

Reality-based drama helps Afghans understand refugee rights

CHAKRI, Pakistan, August 18 (UNHCR) – Two young men are walking along the streets of a Pakistani city when they are stopped by policemen. Asked for their identification, they panic and an argument ensues. Eventually one of them produces a card identifying him as a registered Afghan. His friend, also an Afghan, doesn't have documents and is arrested.

This could have happened anywhere in Pakistan, especially in today's heightened security climate. However, this particular scene was part of a "theatre for development" project staged by Struggle for Change (SACH), a Pakistani non-governmental organization working with the UN refugee agency to sensitize Afghans on their rights and obligations as refugees.

Today, the drama team of seven Afghans has come to the village of Chakri, not far from the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. A crowd of Afghan men and boys have gathered and are watching with great interest.

On stage, the detained actor is released after his community representative vouches for him and pays a fine. The young man is let off with a warning: If he is caught loitering without documents again, he could be deported to Afghanistan.

It's a stark message that leaves the audience divided. Many of them had participated in a government registration of Afghans in Pakistan between October 2006 and February 2007, receiving Proof of Registration (PoR) cards that grant them temporary stay until the end of 2009. Others did not register despite repeated reminders and deadline extensions, and are now subject to the laws of Pakistan.

Mohammad Amin, 62, fled his hometown in eastern Afghanistan's Paktya province in 1979. "We are very happy with UNHCR's work to give us PoR cards," he said. "With the card, I can do my business and go to other cities in Pakistan without harassment."

Another spectator, Akber Khan, explained, "The card shows our identity, which we can easily show to the police. But it will expire at the end of next year, and I really don't know what our future in Pakistan will be like. I will repatriate eventually, when there is peace in Afghanistan."

In the post-drama discussion, Afghans without PoR cards wanted to know if they could register for the cards now, but were informed by SACH staff that the exercise was closed and would not be reopened. Other members of the audience asked for more information on repatriation procedures and assistance for registered Afghans.

"We use theatre for development as a tool to raise awareness on a range of issues affecting the Afghan community. It focuses on daily practicalities and is easy to understand," said Khalida Salami, the executive director of SACH, about the community-based, interactive approach. "Our team performs on different topics such as police harassment, torture, sexual and gender-based violence against women and children."

But it is not just the refugees who need information and sensitization. UNHCR and its partners have conducted numerous workshops for law enforcement authorities in Pakistan's major cities to help them become more aware of refugees' situation, rights and obligations.

There are currently some 1.8 million registered Afghans living in Pakistan.

*By Asif Shahzad
in Chakri, Pakistan*