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Report – Public Talk

Refugee Situation: Contextualizing the Role of Pakistan and UNHCR

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PICTURES OF THE EVENT



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a Public Talk on September 7, 2018 titled, “Refugee Situation: Contextualizing the Role of Pakistan and UNHCR.” Mr. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees was the guest speaker at the occasion.

Welcoming the guests, Director General ISSI, Ambassador (Retd) Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said the issue of Afghan refugees has been a subject of importance for Pakistan for the past four decades. He said that Mr. Grandi's work was watched with keen interest because Pakistan has been home to one of the largest protracted refugee populations in the world. Even at present, after Syria, Afghan refugees are the largest in the number, and are spread throughout the world.

Afghan refugees are present in more than 70 countries, 95 per cent are living in Pakistan and Iran respectively. When the Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, it was Pakistan, the US and other allies that helped Afghanistan defeat the Soviet forces. However, this came at a huge cost for Pakistan, with the pouring in of millions of refugees, Kalashnikov culture, drugs inflow, smuggling and terrorism. When the Soviets left, the US soon left after thereafter, and it was Pakistan who continued to support the Afghan refugee population. Our hearts and homes were open to them, thousands of the refugees studied in Pakistan, earned their livelihood and nearly two generations have spent time in Pakistan. Ever since, Pakistan has faced a dilemma, on one hand we are proud of opening our home, country, and work places to the people of Afghanistan in their hour of difficulty and foreign invasion, even at a huge cost to our economy. On the other hand, we are disappointed when the sacrifices of the people of Pakistan are not fully acknowledged, and instead we receive hostile rhetoric from across the border.

Ambassador Chaudhry said that after 9/11, another dimension overtook the situation, serious security issues have cropped up in Afghanistan, and all this while the Afghan refugees stayed on as they could not return due to unstable political and economic situation in their homeland. Meanwhile, during the past decade or so, Pakistan has witnessed the worst kind of terrorism and violence, which we have fought bravely and reserved the tide of terrorism. However, we know that we can never be fully secure until Afghanistan is stable.

Pakistan is very keen to see peace return to Afghanistan, and for that a comprehensive approach is required which does not recognize a militaristic solution, but one that is essentially an Afghan-owned and led process. But alongside this, two other key areas need to be focused on, border

management - to ensure that terrorist elements do not return to Pakistan. And second, there should be concrete measures to ensure early and honorable repatriation of Afghan refugees.

Ambassador Chaudhry said that Pakistan appreciated the role the UNHCR had played during these years and in providing assistance for the 1.5 million registered refugees. However, there are an equal number that are not registered and are living illegally in Pakistan. He also appreciated the UNHCR's effort in 2016 of increasing the assistance package/cash grant to \$400 per person which led to an increase in repatriation. However, this has now been discontinued. He was of the view that the shortage of funds was the biggest hurdle to repatriation, and the question remains whether creative thinking and innovative methods have been employed to create the pull factors for the Afghans to return, such as giving ownership to their lands, investments by the intentional community in Afghanistan to create job opportunities, and a conducive environment to return.

Mr. Filippo Grandi, began by saying that before travelling to Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, he had been in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan in order to access the refugee crisis, indicating the complexity of the world situation in terms of conflict and human consequences of conflict, because the Syrian refugee situation is today what the Afghan refugee situation has been for a long time and is becoming protractible day by day. He highlighted the fact that we were living in a world of multiple challenges from the humanitarian aspect.

Mr. Grandi spoke about his personal affiliation to the Afghan refugee crisis beginning with his position as a field officer in Jalalabad in 1994. Since then, he has been deeply associated (officially and personally) with it. He said that while it was a pleasure for him to be back, at the same time he was concerned that the refugee crisis was lingering on without any decisive solution. According to the latest figures from the UNHCR, at present there are 68.5 million refugees and displaced people in the world, of whom 25 million are refugees. Out of this number, 10% are registered Afghan refugees, (excluding the unregistered ones in Pakistan and Iran).

According to Mr. Grandi, the Afghan refugee phenomena is still a big part of the world's global displacement problems and is the world largest protracted situations, perhaps next to the Palestinian refugee situation which is the oldest. Sadly, 2019 will mark the 40th anniversary of

the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the first big wave of Afghan refugees into Pakistan and Iran.

Mr. Grandi said that in spite of other crisis, such as Syria, the term protracted in the Afghan context did not mean forgotten, and that it is important that the international community continues to focus on the Afghan refugee situation. The High Commissioner raised concerns about Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation, highlighting that he witnessed two to three massive terrorist attacks during his recent visit to Kabul, which resulted in the deaths of many Afghans. He said that as a result, Afghans are worried, concerned and frustrated about the current state of affairs.

