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# Pakistan abruptly turns against Afghan refugees, calls for deportations



By [Rick Noack](#)

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KARACHI, Pakistan — There hasn't been a single day over the past two years when Mohammad Abed Andarabi felt at ease. A former prosecutor for the U.S.-backed Afghan government that was toppled by the Taliban, he says he has changed hideouts four times in recent months, at one point only narrowly escaping arrest.

Andarabi isn't running from the Taliban, whose fighters he once helped to put behind bars, but from police in Pakistan — the country where he sought refuge almost two years ago. His visa has expired and, amid a widening crackdown on Afghan refugees in Pakistan, he fears that he, his wife and his five children will be jailed or even sent back to Kabul.

After Pakistan's caretaker government last week abruptly agreed to deport the 1.7 million Afghans who are estimated to live in the country illegally, the Interior Ministry on Tuesday announced a 28-day deadline for them to leave voluntarily, promising a "reward" to anyone who shares information on their whereabouts starting in November. While undocumented refugees from other countries could also be affected, the decision appeared to be primarily linked to growing Pakistani frustration with the Taliban and with the economic burden of hosting millions of Afghans.

This would be one of the largest deportation drives in Pakistan's history. In an interview, Abbas Khan, Pakistan's chief commissioner for Afghan refugees, said the government will prioritize the deportation of criminals and seek to avoid "blind action."

CRIMINALS AND SEEK TO AVOID OTHER ACTION.

But exiled critics of the Taliban fear they might get caught up in the crackdown. The U.N. refugee agency on Monday urged the Pakistani government to prevent the deportation of Afghan refugees “fleeing persecution.”

When the Taliban seized power two years ago, there may have already been over 2 million Afghans living in Pakistan. Many had fled war and hardship years earlier. The Taliban takeover prompted a new influx of more than 600,000 refugees into Pakistan, according to government statistics. Pakistani officials say few other countries would have absorbed so many or shown goodwill for so long.

Many of the refugees have settled in the southern city of Karachi, which was once known as the “city of lights” but now struggles to keep them on, as inflation and surging electricity burden a population that has surged to over 20 million people.

Over the past year, Pakistan’s leadership — which under former prime minister Imran Khan stood largely alone in arguing that the world should give the Taliban a chance — has begun to embrace a very different message. Pakistani officials are now leveling bitter accusations against the Taliban, blaming it for tolerating the presence of Islamist militants who have been behind a string of deadly attacks inside Pakistan.

While some Afghan refugees hoped that Pakistan might finally see them as like-minded allies, they now find they’re instead seen as an extension of the problem. Old resentments are gaining new momentum amid a cratering economy, which is sowing division and desperation. In public discourse, Afghans are increasingly viewed as potential terrorists, criminals who traffic drugs, or illegal workers who steal jobs.

Citing such “social evils,” Pakistan’s caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar recently said his country has “suffered profoundly” from tolerating undocumented refugees.

In an interview, Asif Durrani, Pakistan’s special envoy for Afghanistan, said the United States and other countries are partly to blame. Many refugees fearing persecution came to Pakistan after being promised resettlement elsewhere and were only meant to be “here as transit passengers.” But most are still waiting, he said.

## The warning signs

Although the Taliban decreed a general amnesty for former officials in the U.S.-backed government, many Afghan refugees have reason to be concerned about a forced return to their home country, human rights observers say. The United Nations has documented over 200 extrajudicial killings of former Afghan officials and members of the armed forces since the takeover in 2021. The Taliban government rejects those figures.

The Taliban is now seeking to present itself in a better light. In Karachi, where most arrests of Afghans have been documented to date, the Taliban’s top diplomat is busy these days serving visitors tea and explaining the virtues of forgiveness. The Afghan Consulate in this port city has also hired a lawyer to represent Afghans who are in Pakistani prison for migration infractions, including those who fled Afghanistan because they feared life under Taliban rule.

“We’re absolutely helping Afghans who are in a fight with our Islamic emirate,” Abdul Jabbar Takhari, the Taliban’s acting consul general in Karachi, said in an interview. “The supreme leader said we should forgive.”

