

Pakistan ousts Afghans even as it fosters talks with Taliban

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Since December, Pakistan has ousted tens of thousands of Afghan refugees, forcing them to return to Afghanistan with barely the clothes on their backs, creating outrage amongst Afghans and international donors. Yet Pakistan is also helping to broker talks between the Kabul regime and the Afghan Taliban to bring peace to the region and improve its own international image.

The lack of clarity in Pakistan's foreign policy has always caused consternation among its allies, but now that the army has embarked on a serious strategy to eliminate terrorism and help bring peace to Afghanistan, western and regional diplomats are at a loss to explain the country's behaviour towards refugees – many of whom have lived there for over 30 years.

According to UN officials, nearly 35,000 Afghan refugees have been forced back across the border into Afghanistan since late December, when an [army school](#) was bombed by Pakistani extremists, killing more than 150 students and teachers.

Since then it has become a mantra of the police and local government officials to blame the terrorist violence on Afghan refugees, even though no Afghan was involved in the school bombing or any other recent attack. Yet they have become an easy scapegoat for the authorities' own failure to catch Pakistani terrorists.

There are still some 1.5m registered Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, but the government insists it is ousting only unregistered and undocumented refugees, who are estimated by the Pakistan government at more than 1m. Many of them are the children of those forced out in the eighties during the Soviet occupation. They have never lived in Afghanistan and would find it impossible to find work or bring up their families there.

Underlying the strategy is growing police and public hatred for Afghans who take jobs, set up businesses and compete with local people, especially in the transport sector. According to numerous press reports, the police force Afghans to [pay bribes](#) if they want to stay and force them out of the country if they cannot pay up.

There is also growing public xenophobia about Afghans being generated in Pakistan – hardly likely to promote the army's attempts to broker better relations with Kabul.

Over the years, multiple plans by the UN to let refugees return under a supervised programme of cash for resettlement have failed because of a lack of funding from countries in the west or other donors.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani and the Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif – the country's strategist for ending the war in Afghanistan – have jointly carried out several measures to bring their countries and policies closer.

The next step is now eagerly awaited: The next step is now eagerly awaited: officials on both sides have told me Pakistan promised in December to let Afghan officials talk to the Afghan Taliban leadership who live in Pakistan. Such a move could lead to a ceasefire and at least a pause in the war in Afghanistan. Such a move could lead to a ceasefire and at least a pause in the war in Afghanistan.

Gen Sharif has earned immense kudos for making a virtual U-turn on beginning a peace process in Afghanistan when Pakistan has for too long supported the Taliban. But the country's image is receiving a battering, as brutal police measures force Afghans to leave their homes.

A peace process in Afghanistan could bring rich dividends, such as a revival of donor aid to the UN to ensure a safe and productive refugee return. This is the worst possible time to begin an anti-Afghan campaign in the country. If Pakistan has waited 35 years to resolve its refugee crisis it can wait a few more months.

Already Pakistan's image has faltered because it has failed to curb polio in the troubled northwest region where troops and Pakistani Taliban are battling it out. In 2014, there were 300 registered polio cases last year, the largest number in the world – and already this year 15 have been registered.

Next week, Mr Ghani will be visiting Washington where he is certain to raise the refugee issue if steps are not taken to stop the forced returns. Pakistan needs to evolve a comprehensive strategy to bring peace to Afghanistan, not partial tactics that leave many Afghans and the international community angry and dissatisfied.