



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

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UNHCR: Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for coming.

I think we see this is as an opportunity to look back a little bit at our work and operations of this year, and to look forward a little bit also to next year, 2010, because it is December 2009. We can also take this opportunity to look back 30 years to the moment when the Soviet occupation began and the start of this refugee challenge which began at the same time. I am sure you know that event in December 1979 started one of the biggest refugee movements in history.

At the high point of the refugee crisis there were some six million Afghans. About 40 per cent of the population of the country, at that time, were forced to take refuge in Pakistan and Iran. And I am sure you will know that for the last 30 years that there have been different forms of refugee movement, UNHCR has been associated in assisting Afghans and refugees throughout that period.

Our organization is a non-political, humanitarian agency. We have worked in Afghanistan under every government over this long period – during the Soviet period, during the mujahideen period, during the Taliban period, and again, since 2001, and 2002 during the present administration.

As you know, our work involves not only providing assistance to refugees when they leave the country, but also assisting them to return voluntarily when they choose to do so. We have been involved in two of the largest return movements in history: one in 1992-93 and second, again, here since 2002.

Today, as many of you again will know, there are approximately 2.6 million Afghan refugees still outside their homeland. This is not a source of pride for UNHCR. We normally wish to conclude our work and ensure there are no refugees left to assist.

The majority of those still remaining in Iran and Pakistan have been outside Afghanistan for more than 25 years. More than half were born as children outside their country. Today, we are already witnessing a third generation of Afghans born to the children of refugees.

At the same time, we should look at the challenges ahead, because, since 2002, already five million Afghans have taken the decision to return to their homeland. We don't have accurate figures for the present population of Afghanistan, but we believe this return of five million people represents a 20 per cent increase in the overall size of the population. This is the huge figure for such a poor country to absorb.

This year, in 2009, the figure for return was 54,000. This represents quite a significant decrease since 2008. There are perhaps four reasons for this: first of all, the security situation that discourages refugees from returning to their homeland. Second, the increasing difficulty humanitarian agencies have in accessing many provinces in the country. Third, there are concerns about employment and economic opportunities for returning Afghans if they choose to come back home. And, fourth, the fact that most of the remaining refugee population has been outside the country for such a long time.

We do believe all these factors – political, security, economic and even demographic are making the solutions for refugees much more difficult. We believe the key to maintaining these extremely high levels of return – that have been recorded since 2002 – are essentially economic. We think economic growth and opportunities are the

key factors in attracting Afghans to their homeland now. But, of course, the key issues linked to the improvement of the economy of peace and security.

Humanitarian agencies like UNHCR – we do not have solutions for all the economic challenges, of course, that Afghanistan faces. Humanitarian agencies are not mandated to undertake development or reconstruction work. What we can offer is support essentially for immediate reintegration. One thing that we have been associated with since 2002 is a housing programme. Next year we anticipate building a further 10,000 housing units – that will bring the overall total that we have supported to 200,000 since 2002.

Apart from security, housing is most often stated by returning Afghans as their most important requirement. And we know from research that many families struggle to absorb their relatives and families when they come back. We have introduced some new elements in our shelter housing programme next year to address these needs. But this is not enough. Returning refugees need access to schools for their children, access to health services for their family, and access to employment opportunities. And, most of all, what they are looking for is greater predictability to their lives which, we believe, will come when peace and security are established.

With some financial support from the European Commission, UNHCR has been conducting studies on various kinds of population movement, including refugees, since 2005. When we look at next year we do anticipate that there will continue to be a significant number of Afghan families who will wish to return home.

At the same time, we need to understand in a broader perspective, the nature of population movements to and from Afghanistan. Every day, tens of thousands of Afghans cross borders into Pakistan and Iran. They look for work. They do business and trade. They visit doctors and hospitals. Many visit their relatives. These are very normal movements undertaken for very normal purposes.

It is important to signal so that there's greater understanding that not all Afghans crossing an international border are refugees. Probably in one week there are more Afghans returning to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan than refugees returning to Afghanistan for one year.

There seems to be a belief that any Afghan can cross an international border and be accepted as a refugee. This is a misunderstanding. There are particular conditions and procedures attached to being accepted as a refugee.