He said that while he has seen progress in certain areas, the Afghan government continues to struggle as it is weak and lacks the ability to implement policies. The common Afghan has yet to see the dividends of international support and an elected government. Weak implementation results in poverty and unemployment which has now been compounded by drought which is a frequent phenomena. This can be addressed if one has more resources. Addressing drought conditions is an added challenge which does create more refugees and internal displacement. He pointed out there are 8 million Afghans who are either refugees or internally displaced.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Grandi, pointed out that for the first time, he witnessed serious work for the return and reintegration of refugees, and policy making in this regard was becoming stronger. Some plans are now filtering down into legislative work. He said that very recently, a land decree was approved which was a positive development since land was a challenge for many returnees. He was of the view that if a conducive standard of living was established for returning refugees, that in itself would become a pull factor and prevent refugees from leaving.

He said for this, increased dialogue with the neighbors was important and said that since then, dialogue on the refugee issue has increased between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Afghanistan and Iran, which is another positive sign. He said issues like this need to be discussed constructively on forums and not be limited to public statements. However, he pointed out that implementation was a major challenge in this regard.

Speaking about Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Mr. Grandi acknowledged that Pakistan and its people very often feel that hosting the vast population of Afghan refugees has not been sufficiently recognized by the international community. In this regard, it is important to highlight that besides the extraordinary solidarity exhibited by Pakistan in the last 40 years, it is equally important to identify how this solidarity has contributed to regional stability.

Besides providing Afghan refugees with stability and skills, Pakistan - in a world of closed borders, where xenophobia is rising and where the rich and developed countries turn away migrants and refugees - is an extraordinary example. In a world stage that is becoming very problematic, we also need countries like Pakistan that showcase solidarity and are an asylum for refugee seekers in times of war. He further went on to say that majority of the Afghan refugees are residing in urban centres and that authorities in Pakistan have been engaged in documenting all the Afghans. So far, almost 1.9 million have been successfully registered.

Responding to a question on the need for the international community to play a bigger role regarding the repatriation of Afghan refugees, Mr. Grandi clarified that contrary to many perceptions of the UNHCR not doing enough to find a strategy for repatriation, the UNHCR has tried to focus on solutions within the spaces allowed to us in our mandate. The most desirable solution was of course successful voluntary repatriation, and in this regard, a solution strategy is in place under the name of solution strategy for Afghan refugees.

Responding to another question on Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Mr. Grandi said that while Pakistan's generous hosting of Afghan refugees was no doubt a commendable job, in order to ease the burden slightly on the host communities, the UNHCR had established training/vocational centres in Peshawar (Khyber Pukthunkhwa) and Quetta (Baluchistan) where both host communities and refugees were benefitting from the training being imparted. The UNHCR has tried to mobilize international resources to help communities hosting the refugees particularly in border areas - 10 million people have benefitted from this initiative.

Mr. Grandi concluded by saying that the UNHCR would continue to assist Pakistan in hosting the remaining refugees and will continue to work with Afghanistan to help create a conducive environment for returnees. However, he stressed that refugees are an international concern and responsibility which should be shared. He said for its part, Pakistan, like Iran, should continue

efforts to document refugees and regularize border management in order to promote legal movement of masses. Mr. Grandi said that the hope was that in the long term, one could envisage a region where Afghans can move freely, but in a controlled manner like any other population and become an asset for neighboring countries and for Afghanistan itself. In short, this is the direction all countries need to move in.

Chairman Board of Governors ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, in his concluding remarks said that Pakistan has provided shelter to one of the world's largest protracted refugee populations as millions of Afghan refugees have been living in Pakistan since 1979. However, persistent violence, and political and economic turmoil in Afghanistan have discouraged refugees to return and resulted in a continued influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. Over time, the presence of Afghan refugee had created a number of problems for Pakistan in terms of the scourge of terrorism, drug trafficking and arms smuggling. He was of the view that initiatives needed to be explored in order to encourage voluntary repatriation. However, in order to achieve this, a conducive environment in Afghanistan was paramount to accommodate and encourage refugees to return, and creative, out-of-the-box solutions in terms of policy are needed in this regard. Ambassador Mahmood said that a rational and sustainable solution was the need of the hour. While the Pakistani Government was fully conscious of the difficulties involved, Afghanistan and the international community must play a more constructive role by creating adequate arrangements to facilitate repatriation. Efforts need to be made to encourage voluntary repatriation, and resettlement in Afghanistan.