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Report – Webinar

“Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Four Decades of Hospitality”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) hosted a webinar on “Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Four Decades of Hospitality.” The webinar was moderated by Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA. The speakers at the webinar included Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, Ms. Nargis Nehan, an Afghan Politician, Mr. Saleem Khan, Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees, SAFRON, Mr. Qaisar Khan Afridi, Spokesperson UNHCR Pakistan, Ms. Nasria Pashtun, ALIGHT Pakistan, Program Coordinator for Afghanistan and Mr. Tamim Asey, Founder & Executive Chairman of the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS), Kabul.

Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, while expressing her views stated that prolonged instability, which has all too often been marred by foreign invasions, civil wars, political and economic instability not to forget natural calamities have resulted in one of the world’s largest protracted refugee populations – the Afghan refugees. She went on to say that continued uncertainty has thus resulted in the continuous outflow of refugees. While Afghan refugees are present in more than 70 countries, 95 per cent are hosted by Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan and Iran together continue to host 90 per cent of registered Afghan refugees globally she stated. She further explained that although, a non-signatory to the Geneva Convention of Refugees, Pakistan has been home to Afghan refugees which at one point numbered five million, thus making Pakistan the second largest refugee hosting nation, hosting 21 per cent of the world’s refugees. As of January 2022, there are approximately 3 million Afghans living in Pakistan, around 1.4 million of them are Proof of Registration (PoR) cardholders, approximately 840 000 hold an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), and although there are an estimated 775 000 undocumented refugees, the number of unregistered refugees is believed to be far greater since movement across the Pak -Afghan border has traditionally taken place under an unregulated and unmonitored system, thus making it close to impossible to give an accurate number of unregistered refugees.

Despite facing its own economic and social challenges, Pakistan has always maintained its tradition of hospitality by offering refuge to those in need, through its rather inclusive policies towards accommodating Afghan refugees in sectors such as public education and health care. Moreover, officially and unofficially, Afghan refugees have been able to find work and earn, even though at a subsistence level, and have been able to contribute back to the society. While

many have worked as labourers, others have found odd jobs, set up small businesses, and have established themselves within the country's business community and working class, particularly in the transport, carpet and gem stone industry. Even after more than four decades, the same holds true.

Even after more than four decades of prolonged displacement, it is extremely unfortunate that the Afghan refugee crisis continues to linger on. Hosting refugees is a global responsibility, which has certainly not been equitably shared at all, she concluded.

Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, while giving his remarks stated that the refugee problem is very pertinent but has been put on the backburner due to other emerging issues, and therefore not getting its fair share of attention. He further said that the refugees would like to be treated with respect and dignity and we must look at all aspects of how Afghan refugees have been treated by Pakistan for the last four decades. He further said that Pakistan has shared the burden with full commitment and the UNHCR has also helped in these endeavours. He went on to say that the government of Pakistan has consistently maintained that they should return in honor and dignity and voluntarily and that the government of Pakistan has honored that commitment all along. There is also a view of whether some of the refugees could become economic migrants and be absorbed into the Pakistani society.

Ms. Nargis Nehan was of the view that being a refugee is not a choice. She also thanked the people of Pakistan for their hospitality towards Afghan refugees and highlighted how Afghans in Pakistan have had the freedom of movement. Furthermore, they have had the opportunity to continue their education and have been given access to health care services, something which has not been provided to Afghan refugees in other countries. She said that the level of collaboration between the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan was impressive. On the conflict in Afghanistan she said that it has given rise to a young generation of Afghans who do not want to be in Afghanistan because they think they have no future there. It is imperative that there should be a political solution in Afghanistan that responds to the needs of the people and helps in the development of Afghanistan. Women can play a very important role in this regard, she concluded. "Being hopeful is more important than anything," she said. She also said that we should also have more discussions about the conflict in Afghanistan, the roots of conflict and

then how we can address those conflicts. Normalization of relations, although the relationship has been very normal and quite friendly between the Afghan people and the Pakistani people but normalization of the relations between the two states has been something that needs to be focused on.

