

Afghans in Iran: Asylum Fatigue Overshadows Islamic Brotherhood

AFSANEH ASHRAFI and HAIDEH MOGHISSI

Forced or voluntary migration from one's birthplace is as old as human history. However, massive population displacement and the flow of immigrants, migrant workers, refugees and exiles became a prominent feature of human life from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards with Europe's expansion beyond its borders and the transportation of African slaves and indentured labour from Asia. Masses of people were forced to abandon their possessions, memories and loved ones to seek safety and security in foreign lands. But they were met by an unapologetic refusal to make room for the displaced and the uprooted.

These facts, often seen as an unfortunate outcome of the formation of nation-states and fortified national borders, account for the world's refugee flows that are one of the great tragedies of our time. All too often, refugee and immigration policies and practices in recipient states represent attempts to protect borders against outsiders and aliens, instead of reflecting humanitarian concern to protect refugees from suffering, harm and injury. The human faces behind the legal terms "refugee"

Afsaneh Ashrafi is a UNHCR officer in Tehran. She would like to emphasise that the views expressed here are those of the author and should not be taken as representing the UNHCR's position. Haideh Moghissi is an associate professor at York University, Toronto, and director of the "Diaspora, Islam and Gender" project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Ford Foundation.

and "migrant" fade in the process of designing more restrictive measures to safeguard national borders against those who do not belong. The fact that the overwhelming majority of refugees and migrants are forced to leave their homelands and that many would return if given the choice rarely sparks sympathy and generosity in the host states. Neither does it help to remind Western governments of their historical responsibility in creating this lasting human tragedy: the argument falls on deaf ears that it is imperialism, imperialist greed and divide-and-conquer tactics that bear much of the blame for massive population movements.

However, the experience of Afghan refugees in Iran demonstrates that closing borders to outsiders, or the grudging acceptance of displaced populations without concern for their dignity, wellbeing and human rights, are not exclusively Western practices. Nor is making foreigners scapegoats for crime, economic hardship and other social evils. Racism and exclusionary practices against individuals and groups considered "different" are found in many countries, not just Western states. Perhaps the chilly reception given refugees by host societies is a universal phenomenon, even where the source and destination countries share geographical borders and have cultural and religious traditions in common.

Humanitarian agencies such as the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) try to get governments to

live up to their commitments to protect refugees and exiles by signing the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. But the world is increasingly engulfed in refugee-producing phenomena of all sorts, be they civil wars, revolutions, ethnic cleansing, religious and cultural intolerance, foreign invasions, environmental disasters and economic instability. This inevitably adds to the number and complexity of displacement, asylum and refugee emergencies.

Part of the difficulty in dealing with such crises is that they tend to become permanent. The refugee predicament is often presumed to be a temporary state in which people are given protection and residence in second or third countries until they are repatriated within the foreseeable future. But the reality for refugees has changed drastically. "Temporary" emergencies have persisted, at times lasting for decades, producing generations of refugee populations which often have little prospect of a change in their circumstances.

Iran As Host

Over the last two decades, Iran has become host to the world's largest population of Afghan refugees, estimated at approximately 2.4 million people. (Iran also hosts some two hundred thousand Iraqi refugees from the 1991 Gulf War.) To understand the experience of refugees and migrants in Iran and the way the Islamic Republic has coped with the mass influx of Afghans we need to take a look at developments before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Iran signed the 1951 refugee convention and its associated protocol in 1976, but the country had little experience in dealing with uprooted populations crossing its borders. Exceptions were the temporary settlement of

5,000 Polish Jews and Christians who were forced out of Poland during the Second World War, and of about 733 Jewish children on their way to Palestine in the same conflict (the latter, known as the "Tehran Children", were accommodated in camps run by Allied forces and the Jewish Agency). Iran also took in numerous refugees of Iranian ancestry expelled from Soviet Azerbaijan in the late 1940s, and experienced periodic influxes into its border towns of Shi'ites and Kurds from Iraq, particularly in the early 1970s. Considering these last to be the temporary results of political provocation, the Iranian government did not develop lasting legal and social measures or a coherent protection policy to deal with refugees.

