THE AFGHAN TRAGEDY

PARTICIPATING AGENCIES:

British Refugee Council
Oxfam
Christian Aid
Health Unlimited
Ockenden Venture
Afghanaid
Afghan Refugee Information Network
Sandy Gall's Afghanistan Appeal
Catholic Fund for Overseas Development
Help the Aged

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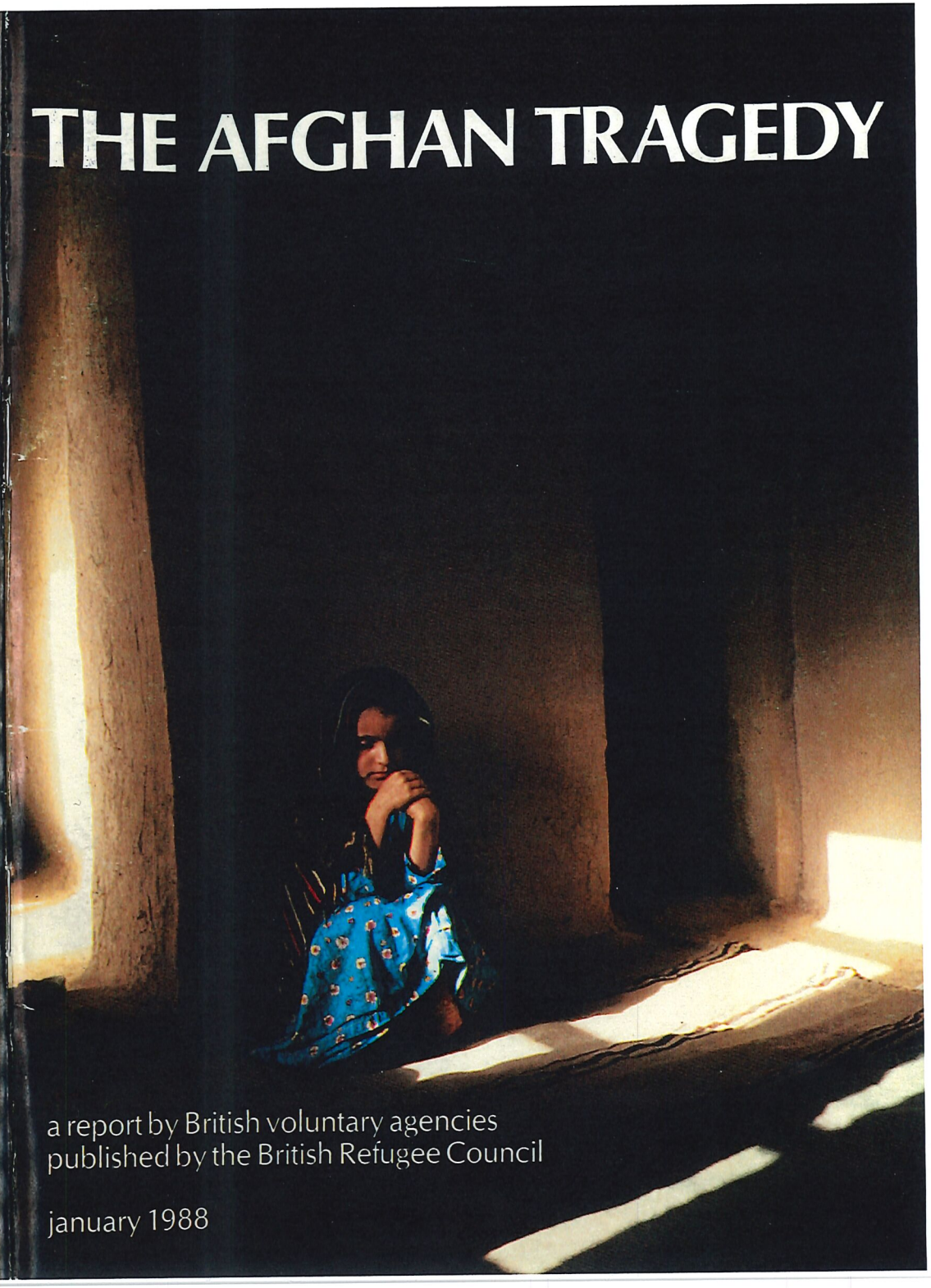

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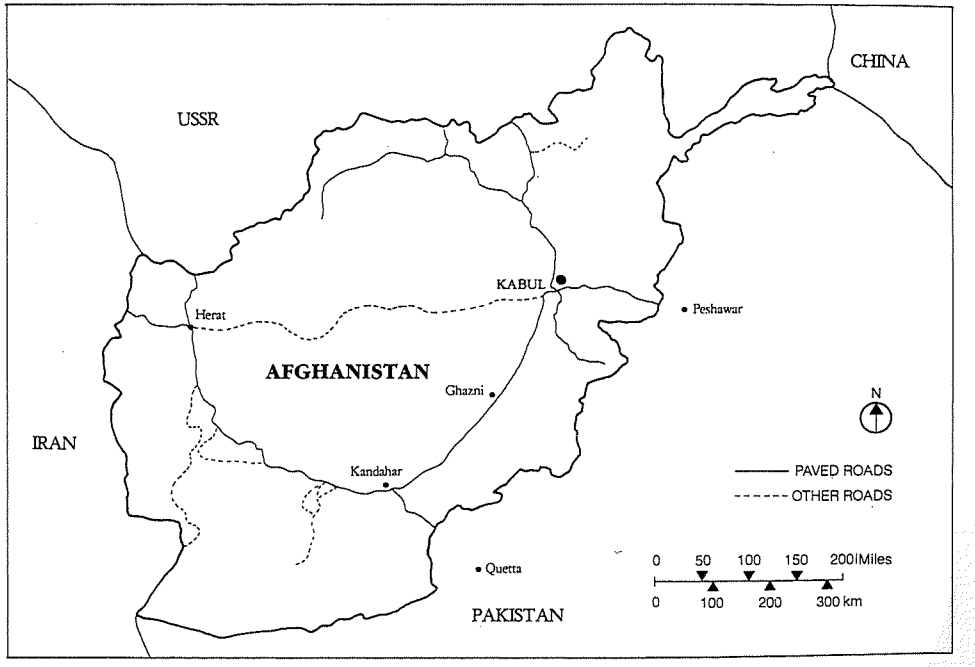
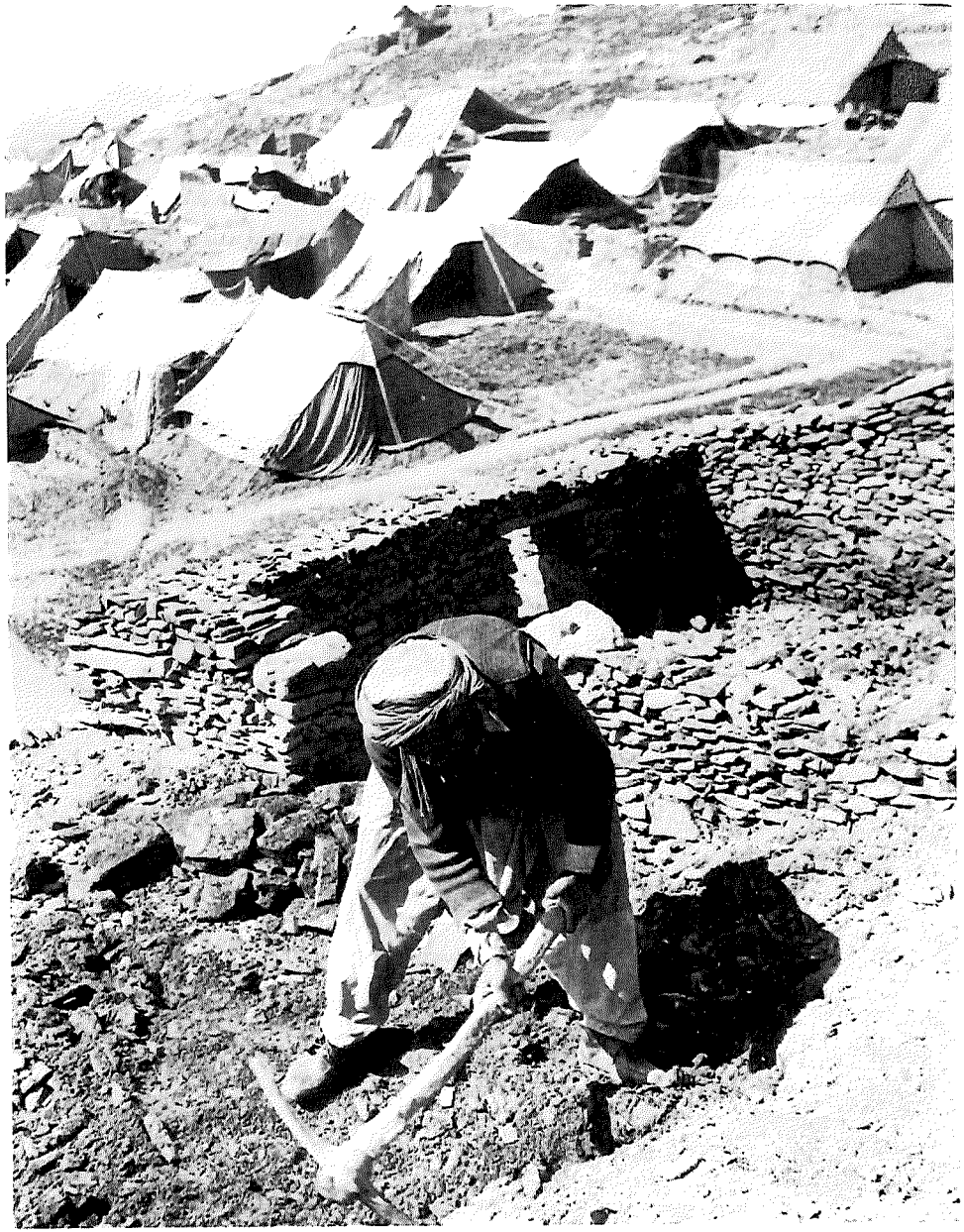