Mr. Saleem Khan, while shedding light on the subject, stated that 1.4million Afghan refugees are documented and 850000 are Afghan citizen card holders who are also being registered through the initiative taken by the government of Pakistan. He stated that in 2017 and 2018 unaccounted Afghans were also documented who are still living in the country. More than 700000 are still un documented and are in process of being documented. He said that we are very careful that refugees should be treated with care and respect and as a result of this policy; no unfortunate event has been witnessed. While talking about the role of SAFRON, he said that we are dealing with the various aspects of Afghan refugees which include health, food, community development, livelihood, repatriation, protection and education. While talking about the security of Afghan refugees he mentioned that we are very sensitive about the protection of the refugees and because of this very reason we started the Afghan Citizen Card project. He emphasized that we are open to treating these refugees in the best possible manner. He stressed that the Government of Pakistan is taking special efforts to facilitate them in the best possible way. The most viable option for us is that they go back to their own country voluntarily. The international community and organizations should engage with Afghanistan to develop a conducive environment for the individuals who are living in the country or who are willing to go back to their country.

Mr. Qaiser Afridi, while expressing his views stated that although Pakistan is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee convention and 1967 protocols, yet Pakistan has always helped Afghan refugees and generously hosted them for several decades. He also stated that if the refugees voluntarily want to go back to their homes, they can go back with security and dignity. He went on to say that displaced people face the same challenges everywhere and there is also an emphasis on youth empowerment. He went on to say that there are challenges globally, and if the global trends are viewed, over 100 million people have been displaced, they have been forced to flee their homes, and 71 out of 78 people on this earth are displaced actually. Everywhere the displaced people are sharing many of the same challenges and vulnerabilities.

So, families seeking international protection often arrive with limited means, like basic facilities like shelter and medical support, food assistance, and other things.

Ms. Nasria Pashtun, highlighted the various problems faced by the refugees which include the issues pertaining to the opening of bank accounts, hurdles in buying property and the lack of jobs for highly educated Afghans. Among others, she said that many face poverty and there is also a lack of skill training for Afghan youth. Talking about the present crises, she said that the Afghan refugees were promised by several embassies and countries that they will have to stay in Pakistan for a few weeks, and then they will move to another country with their families. The immigration offices were swamped with Afghan applications, however the process started to slow down and more and more Afghan families were coming to Pakistan. The international community must address the various issues pertaining to Afghan refugees, she concluded.

Mr. Tamim Asey, while discussing the issue stated that Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees for decades and that the experience of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has been very different. He went on to explain that Afghan refugees have come into Pakistan in four distinct phases and the influx of these four phases has brought political, military and economic challenges to Pakistan. He went on to say that Afghan refugees have also brought in remittances and Afghan entrepreneurs and skilled labour has also been an asset for Pakistan. He further said that historically, cross-border migration between Pakistan and Afghanistan has always been present for cultural, historical, and ethnic reasons because of the Pashtuns who live on both sides of the border that has been in hundreds of years, if not less, when there was no border at all. He concluded by saying that it is also an opportunity for Pakistan as it can use humanitarian diplomacy to get global attention in this regard.

The discussion ended with an interactive question and answer session. In response to a question about the deportation of Afghan refugees, Mr. Saleem Khan stated that the Pakistani government spent 400 million rupees out of its own budget at that time because the Afghans were faceless every time they would be picked up by law enforcement agencies and it was very genuine as they were without documentation. Any country who has people without identity without document is a matter of concern and to address their vulnerabilities and give them identity, Pakistan implemented this program and till now they are present here in the country. While

talking about the challenges, Ms. Nargis Nehan was of the view that every time we had a change of government in Kabul, it was an opportunity to form a truly inclusive government and focus on strengthening of state institutions and move on from there. Unfortunately we got caught up with not only corruption but also a lot of domestic political issues. She said the country could not build consensus with the two important neighbors, Pakistan and Iran. There was consensus amongst the speakers that the root cause has to be addressed and also until the root cause is addressed, to look after the refugees will remain the responsibility of the host country as well as the international community and it is incumbent upon the international community to ensure regular predictable and adequate financial and other assistance to the host countries.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman Board of Governors, ISSI, in his concluding remarks stated that stated that the issue of refugees has been capturing the attention of the international community since several decades. He further said that Pakistan has been generously hosting Afghan refugees since the past few decades and the international community must acknowledge that, he concluded.