

The social integration of Afghan Refugees and the stabilization of peace in the region

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While displacement of civilian population is probably one of the prevailing outcomes of armed conflict, the importance of solving the displacement issue in post-conflict societies had not been sufficiently given attention in the conventional thought of the peace building. In 2009, the report of the U.N. Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict emphasized the importance of solving the issues of displacement – particularly those fled to the neighboring countries – and the social integration of returnees to facilitate the peace building in the post-conflict societies. This report also touched upon the importance of the regional approach of the peacebuilding.

Afghanistan is the country in Asia-Pacific Region which experience a most prolonged conflict and a massive outflow of her population as refugee to neighboring countries. At the peak, as many as six million Afghan population took refuge in neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran. An UN-led repatriation programme began when Taliban regime was toppled out of the power by the invasion of the American forces and its allies. For the new rulers of Afghanistan, repatriation of refugee from neighboring countries was considered as a token of the legitimacy of the newly installed regime under the invaders. However, the repatriation turned out to be unsuccessful as the many of the returned ended up with being the internally displaced population in Afghanistan. Most of the Afghan populations who repatriated to their home country after 40 years exile found impossible to reclaim their land and property that they believed to have possessed as they were taken by their compatriots who remained in Afghanistan during the conflict.

Meanwhile, the situation of the countries hosting a huge number of Afghan refugees is equally volatile. Particularly, Pakistan has suffered from the frequent occurrence of the peace-threatening events ranging from the terrorist attack of fundamentalist groups to the border conflict with India over Kashmir, while it continues to host millions of Afghans either as refugees or illegal immigrants. Pakistan has taken an elastic approach not to overwhelm Afghanistan by the refugee repatriation while not being deprived of the sovereignty in dealing with Afghan population in the territory. Social integration is one of the means in the management of Afghan population.

Now that 40 years has passed since the first batch of Afghan refugee sought asylum in neighboring countries, permanent solutions for the Afghan refugee problem must be sought with the help widely from the international community. Considering that Afghans are now in their second or third generation in the places of their asylum, a full repatriation seems neither feasible nor realistic. Pakistani PM, Imran Khan has initiated a discussion to consider provision of Pakistani citizenship for the Afghan refugees born in Pakistan but has faced a lot of objections. A fair burden sharing must be sought in Asia Pacific region for achieving a successful solution for Afghan refugees.