UNHCR

A refugee camp in Pakistan: attempts to build a new life go on

THE AFGHAN TRAGEDY

Some international crises – the Ethiopian famine, for instance – capture the world's imagination and immediately provoke a compassionate and constructive response. The plight of the Afghan people has not been one of these. The conflict in Afghanistan is normally presented in terms of superpower politics, arms supplies, war footage, bickering resistance groups and stalled peace talks. The sheer scale of human suffering and the near-total disruption of Afghan society have been largely overlooked.

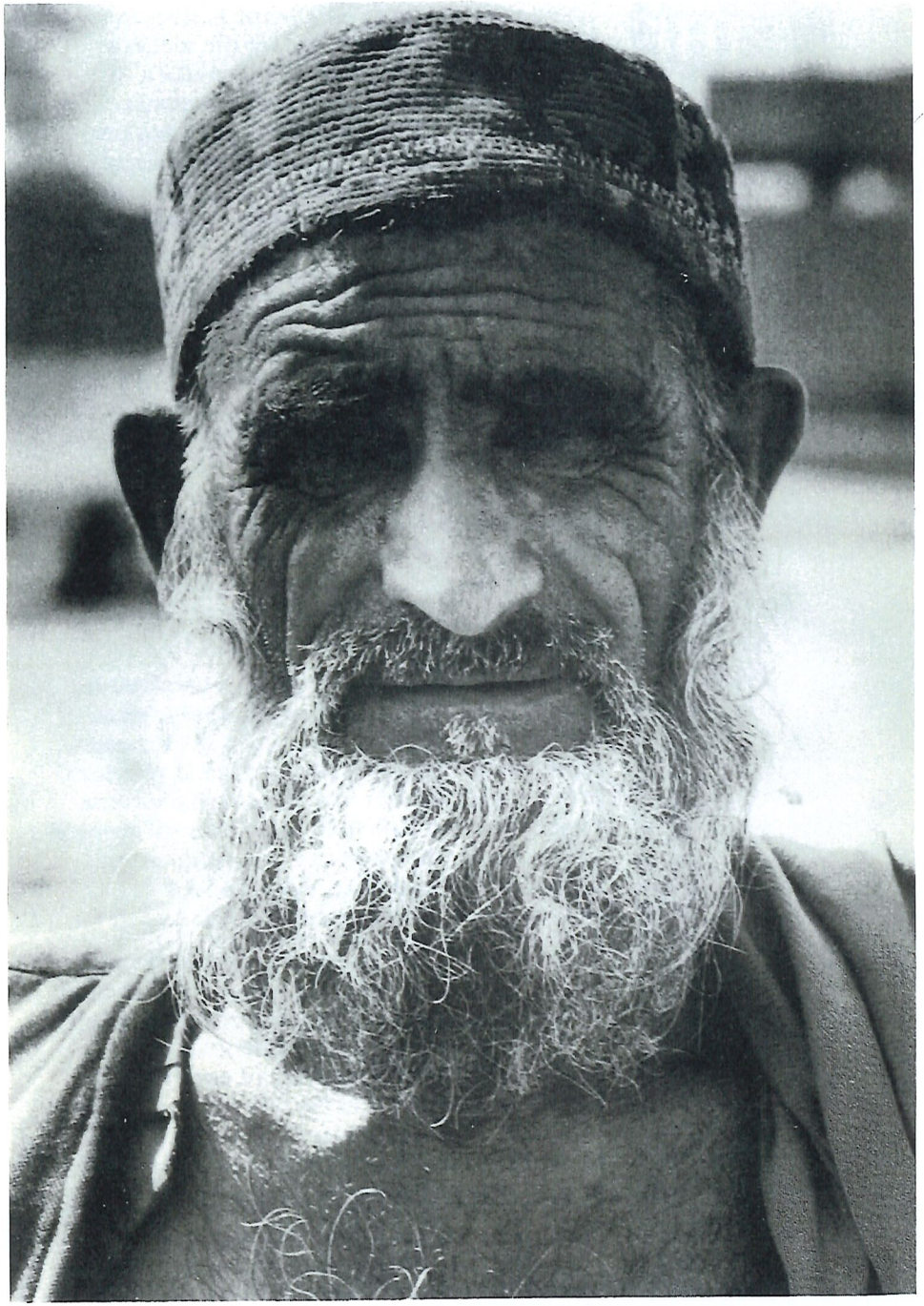
There are many reasons for this, not least the poor public relations performance of the exiled resistance leaders and the natural sympathy of Western liberals for some of the Kabul government's progressive ideas. Support for the victims of the Afghan conflict has been seen as a right-wing cause. But perceptions are gradually changing, and influential voices in the human rights and peace movements are starting to say that the issues raised by Afghanistan can no longer be ignored.

