World must act and deliver for Afghan refugees, says UN chief

By Christopher Reardon in Islamabad, Pakistan, 17 February 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/2/5e4b57e14/world-must-act-deliver-afghan-refugees-says-un-chief.html>

At the Refugee Summit in Islamabad, leaders celebrated the enduring generosity of Pakistan and Iran in hosting Afghans – and urged other nations to do more to sustain them.

The world must step up and do more for Afghan refugees, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said today, calling for greater solidarity and support amid one of the world’s largest and longest-running refugee crises.

“Afghanistan and its people cannot be abandoned,” Guterres said. “Now is the time for the international community to act and to deliver.”

Guterres spoke this morning at the start of a two-day conference about the fate of millions of Afghans living as refugees, just as word of a possible peace deal offered a fresh glimmer of hope.

Four decades of bloodshed have left millions of Afghans in exile, with neighbouring Pakistan and Iran showing tremendous generosity and hospitality through the years. Yet the world’s attention – and crucially, its funding – has shifted to other corners of the globe as massive numbers of people fled places like Syria, South Sudan, Myanmar and Venezuela.

Taking in so many Afghan refugees has put an undeniable strain on host communities in Iran and Pakistan, which are currently home to 90 per cent of the 2.7 million Afghans registered as refugees worldwide.

But hosting Afghans has also brought benefits, said Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, as refugees and hosts forged closer ties in various spheres of life. “This is a remarkable relationship that has endured,” he said.

One “pleasant side effect”, Khan added on a lighter note, is the way Afghan refugees learned to play cricket from their Pakistani hosts. “But the embarrassing thing is that their under-19 cricket team beat Pakistan’s under-19 cricket team!”

Imran Khan, Pakistan's Prime Minister, speaks at the Refugee Summit, where leaders recognized Pakistan and Iran's generosity as host countries and urged more support for Afghan refugees and their hosts.

Imran Khan, Pakistan’s Prime Minister, speaks at the Refugee Summit, where leaders recognized Pakistan and Iran’s generosity as host countries and urged more support for Afghan refugees and their hosts.

Iran and Pakistan have each taken steps to ensure that refugees have access to public schools and government health-care systems. Dating back many years, these initiatives helped light the way for the Global Compact on Refugees, which aims in part to ease the pressures on host countries and enhance refugee self-reliance.

“This is what we are here to mark today,” said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. “The compassion, the hospitality, the solidarity of the people of the host countries – and the courage and resilience of the Afghan people.”

“Our aim is to galvanize more resources and investments [and] widen the circle of partners.”

Grandi and other speakers appealed for more solidarity with Afghan refugees and their hosts.

“Our aim,” Guterres said, “is to galvanize more resources and investments, widen the circle of partners and forge stronger linkages between humanitarian, development and peace investments.”

After decades of conflict, Afghanistan remains a volatile place. More than 400,000 people were displaced inside the country last year – by conflict, drought and other natural hazards. At the same time, just 8,000 refugees were able to return home through the voluntary repatriation programme.

And yet global support for Afghan refugees – and the countries and communities hosting them – has been on the decline. For three years running, UNHCR has received less than half of its required budget for the Afghan situation. These shortfalls, year on year, put a heavy strain on refugees and host communities, as programmes are scaled back, and on host-country governments, which have to deal with the fallout.

Those who pay the biggest price are often the refugee youth. Efforts to educate and empower young Afghans in exile can prepare them to play a leading role in rebuilding their country upon their return. But they require more investment in school infrastructure, teachers and university scholarships.

More international support would also make it possible to scale up training programmes where Afghans and their hosts are learning side by side, developing skills that enable them to earn a livelihood.

“For decades I’ve heard about Afghans as being part of a big political theatre, and that has to change,” said Sania Nishtar, a Pakistani physician who serves as Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Social Protection and Poverty Alleviation. She added: “We need to think of them as people and we need to deploy 21st century solutions.”

Other speakers at the Refugee Summit included Sarwar Danish, Afghanistan’s Second Vice-President; Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pakistan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation.

Ahead of the summit, the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner met on Sunday with a group of 20 refugees in Islamabad, including community elders and promising young university students.

“I’m a child of war. I was born a refugee,” said Zainab Maha Shah, 22, who is now studying bioinformatics at Pakistan’s top-ranked university, Quaid-i-Azam. She is one of around 350 refugees in Pakistan with DAFI scholarships funded by Germany and directed by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

Most of her peers are not so fortunate. Shah and others at the meeting appealed for more scholarships, along with more skills training and more opportunities to earn a livelihood.