Chapter IV

AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN, INDIA AND IRAN
Afghan refugees as a phenomenon emerged after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Afghanistan is a landlocked country situated in South-West Asia occupying an area of 655,000 square kilometres. Afghanistan is a multi-national state. The Pashtuns account for about half of the total population, the rest being Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Chahar, Aimaks, Nuristanis, Baluchis and other ethnic groups. Over 98 per cent of the country's inhabitants profess Islam. Afghanistan is a poor country. The life expectancy is now barely 43 years. The literacy rate is around 20 per cent. Infant mortality and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world.\(^1\) The GNP per capita is among the lowest in the world.\(^2\) Only about 13 per cent of the land is cultivated. Politically, it has two main frontiers, one on the north with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (all of which were part of the erstwhile USSR) and the other, on the south and east with Pakistan. Its frontiers on the west with Iran and on the north-east with People's Republic of China, are shorter.\(^3\) Thus the location of Afghanistan has a strategic significance in the geo-political context of the region. Such a strategic location with its borders touching nations with different ideologies and systems of government, Afghanistan has assumed the status of a buffer state. In the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries it functioned as a buffer between Tsarist Russia and the British Indian Empire. After the Second

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2. GNP per capita was estimated in the U.S. $55 to $90 range in a 1982 publication, Afghanistan, Area Handbook (Washington, D.C., 1982).
World War Afghanistan steered clear of the politics of cold war between the USA and the former USSR while maintaining for itself a non-aligned character. For a long time now, Afghanistan has been maintaining very friendly relations with the neighbouring Commonwealth of Independents States (CIS).

The last king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah reigned from 1933 to 1973. In 1953, the king's cousin, Lt. Gen. Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan was appointed prime minister of Afghanistan. In 1963 after General Daud resigned, Mohammad Yusuf succeeded. In July 1973, King Zahir Shah was overthrown by a coup and former prime minister General Daud came to power. Daud abolished his royal titles and became head of the state, prime minister and minister of foreign affairs and defense. Very soon he came under the influence of the Shah of Iran. This paved the way for repression against the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). These developments among others, gave rise to the April 1978, Saur Revolution which was brought about by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). 4 PDPA was founded in 1965, composed of several functions, viz. Khalq (people) group headed by Noor Mohammad Taraki, Parcham (Flag) Group headed by Babrak Karmal and Shula-e-Javed (Eternal Flame) group led by Rahim Mahmudi. All of them professed different shades of Marxist ideology. In July 1987, the two most organised and popular factions, Khaq and Parcham after abandoning their ideological differences, reunited to oppose Daud under the banner of PDPA. They engineered a coup on 27 April 1978 against Daud, who was overthrown with the active participation of armed

4 The word Saur means April. The Saur Revolution, therefore, means a revolution which took place in April.
forces of the country. This change of political power came to be known as Saur Revolution. The Republic of Afghanistan was renamed as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). The Saur Revolution in Afghanistan resulted in widespread destruction, death and large population movements. This conflict became heavily internationalised due to the involvement of the former USSR and the United States. The efforts to modernise Afghanistan always involved a struggle between the government and the traditional local power holders. Afghanistan being a strong Islamic country, whenever efforts were made to initiate changes, Islam was invoked by those who opposed change.5

The new government was formed with Noor Mohammad Taraki as the prime minister and Babrak Karmal as the deputy prime minister. After the success of the Revolution the PDPA party failed to remain united. Right from its formation in 1965, the party had internal differences. In this factional fight, Haafizullah Amin, PDPA leader made alliance with Taraki and got Parchamites removed from the positions of power. Karmal was sent to Prague as ambassador. The Soviets however, tried to persuade Taraki in regaining his control of the PDPA from Amin and to accommodate the Parcham faction in the affairs of Afghanistan. This matter was believed to have figured at a meeting between Noor Mohammad Taraki and President Leonid Brezhnev held in Moscow on 10, September 1979. When on 11 September, 1979 Taraki returned to Kabul, Amin led a coup, Taraki was removed from office.

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following a shoot out at the Presidential Place on 14 September 1979.\textsuperscript{6} Now the Khalq party got further divided into pro-Taraki and pro-Amin factions. Then Amin took over as the Secretary General of the Party and Chairman of the Revolutionary council. On 15 September Amin dismissed the Ministers of Interior and Foreign Affairs. Soon after, Taraki was officially reported to have died. It was under these turbulent circumstances that in 27 December 1979, the Soviet army with more than 50,000 troops entered into Afghanistan. A new government headed by Babrak Kamal took over with the Soviet help.\textsuperscript{7}

The Soviet intervention transformed the conflict in its dimensions. It rapidly become an East-West confrontation. The Soviet intervention had the contrary effect of generating a counter intervention. The Soviet action gave Afghan rebels (Mujahedsin) legitimacy and a political rationale to organise with large-scale foreign assistance. The main supporters of Mujahedsin were the Islamic/Arab countries, the United States and China. The assistance was channelled through Pakistan which allowed thousands of rebels to use its border.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{The Cause of Exodus}

The Afghan conflict created a huge refugee problem for the countries in the neighbourhood, particularly in Pakistan, Iran and India. The refugees left Afghanistan in waves. Some refugees left Afghanistan as early as 1973 after

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\item \textsuperscript{6} Dev Morarka, “The Russian Intervention: A Moscow Analysis”, Round Table (London), No. 282, April 1981.
\item \textsuperscript{7} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Aristide R. Zolberyg and others, Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World (New York, 1989), p.152.
\end{itemize}
the palace coup deposing king Zahir Shah. Approximately 80,000 refugees crossed the border into Pakistan between 1973 and 1978. However, the flow increased after the 1978 coup which established the Marxist government of Noor Mohammed Taraki. This coup was more bloody and the efforts of Taraki regime to bring rapid and radical social change resulted in violence and caused many Afghan to flee to Pakistan, India and Iran. By the end of 1979, around 400,000 Afghans refugees had sought refuge in Pakistan.

It was the Soviet intervention which opened the floodgates. Afghanistan became the world’s leading refugee producing country. For example in 1996 the refugee population from Afghan remained the largest in the world, standing at 2,628,550 as compared to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina 1,006,450. However, Iran and Pakistan are the major asylum countries for Afghan refugees. During the 1980s, in Pakistan about 3.5 million Afghan refugees took refuge, whereas in Iran about 2 million and in India over 20,000. Although the majority of the refugees left Afghanistan by the end of 1982, refugees continued to arrive in South West Asia even after that period. There were some particular periods when the rate of flow of the refugees increased. These periods witnessed intensity of the conflict inside Afghanistan. Such increased flows occurred in 1983, 1986, 1988 and in the spring of 1991.

