



Afghan families heading toward a border crossing in Torkham, Pakistan on October 31st, 2023 (Photo by Muhammad Sajjad/AP)

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Pakistan and Iran Deport Thousands of Afghans Amid UN Plea

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In the past 18 days, more than 18,000 Afghan migrants were deported from Pakistan and Iran through three of Afghanistan's border crossings. 14,500 migrants were deported from Iran and 4,000 from Pakistan, although just two days ago Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, asked the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees originally displaced by the war. Pakistan halted its deportation of Afghan nationals on Tuesday, which began when Islamabad initiated the second phase of its highly controversial Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan earlier this month. Reportedly, the Taliban is assisting in the reintegration of these displaced migrants, of whom the UN estimates upwards of 600,000 have passed through Afghanistan's borders so far.

Does Pakistan's Plan Impact Refugees or Militants?



The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, left, shakes hand with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif after their meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan on July 9th. (Photo by Pakistan's Prime Minister Office)

Reportedly, Pakistan is expected to deport around 800,000 migrants in the second phase of its repatriation plan, adding to those who already left the country last November. The Pakistani government estimated there were 4.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan before the operation began, claiming almost 2 million of them were undocumented. The UN currently reports that Pakistan holds 3.2 million Afghan migrants, of whom 76 percent are women.

Filippo Grandi's call to the international community came during his three-day visit to Pakistan, where he met with migrants. Human rights advocates around the globe have condemned Pakistan's plan, and critics accuse Islamabad of taking blanket actions to address a specific problem, which could result in further radicalization and strain the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Grandi's exhortations worked, and Pakistan has stopped deportations for the time being.

Pakistan, notably, did not ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention and is not required by international law to provide domestic protection for refugees.

The deportation plan was followed by the Resolve For Stability security operation announced in late June by Islamabad, which the international community and the Pakistani public have also decried. Islamabad claims these measures will address Pakistan's ongoing security crises. Members of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) have conducted numerous attacks in recent years in northwestern Pakistan. On plenty of occasions, Islamabad has accused the Taliban-led government in Kabul of harboring TTP militants, who reportedly cross over the border to make attacks. The Taliban has denied these accusations.

Some speculate that the deportation is also a response to pressure from Beijing, where Chinese officials have admonished Islamabad for not securing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Although Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently hailed a new era of Pakistani-Chinese cooperation, the Resolve For Stability military operation suggests China needs militant attacks on its workers to stop for Chinese investors to stay.

The newly announced military operation has been met with significant internal resistance; just last week, mass protests against the operation erupted in Pakistan's Swat Valley and Takht Bhai Tehsil in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Reports have also surfaced of mistreatment of Afghan migrants, which the Prime Minister strongly denied.