The flow of refugees from Afghanistan began with the Soviet invasion in 1979. Geographical proximity, as well as religious, cultural and linguistic affinities, made Pakistan and Iran clear choices for the masses of Afghans who fled their country. Afghans were not alien to Iran. Even before the Islamic Revolution, particularly during Iran's economic boom of the 1970s, thousands of Afghans lived and worked in Iran legally. Thousands of others did so without proper legal documentation. The authorities, aware of the situation, welcomed this source of cheap labour, as many Afghans worked on building sites, in brick factories and on farms for much lower wages than their Iranian counterparts. In the early 1970s, it was not uncommon to see groups of Afghan workers living in dire conditions on semi-finished building sites and hear their melancholy songs late at night. They were ready to move wherever an opportunity for work arose whatever the pay, something most even unskilled Iranian labourers were not inclined to do.

But sheltering the Afghan refugees and

migrants was as much an ideological stance as a humanitarian gesture by the Iranian state. First, there was the obligation to take in Muslim brethren fleeing persecution by "infidels", be they the Soviet-backed communist regime in Afghanistan or the American-backed Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Ayatollah Khomeini's well-known statement that "Islam has no frontier" clearly defined the position of the post-revolution government towards refugees.

Second, the provisions of Article 155 of the Iranian constitution were also ideologically charged in that they excluded from protection asylum-seekers whom the Iranian government regarded as "traitors" or "criminals". Under Iranian law, a person can be considered a "traitor" and/or a "criminal" for being an atheist, a homosexual, a socialist or someone who opposes a government with which Iran has friendly relations.

Finally, the application of "group status determination"¹ to the mass of Afghan refugees, and the government's decision not to involve the UNHCR in their protection, also reflected the Islamic Republic's ideological outlook in the 1980s. Considering it a normal and obligatory act of Islamic charity to help fellow Muslims in times of hardship, Iran did not seek and even refused international assistance in aiding refugees. Hence, unlike Pakistan, for example, which received hundreds of millions of dollars in international aid, the Iranian government for many years sought no outside financial help, and even failed to get due recognition for its pains. It is also a fact that this reading of Islamic principle enabled the Iranian government to reserve for itself unilateral control over the refugee situation

and the lives of refugees.

Iran, then, neither requested nor permitted the UNHCR to register Afghan refugees. But the agency has used its mandate over the years to provide assistance to Afghans when it felt its intervention was required—for example, to help resettle refugees who were unable to remain in Iran or to be repatriated to Afghanistan. The UNHCR would also act directly, but always after negotiations with the government, to offer special services to vulnerable refugees in the areas of health, education and skills training.

Refugee Policies

In 1976, Iran signed the 1951 refugee convention, although it had reservations about some of its provisions, such as those regarding wage-earning and employment (Article 17), labour legislation and social security (Article 24) and freedom of movement (Article 26).

After the 1979 revolution, Iran's commitment to granting protection to those who request political asylum was reiterated in the Islamic Republic's constitution (Article 155). Article 122 of the Labour Law also allows the ministry of labour to issue work permits to immigrants, particularly those from Islamic countries, and to extend these permits. But the written agreements of the interior ministry and the foreign ministry are also needed, and these will only be provided if the applicant has a valid immigration or refugee card.

However, because of the complexity of the issue and the continued flow of refugees, and above all because of the absence of a clearly defined legal framework for the presence of Afghans, documentation of refugees in Iran remains a problem. There are various docu-

1. A "group determination" of refugee status is made when a large number of people are affected by circumstances serious enough to qualify each individual as a refugee.

ments in circulation that fail to reflect the nature of the asylum granted or the refugees' need for protection. These include:

- *Refugee booklet*: this, in continuation of a pre-1979 practice, is granted to Iraqi Kurds and to well-connected Afghans. The booklet, renewed every three months, is the only document that uses the term "refugee". It also provides the holder with an alien's passport for travel abroad.