Shortly after the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, a village called “Rozay Qala” was destroyed completely. Momin Gul, a farmer of that village said,

a Mujahed (resistance fighter) was hiding in the village. Soviet troops came to find him. He shot one of the Soviet troops. After this,

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they opened fire indiscriminately and killed more than 300 villagers in a single day. Next day, a rocket hit a house after which the entire family disappeared in dust and ashes.\(^{10}\)

As the country got embroiled in the worst of the proxy war, the number of refugees kept climbing. From 1985 to 1990 the number of refugees reached over 6.2 million in Pakistan, India and Iran. Nobody knows the costs of the war. The Afghans of course paid the highest price and are still paying with fighting continuing and their country in ruins.\(^{11}\)

### Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Throughout the Afghan crisis, the refugees kept on pouring into Pakistan. Starting with 80,000 refugees between 1973 to 1978, the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan gone up to 3.5 million by the time Geneva Accords were signed in 1998.\(^{12}\) The UNHCR’s Chief of Mission for Afghanistan Sri Wijeratne revealed that:

during the 1980s the open door policy of Pakistan and its treatment of the refugees was exemplary. The example of Pakistan should be studied very carefully by many countries who try to shut up shop when confronted with refugee caseloads a fraction of the size of the Afghans. Pakistan responded with a generosity of spirit that has not been parallel since.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) On 14 April, 1988 at the Palace of Nations in Geneva Accords on a political settlement in Afghanistan was signed. The documents include a bilateral agreement between the Republic of Pakistan on principles of mutual relations, a declaration on international guarantees, a bilateral agreement on the voluntary return of refugees and an agreement on the interrelationships for the settlement of the situation relating to Afghanistan.

\(^{13}\) Refugee Magazine, n.10.
Most of the refugees were lodged in refugee camps especially designed by the Pakistani government in co-operation with the UNHCR. These especially set-up camps were officially called “Refugee Tentage Village” (RTVs). These camps were different from most refugee camps around the world. There were at least 350 RTVs in Pakistan, mostly in the border areas. Around two thirds of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan were stationed in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). In addition, camps were set up in Baluchistan and Punjab as they were also refugee receiving areas. Many of the refugees, especially the middle-class among them moved on their own into the Sind Province particularly to the city of Karachi.

The distribution of Afghan refugees in Pakistan was 70 per cent of refugees in the NWFP, 24 per cent of refugees in Baluchistan, 2 per cent in Punjab and 4 per cent scattered in other areas of Pakistan. The registration of refugees were done in these provinces so that they could receive official refugee cards and ration documents. The camps were designed to accommodate an average of ten thousand refugees but most camps held many more. The Pakistani government decided in 1982 that the NWFP had reached the saturation point, so parts of the Punjab province were opened for the purpose of refugee settlement. But Afghans did not like living on the hot Punjab plain, nor did they like the Punjabis.

According to the Government of Pakistan Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, 75.6 per cent of the registered refugees in Pakistan were women and
children. Out of that, 48 per cent children were under fifteen years of age, 28 per cent adult female and 24 per cent adult males. 14

In Pakistan, Afghans were allowed to move freely in and out of the refugee villages to find work and to set up businesses of their choice. As a result, the Afghan refugees in Pakistan could avoid the danger of permanent dependency. Nowadays the vast majority of them are almost self-sufficient. It is pertinent to mention here that when food aid was progressively reduced from 1992 onwards in Pakistan and finally cut off altogether in 1995; the Afghans did not face much of a problem. The refugees in Pakistan were treated with tremendous generosity both by the government and the local population, particularly in the NWFP where the majority of the Afghans and majority of the local population belonged to the same Pashtun ethnic group. The RTVs were set up like small cities which were scattered throughout the NWFP and Baluchistan, and a few in Sind and Punjab provinces of Pakistan. The way the Afghan refugees were received by the government and people and were offered every possible assistance which was duly recognised and appreciated worldwide. This was a grand humanitarian gesture exceeding even the requisite international standards. 15 All this was done even though Pakistan was not a party to any of the Conventions relating to the status of refugees and had no specific domestic law in this regard. All these actions were motivated simply by high humanitarian considerations.


Role of UNHCR

All the “Refugee Tentage Villages” (RTVs) which were established in Pakistan for Afghan refugees were gradually provided with the necessary infrastructure for a regular water supply, food and other basic necessities. After they had settled down, efforts to register them were intensified. Each head of family reported the number of his dependants of the cattle he had brought with him and the vehicles he possessed. A family passbook showing these details was provided to refugees which also served as a ration card. The Afghan refugees were the UNHCR’s biggest single refugee caseload in the world for nearly two decades year in succession. Since October 1979, UNHCR alone spent over 1 billion dollars on them in Pakistan. Similarly the World Food Programme spent nearly $1.4 billion for them. An administrative unit called the Commissionerate for the Afghan Refugees was formed by the Pakistan government which was dealing with matters of aid to the Afghan refugees. This Commissionerate was assisted by the UNHCR, the World Bank and by other national and international voluntary agencies. The United States did not extend in humanitarian aid until the mid-1980s. It was supplying the Afghan resistance with large supplies of sophisticated weapons.

The relief assistance provided to Afghan refugees in Pakistan was divided into broadly two categories—direct and indirect assistance. The direct assistance included shelter, food, clothing, household goods, cooking and heating fuel construction materials, etc. Under indirect assistance some social

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16 Refugee Magazine, n.10.
17 Farr, n.14, p.121.
and community services such as water supply, health care, educational facilities, veterinary aid, income-generating projects etc. Alongside relief assistance, the Government of Pakistan also initiated some projects to repair the damages caused to ecological wealth and road networks resulting from the presence of refugees. 18

**Shelter**

In the very beginning the Government of Pakistan along with UNHCR provided tents and gave a subsistence allowance to each head of the Afghan families. Since the number of refugees was going up, request to increase the international aid particularly in the form of shelter material and food was made. The UNHCR provided tents, tarpaulins and ground sheets in large numbers. Mud houses were constructed with the aid received from UNHCR. These mud houses offered greater protection against the harsh climate. The refugees built the houses themselves in traditional style separated from one another by a yard surrounded by low walls.