The 10 British voluntary agencies involved in producing this booklet all work with Afghan refugees and displaced people, or with those who have stayed on in their homes in war-torn areas of Afghanistan. The agencies have come together, under British Refugee Council auspices, to try to raise the profile of these millions of ordinary Afghan people and to call for international action on their behalf.

The agencies' recommendations, which can be found at the end of this booklet, were presented to and adopted by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies – an influential forum comprising 81 non-government organisations from 26 countries – in Geneva in October 1987. The recommendations have also been presented to Britain's Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

But the major purpose of this booklet is to bring concerned readers a clear and unbiased description of the largest-scale human tragedy in the world today.

JAMES REED



Mohammed Yusuf did not want to leave his homeland, but eight years of war eventually forced him to become a refugee

TESTIMONY: MOHAMMED YUSUF

"I was a tenant farmer in northern Afghanistan near the Soviet border. I didn't want to leave my homeland – it took eight years of war to make me and my family refugees.

We left our village along with 18 other families, after being bombed every day in retaliation for a Mujahideen attack. It took us six weeks to reach Pakistan. We were bombed twice on the way and ambushed as well. About 60 people in our convoy were killed – men, women and children.

When we arrived, we had to sell our remaining possessions to buy food. Now this money has nearly all gone and we are still not registered as refugees, so we don't receive rations. We hope to find relatives in the refugee camps who might help us. In the meantime we have nothing."

INTRODUCTION: THE SCALE OF SUFFERING

The conflict in Afghanistan, now entering its ninth year, has created the largest-scale human tragedy in the world today.

Afghans make up two-fifths of the world's total refugee population. There are over 5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, and tens of thousands in exile elsewhere. Perhaps 3 million more have been displaced within Afghanistan, forced to move to the towns or to safer parts of the countryside.

This means that around half the country's entire population – 15.5 million at the end of the 1970s, according to government figures – has been uprooted.

Around a million people are thought to have died in the conflict. Tens of thousands of women have been widowed and children orphaned. Countless numbers of people have been crippled or maimed, have been imprisoned or have disappeared.

For the survivors, life inside Afghanistan is a continual and precarious struggle. An estimated quarter of all the country's villages have been destroyed. But Afghans are passionately attached to their land and stay on if they can, seeking refuge in the mountains where they live in caves and try to farm the inhospitable terrain. Despite much-publicised Western backing for the guerilla campaign of the Mujahideen, the civilian population in most of Afghanistan receives virtually no relief or development aid. Only a handful of international voluntary agencies reach them, by running clandestine and dangerous assistance programmes across the Afghan-Pakistan border.

For the refugees, life in exile is a struggle against hardship and demoralisation, in camps in Pakistan which – despite the efforts of the government and the relief agencies – are inadequately serviced and overcrowded, or eking out an impoverished existence in Iran. A whole generation is growing up knowing no other life.

New pressures are also threatening Afghan refugees. As economic recession and – in Iran's case – war take their toll on the host community, hospitality comes under strain. Pakistan is reported to be considering a tougher policy which would confine refugees to designated camps, partly as a result of popular antagonism towards the exiles. Hostility is also rising in Iran.

UN-sponsored peace negotiations have been underway since 1981 but have been slow to make headway. Even if a political agreement is reached tomorrow, enormous problems will remain. How will 5 million people be repatriated and their safety guaranteed? How will the refugees and displaced people be resettled? And – the biggest question – how will Afghanistan's society and economy be rebuilt?

This booklet has been written to draw attention to the immense human cost of the Afghan conflict. It explains how the mass uprooting of Afghans has come about and what it has meant to the people affected. It describes life for the displaced inside Afghanistan and for the refugees, and looks at what is being done to help them, highlighting some of the work of British relief agencies. It examines the prospects for a just and durable solution to the conflict and the immense task of reconstruction that will eventually be required.

Finally, it recommends ways in which voluntary agencies, governments and intergovernmental bodies could do more to assist the people of Afghanistan to sustain themselves and live with dignity, whatever their future holds.

Afghan women in Iran with the last of their possessions

UNHCR

THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT

Although squeezed by British and Russian imperial expansion in the 19th century, Afghanistan was never colonised. It maintained independence and international neutrality. But the Soviet Union has long had a significant influence on Afghan affairs, including the training and equipping of the armed forces.

From the mid 18th century until the early 1970s Afghanistan was a monarchy, ruled from 1933 by King Zaher Shah. In the later years of Zaher Shah's reign, attempts were made at modernisation and liberalisation, including introduction of a new constitution, a freer press and legalisation of political parties.

The reforms opened up domestic tensions in the mid and later 1960s, particularly in Kabul among educated young people. Political movements flourished, including the Communist party which was established in 1964. It subsequently split into two rival groups: the Khalk or ''people'' faction and the Parcham or ''flag'' faction.

In 1973 Zaher Shah was deposed in a bloodless coup and Mohammed Daud, the king's cousin and former prime minister, installed himself as president of a new republic. Daud's government initially included members of the divided Communist party, but these were later eased out as the regime became more and more autocratic. Increasing intolerance of opposition also drove into exile the leaders of Islamic political groups.

Daud was killed in a bloody military coup in April 1978. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) – formed after a temporary reconciliation between the two Communist factions – took power. The leader of the Khalk faction, Nur Mohammed Taraki, became president.

The new Communist regime – drawn from the urban elite – announced an ambitious programme of reforms. Decrees were introduced to cancel rural debt and to redistribute land in favour of poorer households by limiting the size of holdings. A major campaign against illiteracy was launched and reform of the dowry system announced. Though apparently enlightened, the reforms were ill-conceived and insensitively implemented, showing little understanding of the rural way of life. They provoked intense opposition in the countryside and the emergence of armed resistance.

Meanwhile in the towns, political leaders and intellectuals opposed to the regime were arrested and executed or fled, marking the beginning of the refugee exodus. The PDPA government was divided by bitter factionalism. In a bloody upheaval within the regime in autumn 1979, Taraki was killed and his deputy Hafizullah Amin became president.

The refugee exodus began after arrests and executions in the towns and ill-conceived reforms in the countryside

Repression became still more intense under Amin, but failed to stop the spread of opposition. There were mutinies and mass desertions from the army, while the armed resistance in the countryside – the Mujahideen – grew stronger.

HEALTH UNLIMITED

TESTIMONY: HUMA

"I was a schoolgirl in Kabul in 1978 when my father was arrested and imprisoned. He was a businessman, but was known to have anti-government views. I had to take on responsibility for the family.

We could find out nothing about my father. When the Russians entered Kabul the following year, I saw a newspaper photograph of him among prisoners held at Pul-i-Charkhi prison. I asked the authorities about him, but got no response.

I was in my last year at school by then. I began to join in anti-government demonstrations. In 1980 I enrolled at Kabul University to study agriculture. I went on taking part in student demonstrations, though I saw a lot of my fellow-students killed.

Other members of my family were imprisoned. The house was attacked several times. My 10-year-old brother was shot and killed.

The university authorities wanted me to go to the Soviet Union to study for six years. They said it was because I was one of the best students. I refused, but they kept on asking me. When I kept on refusing, they threatened me with prison. At the same time, another of my brothers disappeared.