- *Permanent card*: this is issued to Afghans and Iraqis (blue for Afghans, green for Iraqis) and describes the holder as a *mohajer* (migrant) or as someone who is on the move for religious reasons.

- *Temporary card*: issued to about 530,000 individuals in 1995 through UNHCR intervention, this card legalised the status of undocumented Afghans with a view to assisting their eventual repatriation. (In 1996, the card was declared no longer valid and the holders were identified as illegal aliens.)

- Other documents include the *laissez-passer*, valid for a one-way journey out of Iran; *leave permits*, which grant leave from refugee camps for a certain period of time; and *joint programme certificates*, which are valid for three months and otherwise confer the same rights as blue cards.

In theory, holding one of these documents legalises the status of the immigrant and thus safeguards him or her against deportation. However, this does not always hold true, and there have been cases of documented Afghans being deported. Although many of the documents were issued in response to the practical, sometimes immediate, needs of refugees, their confusing range failed to define clearly their holders' legal rights and created much discomfort and uncertainty both for refugees

and the authorities dealing with them.

The position of the Afghan refugees was clarified (partially at least) by the annex to Third Five-Year Development Plan, Article 48, passed by the *majlis* (parliament) in April 2000. Article 48 instructs the interior ministry to take steps to ensure that all foreigners without work permits are rounded up and deported to their countries of origin. But the same article exempts those foreigners "whose life is threatened". Responsibility for determining whether there is a threat to life lies with the foreign ministry. The Third Five-Year Development Plan also established a "Co-ordination Council" to oversee the "arrival, settlement, deportation, expulsion, training, employment, health, medical treatment and international relations" of asylum claimants.

A registration exercise in 2001 compelled all documented and undocumented Afghans in Iran to register at district governor's offices across the country. "Alien Identification Plan Slips" were issued to those who registered. The holders of these slips are protected against deportation. However, the document is also a crucial element in the government's plan for the gradual mass repatriation of Afghan migrants, and in addition facilitates their resettlement in third countries when the opportunity arises. According to the Iranian authorities, all but 8–10 per cent of Afghans showed up for registration.

Afghans in Iran: A Profile

Millions of Afghans poured into Iran in the early 1980s as a result of intensified conflict in their homeland. The refugees were fleeing war, the spread of deadly landmines, and environmental damage caused by the bombardment of farmlands and canals. The influx continued until the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992, and

amounted to some three million refugees.

With the takeover of Kabul by mujahideen forces in April 1992, close to 1.5 million refugees repatriated voluntarily, without waiting to receive assistance from the UNHCR (which included a gift of \$25 and fifty kilograms of wheat). Most of the returnees were male and belonged to the Afghan resistance. They left women and children behind in Iran to join their own ethnic fighting groups. However, continued conflict between these various groups caused massive further damage to Afghanistan's infrastructure, intensified the lack of security and perpetuated the harsh conditions of life. A new refugee flow was induced, thus initiating in Iran a "revolving door" phenomenon of departure and return by Afghans.

In the late 1990s, persecution and continued ethnic strife under the Taliban regime, together with a severe drought in much of Afghanistan, saw several hundred thousand more Afghans cross the border into Iran. This pattern of population movement persisted more or less up to (and even after) the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001.

In 2000, official Iranian government figures put the total number of *documented* Afghans in Iran at 1,482,200. If the many non-documented migrants are added, an estimate of 2–2.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran seems realistic.

The Afghans in Iran have diverse social origins. Most come from rural areas and are small landowners with a generations-long farming background. But the refugees also include members of the urban middle class, fleeing persecution or seeking better employment/economic opportunities, medical treatment and resettlement in third countries. An Iranian government survey in 1999 found that 38 per cent of the Afghan refugees were

female and 61 per cent male. Two-thirds of the male exiles were unmarried. Others came to Iran alone, leaving their families in Afghanistan. As regards ethnic composition, the survey found that 34.4 per cent of the Afghan refugees were Pashtuns, 27 per cent were Tajiks, 19.4 per cent were Hazaras, and 19.6 per cent were Uzbeks, Baluchis and other minority groups. The Afghan exiles are a young and growing population, with close to 43 per cent being under eighteen years of age. Many of the second-generation refugees are children of the 1980s influx and were born and raised in Iran.