**Food**

The Government of Pakistan released a list of an estimated number of refugees in order to get food assistance from both the UNHCR and the WFP. The estimate was based on the numbers living in the refugees villages in the NWFP and Baluchistan, without taking into account the scattered refugees. Accordingly, food material were provided to Afghan refugees by both the agencies. In June 1982 the number of refugees had risen to 2.1 million and

therefore, UNHCR had to undertake the responsibility to provide rations to another 100,000 refugees who were living elsewhere until they could be settled in the villages.

The huge task of providing food to the refugees in Pakistan was largely taken care of by the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR. The WFP provided the basic foodstuffs for example, the daily food-basket per refugee included wheat--500 grams, dried skimmed milk--30 grams, edible oil--30 grams, sugar--20 grams, and tea--1.5 grams.\textsuperscript{19} UNHCR made available tea, sugar and high-protein biscuits for children, pregnant and nursing mothers and for the old people. The WFP spent $192 million by October 1982 and the UNHCR spent 14 million dollars on supplementary food. The UNHCR's total expenditure in 1982 was $83 million. Out of the total amount the contribution of the United States was 30 per cent of the WFP budget. Other major contributors were Japan, West Germany and the Arab States.\textsuperscript{20}

Later on the emphasis was shifted from emergency relief assistance to settlement or to make the refugees self-reliant. For example a joint project of UNHCR and World Bank was initiated to provide employment and thus generate supplementary income for refugees in the North-West Frontier Province and in Baluchistan.

\textsuperscript{19} ibid.

**Water**

All over Pakistan there was a problem of safe drinking water and it was estimated that only one third of population in Pakistan had permanent access to it. Much of the refugee's drinking water was supplied through tankers. The refugees were getting 10 litres of drinking water a day per person. Very soon, however, other methods were used to get sufficient water near the refugee villages. Wells were shallowed in the North-West Frontier Province, particularly in the areas where the water near the surface was good. Tube wells were used to raise water from deeper levels. They were not sufficient to produce enough for the growing numbers and therefore, more than 30 tankers were deployed by UNICEF furnishing 700,000 litres a day to 19 refugee villages. In 1982, UNHCR raised the daily ration of water to 25 litres for each refugee. This cost around 4 million dollars to the UNHCR and another 2.9 million dollars were allocated to continue the water supply the next year.

**Health**

In order to provide medical care to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan hospitals, dispensaries and mobile medical units were established to carry out mass vaccination programmes. In the North-West Frontier Province 34 new dispensaries were set up in 1981, in addition to the 40 already established in 1980. Apart from those, 31 mobile medical units were also working in the refugee villages. In Baluchistan 20 health centres were set up to provide medical services. In this regard, UNHCR concluded an agreement with the World Health Organisation (WHO) which provided enormous medical
facilities to the refugees. Besides, several voluntary agencies were also provided their useful support for the newly established medical services. Women doctors were recruited for the treatment of mothers and young children. It was done due to bad tradition which forbids women to be treated by male doctors.

An amount of 6.8 million dollars was allocated for this purpose and improve the services further, particularly in preventive medicine and sanitation. In 1984, $7.5 million was allocated for the purpose of health facilities.21

Not only food, shelter, and health facilities were provided by the UNHCR and other agencies but, due to the severity of the climate and poverty of refugees, clothes, shoes, blankets and quilts were also purchased and distributed to the refugees. For this purpose UNHCR had to spend 10.5 million dollars.

Education

Education is a human right. The education of refugees is the responsibility of the government in the country of asylum. In cases where the authorities are not in a position to fulfil this responsibility, UNHCR endeavours to identify other sources of assistance. Where the educational facilities are insufficient, UNHCR provides essential educational assistance to

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eligible and needy refugee. 

Primary education is provided to all refugees. Education assistance at post-primary levels such as, lower secondary, higher secondary and tertiary levels as well as assistance for apprenticeship and non-formal education are provided as part of the search for a durable solution for the refugee group or refugee concerned.

In order to provide education to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 250 schools were established in the North West Frontier Province with some 30,000 pupils. In Baluchistan traditional ideas of education, which includes a preference for religious schools and resistance against schooling for girls hampered the educational programme. In spite of that, 39 schools with 5,500 pupils were opened. For this purpose, teachers were recruited in the region, and in 1983 efforts were made towards better recruitment of teachers and improvements in the syllabi. UNESCO's support in this regard was commendable. Besides, voluntary agencies were also provided their valuable services. Around 250 refugee students were provided scholarships in 1983 and an amount of 400,000 dollars was spent on this account. All these amounts were provided from the special refugee education account and not from the regular UNHCR Programme.

In addition, a vocational training project was initiated by the UNHCR which was funded by it and implemented by ILO. However, though UNHCR's main component of assistance was to provide shelter, food and

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22 All refugees who are of concern to the High Commissioner are eligible for UNHCR educational assistance. Such assistance is provided once the circumstances in connection with the applicant are recognised as a refugee cease to exist or when a durable solution has been attained.


medical services, the office also developed and expanded its activities towards the self-sufficiency.

The total expenditure incurred by UNHCR for the assistance programme exceeded $78 million in 1986, $14 million in 1987 but in 1988 it came down to $12 million.25 The assistance budget was getting reduced year after year because of the success of UNHCR/World Bank project of income-generation among the refugees. At the end of December 1986, the project had generated 55 million work days of employment, out of which 80 per cent was allocated for the Afghan refugees. Ninety one sub-projects were established in three provinces in the forestry, watershed management, irrigation, road and fishery sectors. All these projects were started in July 1987 and continued until June 1990.26 The amount expended on these projects was $40 million. Implementation of these projects showed considerable progress in 1989 and it was closed by the end of 1990.27

The income-generating opportunities offered under these projects, were vital for refugees who could not return to Afghanistan. Further, UNHCR endorsed a two-year phase for which financial requirements were estimated at $25 million. This phase was continued to provide employment for both refugees and the local population in development schemes aimed at repairing and creating basic infrastructure assets in refugee-affected areas. The main emphasis was in the fields where experience gained by the refugees would be useful in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan.

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Repatriation

In 1987 UNHCR developed some contingency plans in preparation for the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. The United Nations mediated talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the same year. In the course of contingency planning, UNHCR consulted with World Food Programmes (WFP) and other organisations to co-ordinate activities to assist the repatriation and rehabilitation of returnees. In this regard some voluntary agencies were also consulted by the UNHCR.