I decided to leave Afghanistan. My mother and sister wouldn't come; they wanted to stay and search for our missing relatives. I left Kabul in 1984 with the help of my sister's husband. It took us nine days on foot to reach Pakistan."

THE WAR

Soviet forces entered Afghanistan on 27 December 1979, ostensibly under a friendship treaty concluded the previous year. Amin was killed and replaced as president by Parcham leader Babrak Karmal, a former parliamentarian well-known in Kabul, who the Russians hoped would be more acceptable to the Afghan people.

But Karmal was widely regarded as a puppet of the Soviet Union, and his more moderate approach failed to make any headway. The PDPA regime was forced to back down on many of its policies. Faced with continuing party disunity, a meagre base of support, disaffection in the bureaucracy, mass desertion from the army, growing economic problems, and above all the escalating civil war, Karmal's government could only sustain itself in power by increasing dependence on the Soviet military and administrative presence.

By 1986 there were 120,000 Soviet troops in the country, with many others based in Soviet Central Asia, from where they have launched repeated forays into Afghanistan.

The Kabul regime and Soviet forces have tried to retain control of the main towns and roads, and have concentrated on areas of major strategic importance such as the Panjshir valley. However, few parts of the country have been untouched by conflict. Reports from aid agencies estimate that a quarter of all Afghanistan's villages have been destroyed. Supply lines from Pakistan have been disrupted, while shelling, bombing and incursions across the Afghan-Pakistan border have been common.

But the resistance has proved impossible to contain, and the Kabul government now concedes that up to two-thirds of Afghanistan is outside its control.

TESTIMONY: KAMBAR ALI

"I remember the day the war started. I was 18. I lived on my family's small farm in the mountains, in central Afghanistan, and my main job was looking after the sheep. One morning in the mosque, the mullah told us that Kabul, Herat and other towns had been invaded by the Russians, and that young men should join the jihad (holy war) to rid the country of the invaders. Several men from the village left immediately to fight, but I didn't – I had too much to do on the farm.

Several months later, soldiers from Kabul surrounded the village and attacked it. They eventually retreated with three prisoners. A lot of buildings were destroyed, and 26 Mujahideen and 45 government soldiers were killed in the fighting.

Five months later there was a second attack. This seemed better organised. We were bombarded by tanks, helicopters and aircraft, but the Mujahideen who were in the village escaped.

The third attack came a month later. The whole valley of 150 villages was occupied for 20 days. More people were killed and wounded than in both previous attacks. When the soldiers withdrew, they took 120 children with them to be sent to Moscow. They took 35 other people as hostages from the valley, and threw them out of helicopters for everyone to see.

After that, many people left the valley to become refugees. My family stayed on to try to keep the farm going. I decided to join the Mujahideen."

THE MUJAHIDEEN

The Mujahideen claim to control more than four-fifths of the country, and are able to move around most areas, including Kabul, more or less at will. From meagre beginnings they have become an effective military force. They are made up of local groups drawing their support from rural communities and operating mainly in their home areas. Many Mujahideen are part-time fighters who return to their villages between spells of military action.

The Mujahideen are also developing new forms of civil administration in many areas. Government officials and the "khans" or local chiefs have been replaced by Mujahideen leaders who administer taxes, education, justice and other functions through village committees, and are said to be more in tune with the needs and aspirations of rural communities.

The Mujahideen groups are linked with the seven main political parties, each with a different religious and ethnic constituency, based in exile in Peshawar in Pakistan. The parties are the international face of Afghanistan's resistance, and in May 1985 formed an alliance to present a united front against Kabul and the Soviet Union.

However, relations between the parties and the Mujahideen groups inside Afghanistan are ambivalent. Many of the fighters have become increasingly wary of the ambitions of the Peshawar-based political leaders. The fighters have jealously guarded their autonomy in conducting the resistance war, and have become more and more vocal in the debate over the future shape of Afghanistan.

TESTIMONY: A FARMER IN GHAZNI PROVINCE

"There is nothing now because the Russians are just 1 kilometre away from us. We get very little produce from our land because the Russians and the government are bombing our barns and crops. We get less than a third of the crops we used to get. There is not enough irrigation water because there are no young people in the village to clear the channels. Old people cannot do it. The channels have been destroyed by the government and there is nobody to repair them. It's the same in other villages."

DESTRUCTION OF A WAY OF LIFE

The war has devastated Afghanistan's economy and society.

Before the war most Afghans worked the land. About half of them were modest self-sufficient farmers, owning between 2 and 10 hectares. Some land was leased to sharecroppers, and about a quarter of the rural population worked as labourers for other people. But there was no large landlord class, and holdings of more than 100 hectares were rare.

Urbanisation was slower than in most developing countries. There was very little industry and only a very small urban working class.

Water has always been a crucial resource, and a sophisticated system of water management has been developed over the centuries. Irrigated lands could produce two crops a year, watered by permanent streams distributed through networks of small canals. Dry farming lands could support a single crop, if winter snowfalls provided enough water in the spring.

The main crops were wheat, barley, fruit and nuts. Livestock were an important source of meat, milk, oil, hides and wool, much of it produced by the nomads who before the war numbered around 2.5 million.

Until the late 1970s, this pre-industrial economy was able to feed Afghanistan's people, except in occasional years of drought. A cash economy was slowly developing in the countryside. Seeds, fertilisers and other agricultural inputs were provided by the government in part-payment for crops. Dried fruit, nuts and wool were being exported in significant quantities.

Since the war the cash economy has largely collapsed and agriculture has reverted to a subsistence level in many parts of the countryside. Agricultural output has plummeted. In some areas, farming has been completely devastated by the bombing of irrigation systems, fields and livestock. Topsoil left unirrigated has blown away, and drought has increased the environmental degradation. Many of the nomads have had to abandon their way of life because they have lost their livestock.

With trading networks disrupted and transport short, grain and other essential supplies cannot be properly distributed. Bombing of the border zone has dried up imports from Pakistan, and food prices generally have shot up. Though full-scale famine has not yet occurred, there have been severe and persistent local food shortages. Malnutrition has worsened the effects of diseases like tuberculosis, malaria and

THE DECISION TO FLEE

The Afghans' strong attachment to their land means the decision to flee is never taken lightly. But constant fear of aerial or ground attack and persistent searches or other harassment make people decide, eventually, to leave. Reports of atrocities, detention, torture and execution add to their fears.

Men flee to avoid conscription into the government forces, which since 1982 has applied to all males over the age of 15. This has left many agricultural communities unable to support themselves. Their situation is worsened by the disruption of trade routes and closure of bazaars, cutting off supplies of essential goods. Many traders and nomads have been deprived of their livelihood altogether.

There has been large-scale internal displacement as well as mass exile abroad. The decision to flee the country is usually taken only after trying and failing to find safety within Afghanistan. Many people cannot raise the money needed to make the journey to Pakistan or Iran.

There are two kinds of internal displacement. About 1.5 million people are thought to have found refuge in the towns. Kabul's population has trebled since 1978, and there has been similar migration to other cities. Because of the fear of conscription, this movement is mainly of families without their men.

At least another million and a half people – though precise figures are, obviously, hard to come by – have fled to safer parts of the countryside. The war has forced migration to unoccupied and inhospitable high valleys, hill country or distant mountains. This has resulted in wholesale depopulation of many rural areas.