An overwhelming number of refugees reside in provinces bordering Afghanistan, and are concentrated in the margins of major urban centres. Only about 3 per cent of Iran's Afghans inhabit refugee camps, the rest being free to live anywhere in the country. (This factor for many years made registering the refugees and obtaining accurate statistics about them extremely difficult.)

An Uncertain Welcome

Although Afghans have lived in Iran for more than two decades and contributed much to its economy, many legal and social practices and attitudes block their full integration into Iranian society. For instance, Iranian law grants the possibility of naturalisation to people born in Iran of foreign nationals if they have lived in Iran up to "one year after their eighteenth birthday". But while many Afghans meet these conditions, few have availed themselves of this option. Consequently, Afghan children are automatically considered to have the nationality of their fathers, even though they may not have a valid document to establish their Afghan nationality. Within such an environment, most Afghans are still regarded as aliens or for-

eigners; their freedom of movement is restricted; they are not able to obtain travel documents that would allow them to leave and enter the country; and they usually cannot get work permits.

Restrictions in such areas as education, employment, residence and marriage, etc., demonstrate specific ways in which Afghans are denied rights despite international and national legal instruments acceded to by the Iranian government. For example, nearly all Afghans (close to 97 per cent) live outside the refugee camps and may choose where to reside. However, once they are registered in an area, they are free to move only within the province of their residence. If they wish to leave that province, they must obtain a travel document, whose validity is limited. Again, documented Afghans are permitted to rent houses in areas where they have registered, but since the implementation of Article 48 at much higher cost and with further restrictions. Often, up to twelve family members or friends live in a three- to four-room apartment or house.

Securing employment remains a concern for Afghan migrants and refugees. They have generally been confined to low-paid manual jobs such as construction, brick-making, tile-making, well-digging, and labouring on poultry and dairy farms. Even for such humble jobs as these a work permit is required. The permit is granted to very few, as a precondition is that no Iranians should be available to do the same work. Until the implementation of Article 48, the government tended to overlook this requirement, but in June 2001, the labour ministry announced that all illegal foreign workers in Iran should be dismissed, otherwise the employers would be

subjected to heavy fines and/or imprisonment. The measure caused widespread concern within Afghan communities. Many Afghans lost their jobs. Many small enterprises were closed and the employers fined. Today, no Afghan workers are entitled to unemployment insurance, medical coverage and other benefits enjoyed by their Iranian counterparts.

For almost twenty years, all Afghans, like Iranian nationals, had access to education and health facilities virtually free of charge. However, since the mid-1990s, increasing economic pressures, accentuated by the withdrawal of state subsidies, have made access to education and health services more difficult. Documented children are registered in Iranian schools but undocumented refugees do not enjoy the right to basic education. Even Afghan community-based schools were closed at one point by the government. Medical care has become equally difficult to obtain because of the increasing cost of treatment and the unavailability of medical insurance.

Racism against immigrant populations is a common phenomenon in many recipient societies, and it has often been noted that religious, linguistic and cultural affinities between the migrants and the people of the host country are no guarantee against institutional discrimination and overt and covert prejudice. A revealing example, pointed out by Saskia Sassen, is how Germans from the former East Germany are regarded as a different ethnic group in the west of the now reunified country.² But the situation is even worse when refugees find asylum in poorer nations with scarce resources, and an impoverished, mismanaged state is expected to cope unassisted with the newcomers.

2. Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* (New York: New Press, 1999), pp. xvi-xvii.

The ugly face of racism and prejudice against Afghan refugees manifested itself in Iran after the country was dragged into a bloody war with Iraq in 1980. Economic scarcity and the political and social crisis of the period made Afghans scapegoats for the problems faced by ordinary citizens. In addition, many Afghan refugees were recruited to the war effort and used as an ever-present army of support in the ideological struggle of the Islamic Republic against its opponents at Friday prayers and other political events. This caused much resentment in Iran. There was a widespread feeling that Afghans were being nicely provided for by a government that was unable to do the same for its Iranian citizens. The Afghans' harsh living conditions, their hard work and the coerced nature of their participation in the Islamic government's propaganda campaigns were hidden.