As a result of the negotiation an agreement was signed on 14 April 1988 in Geneva.28 Abdul Wakil the foreign minister of Afghanistan and Zain Noorani, minister of state for foreign affairs of Pakistan signed the agreement on principles of mutual relations on the voluntary return of the refugees and on the interrelationships for the settlement of the situations relating to Afghanistan. Edward Shevardnadze, the then foreign minister of the Soviet Union and George Shultz the then US Secretary of State signed the declaration on international guarantees and the agreement on the interrelationships. The UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, and his personal envoy, Diego Cordovez were also present on the occasion.29

As per the accord, the activities of voluntary repatriation of the Afghan refugees were started in 1989. In this regard, UNHCR maintained its co-

29 Ibid.
operation with the Office of the United Nations Co-ordinator for Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes relating to Afghanistan and other agencies. It continued its co-operation with the World Food Programme with a view to achieving the objectives of the UNHCR’s mandate and the Geneva Accords. It was stated that a satisfactory process of return should have two conditions: first, “Afghan refugees are in a position to decide of their own free will the timing and manner of their return”; and second, “refugees, upon their return, benefit from living conditions that will allow them to integrate rapidly”.30

In order to meet those objectives the operational approach was divided into three areas. The first activity was concerned with international protection of the refugees and the spontaneous returnees. The second component of activities was to build an appropriate response capacity in the event of large-scale repatriation movements. The third and final component involved direct support to the returnees in Afghanistan.

In 1989 an estimated 100,000 Afghan refugees returned from the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan to their places of origin in the southwestern and northern provinces of Afghanistan.31 But the continued fighting in some provinces of Afghanistan once again brought new waves of refugees to Pakistan. According to the sources of the Government of Pakistan, more than 50,000 entered Pakistan between October 1988 and March 1989. UNHCR supported the delivery and distribution of relief materials from the UNICEF, the UNDP, the UNOCA, the WFP and other agencies. In 1990,

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31 UNHCR Report, session 45 (1990), P.23.
UNHCR funded cross-border projects in Afghanistan from where the maximum number of refugees originated. These projects were implemented by various voluntary agencies. Besides, the UNHCR office planned to carry out various measures in the course of 1990 in the context of a plan of action agreed amongst the United Nations agencies who were involved in the repatriation and rehabilitation of Afghan refugees. On the other hand, the United Nations increased its efforts to establish peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan. UNHCR reoriented its planning and implementation of humanitarian assistance programmes to meet the needs of repatriation. For example, the target of 80 per cent full immunisation was reached in most of the refugee camps.

UNHCR’s assistance to the Afghan refugees was aimed to extend and improve the rural health, delivery infrastructure, water and sanitation systems, access roads, educational facilities and some income generating activities. Since the emphasis was on repatriation the programme was shifted from infra-structural assistance to assistance measures of direct benefit to refugees. In 1989, $13.7 million were spent in providing assistance to Afghan refugees.

According to the UNHCR report, by 1991, 300,000 Afghan refugees were repatriated from Pakistan. In spite of the civil war raging in Afghanistan, it was expected that spontaneous repatriation movements would be maintained. The strategies of UNHCR for the year of 1991 included improved monitoring of political and military developments and of refugee movements resulting therefrom, and a reassessment of the degree of self-sufficiency of refugees.
In order to promote large-scale repatriation, UNHCR and the WFP along with United Nations Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programme Relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA) launched a Pilot Repatriation project in July 1990. That project provided for a cash grant of Rs. 3,000 and four kilos of wheat against surrender of every family ration card. The purpose of this grant was to facilitate the return of the refugees to Afghanistan. UNHCR mobilised additional programme to monitor movements back to Afghanistan. By the end of December 1990, around 70,000 person had been benefited because of this scheme.

In Afghanistan in the same year, UNHCR continued to support the Peace Guest House Project where returnees were received and assisted with onward transportation to their areas of origin. Those Guest Houses were supported at Kabul, Herat and Mazari-i-Sharif. The WFP provided a food component to the participating returnees. At Herat, a considerable number of returnees required UNHCR’s help to organise onward transportation by air. By the end of 1990, approximately 30,000 persons had been assisted by UNHCR through the Guest House Project in Afghanistan.

The amount expended on disbursement in 1990 by UNHCR for the repatriation of Afghan refugees totalled 14.5 million dollars. Out of that $2.4 million were expended for activities in Afghanistan and $9.9 million to activities in Pakistan and Iran.

33 ibid.
34 ibid.
Although the Soviet armed forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the government which they had kept in power was finally ousted and replaced by an Islamic administration in April 1992. This change of government was followed by the return of 1.5 million refugees from Pakistan to Afghanistan. But fighting amongst competing political factions soon erupted in and around the capital city of Kabul. A new flow of internal displacements and refugee movements took place. This imposed an additional burden on UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations which were struggling to cope with the returnee influx. Another 300,000 returned spontaneously from Iran during the same period. The period between the Soviet withdrawal and the outbreak of civil war in 1993 represented a lost opportunity.

Between 1992 and 1996 resistance factions joined later by the Taliban, "locked themselves into frequently changing power struggle that resulted in the annihilation of huge swathes of southern and eastern Kabul and considerable damage to rest of the city". Afghanistan's own uncompromising leaders were primarily responsible for Kabul's destruction, but the Soviets also laid waste to huge areas and were responsible for millions of land mines that still turn into debris the Afghan countryside.

Large population movements have been as unpredictable as the conflict itself. Even while fighting continued in Kabul, many refugees returned to Afghanistan. Following the return of an unprecedented 1.5 million Afghans in 1992, the rate of repatriation decreased in 1993. Around 468,894 refugees repatriated with UNHCR assistance and 400,000 refugees spontaneously.

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35 UNHCR, n.1, p.182.
36 Colville, n.10, p.4.
Many refugees who had expressed their desire to return delayed their departure until the emergence of a more favourable security situation within Afghanistan. The total expenditure relating to the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees in 1992 was $48.6 million, whereas in 1993 the total expenditure was $31.7 million.

Repatriation of Afghan refugees during 1994 confirmed earlier projections. A total of 329,327 persons returned to Afghanistan. But also by the end of 1994, approximately 1.6 million Afghan refugees remained in Pakistan.

Factional fighting in Kabul broke out in 1994 which caused massive displacement within Afghanistan. It was estimated that around 1 million people were displaced within the country itself particularly after the fall of the Najibullah government in April 1992. Those internally displaced persons were settled temporarily in the camps at Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat and Kandahar. Entry into Pakistan for Afghans in 1994 was officially restricted to those with valid travel documents or those allowed only on humanitarian grounds. However, since January 1994 over 76,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan.37

Continued factional fighting affected the rate of repatriation of Afghan refugees. For example in 1995, 348,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan and in 1996 only 120,000 refugees returned. In 1997, the remaining caseload in Pakistan was 1.2 million persons.