The large-scale exodus abroad was sparked off by the upheavals of 1978-79. The first refugees were mainly urban people fleeing arrest, imprisonment, torture and execution. It was officially admitted that 12,000 people were executed under the Taraki regime, and it is certain that a great number were killed under Amin. By December 1979 there were 402,100 registered refugees in Pakistan.

After the Soviet intervention and escalation of the military campaign, a mass exodus of ordinary rural people began. By May 1980 there were over 1 million registered refugees in Pakistan, and this figure had doubled a year later. By mid-1987 there were 3.15 million registered and an estimated 400,000 unregistered refugees in Pakistan.

Others fled to Iran where there are now between 2 million and 2.25 million refugees. Afghans have also sought refuge in Turkey, India and Western countries.

The decision to leave the country involves long dangerous marches on foot, camel or donkey. Possessions and livestock are sold to finance the arduous journey. Great heat alternates with intense cold. Clothing and bedding are often inadequate, and medical help is rare. Most of the refugees are women, children and the elderly – the least fit to withstand long marches. Their caravans are often subject to Soviet air attacks.

TESTIMONY: GUL JAMILA

"Many tanks came to the village and many aircraft flew overhead. We were working in the fields. We ran behind some trees because the explosions were so near. One hit my two-year-old son and his head was bleeding. I ran to him and pushed my chador (veil) into the hole in his head to stop the blood. In the night a friend took us by truck to the hospital in Jalalabad.

Russian soldiers searched what was left of the houses looking for Mujahideen but didn't find any. Then they went unexpectedly to the ruins of the mosque, where the Mujahideen were hiding. They took them outside and the villagers were forced at gun point to watch them being shot. After this, other Mujahideen came to help us escape and we left the village."

TESTIMONY: HAJ MOHAMMED SHAH

"My family was forced to come to these high pastures three months ago. We used to live in a village lower down the valley but we had to leave because there was so much bombing. Many people have left the village but have stayed in the area. This is our home.

I have 3 jeribs (just over 0.5 hectares) of high land here which I owned before the war. There are many people now living up here as it is much safer, although we do not escape the bombing as we live near a pass.

There are 20 people in my family. We cannot live off this land alone. This year the harvest is bad – there was some rain, but it has been cold and windy. Next year the land will have to lie fallow because we cannot afford to buy fertiliser.

Most of the young men are Mujahideen, but some work as horsemen carrying goods over the passes. It's dangerous with so many aeroplanes. Last year, more than 100 people were killed in the next village down the valley.

We have no medical facilities at all. It is cold up here. We have a lot of sick children at the moment. We don't know what is wrong with them."

LIFE INSIDE AFGHANISTAN

Many people left inside Afghanistan are worse off than those who have taken refuge abroad. Health, education and other basic services no longer exist in the greater part of the country now outside government control.

There is virtually no prospect of relief or medical attention. The collapse of government health services, including disease control programmes, has led to a resurgence of tuberculosis, malaria and measles, made worse by malnutrition. Infant mortality rates and other health indicators have worsened dramatically.

People forced to take refuge in the mountains are often in the worst position. There is less risk of bombardment, but living is precarious with little cultivable land, no irrigation, very limited pasture, scant fuel and a harsh climate. Many families have to live in caves, some even in the open. Isolation from whatever trade routes or bazaars may still be operating means there is little prospect of buying goods, nor is there the cash to buy them.

Those who have taken refuge in neighbouring villages or valleys face the problems of living on other people's hospitality: strain on scarce resources, no means of generating their own income, and ever-accumulating debt.

Bands of orphans and children separated from their parents have been reported eking out a living in the valleys by begging and stealing. This is a disturbing measure of the social disruption inside Afghanistan. Before the war such children would have been cared for by the extended family or community.

Bad though conditions are in many places, especially in the main combat zones, they are not uniform throughout the country. In some areas the economy is working reasonably well. Inns and bazaars have sprung up along the routes used by resistance fighters, army deserters and refugees. The new markets are often controlled by Mujahideen groups who also regulate the movement of grain and the price of goods and services such as transport, as well as setting up basic civil administration.

The new forms of civil administration are rudimentary, fragile, and, like the communities they serve, vulnerable to military attack. But they may provide a basis for reconstruction of Afghanistan's economy and society as and when hostilities end.

HEALTH UNLIMITED

Training Afghan health workers is vitally important so that skills can be spread more widely

ASSISTANCE INSIDE AFGHANISTAN

Efforts to assist people inside Afghanistan are much more controversial than aid to Afghans in exile. A handful of voluntary agencies work inside the country or run cross-border programmes from Pakistan, often operating clandestinely and under conditions of great difficulty and danger. But such assistance is vital to help Afghans sustain themselves in or near their home areas – where they wish to stay – rather than fleeing abroad.

The impact of the agencies operating inside the country is limited in scale but tremendously important for the communities involved. A few clinics staffed by trained doctors and nurses have been set up to provide primary

HEALTH

health care and treatment for war victims. Training of local health workers is emphasised, so that health care can be spread more widely. The skills of local traditional birth attendants or ''wise women'' are built upon to promote better health among women and children.

Afghan medical workers are also being trained in exile to return to Afghanistan and help build up basic medical services. If maintained and extended, their work will eventually contribute to the reconstruction of health services in a peaceful Afghanistan.

EDUCATION

Attempts are also being made to restore education. Schooling has been severely disrupted by the war, and very few Afghan children have received systematic education over the last eight years. However, traditional Islamic schools have remained open in some areas, and about 200 schools are reported to have been set up in resistance-held areas with the help of aid agencies. Some of them have training programmes for local teachers so that eventually a wider range of subjects can be taught than the Koranic studies which form the central focus of the Islamic schools.

ECONOMY

Efforts to rebuild Afghanistan's devastated economy, especially its agriculture, are even more difficult to implement. A number of aid agencies have supplied seeds and other inputs to communities inside the country. Some have given cash to needy households to buy food in local markets, especially in war-torn districts where the need for emergency relief is greatest.

But wherever possible aid is now being chanelled towards rebuilding agriculture and infrastructure. Several agencies have supported a programme to help local communities improve farming and livestock-rearing in eastern Afghanistan. Further assistance of this kind is desperately needed to help more people remain in their home areas and avoid displacement or exile.

JAMES REED

Long delays in fitting artificial limbs add to hardship

TESTIMONY: EMADDUDIN

"I had both my legs blown off by a mine while I was gathering grain for the Mujahideen. They got me to hospital in Peshawar – it was a terrible three-day journey by mule through the mountains.

After many Russian bombardments my wife, children and others from my village fled to Pakistan, helped by the Mujahideen. Those too poor to raise the cash for mules and food had to stay behind, digging caves to hide from the bombing.

My family and the others had to travel by night to avoid bombing, and it was bitterly cold. We were eventually reunited in Peshawar. I had been discharged from hospital because there was no space for me.

We shared one room with cousins in refugee quarters. We were not yet registered, so food rations had to be shared between us. We were always hungry.

I was eventually fitted with two old-fashioned artificial limbs. My family was registered after 10 months and began to get rations. We moved near the Saudi Red Crescent workshop where I've trained to be a tailor.

Three years on, I can just about walk to the workshop with the help of crutches, but the artificial legs need refitting. That will mean a long walk over rough ground to the camp entrance, a bus ride and a long wait for treatment."