In a study conducted among camp refugees in the early 1990s, several Afghan respondents noted this misinformation and complained about the dominant perception of *mohajers* as a hungry (*gorosneh*) crowd that was enjoying the comforts of life in Iran. Even getting their state-provided rations of food and other basic necessities during this period was a painful experience for them because of the hostile attitudes of shopkeepers and the public. The media has publicised sensational accounts of violent crimes, robbery and sexual and other assaults, attributing the offences to Afghans even before proper investigations were carried out.

It is little wonder, then, that the incidence of psychiatric problems, including depersonalisation, neurosis and psychosomatic disorders, among Afghan refugees in the south-

western city of Shiraz has been reported to be twice (34.6 per cent) that of the native population of Iran (12.5–16.7 per cent). Short-term and long-term causes of stress, including lower socio-economic status than natives, social isolation, involvement in physically demanding jobs, discrimination, inadequate social support and security, and anxiety about the situation in Afghanistan, have been noted as factors affecting the refugees' mental health.³

Despite all this, Iran can by no means be regarded as a basically hostile recipient society. It has hosted Afghan refugees for more than two decades while receiving virtually no international assistance. Yet the refugees have been allowed to live alongside local populations and to benefit from a number of social services. And, rhetorically at least, refugees and migrants have been regarded as "brethren" and "guests".

It would be wrong to generalise about the supposedly uncompassionate attitude or apathy of Iranians towards Afghan refugees. In 2000, for example, a group of Afghans wrote an open letter to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressing serious concern about the situation of their people in Iran. More than three hundred prominent Iranian intellectuals and political figures added their signatures to the letter in solidarity with the Afghan community.

The experience of the Afghans in Iran is perhaps testimony to one sad reality of our troubled times, namely, that there is no place on earth where an uprooted population can live in peace and harmony without its sense of dignity being threatened. It also testifies to the fact that to defend the right to life of refugees

3. Y. H. Kalafi, H. Hagh-Shenas and A. Ostovar, "Mental Health among Afghan Refugees Settled in Shiraz, Iran", *Psychological Reports*, no. 90 (2002), pp. 262–6.

and protect them from harm one must go further than providing shelters and other basic necessities. The notion of protection must include parity with other citizens and safeguarding the refugees' sense of self-worth and belonging. These are precisely the basic human rights that were brutally denied to the Afghan refugees in their place of birth.

Gender and Asylum

More than twenty years since their mass exodus from their homeland, Afghans in Iran and Pakistan constitute the largest refugee population in the world. Contrary to the general pattern where women and children constitute the majority in refugee populations, in Iran 39 per cent of Afghan refugees are female and 43 per cent are under eighteen years of age. Women have suffered excessively throughout Afghanistan's protracted agony, yet they have also shown remarkable resilience in dealing with the trauma of war and the day-to-day ordeals of dislocation. They have learned new skills and acquired more awareness of their own rights as Afghans and as women. While reports about the brutal and systematic sexual and non-sexual abuse of women in camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan abound,⁴ there have been few reports of such atrocities against Afghan women refugees in Iran.

Afghans in Iran have generally enjoyed a much higher standard of living than those in their strife-torn homeland. They have benefited from health care that until recent years was virtually free. The primary and secondary schooling currently received by 167,000

Afghan refugee children is comparable to that received by many Iranian children. In sum, despite restrictions on employment and housing, the fact remains that Afghans have managed to live, work and be self-reliant in Iran for over twenty years. Life in Iran has been of particular advantage to the Afghan female population. The younger generation of Afghan women has had the chance to go to school and benefit from national schemes such as literacy training, and reproductive health and family planning programmes.

