that Afghan community schools usually face is a lack of funding. They are usually run by the minimal fees paid by the parents of the students and teachers are paid very low wages. Moreover, such schools are unable to afford a solid and permanent building of their own and thus are forced to rent a small space at a mosque or conduct classes in tents.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned examination demonstrates that the opportunities for Iran's Afghan children to attend schools has, on the whole, expanded as documented children started to be officially accepted and LMO classes for undocumented children have been promoted. This however is not foreseen to continue. On the contrary, it is likely that Afghan children may find it more difficult to gain access to primary education in the near future as the on-going repatriation program is further promoted.

The definition of refugee is highly problematic as explained earlier. The determining of who to protect as a refugee is a task for either the hosting country as well as the UNHCR. Therefore, the UNHCR and the Iranian government are faced with the

difficult decision of the extent to which they should provide primary education for the Afghan residing in Iran.

The on-going unrest and the slow progress in establishing security in Afghanistan appears to be causing a delay in the entire process of reconstruction. From the perspective of UNICEF's emphasis on a children's right to education and thus on "Basic Education for All," it is mandatory for Afghan children to receive primary education regardless of the situation in which they are placed and whether they are documented or undocumented. Thus, their right to education is justifiable even though they illegally stay in Iran as long as they claim their difficulty going back home.

From the viewpoint of UNHCR and Iran however, who intend to promote the repatriation of Afghans, providing basic education to Afghan children would reduce their parents' incentive to return home. According to my interview with an officer at UNHCR-Tehran, the UNHCR is likely to decide on a 40% reduction in the budget of education for Afghans in Iran, and instead would reallocate the amount of such reduction to Afghan children in Afghanistan as a part of its comprehensive reconstruction programs.

On the other hand, the economic burden on Iran, if the Afghans are allowed to stay is in reality to great for Iran to bear continuously as Iran's unemployment rate is said to be getting increasing over the past number of years. Though it is true that employing Afghans in some sectors of Iran's industry helps Iran to keep the rate of inflation in check, the Iranian government has been exposed to criticism of the Iranian people, who are against Iran's hosting such a huge number of Afghans. Thus, Iran's government now is forced to pressure Afghans leave the country.

Here one should argue that an inevitable conflict exists between universally held children's rights to education in an exiled country and Iran's solving their domestic economic problems by kicking out Afghans. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the definitions of "refugee" and "migrant" involve a great deal of politics between a hosting country like Iran and an international donor like the UNHCR. This makes it difficult for both a hosting country and the UNHCR to formulate aid policies for refugees and migrants.

Iran is now finds itself in an era in which it must formulate a "migration policy" for Afghans not a "refugee policy." As a mater of fact, negotiations are underway between Iran and the ILO regarding the establishment of an ILO office in Iran to deal with the employment of Afghan migrants. If this eventuates, the number of Afghan workers who are to be officially employed and thus to be able to obtain working permits is likely to increase. This will, in turn bring about the increase in the number of documented Afghans whose children may have a better chance to access education.

However, a question still remains for the majority of Afghans who are present in reality but whose presence has not been officially recognized. The question is, "Who can aid Afghan undocumented children?" It seems that international NGOs and other politically neutral actors will remain limited players in this field until the degree of Afghanistan reconstruction is such that Afghan exiles can return.

Notes: This paper is written based mainly on my field research conducted in August 2002 and August 2003. I interviewed the Director of Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (under Interior Ministry), Iran's Former Ambassador to Afghanistan, the Director General of the Institute of Political and International Affairs (at the time), the Former Deputy Minister of Iran's Ministry of Defense, and approximately twenty Afghans living in Tehran, Kan and Sharahzad which are located in the suburbs of Tehran. The following references were also utilized.

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