In another significant development a total of 386 Quick Impact Projects (QIP) were implemented across Afghanistan by the five UNHCR sub-offices. The emphasis was given in the sectors of education, irrigation and transport. But in September 1996, the new authorities in Jalalabad and Kabul imposed regulations abolishing the employment of women and the education of girls. As a result, the programmes and rehabilitation activities of UNHCR in those cities were disrupted or cancelled. Thereafter, the office was engaged in a dialogue with the ruling authorities to ease some regulations and to resume educational programmes for girls.

However, the scale of the return, a total of 3.9 million people by the end of 1997 was a great surprise. Now UNHCR plans to expand the group repatriation project considerably through 1998, concentrating on locating villages or even entire districts to which the former inhabitants are keen to return, provided certain inhibiting factors are taken care of. Other UN agencies and NGOs have also been invited to achieve the target.

Over 2 million Afghan refugees are still living outside their country and they remain one of the largest refugee population in the world. Despite all problems, UNHCR's recent experience in Afghanistan has demonstrated that repatriation and reconstruction can take place in the absence of a stable national government. Although fighting continues in Kabul even today, many of the rural areas are however, relatively peaceful. Many rehabilitation activities are going on. These include, for example, demining, repair of irrigation channels, making provision of seeds and other agricultural inputs, improvement of roads and the installation of shallow wells and hand pumps.

38 Colville, n.10, pp.6-7.
to provide safe drinking water. As a result of such activities, fields which had been abandoned for a decade or more are once again producing wheat, fruit and other crops. According to the United Nations Development Programme, over 90 per cent of the population are now engaged in productive activity.39

Afghan Refugees in India

After the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Afghan people fled not only to Pakistan and Iran but also fled to India. By the end of December 1981, a total of 3,507 refugees were registered in India. Out of these 2,685 were Afghans, 720 were Iranians, 97 Indo-Chinese and 5 from other countries.40 The Afghan refugees live in and around Delhi. Most of them come from urban-middle class backgrounds and belong to Kabul and other towns in Afghanistan. One reason for the preponderantly urban-middle class background is that most of these refugees are those who could afford an air ticket to India, often directly from Kabul to Delhi. Threatened by one regime or the other these Afghans mostly served in government and other professions and are generally educated. Later on, the number of refugees from Afghanistan to India went up to 20,000 in India, who came either individually or in small groups.

Why are Afghan refugees in India called urban-refugees? The “urban refugee” concept is commonly used to describe at least three different groups of people. Firstly, refugees with an urban, non-agricultural and usually

39 UNHCR, n.1. p.182.
educated background, who take up residence in a town or city so that they can live in a familiar environment. Secondly, refugees of a rural, agricultural and uneducated background who initially take up residence in a camp, but who subsequently move to a town or city in search of work, trading or income-generating opportunities. And finally, individual and small groups of asylum seekers who arrive independently in the capital cities of low-income countries and who submit a claim for refugee status to UNHCR and the national authorities. 41

While urban refugees are to be found in almost every capital city in the world, the largest groups registered with UNHCR are found in Cairo, Islamabad, New Delhi, and Rio de Janeiro. New Delhi is home of some 17,000 Afghan refugees who arrived directly from Kabul. India has no laws on asylum and the Afghans are not officially recognised as refugees. Their presence is tolerated however, as “foreigners temporarily residing in India.” 42

After the settlement of Tibetan refugees in India, the UNHCR’s New Delhi office was closed in 1975. From 1975 to 1980 refugee matters in India were looked after by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 43 These consisted largely of assistance to a small number of individual cases, mainly of Indo-Chinese and African origin. In the latter months of 1980, there was a rapid increase in the number of Afghan asylum-seekers. Then, it became necessary to re-establish a UNHCR presence in India. Following four missions from the headquarter in late 1980 and early 1981, a UNHCR office was

42 ibid.
43 UNHCR Reports, n.40, p.39.
opened under the aegis of UNDP. In July 1981, a charge-de-mission was assigned to New Delhi to deal with protection and assistance matters. Needy refugees relied on UNHCR assistance as there are no work prospects for foreigners in India. A programme was established in 1981 to provide for the care and maintenance, medical care, primary education, English language courses, training in handicrafts and recreational activities.

After asylum seekers arrived with valid documents and visas they approached the New Delhi UNHCR's office, who conducted eligibility determination interviews and issued Refugee Certificates to those who qualified as refugees. Although such Refugee Certificates are not legally recognised by the Government of India, the Ministry of Home Affairs and local police authorities extended *de facto* protection to refugees in India. Even for rejected cases, the Government of India had generally been sympathetic and deportation cases were not vigorously pressed, thanks to a tradition of respect for basic refugee principles.

Illegal entrants, however, ran the risk of deportation or detention followed by deportation. Without a UNHCR Refugee Certificate, there is no guarantee that a residential permit would be issued. Thus those entering India illegally may be unable to regularise their status. Even those entering legally are not guaranteed a continued stay. Refugees considered foreigners are subject to a number of domestic laws governing the entry and stay of foreigners. There are sometimes educated professionals among the refugees. But prevailing laws do not allow foreigners to take up any employment. India largely ignores the refugees who look for or have taken up low wage jobs.

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*ibid.*
One of the biggest challenges facing the UNHCR’s New Delhi office is to reorient the middle-class refugees to support themselves through self-employment. Many of the Afghan refugees found it difficult to come to terms with their marginalised existence as refugees. For those from economically and socially weaker sections, adapting to a refugee situation may not be very difficult or different from their harsh day to day life. For a majority of the Afghans in Delhi so far used to a decent standard of living, adapting to the new realities was not easy. Unlike conventional refugees, Afghans were not easily amenable to take up any odd job and increase living.

It may be mentioned that a large number of Afghan refugees were from the business and trading community before they arrived in New Delhi. Afghan traders and shopkeepers were generally better able to utilise their entrepreneurial skills in India but even they are often hindered by a lack of capital or contacts in a strange city like New Delhi. Dispersed throughout the city, living in cramped and rented accommodation, Afghan refugees were unable to develop the kind of community support structures which are often available in camps.

**Problem of Subsistence Allowance**

When the first Afghan refugees contacted UNHCR in 1981, the New Delhi office responded by paying them a monthly cash allowance. The head of the family was receiving Rs 1,200 per month and the next three dependants

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45 UNHCR, UNHCR in India: An Information paper for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in India (New Delhi, n.d.), p.2.
46 UNHCR, n. 41, p.60.
were getting Rs 500 each per month. The next three dependants were receiving Rs 400 per month and other dependant family members received Rs. 200 each per month. They were getting the payment on a bi-monthly basis at the Refugee Counter, of the Syndicate Bank at Khan Market, in New Delhi.