In a study examining the changing life-conditions and self-awareness of Afghan women refugees, respondents noted that although they had left Afghanistan primarily because of war and lack of security, their main reason for staying in Iran after 1992 has been access to education, especially for girls. Afghan women are extensively involved in the schooling of their children. Most Afghans in Iran hail from rural areas of their home country, where literacy levels are low, particularly among women. Hence, access to education in Iran has been a major gain for young Afghan females. The growth in literacy among the Afghan refugees has been impressive, rising from 19 per cent in 1980 to 41.4 per cent in 1992. It is perhaps for this reason that Afghan women unanimously express a desire to stay in Iran, either permanently or at least until stability and security return to Afghanistan.⁵

As noted earlier, lack of employment opportunities is a major concern for Afghans in Iran, especially for educated Afghans, both men and women. Although men tend to find

4. See, for example, Sima Wali, "Repatriation and the Reconstruction of Afghanistan: The Role of Women", *Migration World Magazine* 22, no. 4 (September–October 1994).

5. See Azizeh Shahmoradi, "Afghan Women Refugees: Sorrow of Exile, Sorrow of a Return", *Jens-e Dovoum*, no. 2 (Tehran, 1999), pp.133–49.

manual work, women have difficulty in getting jobs. Many resort to tailoring or handicrafts as a means of earning income at home. In the past two years, groups of educated Afghan women have set up community-based or home-based schools for undocumented/unregistered Afghan children who cannot attend local schools. These makeshift schools, run with minimum facilities, books and stationary in refugee homes or small rented rooms, are of the utmost importance to the Afghan community. The initiative has been strongly opposed by the government, which has advised international organisations not to provide the schools with buildings or financial support. Some of the schools have been closed.⁶ Hence, the schools are supported by the Afghan community itself, through donations or basic tuition fees for students who can afford to pay. Afghan women play a remarkable role in teaching at the schools and administering them.

Women with little or no education take up agricultural labour, weeding, animal husbandry and handicraft work. Two points are noteworthy: first, many Afghan women have become the main breadwinner or the head of the household. These include women whose husbands have returned to Afghanistan or cannot live openly in Iran for fear of repatriation by the Islamic government. Second, for many women, mostly Pashtuns, paid work outside the home is a new experience and a necessity resulting from migration. The outcome of their adoption of a greater public role has been more independence, more self-respect, and a bigger say in the family.

The legal and personal status of Afghan women resembles that of their Iranian coun-

terparts, being defined by the structure of male dominance, not least in marriage. In rural areas and provincial towns especially, Afghan marriages are not officially registered but are shari'a-based religious marriages endorsed by local clergy or the community. This has given rise to serious problems, particularly with mixed marriages between Afghans and Iranians. The Iranian government was aware of the impending difficulties by 1993, when the Imam Aid Committee (*Komite Emdad-e Imam*) in Khorasan province reported that it had to support some thirty thousand young Iranian women who had entered non-registered shari'a marriages with Afghan nationals and had been abandoned when their husbands returned to Afghanistan. The head of the committee warned Iranian parents to insist on the registration of marriages or not to marry their daughters to Afghan nationals.

Iranian law is far from practising gender parity concerning marriages between Iranian citizens and foreign nationals. Iranian men may apply for their foreign-born wives and children to receive Iranian citizenship, but Iranian women are denied the equivalent privilege. This legal discrimination complicates the current repatriation programme as the citizenship rights of spouses and children born to mixed marriages have first to be resolved. The Iranian parliament has rejected the idea of granting citizenship to the Afghan spouses of Iranian women. However, it has authorised the issuing of permanent residence permits to these Afghan nationals under specific conditions.

6. Following the post-11 September events in Afghanistan and progress in the repatriation policy, the government has shown a noticeable tolerance towards the Afghan presence in Iran, in effect turning a blind eye to activities such as the education of undocumented children in community-based schools.

