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Suspension of Afghan Refugee Repatriation from Pakistan a Short-Term Solution to a Long-Term Problem

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) commends the suspension of the voluntary repatriation programme for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, which had resumed earlier this month, due to the global outbreak of COVID-19. However, as the measures are only provisional, APRRN continues to express concern regarding the appropriateness of the program itself, due to the notable lack of protection available to returnees in Afghanistan. The repatriation program, emergent from a tripartite agreement between UNHCR, the Government of Pakistan, and the Government of Afghanistan, was initiated in 2003, and reaffirmed in July 2019.

The lack of resources in Afghanistan and surrounding refugee-hosting countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan, to adequately prepare for and respond to cases of COVID-19 in the context of the current global pandemic, compounded by limited resources to treat and prevent the spread of the virus, for example, access to health facilities and COVID-19 test kits, leaves refugees and other migrants extremely vulnerable to exposure, often without recourse to adequate healthcare. This is one of many complex and interrelated factors that indicates that Afghanistan is not yet ready to absorb returning refugees.

While the 29 February 2020 Peace Agreement between the United States and the Taliban signals a potential shift in regional dynamics, the upsurge in violence within Afghanistan over the last eight months highlights that country's fragile stability and challenges any guarantee that safe and dignified return is available to Afghans in exile.

According to local and international NGOs based in Afghanistan, returning refugees face considerable challenges, including a lack of access to employment, land, education, identification cards, and health certificates; increasing levels of debt, child marriage, and trafficking; and threats of generalised violence. Additionally, for many refugees, returning to Afghanistan constitutes a secondary form of displacement, placing them in a country they have not lived in for many years, or for some, not at all, and absent the livelihood supports critical to basic maintenance.

APRRN strongly urges the global community, Pakistan—home to more than 1.4 million recognised refugees and 1.3 other Afghans—and other affected nations to progress a multilateral and sustainable solution for Afghan refugees. This should include, but not be limited to:

- Ensuring no forcible returns to Afghanistan take place, regardless of documentation status;
- Ensure that all return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan be informed, voluntary, safe, and dignified;
- Ensure refugees and other migrants in similar circumstances are substantively considered and engaged in all COVID-19 preparedness and response plans as a matter of urgency; and
- Increase global support to refugee-hosting countries such as Pakistan, who have hosted Afghan refugees for over 40 years.

We urge the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan to ensure that repatriation only occurs in an informed, voluntary, and dignified manner, with affected communities occupying a participatory role at each stage.

While APRRN statements are prepared in consultations with APRRN members, they do not necessarily reflect the views of all members.

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is a network of 400+ civil society organisations and individuals from 28 countries committed to advancing the rights of refugees in the Asia Pacific region. APRRN aims to advance the rights of refugees and other people in need of protection through joint advocacy, capacity strengthening, resource sharing and outreach.

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