In theory, such assistance was to be for a limited period. In practice, since they were not authorised to work, the refugees in India failed to become self-sufficient. As a result of this problem and the growing number of Afghan refugees in Delhi, UNHCR’s budget rose from $2.3 million in 1983 to $ 4.8 million in 1995. By that time some of the Afghan refugees had been living in Delhi for over a decade on UNHCR assistance. This led to a stage where the refugees became completely dependent on UNHCR, unable to explore other sustainable means of survival. Home visits, a common method to check the refugee’s economic condition, revealed that several persons sought refugees status primarily for the monthly allowance and other benefits. Some were actually well off, though pretending to be needy. As a result of these, UNHCR was forced to review its policy. A survey undertaken in 1994 found that many of the Afghan refugees actually had substantial resources of their own and had found some kind of gainful employment. UNHCR’s assistance was therefore supplementing a lifestyle that was quite prosperous by local standards. In addition, the study showed many of those Afghans who were living in poverty were able-bodied and had the potential to earn a reasonable income if they were given appropriate training and advice. When

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47 UNHCR, n.45, p.6.
48 UNHCR, n.41, p.60.
49 ibid.
talked to them, many of the refugees showed willingness to start a business though they had no initial capital to start with.

However, UNHCR endeavoured to reduce the refugee's prolonged dependence by helping them to gain new skills. For this purpose, they were provided vocational training that could help them in self-employment or getting jobs. Initially not all the refugees were willing to work, particularly because it meant giving up the monthly allowance. Counselling the refugees required a lot of tact and patience and had to be done in the face of hostility and resistance. The idea of going to work for a living was not very appealing to begin with, though they had slowly now come to accept it reluctantly.

**Vocational Training**

Vocational training was provided to Afghan refugees to encourage them to be self reliant through employment or self-employment. It was implemented by Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) and funded by UNHCR. The purpose of the vocational training was to help the refugees to acquire skills with which they could start earning a living. Refugees over the age of 14 years and under the age of 55 years were entitled to enrol for vocational training courses. They were normally allowed to do only one course during their stay in India. Vocational training courses included motor mechanics, tailoring, beauty-culture, air ticketing and travel tourism, TV technology, air conditioning and refrigeration. Apart from these courses YMCA provided some other courses also. The UNHCR made the payment to the institutions which provide training to refugees. In New Delhi, there are two centres of YMCA where refugees got education and training. These
YMCA centres in New Delhi not only provided education and vocational training to refugees, but also provided assistance, guidance, counselling and information for refugees regarding the grants and jobs.

Refugees registered with UNHCR earlier depend solely on the subsistence allowance provided by the new Delhi office. Now financial assistance to a new arrival is provided only for a temporary period extending up to a year. After that the refugees are expected to find alternative means of supporting themselves. Since 1993, the assistance programme was revised to provide lump sum grants to refugees. This was the equivalent of a year's subsistence allowance, averaging Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000 per family. With the help of this amount refugee could start a business on their own and become self-sufficient. The beneficiaries of this lump sum grant are not eligible for subsistence allowances but continue to receive medical and educational assistance. In addition, they are also provided a self-sufficiency grant to set up a small-scale enterprise, either by a refugee individually or in co-operation with other refugees.

However, it was discovered that initially very few women took advantage of the vocational training. Besides, refugee women found it much more difficult to establish an independent livelihood, partly because they had few marketable skills and partly because they were prevented or discouraged from working outside home. But later earnings from one member, usually was not adequate to sustain a family. Besides, there were a fair number of women-headed households, without male support. Thus, women were encouraged to take up vocational training. The idea was not only to empower

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50 UNHCR, n.45, p. 2.
them as refugees, but also equip them to restart their lives when they returned to their homes. Taking general aptitude into consideration, women are presently being trained in beauty culture, embroidery and tailoring. Some had also been gainfully employed after completing the course, while a few worked on their own. But when women go to work, they need crèches to look after their little children. For this purpose UNHCR planned to run 10 crèche-cum-day-care centres. Run by refugee women in various population concentrations, the crèches would also accept non-refugees children to make it more self-sustaining.

In 1995, a total of 4,500 refugees (approximately 900 families) received lump sum grants in lieu of monthly subsistence allowance. In 1996, around 3,216 and in 1997 some 395 people had received lump sum grants. According to the recent report, however, 2,400 refugees are getting subsistence allowance from the UNHCR's New Delhi office. These include the seriously/chronically ill, the handicapped and the old and disabled. Financial needs of some individuals are reviewed periodically and in some cases, assistance restarted. A few are also issued ration cards, enabling them to buy food grains and essentials like kerosene, rice, sugar etc. at government subsidised rates.

**Educational Assistance**

The children of Afghan refugees were also provided education assistance to pursue studies at primary and lower secondary level. There is an arrangement between UNHCR and the YMCA to implement the educational

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51 UNHCR, Information Paper (New Delhi, 1997), p. 3.
programme. As an implementing partner, the YMCA has showed greater interest and enthusiasm for skills training and other educational programme among the Afghan refugees. Children of Afghan refugees up to class four are admitted in government schools. The students in government schools are provided a lump sum of Rs 1,500 per annum by UNHCR. But those students who are studying in a private school in class five to eight are eligible to receive tuition fees of Rs 175 per month and Rs 1,000 for scholastic materials per annum and Rs 1,000 for new admission charges. UNHCR does not provide any assistance up to class four. Similarly the students of class nine and ten receive tuition fees of Rs 225 per month, Rs 1,000 for scholastic materials per annum and Rs 1,000 for new admission charges.

Medical Assistance

The Afghan refugees in Delhi availed the facilities of government hospitals and health centres. The UNHCR’s New Delhi office prepared a list of recommended government hospitals. In addition to the government facilities, UNHCR provided limited medical assistance through a project implemented by the Voluntary Health Association of Delhi (VHAD). Primary Health Care Centres have been established by VHAD where the refugees get treatment free of cost. At this centre, a nurse and one interpreter are available In case there is a complicated medical problem and the centre can not treat a patient, the case is referred to a nearby government hospital. The refugees utilised the medical facilities available at the Municipal Corporation Dispensaries (MCDs) in their neighbourhood. In case of emergency, the
refugees could use Emergency Services of government hospitals which are open 24 hours.