LIFE IN EXILE: PAKISTAN

There are more than 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Most of them live in 320 designated camps along the border – nearly three-quarters in North West Frontier province (NWFP) and another one-fifth in Baluchistan. Because of overcrowding, a smaller number of camps have been set up in the Punjab. Many refugees also live outside the camps, mainly in or near urban centres.

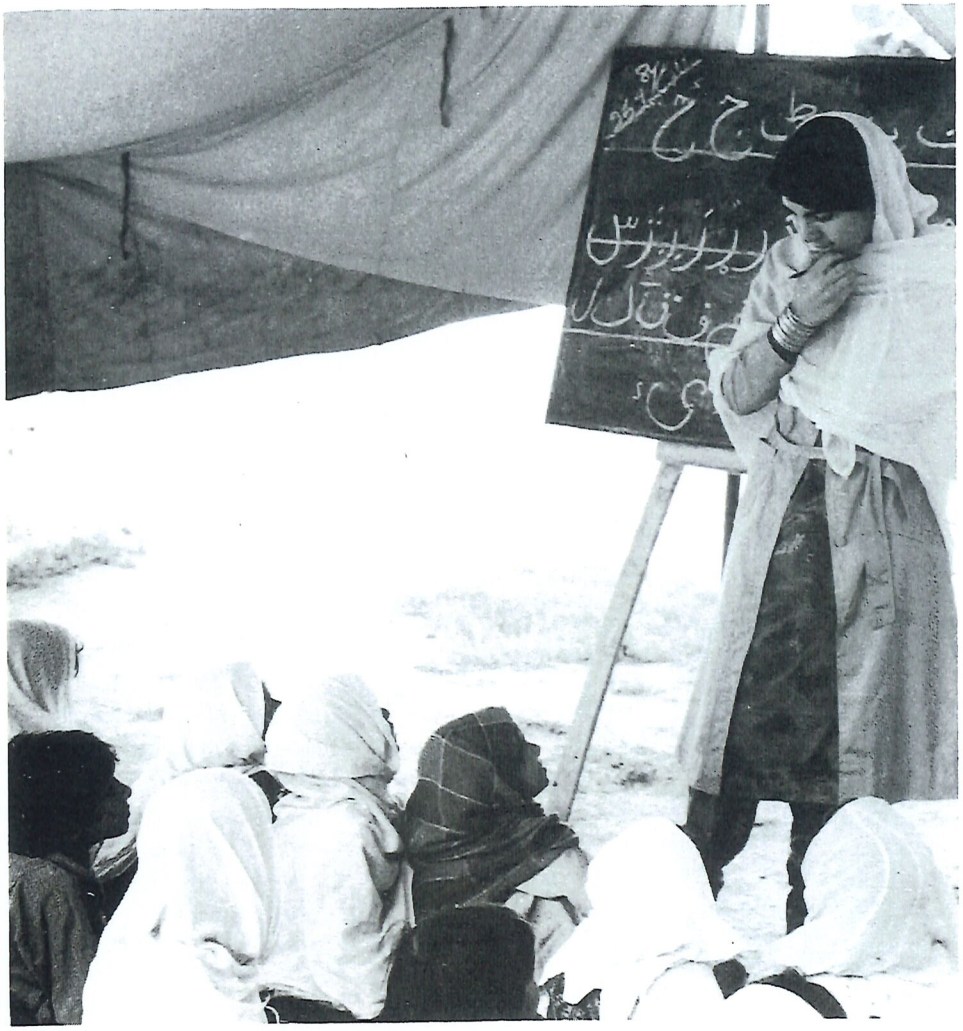
Accommodating so many people has caused enormous problems. Camps originally expected to hold some 10,000 people are occupied by up to 100,000. One camp contains 125,000 people, putting it among the largest refugee concentrations in the world. Overcrowding has placed severe strain on water supply, sanitation, health, education and other services, causing serious and widespread hardship.

As well as the everyday struggle of living in these conditions, life in exile means fragmentation of families and communities, lack of privacy, and the impossibility of maintaining Afghan culture, values and identity. These factors have had a grave effect on refugee morale.

So too has the loss of livelihood. A small number of refugees with sufficient capital have set themselves up as hauliers, traders or artisans. Others who have skills can find employment in the towns. But the vast majority of refugees were previously small farmers who cannot continue their livelihood since they do not have access to land. Freedom of movement outside the camps has allowed them to work as labourers for local farmers or in construction, but such work is a poor substitute for working their own fields; it also makes the pain of losing their land at home all the more acute.

Women are particularly traumatised by life in exile. Their physical and mental health has deteriorated sharply, with frequent symptoms of stress and depression, as they are caught up in fundamental and contradictory social changes. On the one hand purdah has often been reinforced in the camps, partly as a reassertion of traditional values in the face of adversity, and partly because of the presence of unknown men. This has severely limited women's social contact and reduced the possibilities of education for girls.

But on the other hand many women – widows in particular – have been forced by circumstances to take on a more independent role. The income they can earn is vitally important, and in some cases they have become head of their household and the main breadwinner. In the past this would have been inconceivable; widows would have been catered for within the extended family.



UNHCR

Few refugee children receive any sort of education in the refugee camps in Pakistan

TESTIMONY: MASOOMA

"I am 39, a widow, and I came to Pakistan in 1981 with my four children. After a long search I found some of my relatives, but life was still hard.

The heat and the struggle to exist were bad enough, but then my youngest daughter died from dysentery after a high fever. I kept the family together with help from relatives and neighbours, and from the earnings of my eldest son as a roadside cobbler.

Sometimes there was enough to buy vegetables but very often all we had was black tea and nan (bread). God looked after us somehow. I wanted and needed work. I went to the Ockenden Venture's quilt-making project as a I knew how to use a sewing machine.

It was the first time I had worked for pay. As I learned and improved, my small income helped the family to live with a little more dignity, without having to depend on relatives and neighbours.

My confidence has grown and life as a refugee is more tolerable. We now sometimes buy meat and are even able to have a little extra for feast days."

ASSISTANCE IN PAKISTAN

RECEPTION AND RELIEF

The relief operation run by the Pakistani authorities, with support from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and international agencies, is generally regarded as one of the best-organised refugee programmes in the world. Yet – perhaps inevitably in an operation of this size – it has serious shortcomings.

To qualify for aid, Afghans have to be registered and to live within designated refugee villages. On registration, family heads receive a pass book which entitles the family to a monthly ration of food – wheat, oil, sugar, tea and dried milk – as well as fuel, other supplies and sometimes cash. There have been food shortfalls but in general the refugees have received sufficient to eat.

But registration can be very slow, causing long delays before refugees get any form of assistance. Procedural changes in mid-1986 have caused registration to drop sharply. In NWFP it has stopped altogether and refugees are being directed to Baluchistan or the Punjab. However, registration in these provinces is reported to be erratic, often depending on whether voluntary agencies can find a suitable site for a new camp. Some refugees say they have even been told to go back to Afghanistan.

The plight of unregistered refugees – now numbering some 400,000 – is very serious. They arrive exhausted and weak; many are sick or war-wounded, and most are destitute. Without access to official sources of relief, they are forced to hang around the fringes of the camps, the lucky ones relying on relatives and friends who are registered. Illegal settlements of unregistered refugees have recently been destroyed by the Pakistani authorities. The whole issue of registration needs to be urgently examined.

