

Speech by Palwasha Hassan

The international Refugee Day
Program organized by UNHCR, Peshawar
And Afghan NGO working with Refugees
Sheraz Gathering, Peshawar
20 the June, 2002

Greeting and thanks

Respected Ladies and Gentlemen,

Aslam-ul-Alikum!!!

I am very glad to be with you sharing my thought feeling as refugees in a Day, which is Internationally, recognized as the refugee's day. As you know Afghanistan is one of the Countries with largest number of refugees in the World by having around the quarter of its population uprooted from their places of origin in particular seeking settlement in neighboring countries mainly Iran and Pakistan.

I am also pleased that we Afghan are in historical moment after years of struggle and very close to making political fate of our country and start of a new era of nation building. You are all also witnessing to the world promises in Bonn and Tokyo for supporting Afghan in their new struggle for existence. Hopefully world will stand by its promises to help us in building of our country. In this hope Afghans are already leaving in hundreds crossing the Torkham daily, over crossing the estimate of UNHCR of 400,000 repatriation plans for year 2002.

This is the sign showing that Afghan refugee has never intended to stay here for always the insurance of the dignified living _shelter, food and above all security will take the rest of Afghans to return to their homeland with very good memories of their hosts.

Afghans are very thankful to the people of Pakistan and particular to the people of Soba Sarhad, for their open heartedness, hospitality and brotherly relation with Afghan over the difficult years of exile and away from home. We always did felt being in our second home. Many children are born and raised here. We are also thankful to the international and National NGOs, UNHCR and many individual initiative which were started for the support of refugees either in the form of relief, social services clinics, schools, income generation, protection Psychological well being services etc.

I also like to thank and request UNHCR for more collaborative projects with grassroots Afghan organization for the support of refugee. As this is the way to change the attitude of considering refugee as passive recipients of the aid instead they could active actors.

Proposal on improving situation of refugees

Taking today's opportunity I would like to make two proposals on behalf of my organization other like-minded organizations, and simple of all as Afghan Refugee.

- My first request is to draw attention to the situation of Afghan imprisoned in Adiala Jail and deportation of Afghan over the border against their wishes. The non-recognition of refugee status and specially stopping the registration of refugees for many year has created a legal vacuum, which increase vulnerability on the part of refugee, in particular whenever an incidence of crime has happen. The recent crackdown of police and imprisonment of Afghans in the Pinidi jail, in hundreds is clear example of the situation. On one hand we are hearing that no refugee according to Pak Government policy are supposed to be repatriated by force while on other hand only last few weeks many Afghan are reported to be send across the border for not possessing legal document (passport). This issue is raised by Pak based Human right organization in Particular by HRCP. On the request of participant of a meeting organized by Aurat Foundation and AWSD Mr. Afrasyab Khattak was asked for formally requesting the Pak, and Afghan Government, and UNHCR to draw a joint policy which make the process of repatriation more save and convenient for the refugees and host and recipient countries. So that in one hand the very new Afghan government to born yet will have enough time to absorb the newly repatriated population at least with minimum degree of dignity and living and the other hand to lessened the over years burden of the Pak government economy. And also to ensure the safety and better protection to the refugee while they stay in Pakistan.
- My second request is to the invite the support and attention of UNHCR, NGO community and govt concerned authorities to a very practical need of urban refugees in Peshawar, about the situation in Khyber Park.

Hearing the Khyber Park might sound luxury, while for many Afghan women and children it has been more than that. It means to them a place for breathing, an access for traditional counseling by women to women and space for learning holy Quran, embroidery and a recreation space for their kids. With great disappoint we learned recently that Rs/=3 per adult and Rs/5 per kid is charged for visiting families and that means Rs 18 – 23 per family for a very averages size families of 4 to 5 person. While we as NGO working with refugee women children, simply know that it is just out of their financial convenience. Working with women health and emotional well-being we believe that access to healthy environment and access to other people of same concern who are ready to listen to your problem and tell you about her own experience are very important for reducing the emotional tension of women who lived year of war and been exposed to traumatic experiences or its consequences in the form of domestic violence etc.

The Afghan refugee problem has been one of the largest not because of its physical number but by the nature of the problem. The war and shifting of power, and the ethnic dimension and other reasons make it more difficult, which might mean that on one hand there will be large repatriation, on the other hand many Afghans will be still coming in search of protection as it is beyond realistic imagination that Afghanistan will be safe for every Afghan, unless with passage of time and efforts of its people and international community in particular the neighbors. Those refugees who have to stay need support and protection. It is also important that refugees shouldn't be always looked upon as a burden, but also as an asset. It is good to see that recently some of the printing media has started to look to this aspect stating the quick repatriation of refugees in Soba Sarhad causing recession on the local economy, writing the fact that refugees have been after all contributing to the local middle class economy.

In conclusion I will say that the refugee problem is a human problem whether it takes it as an asset or a burden. And solving the root cause could solve the problem of Afghan refugees and any refugee. In our case the safety and security of Afghanistan will be a reply to all which we are sure for this task we will have the support of international community and specially of Iran and Pakistan.

Believe on us we Afghans will be able to build our country with the grace of Almighty Allah.

So Cha patai yao Afghan we till ba Da Afghanistan we