

Decades of war creates refugees

The rivalry between East and West has been played out in Afghanistan for the past two decades. The resulting war, instability and human rights abuses have created over six million refugees.

Sami Aziz

I used to be the Deputy Editor of *Voice of the Fatherland*, a journal published by and disseminated among Afghan refugees. Afghanistan had one of the highest proportions of refugees per head of population: nearly six million people were struggling in appalling conditions in Pakistan, Iran and neighbouring countries. The journal was targeted at them, inviting them to come back and participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The regime had a reconciliation policy and was trying to find an Afghan solution to the Afghan crisis. To some extent, credit is due to that regime for introducing law and order to the country and for considering issues of women's equality. Their intentions were good: to help Afghanistan find a respectable place in the international community and to kick-start the economy.

But in 1992, the Government collapsed, and the crisis and chaos in the country deepened. At the time, I was abroad on a short holiday and, as Deputy Editor of a journal linked to the Government, was told that it was not advisable for me to return to Afghanistan, so I came to Britain.

Afghans have not been lucky in recent decades: they have had 23 years of continuous civil war. The rivalry between East and West during the Cold War, between the Russians and NATO, was acted out in Afghanistan. Different sides supported different factions. The scale of the problem created is easy to see. Before, the Ministry of Defence found it difficult to afford 1,000 rifles or shoes for its soldiers; but then suddenly the country was armed to the teeth. For every Afghan, there was a landmine; almost one in two Afghans had a Kalashnikov. In Afghanistan, you could find an enormous quantity of weapons from different countries – Russia, China, Egypt, America, Britain, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. Nearly 1.5 million Afghans lost their lives or were maimed as a result of clashes between the different groups opposed to the Government. The tragedy was never-ending, and the main losers were Afghans themselves.

After the withdrawal of Russian troops in 1989, international interest in Afghanistan absolutely vanished. The Afghans were left to come to terms with their grief and to put the pieces back together. But Afghanistan did not have the ability to put its destroyed infrastructure back together, to revive its economy, to create the fabric of society. Its difficulties were compounded by additional issues: the local players and neighbouring countries all became active in different parties and groups, creating a power struggle, all fighting for different reasons.

Disaster struck when the Taliban emerged in Pakistan and came to Afghanistan. Life was appalling under the Taliban, particularly for women. No information came out of Afghanistan as journalists were barred. But nobody from the outside world was interested anyway – the international community no longer considered Afghanistan relevant after the influence of Russia there had been checked. As a result, lots of people from different parts of the world found sanctuary in Afghanistan. They could hide there and carry on whatever activities they wanted. Resistance was impossible: the people of Afghanistan were struggling to find just a little piece of bread on which to survive. Resistance from the West would not work: it has to come from inside Afghanistan.

For Afghanistan to survive, it is imperative that the international community takes its responsibilities seriously and not withdraw from the country. If it does, there is a real danger that Afghanistan will plunge into a third epoch of civil war. The warlords are still very active.

A country like Afghanistan, ruined by international players, not by Afghans, which has been at war for 23 years and which has no infrastructure, cannot recover within a month or even a year. It will take years to recover and require a strong, genuine commitment from the West. So far, that commitment has been just in words. Lots of financial assistance has been offered to Afghanistan,

but it has never materialised. Even then, most of the help promised has been humanitarian hand-outs not the kind of long-term projects that will empower and enable the Afghan economy.

Afghanistan has never had a proper industry or infrastructure to help build its economy. Any investment in projects that bring prosperity, money and jobs is welcome. The imminent task for Afghans is for them to put down their guns and pick up a shovel and start rebuilding the country.

I was extremely lucky when I came to Britain. I had no difficulties when I arrived here, I was not the victim of any sort of racial harassment. As a community representative now, I had deep concerns about a backlash or reprisals against Afghan asylum seekers and refugees after September 11th. But apart from a couple of minor incidents, the public response has been very good. I received more than ten 'phone calls making sure that we were okay, and the Afghan Association has received more volunteers. It indicates that public support is there and that people are understanding: it's not as though all of them believe the tabloid newspapers. Public opinion generally believes that people who need protection should be offered protection.

Indeed, the media campaign against refugees makes a mountain out of a molehill. My main recommendation would be more to politicians than to the media. Politicians should not use words that provoke people and they should be brave enough to stand up against racists and some elements in the media, who are damaging the peaceful and tolerant way of living in this country.

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