Most Afghan political dissidents who initially fled to Karachi after the Taliban takeover spotted the warning signs early enough. They moved months ago to settle in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, a calmer city that appeared to provide a degree of safety from arrest and a better chance of resettlement in Europe or the United States.

But the arrests of those who stayed behind in Karachi, mostly laborers without savings, are a warning of what might happen elsewhere in the country, said Moniza Kakar, a lawyer who represents Afghan refugees in Karachi. Pakistani authorities in Karachi arrested at least 4,000 Afghans and deported more than 2,500 of them from the city over the past 15 months, according to lawyers who represented them.

## Growing desperation

Kakar looked tired as she headed out of central Karachi on the city’s congested highways on a recent afternoon. “These days, people call me at 4 a.m. to seek help,” she said.

Kakar, who works pro bono, said she would not accept money from the Taliban-led government for her work. Among the most troubling cases she deals with are girls and young women who came to Pakistan in hopes of being able to resume their studies or go to school, she said.

“The other day, a 17- or 18-year-old girl said, ‘Don’t deport me; I want to become a doctor,’” Kakar recalled. But Kakar couldn’t help her. The girl was sent back, she said.

When Kakar arrived in an Afghan migrant neighborhood on the outskirts of Karachi, she was swarmed by Afghans desperate to obtain one of her business cards. The neighborhood’s makeshift Afghan bistro flies Pakistan’s white-and-green crescent moon flag at its entrance, but inside, few Afghans still identify with the country.

Decades ago, the influx of Afghans was encouraged by the Pakistani leadership, with Gen. Mohammed Zia ul-Haq allowing millions of Afghans to stay in the country from the late 1970s. Some Afghans in Karachi arrived on travel documents issued in the 1980s by the Soviet Union-backed Afghan government; others were born in the city but never received Pakistani citizenship.

Their presence soon altered places like Karachi and, as Pakistan’s leadership eventually realized, exacerbated the bitter competition for housing and work. By the late 1980s, [Karachi struggled](#) to rein in repeated outbreaks of ethnic riots.

Hajj Mohammad Jan, a 58-year-old Afghan from Kunduz, remembers that period more vividly than his home country — he arrived in Pakistan when he was 13. He and others blame the current tensions on Pakistani governments that provided them with few ways to integrate into Pakistani society, leaving their neighborhoods without schools and other facilities.

“They should finally give us citizenship,” he said.

The latest crackdown suggests that's unlikely to happen. Ahmad Jan, a 30-year-old from Afghanistan's Mazar-e Sharif, told Kakar that police "stole" his brother's registration card, his phone and the money he was carrying. Bystanders weighed in with similar accounts, saying many of them have had to pay bribes to avoid arrest.

## Fears of scapegoating

Irfan Bahadur, a senior Karachi police official, denied that any bribes were paid. In his view, police in Karachi are now the last line of defense against what the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has unleashed.

Local officials blame Afghan refugees for a wave of cheap crystal meth that's wreaking havoc not only in Karachi but across the country. Profits are smuggled back to Afghanistan in stacks of U.S. dollars, destabilizing the Pakistani rupee, officials say.

But lawyers and economists say that's only part of the story and that Pakistan won't overcome its chronic problems unless its leadership takes responsibility. "If you're looking for the main reasons for Pakistan's severe economic stress, you have to look internally," said Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center.

With Pakistan gearing up for elections early next year, Afghan refugees suspect the scapegoating will get worse. "We shouldn't be harassed for something that we're not responsible for," said Taher Sadeed, an Afghan journalist who was detained in Islamabad for overstaying his visa this year but eventually released.

Safia Arify, 32, who only just arrived in Islamabad with her children, worries that she came to Pakistan at the wrong time. Until recently, she was among the last participants in women's protests against the Taliban in Kabul. When she was identified by Afghan officials, she decided to flee.

But shortly after her medical visa expired last month, Pakistani police raided her neighborhood. She managed to lock the heavy iron gate just in time.

"God forbid that I'm deported," Arify said.