Besides the hardships of exile, Afghan women in Iran have had to struggle with the difficulties arising from patriarchal values, male-centred suppositions and culturally prescribed gender roles, all of which are endorsed by leaders of the Afghan community and the host government. For example, Human Rights Watch and Doctors without Borders have reported that during forced repatriations of Afghans from Iran, it is men who are asked if their heavily pregnant wives should return, "a practice which ignores the fact that life in Afghanistan is very different for women than it is for men".⁷

Of course, gendered attitudes and behaviours cannot be expected to disappear rapidly as a result of women's changing role in the family. But it is reasonable to assume that many women have been given a new awareness by education, paid work, and exposure to woman-centred ideas, activities and publications. The prime agents of change are Afghan women themselves, but judging by articles about them in Iranian feminist and gender-focused journals such as *Jens-e Dovoum* and *Zanan*, it would appear that they enjoy much support and solidarity among their Iranian sisters.

After 11 September

The Afghans in Iran had to leave their homeland and build a new life in exile through sheer hard work and the overcoming of unimaginable difficulties. They now face yet another major challenge. No longer welcome in their country of asylum, they are being compelled to return to their home country, which has been devastated by foreign intervention, war, and political and ethnic conflict. They must start their lives all over again, almost empty handed and tormented by new

fears and new waves of insecurity.

In the immediate aftermath of 11 September and the subsequent United States-led bombing of Afghanistan, the Iranian government's stance towards Afghans in Iran became more lenient (for example, there were fewer mass arrests). However, although Iran accepts that there will remain a residual presence of Afghans for which a defined legal framework will have to be developed, it has made clear that it would like to see the gradual repatriation of most of the Afghan population.

The 1951 refugee convention bars returning refugees to a homeland where they might face political persecution or physical danger, yet Iran forcibly returned Afghan refugees from border regions immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime. It also closed its borders to Afghans during the US-led bombing campaign, insisting that all movements should be contained inside Afghanistan. In fact, with the assistance of the international community, namely the UNHCR, Iran established two refugee camps just inside Afghanistan. These camps provided temporary shelter and refuge to some ten thousand Afghans fleeing internal conflicts, but Iran refused to open its borders, despite repeated calls from the international community. Human Rights Watch was among many organisations that criticised Iran for violating its obligations under the 1951 refugee convention by sealing its borders and pushing back refugees who crossed over.

This tough stance of the Iranian authorities towards the new wave of Afghan refugees is not justified. But any meaningful analysis of the issue must take into account the difficulties faced by a host country that is entangled by political disputes, increasing economic

7. Haleh Anvari, "Asylum Denied", *MS*, February–March 2001, pp. 26–7.

constraints and rising unemployment. The government of Iran is under considerable pressure to find a way of reducing the country's refugee population.

The implementation since April 2002 of a large-scale repatriation plan by the government and the UNHCR to return four hundred thousand persons every year over the next three to four years might conceivably prompt Iran to soften its position towards the remaining Afghan refugee population. However, following the establishment of the interim government in Afghanistan, Iran has expressed its determination to continue implementing Article 48. And there has been no relaxation in its policy of not readmitting refugees who have left Iranian territory, legally or illegally.

A smooth flow of repatriations will depend primarily on the level of security in Afghanistan. Other obstacles include harsh winter weather and the lack of international assistance. At the beginning of the repatriation programme, the assistance package provided to the returnees consisted of 150 kilograms of wheat, plastic sheeting, soap, hygienic cloths and some domestic items. However, owing to

shortage of international funding, this minimal assistance was decreased. Within this context, the Iranian government's argument that Iran has assumed its fair share of the responsibility owed to the refugees by admitting over 2.5 million Afghans to its territory, and that the international burden-sharing has been insignificant and grossly insufficient, seems justifiable.

Meanwhile, although greater political stability in Afghanistan may persuade more refugees to return, it remains the case that the country has suffered drought for three years, food supplies are almost non-existent, and economic activity has been reduced to smuggling and subsistence farming. So far, only 15 per cent of the more than \$5 billion promised to Afghanistan at a donor conference in Tokyo in January 2002 has been delivered, making the likelihood of an improvement in the country's situation remote and persuading many refugees to remain in Iran. They need shelter and protection. This requires a serious contribution by the international community, particularly Western governments, whose commitment to refugees hardly goes beyond self-serving rhetoric. □