Distribution of relief is a further problem area. Deliveries to some camps are very erratic, and there have been the inevitable instances of misappropriation. The Pakistani authorities have tried to improve distribution and curb abuses, but it is extremely difficult to control such a huge operation.

Voluntary agencies are the only source of assistance to refugees before registration. They assess needs, advise on registration procedures, and provide food, shelter and medical treatment when necessary. Hopes that UNHCR and the government could take over this work have faded as registration problems have mounted. Soviet offensives in the winter of 1986-87 greatly increased the number of new arrivals, many of whom have had to fend for themselves, and more new arrivals are expected early in 1988. ▷

HEALTH

Health care is a vital part of the assistance programme. Many of the incoming refugees need immediate medical treatment. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has concentrated on the war-wounded, setting up surgical hospitals in Peshawar and Quetta, a prosthetics workshop to make artificial limbs, paraplegic centres and a blood bank. ICRC and the Pakistan Red Crescent also run mobile first-aid teams to treat the wounded at known border crossing points. This work is being supplemented and extended by voluntary agencies.

But the major thrust of the voluntary agencies' work is basic health care and health education. Community and preventative health care and improved sanitation are being emphasised.

Attention is also now being focused on the needs of women, who have often suffered most during the journey to Pakistan and in the camps. At first, doctors and nurses were almost invariably male, and this discouraged women from attending for treatment. Mother-child clinics have now been set up and traditional midwives are being trained. These programmes have had to overcome the suspicion of male-dominated communities and the problem of access to women in purdah, but are making gradual progress.

EDUCATION

Education is another main focus of the voluntary agencies' work. Primary education for boys is provided by the Pakistani authorities helped by UNHCR, but – with teaching in Urdu – is of limited relevance to Afghan society and culture. Some schools with teaching in Pashtu have been set up and run by the Afghan political parties.

Voluntary agencies have been trying to develop education appropriate to Afghan children by improving the range of subjects, upgrading teacher training and producing text books. But these aims have proved difficult to achieve. Only 10 per cent of school-age refugee children are receiving any sort of education, and facilities for girls are minimal.

Secondary education is virtually non-existent. Young women in particular are missing out, partly because of the attitudes of the fundamentalists. Adult education is very limited and higher-level professional and technical education is sorely lacking. Major resources need to be put into education at all levels, not only to help Afghans maintain their culture and identity, but to provide skilled personnel for Afghanistan's future.

EARNING A LIVING

Providing refugees with a means of earning a living has become a major concern as the period of exile has lengthened. Many Afghans have taken up new occupations. But for many others – deprived of their land and with it their livelihood and traditional self-reliance – enforced idleness has brought demoralisation and despondency.

Since 1984, UNHCR and voluntary agencies have increasingly emphasised income-generating projects. About 10 per cent of refugees have benefited from some sort of vocational training or assistance in the form of tools, enterprise allowances or help with marketing. Refugees play an important role in design, implementation and management of these projects. But the capacity for self-reliance is limited, as so many of the refugees are children or the elderly who cannot work to support themselves.

INFRASTRUCTURE

There has also been growing recognition that assistance should where possible benefit Pakistanis as well as refugees. In February 1984 a $20 million infrastructure programme was launched by the Pakistan government, the World Bank and UNHCR to improve irrigation systems, watershed management, flood control, road building and tree planting in the areas most densely occupied by refugees. The programme, due to continue until 1990, has been an important source of employment for both refugees and local people. It also includes training in skills like forestry which refugees can put to good use when they return home.

Earning a living also raises morale

UNHCR

WHAT THE AGENCIES DO TO HELP AFGHANS

Afghanaid runs a ''cash for food'' programme in areas of Afghanistan to which the victims of bombing have fled. The programme has helped some 10,000 families to survive by providing small grants to destitute families to buy food in local markets. New projects will help revive agricultural production, improve public health and provide schools in these areas. Afghanaid also runs an ambulance service to evacuate the severely wounded from Afghanistan. In Pakistan it has a small tailoring project which helps provide employment for disabled refugees.

Afghanaid: 18 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0HR

The **Afghan Refugee Information Network** supports medical and educational work in Afghanistan and Pakistan and produces a quarterly newsletter with worldwide circulation. It directs funds to projects in their early stages or needing short-term finance to survive. ARIN has made grants to organisations providing medicines, setting up clinics and supplying textbooks for Afghan-run schools.

ARIN: 77 Chelverton Road, London SW15 1RW

The **British Refugee Council** is a co-ordinating organisation for British voluntary agencies whose work concerns refugees and for refugee community groups in Britain. Its Asia Committee – which enables agencies to share information and agree joint action on issues concerning refugees in Asia – was responsible for the original idea of producing this booklet.

BRC: 3/9 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ

The **Catholic Fund for Overseas Development** assists Afghan refugees through the Catholic Church's official aid organisation Caritas Pakistan. Caritas has helped UNHCR set up basic health units in the camps around Peshawar, including mother and child care, immunisation, health education and sanitation as well as curative treatment.

CAFOD: 2 Garden Close, London SW9 9TY

Christian Aid channels funds through Inter Church Aid, which concentrates on helping refugees between their arrival in Pakistan and registration. New arrivals are met, given advice, and provided with food, shelter and medical treatment if necessary. Christian Aid and ICA also support some schools and orphanages with emphasis on education for girls, and work in the camps encouraging women to attend clinics and health education groups.

Christian Aid: P.O. Box 100, London SE1 7RT

Health Unlimited sends teams of professional health workers into Afghanistan to run a clinic-based primary health care programme. Their midwives have developed close working relationships with traditional birth attendants to improve health care among women and children. The long-term aim is to build up a pool of skilled health workers who can train others. HU has also provided educational materials for schools and assisted with a teacher-training programme.

Health Unlimited: Tress House, 3 Stamford Street, London SE1 9NT

Help the Aged channels funds to projects in many areas of Afghanistan. Included in these is the International Assistance Mission which assists eye hospitals and an institute for the blind in Kabul and Herat, and works with the government on programmes for treatment and rehabilitation of the handicapped and mother and child health.

Help the Aged: St. James' Walk, London EC1R 0BE

The Ockenden Venture supports a quilt manufacturing scheme for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, employing 800 men and women full-time and producing about 120,000 quilts a year. Tailoring teams also make 60,000 school uniforms a year. With UNHCR, Ockenden runs a marketing centre which provides outlets in Pakistan and abroad for goods made by refugees. Ockenden is also responsible for the maintenance of official buildings in the refugee camps. In all sectors full-time and part-time refugee employees number about 6,000.

Ockenden Venture: Guildford Road, Woking, Surrey GU22 7UU

Oxfam funds a number of projects inside Afghanistan and among refugees in Pakistan. It helps send medical supplies to health workers in Afghanistan and supports training of Afghan medical workers in Pakistan who then return to their own communities. Oxfam is also involved in efforts to improve agriculture in Afghanistan. It has provided grants for health, education and income-generating projects in refugee camps in Peshawar and Quetta, with particular emphasis on assisting and training women.

Oxfam: 274 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7DZ

Sandy Gall's Afghanistan Appeal runs an orthopaedics workshop in Peshawar making artificial limbs for wounded and disabled Afghans. The Appeal is building a new medical centre in Peshawar costing £120,000. It also supports similar work by other agencies, such as Operation Handicap International's large training workshop and rehabilitation centre in Quetta.