We are becoming aware that many Afghans – particular young Afghans – who are undertaking very dangerous and risky journeys. Many seem to believe all they have to do is reach a foreign country and that as an Afghan they will be automatically accepted as a refugee. But this is not the case. We believe that it is very important that the Afghan population also understands that there is a difference between someone who crosses the border as a refugee to escape violence and somebody who crosses the border to do business or trade to visit relatives or look for work.

Next year we will be undertaking further research in Europe to understand why so many young Afghans are travelling to Europe. Why? How they got there? The money they require to make these journeys and where they come from in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees. We do think this is a very important step the Government here has taken in recognizing how this legal instrument, the 1951 Convention has so successfully defended the rights and interests

of refugees – especially Afghans – for so long. Although there are not many refugees who come to Afghanistan itself, the Government's record of providing asylum to those few refugees is an honourable one. In order for UNHCR to do its work and to continue to defend the interests of refugees as distinct from people who cross borders to look for work or to do business we think it's very, very important that the principle of asylum is upheld and recognized and distinguished from economic migration.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

RFE/RL: I have two questions for Mr MacLeod. You pointed to the dangerous journeys and you said that a large number of Afghans are trying to take asylum in different parts of the world. Can you give us an example of these dangerous journeys and how they can affect in the future those who undertake these risky journeys?

UNHCR: Well, I can give you one very clear example: About a year ago, the authorities in the Baluch, in the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan, discovered a container, in which 40 Afghans died because of suffocation. This was an illegal movement. And, I think it indicates very well the kind of risks and dangers involved in using traffickers and smugglers to travel across international borders.

RTA [translated from Pashto]: Thank you Mr MacLeod. The question is about your activities overall and the programmes that you are delivering to Afghans who are returning back as well as the principles of providing protection and asylum for the refugees. Recently reports suggest that in Pakistan, following security incidents, or any suicide attacks, or any bombings, Afghans have been arrested, despite the fact that they were holding registration cards issued by your office and the Government of Pakistan. And in some cases, Afghans with legal passports and visas, have also been arrested. What kind of protection does your office or has your office provided to those Afghans who are registered legally in Pakistan?

UNHCR: First of all a couple of comments. It's a very good question. Thank you. I think any government confronted by the scale and the frequency of security incidents that have occurred in Pakistan over the last few months would have a very serious cause for concern. Second comment, it's not only Afghans who have been arrested on suspicion of being involved in security incidents, but many Pakistanis too. The UNHCR office in Pakistan does follow all of the cases that we hear about of Afghans holding proof of registration cards of when they are arrested. And then, indeed in the news you do hear of quite a large number of Afghans holding these documents who are arrested. What you don't hear in the news is that all of them are released, normally within a few hours. I cannot comment on those arrested either without documents or those that are carrying passports. What I would say however is that we think it is important that the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to encourage both citizens that they should travel with an ID, with a passport or travel document.

PAJHWOK [translated from Dari]: The question goes back to basically the suspension of return operations? When did you resume the repatriation? The other question is that you referred to half of Afghans born in Pakistan, what challenges do they face returning to Afghanistan? And lastly, you referred to the lower number of families returning this year while you just mentioned that many more families will be returning in 2010. What makes you optimistic that many more families will return in 2010?

UNHCR: Just to recall, there has been a very difficult situation in the northwest frontier provinces and the administratively troubled areas of in Pakistan in most of the past six

months. And because of the difficulties of safe access to the voluntary repatriation centres near Peshawar, our office, in cooperation with our office in Pakistan, recommended that we close on, safety grounds, those centres.

Your question regarding the challenges for younger Afghans: First of all, let me just say that this is not just Pakistan. It is also Iran where we have exactly the same situation where slightly more than half of the population was born in exile. I think the most difficult thing, of course, is the fact that the standard of living, the conditions of living, and the opportunities in a country like Iran which is much more developed than Afghanistan mean that returning to Afghanistan is a bigger challenge after you have become used to a different culture, a different context and a different living condition.