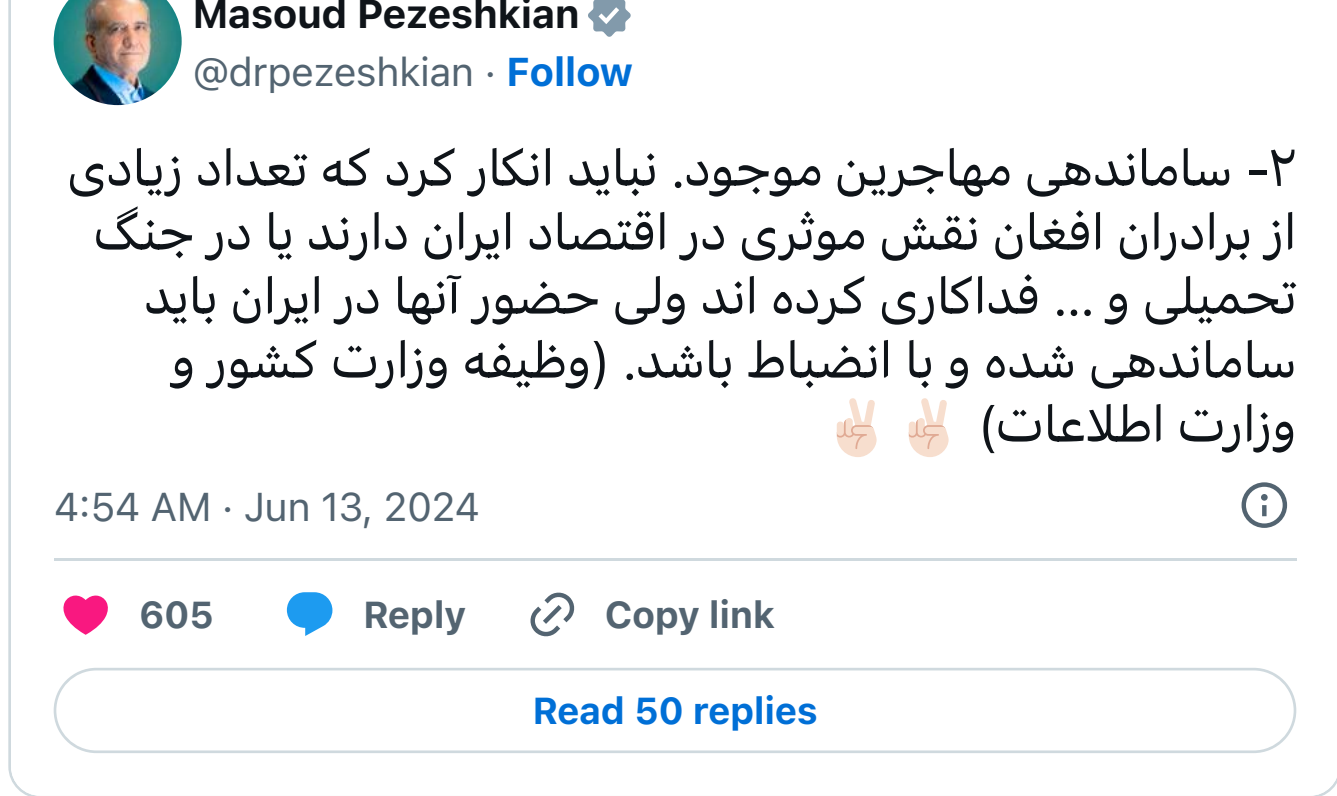
Iran's Afghan Population Flees



An Afghan police officer at an outpost in Farah Province, near the border with Iran. (Photo by Bryan Denton/The New York Times)

Although Pakistan is responsible for most of the deportations, Iran has also been deporting Afghan migrants, and Tehran, like Islamabad, claims their primary concern is *undocumented* Afghan migrants. The topic of migration from Afghanistan made its way into the last election cycle, where immigration was discussed. Asylum-seeking refugees have flooded over Iran's border in recent years, and the UN estimates 3.7 million refugees live in Iran today. The government has forbidden Afghan nationals from living in nearly half of Iran's 31 provinces. Reportedly, mistreatment of Afghan migrants has become common among security forces, politicians, and even civilians. As Foreign Policy recently noted, the popularity of anti-immigration sentiment is likely a response to increased economic hardships across the nation.

The newly elected Iranian President, Massoud Pezeshkian, said during the campaign cycle that the Afghan-Iran borders would be closed and that new procedures for dealing with Afghan migrants would be developed. He acknowledged the economic benefit that working migrants could provide the country and Afghan sacrifices in the Iran-Iraq war but called for more stringent border control. So far, it's unclear what those procedures are, but the waves of migrants returning to Afghanistan could be related.



The Future for Afghan Refugees

Pezeshkian posted on X that the West ought to accept responsibility for its actions in Afghanistan, saying Iran should not pay the price for the 'wrong policies of others.' He added that European countries should either accept some of the immigrants or at least bear the costs of keeping them in Iran.

Economically strained Iran cannot easily bear the brunt of mass immigration from Afghanistan, and Pezeshkian's comments might be justified. It's worth keeping in mind, though, that in addition to Afghanistan's participation in the Iran-Iraq War, Afghanistan and Iran speak two accents of the Persian language—Dari and Farsi—and religious and cultural norms carry across the border. Iran has historically supported the Hazara people, an ethnic group mainly living in western Afghanistan that experienced repression under the Taliban, and Afghan Shiite militants fought for one of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-backed proxy groups in Syria. The two countries have a history of partnership that could persuade Tehran to refrain from volatile actions, like closing the border.