In some cases, UNHCR reimburses the medical bills. But, reimbursement of bills for medication, investigation etc. are restricted to those who are seriously/chronically ill or the handicapped. No reimbursements are available for those suffering from minor illnesses.

With regard to Afghan refugees in New Delhi, who are skilled and educated, a long-term solution needs to be found because they do not have the option to go to camp. In the case of unskilled and uneducated Afghan refugees, neither repatriation nor resettlement in another country is possible in the near future. Therefore, the office of UNHCR is endeavouring to integrate them locally through the income-generating and skills-training programmes which is a right approach for a long-term solution.

Afghan Refugees in Iran

Iran with Shias as majority shares its 850 kilometre border with Afghanistan.\(^{52}\) It is rich in oil resources which constitute its primary source of exports and foreign exchange earnings.

The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 followed by prolonged civil war created a huge refugee problem to Iran with nearly 2 millions of Afghans seeking refuge in that country. At present, the Islamic Republic of Iran hosts

\(^{52}\) Kurian, n. 3, p. 835.
an estimated 1.4 million Afghans, 580,000 Iraqi refugees, and some 40,000 other refugees including Tajiks, Bosnians, Azeris, Eritreans and Somalis.53

The history of refugees in Iran, particularly those from Afghanistan, has been different from other refugee situations. First, there is the sheer number of people involved. Second, most Afghans have been absorbed into local communities in sharp contrast to other regions such as central Africa where refugees live in dirty and broken camps.54 Absorption of refugees is the UNHCR’s preferred solution but, only few governments are willing to undertake such programme and as such Iran is one of the few recipients of UNHCR’s acclaim as the world’s most generous country in granting asylum over the past ten years. According to Soren Jessen PTRSEN, a senior UNHCR official, Iran not merely granted shelter to a large numbers of Afghans but also allowed refugees to integrate with its society, rather than forcing them to return home.55

However, on the other hand, U.S, Department of State, in a report on human rights practices in Iran stated that:

The government’s human rights record remained poor. The government restricts the right of citizens to change their government. Systematic abuses include extra-judicial killings and summary executions; disappearances; widespread use of trotter and other degrading treatment; harsh prison conditions; citizen’s privacy; and restriction of the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association,

religion and movement. The government manipulates the electoral system and represses political dissidents. 56

During 1979-80, approximately 2,00,000 Afghans had fled to Iran. As Afghanistan got entrapped in a proxy war between the then super powers—USSR and USA—the number of refugees kept climbing. In 1983, approximately 500,000 Afghans had crossed into Iran.57 As a result, UNHCR started negotiating with the Iranian authorities in order to provide assistance to Afghan refugees. A plan was initiated to establish ten villages for 5,000 refugees in the rural areas.58 Accordingly that plan was completed by 1984, and further number of villages were increased.

Moreover, during that period Iran followed an Open-door policy for Afghans and treated them with a generosity of spirit. As one British NGO official said, "it has also always been at or near the top of the league table in welcoming and helping refugees". 59 One reason for Iran's generous posture could be the religious bond with the neighbouring Afghan, especially as a newly installed Islamic regime in Iran.

Several refugee camps were established with the co-operation of Iranian authorities. The Afghan refugees were provided subsidised food, health and education packages and many refugees, including women were provided the facility of local employment. The education and employment opportunities to women exposed to the workplace, as a result it became very difficult for them

57 U.S. Committee for Refugees, n.20, p-70.
58 ibid.
59 Wilkinson, n.54, p-1.
to resettle in a traditional Afghan society, if and when they returned home. Approximately 20,000 Afghan refugees are currently housed in camps in Iran. In a significant development, the vast majority have been allowed to mix freely in Iranian society and for many years benefited from state education, medical facilities and access to employment. One result of this has been a significant improvement in the status of Afghan women in Iran, both in their own eyes and their relatives.

Among the governmental and non-governmental organisation (NGOs) provided valuable support are the Islamic Republic of Iran Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Training International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Volunteers (IUNV) have be supporting UNHCR. Similarly, in Afghanistan also several international and local voluntary agencies, and local authorities are involved in implementation of Quick Impact Projects. Some of them are International Assistance Mission (IAM), Independent Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs (IBHI) International Rescue Committee (IRC) Danish committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (SACAAR), MEDAIR, the WHO, and the WEP. The number of NGOs working in Iran are relatively less. The government of Iran has not felt the need to involve NGOs in a large number because of its confidence to handle the refugee influx on its own. But later on, Iranian government realised the financial burden associated with refugee crises which donor governments and humanitarian

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60 UNHCR, Funding and Donor Relations: Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration of Afghan Refugees (Geneva, 1998), p.3.

61 ibid.

62 ibid.
agencies normally sustain. Then, the Teheran government signalled to welcome a larger role by outside agencies.

**UNHCR’s Assistance for Basic Needs**

A UNHCR’s office was established in Iran in October 1984, after prolonged discussions between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and UNHCR. In 1984-1985 the number of Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran was estimated around 1.8 million. Around half of them were residing in the provinces of Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan. The remaining 50 per cent were living in 10 other provinces. A total of $3.5 million was apportioned for assistance to Afghan refugees in Iran for the year 1983. Where as in 1984 UNHCR increased its budget for them. Since, the refugee number went up, the next year in 1984, the UNHCR responded accordingly in increasing its financial budgets to $7.5 million. Its assistance programmes were implemented by the Council for Afghan Refugees (CAR) in Iran. Out of UNHCR sanctioned funds, portion was channelled to the emergency Fund in order to provide tents to meet the urgent needs of new arrivals as well as basic relief items for refugees. The CAR implemented its programmes in the area of health, nutrition, water and sanitation, reception infrastructure, household and personal equipment, transport and logistics, agriculture and livestock, skills training and self-help activities. The assistance programmes of UNHCR for Afghan in Iran was continued during 1986 with the principal component of assistance channelled to the provision of supplies and services, although the

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63 UNHCR, n.48, p.33.
64 UNHCR, n.51, pp.30-31.
65 UNHCR, n.40, p.33.
office of the UNHCR had developed and expanded activities encouraging self-sufficiency. By the end of 1986, the number of Afghan refugees in Iran was estimated $2.2 million. During that period, a total of $5 million was obligated for assistance by UNHCR, mainly in the sectors of health, water and sanitation.\textsuperscript{66}

An amount of $14 million was spent in 1987 mainly in the areas of health, water supply, agriculture and vocational training.\textsuperscript{67} The High Commissioner continued his programme in Iran throughout the year 1987-1988.