I would suggest very much that you look at a study carried out by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) which has looked at this issue and the challenges for second-generation Afghans in a lot of details. I think it is a very interesting study, and it shows many of the social and cultural and economic challenges that confront young Afghans outside in their country.

You asked about repatriation for 2010 and you asked why I was optimistic. Probably, I prefer to say that I am realistic rather than optimistic. But the reason for projecting that families will continue is, firstly, because over the last 20 years, Afghans have consistently demonstrated a very strong link to their homeland, even during a difficult period.

And secondly, because there are still opportunities for people to return. There are family, social and economic networks that continue to be an attraction for families to come back.

And thirdly, because sometimes the situation in Pakistan and Iran is not so easy for Afghans to remain there. So I think those are the three main factors.

IRNA [translated from Dari]: The question is about climate change. What kind of a negative impact may it have on the country and on Afghans if they decide to leave the country, perhaps or because of the flooding and some other reasons to leave, do you see a trend?

UNHCR: I know that globally, it is a subject of reasons and growing interest – the impact of climate change on population movements. Given the conditions in Afghanistan, I think it is very probable that in future, we might well see the population movement linked to climate change.

INDIAN FREELANCE JOURNALIST: I have two questions and I will keep them brief. One is on IDPs: I know this is not your mandate but since you are assisting development and finding solutions with the influx of new troops fighting is expected to go up and probably result in a larger number of internally displaced persons. What is your prognosis for that?

The second question is related to the recent national risk vulnerability assessment report because of the 71 per cent of Afghans who said they had experienced household shock, 60 per cent said this was due to the return of refugees and IDPs. So my question are these returns creating a new humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan?

UNHCR: On your first question about whether the increase in international troops will lead to an increase in displacement. I have no ability to forecast that at all. What I can

say is that at the beginning of this year, we had prepared for an increase in the internal displacement, but we didn't see any major impact. I think the figures that are most widely quoted for Helmand for example, the total is 1,700 families. This is not a huge number and we believe that the response to their needs will fully be met.

Nevertheless, in the planning for next year, we have to also anticipate maybe an increase in the internal displacement and also perhaps from people displaced across the border of Pakistan by the fighting in the border areas.

On your question about the statistics report, I only saw the report for the first time yesterday, so I haven't had an opportunity to read and analyze it. But I would say of course we are very conscious that the country's absorption, the capacity is under strain. Any poor society like Afghanistan that has to absorb such a huge number of people in a short time will of course experience some stress and strain. Certainly in some very poor districts in some provinces of the country, there is no doubt that the family is experiencing a lot of difficulty.

At the same time, I think we should remember among the five million people that have returned since 2002, there have been many businessmen, there have been many traders, and there have been many families who brought with them, money, skills, information, knowledge which has also contributed very substantially to the economy recovery that we have seen since 2002.

REUTERS: More troops will come here in the New Year. What impact do you think it will have on the number of returnees in 2010? Would you anticipate whether these returnees will trigger more Afghans wanting to be refugees? Do you get the sense that Afghans returning from Iran face any discrimination? Do they have a negative experience there or does it have any impact on their lives?

UNHCR: It seems to be three questions there. On the first one, historically return patterns to the south and south east of Afghanistan have been lower than anywhere else in the country and that pattern has existed for 10 or 15 years.

With respect to your question of the displacement: I am not a military authority or strategist so I really can't answer that question. All I can say is from the perspective of UNHCR, we will need to be prepared for different forms of displacement as we have been this year. As to where and how that displacement occurs, I really cannot say but we do need to be prepared for it.

Your third question is about the potential discrimination faced by Afghans in Iran. Discrimination against refugees unfortunately is a global problem and UNHCR is faced with this in many, many countries UNHCR where we work. In the case of Iran, we should recall. It is a country that has hosted Afghans for thirty years in huge numbers and we should remember how generous that hospitality has been for such a very long time. And even recently, a piece of information I am happy to share with you, that demonstrates that the Government and the people of Iran are continuing the goodwill towards the refugees is the fact that Afghans are permitted to enter both public and private universities still.

Secondly, Afghan children whatever the state of their parents are, can also access the primary schools, this is a very generous gesture on the part of the Iranian authorities.