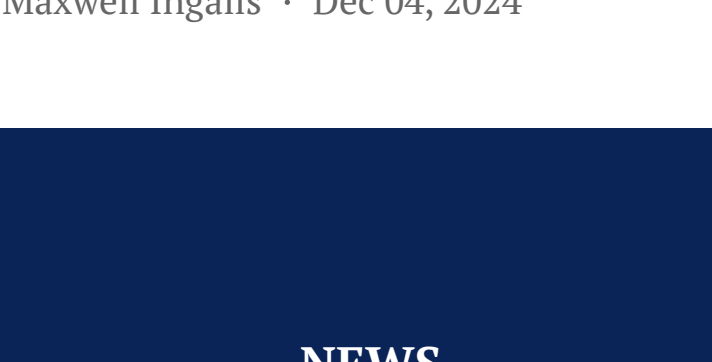
Pakistan's deportations, meanwhile, have halted over the UN's humanitarian concerns, and a senior Pakistani official echoed the Iranian sentiment that the international community should support and take responsibility for the Afghan migrants instead of leaving the burden to Pakistan.

The UN's estimate that Pakistan's Afghan migrant community is 76 percent women and children suggests that Islamabad is not motivated only by terrorist threats, but by the economic pressure of supporting the vulnerable refugees. On the other hand, Afghanistan is entirely unprepared to meet the needs of thousands of new refugees in the midst of its economic and humanitarian crises. The UN is most likely at a standstill between mustering up support for Iran and Pakistan to house the migrants, despite anti-immigrant sentiments flaring in both countries, or letting these migrants continue to be deported to Afghanistan, which could necessitate providing further aid to and interaction with the Taliban, essentially transferring the refugee crisis instead of solving it.

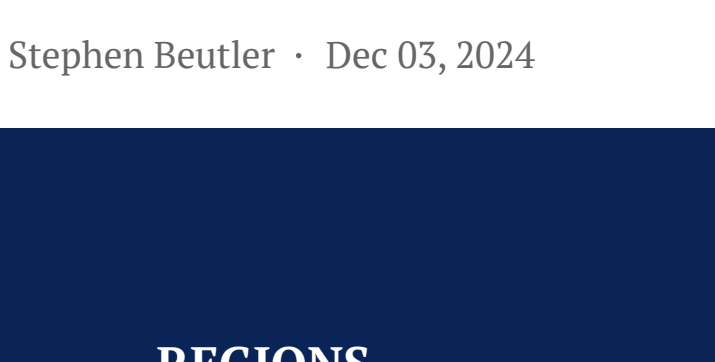
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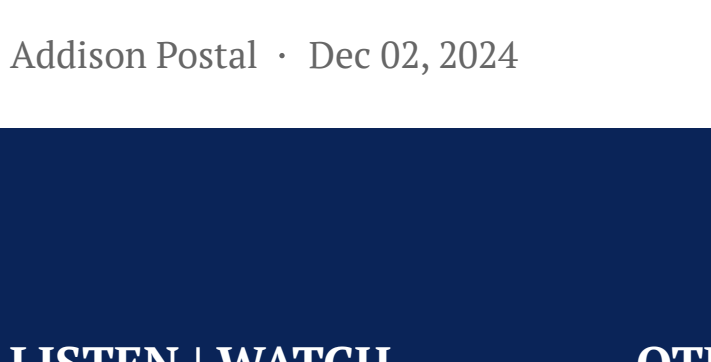
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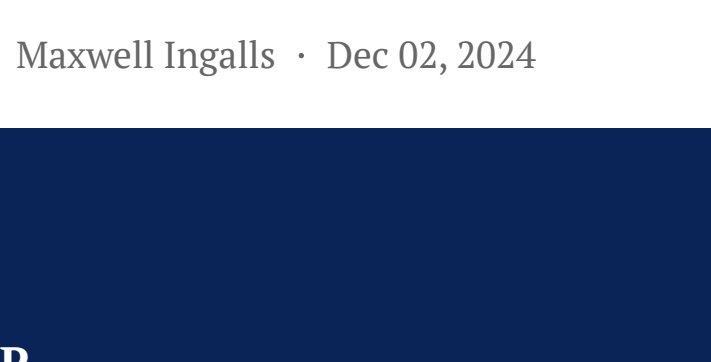
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