Furthermore, in the health sector, UNHCR assistance comprised training of Afghan health workers and birth attendants, provision of drugs, medicines, health kits, X-ray units etc. More than six sites for potable water were developed. In addition, other assistance included logistic support, sewing and carpet-weaving training for Afghan women, construction of bakeries, bath houses, primary schools and teachers, the procurement of paper for books and the construction of roads to enable access to refugee settlements. Thus, the total amount spent in 1988 by UNHCR was $10.6 million.\textsuperscript{68}

In 1989 and 1990, new arrivals were not reported and the refugees number remain constant over 2 million. UNHCR’s assistance to the Afghan refugees was aimed at extending and improving the rural health delivery infrastructure, water and sanitation systems, access roads, educational facilities

\textsuperscript{66} UNHCR, n.53, p.21.
\textsuperscript{67}UNHCR, n.53, p.27.
\textsuperscript{68} ibid., p.34.
and some income generating activities. During 1989, an amount of $13.7 million were spent in providing assistance to Afghan refugees.69

**Assistance for Repatriation**

A comprehensive programme review was undertaken to strength the durable-solution as a part of UNHCR assistance activities and to develop an inter-agency approach. In that regard, a joint UNHCR and WFP mission as well as a WHO consultancy mission visited Iran during the later part of 1986. As a result, apart from emergency programme, strong emphasis was given to preparations for repatriation by the end of 1987.

However, the absence of a durable solution to the problem of Afghan refugees, in terms of political settlement remained the major obstacle in their large-scale return during 1990. But in order to promote such return UNHCR and WFP launched a pilot repatriation project for the United Nation Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes Relating to Afghanistan. According to that pilot project, every family was receiving a cash of Rs. 3,000 and 4 kilos of wheat against their surrendering of ration card.70 The main purpose of that grant was to facilitate refugees travel to Afghanistan. For that purpose UNHCR was required additional staff to monitor the repatriation programme.

In 1988 UNHCR and International Organazaiton for Migration (IOM) jointly operated a ferry crossing at the Milk border near Zahedan in Iran for

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69 ibid., p.25.
70 UNHCR, n.60, p.31.
returnees to Farah and Nimorz provinces. Transit facilities were established for returnees from Iran proceeding through Turkmenistan to destinations in northern Afghanistan. This transit operation was immediately launched once the Afghan authorities agreed. UNHCR was emphasising shelter assistance in returnee areas, besides potable water supply, irrigation and agricultural rehabilitation. Minor road repairs were undertaken when necessary to keep routes open to returnee areas. UNHCR launched these projects primarily in the provinces bordering Pakistan where refugees were willing to return.

In addition to the pilot project, UNHCR established a network of in-country transit centres, border-exit stations and organised internal transport. The internal transport programme was carried out by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). But, the number opting to benefit from the repatriation assistance package remains limited, owing in part to the continued instability in Afghanistan. No doubt the refugees had already started returning home even before the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. But, the repatriation programmes pick up a great movement after the communist government finally fell in April 1992. It was estimated that the number of spontaneous returnees during 1992 was about 4,00,000. Further, approximately 2,500,000 Afghans remained in Iran on 31 March 1993.

Similarly, in 1994 also, it was planned to repatriate around 4,00,000 Afghan refugees from Iran. But the factional fighting that broke out in Kabul during January 1994 adversely affected the repatriation programme. This is substantiated by the statistics as only 2,26,669 persons returned to Afghanistan.

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71 Colville, n.10,p.4.
from Iran in 1994, which was below the originally projected figure of 4,00,000. Out of that returnees, 121,402 were provided assistance by UNHCR at the border exit points, and 105,267 persons were returned spontaneously. 73 At the end of 1994, approximately 1.6 million refugees remained in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is noteworthy to mention here that the maximum return from Iran was to the western provinces of Afghanistan the most seriously affected by the ongoing conflict in Kabul. About 1,95,000 Afghan refugees were repatriated in 1995 of which 92,000 were assisted by UNHCR. But in 1996 less than 10,000 Afghans could be returned from Iran. 74

Simultaneously, the assistance projects for returnees in Afghanistan continued to be structured around Quick Impact Projects (QIPs). The reintegration activities focused on the survival and needs of those living in provinces and receiving refugees. QIPs were centred on increasing the rural drinking water supply in the eastern provinces and improving the irrigation supply in the south-east of Afghanistan. Besides, income-generating projects for women, widows and the disabled were also started. The UNHCR in cooperation with WFP, provided 10,000 families in the western provinces food and tools to reconstruct their homes.75 In 1995, a total of 386 QIPs were implemented across Afghanistan by the five UNHCR sub-offices.76

The office of the High commissioner continues to assist the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran through various health, education and income-

75 ibid.
76 Five UNHCR’s sub-offices in Afghanistan were in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Mazar-i-Sharif.
generating projects that meet the requirements of the refugees. It has introduced some new assistance measures in the education sector to support the efforts of the government to ensure that primary and secondary education continues to be extended to non-camp refugee children. However, since October 1979 to till date, the UNHCR has alone spent over $150 million in Iran. 77 The Afghans have the unfortunate distinction of being UNHCR’s largest single refugee caseload in the world for the 17th year in succession. 78 At present around 1.4 million Afghan refugees remain in Iran. 79

However, by increasing its presence and activities in the key areas of the country, UNHCR believes that it can contribute to the stabilisation process and help to establish viable living conditions for the Afghan population. Indeed, such initiatives are a prerequisite for the repatriation and reintegration of refugees who remain in exile. The experiences of UNHCR reveal that there is no necessary correlation between rehabilitation and return. In some parts of the country, reconstruction activities were initiated as a means of promoting repatriation but the homeward movement was blocked by other factors such as land tenure disputes or tribal ethnic and religious differences. As a result, the focus of UNHCR’s activities has shifted to areas where repatriation is already underway and where returnees and other local residents together can be the driving force of the rehabilitation process and a leading partner in the identification, planning and implementation of development projects. The need to support the choices of returnees and other beneficiaries, rather than imposing priorities upon them, is important for Afghanistan. Afghanistan is

77 Colville .n.10, p.2.  
78 UNHCR , n. 60, p.3.  
79 ibid.
characterised by strong communal loyalties and an entrepreneurial culture. Recognising the realities of the situation within their homeland, the Afghan refugees in Pakistan have developed their own repatriation strategy. Some of the men have decided to go back to Afghanistan to prepare the land and rebuild their houses, while others work for wages in Karachi or in the Gulf countries leaving the women and children in the social and material safety of the refugees camps. Given the uncertain conditions of life in Afghanistan, such strategies are a positive sign of the refugees interest in returning to their own country.