Sandy Gall's Afghanistan Appeal: P.O. Box 2LJ, London W1A 2LJ

LIFE IN EXILE: IRAN

There are more than 2 million Afghan refugees in Iran. About half of them have concentrated in the eastern provinces bordering Afghanistan, and the rest are scattered throughout the country.

Most of these refugees are Persian speakers, for whom making adjustment to exile in Iran is easier. The majority are Sunni Muslims from northern Afghanistan, but there are also many Hazara, as well as other Shi'as from Herat and Kandahar. Like the refugees in Pakistan, most exiles in Iran were previously small farmers or landless rural people, with few marketable skills.

Iran's refugee policy is very different from Pakistan's. Iran has about a dozen transit camps with a total capacity of 50,000, where refugees undergo medical inspection and treatment immediately after they arrive in the country. When they leave the camps, they have to fend for themselves.

Afghan refugees can enter Iran at will, but are not free to travel or work where they wish. They are restricted to certain designated occupations and their movements are controlled by residence permits, with punishments for infringement. Nevertheless, most young men make for the towns to find work.

The refugees' poor health and the danger of them spreading disease are a serious concern to the Iranian authorities. A number of diseases that had been brought under control or eradicated have apparently reappeared following the mass movement of Afghans into Iran. These include tuberculosis, cholera, measles and leprosy.

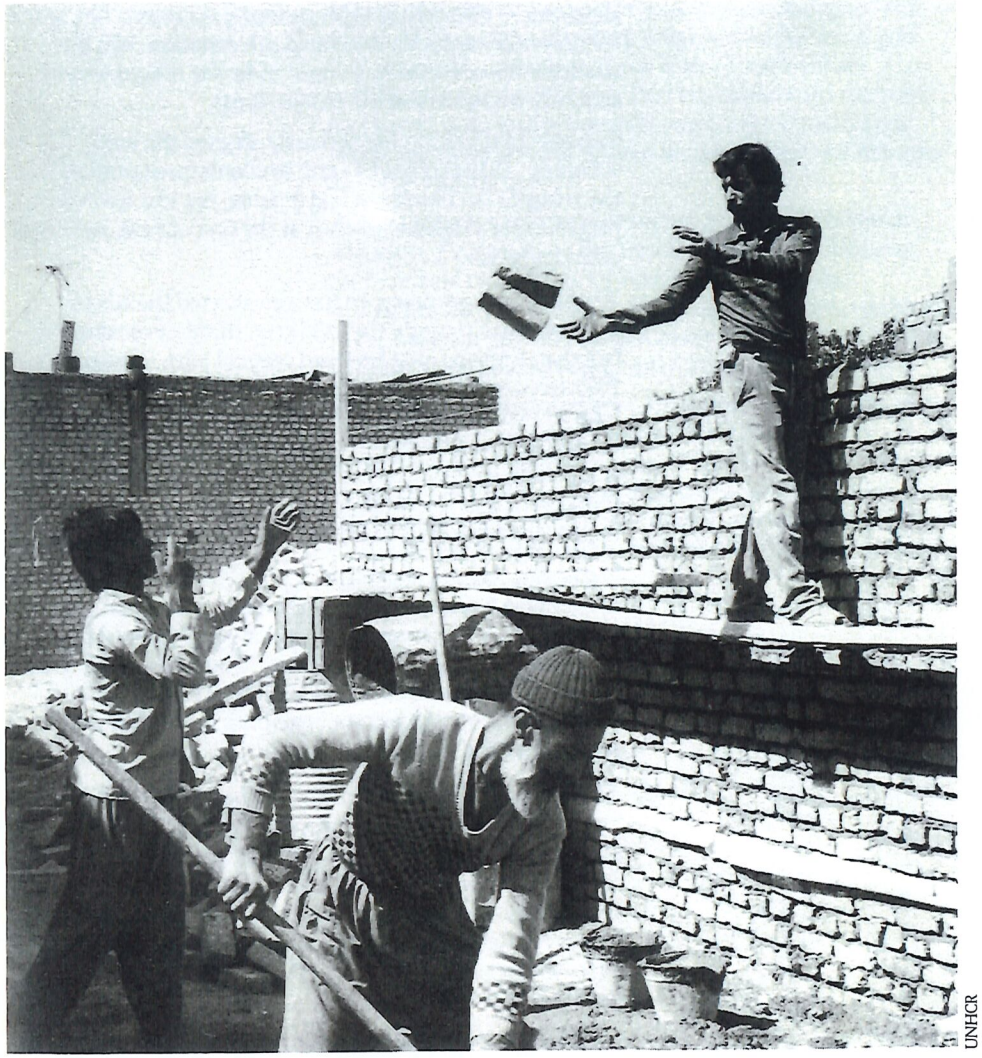
Aid to Afghan refugees in Iran has been much less prominent than assistance in Pakistan. At first the Iranian government eschewed international aid and bore the entire cost of the relief operation itself. A Council for Afghan Refugees was set up in 1979, under the Ministry of the Interior, to run the operation.

Since 1983, however, Iran has accepted an increasing amount of assistance from UNHCR and other UN agencies. The Council for Afghan Refugees' budget has been drastically reduced as government resources have come under pressure from the Gulf war.

UNHCR has emphasised health and the needs of newly-arrived refugees. Quarantine and reception centres have been set up and assistance has been provided for infant nutrition and drinking water programmes. Voluntary agencies are not allowed to run assistance programmes in Iran, though some have been able to channel food, medical equipment and other supplies through UNHCR.

Once they leave the transit camps, the vast majority of Afghan refugees in Iran have to manage without any kind of international assistance. New schemes are being developed, including income-generating and vocational training projects and mobile clinics for nomads, but more international assistance is badly needed.

Refugees in Iran find their work opportunities restricted



UNHCR

NEW PRESSURES ON REFUGEES

The influx of refugees has had a profound impact on the two main host countries, Pakistan and Iran. This has inevitably led to tensions as the host countries find their own resources coming under strain.

In Pakistan the tensions have become more open in the last 18 months. In the North West Frontier and Baluchistan provinces, one person in every six or seven is a refugee. In some districts there are more refugees than local people.

Conflict has flared over access to scarce resources like fuelwood, water and pasture, especially in the arid border areas where the ecology is precariously balanced. The search for firewood has resulted in rapid deforestation, and the several million livestock brought in by the refugees have seriously overgrazed some pasture areas.

Refugee immigration has seriously affected the local economy. Pakistani traders and landlords have profited from the refugees as consumers and tenants, but less well-off local people blame Afghans for rises in the cost of food, rents and property prices.

The large refugee presence has also affected the labour market. Until recently the local community welcomed the fact that Afghans took low-paid manual jobs, unwanted by Pakistanis or left vacant because of Pakistani labour migration to the oil-rich Gulf states. But with the recession in the Gulf many of these migrants have had to return, sharpening competition for local jobs. The presence of large numbers of refugees willing to accept low pay has depressed wages, angering local workers.

Increasing Afghan predominance in certain businesses such as transport has also caused resentment, particularly since the refugees are exempt from licensing and taxes. Alleged Afghan involvement in smuggling, drug dealing and other crime is another source of antagonism. There is also resentment that refugees are benefiting more than local people from the relief programmes.

The spread of conflict across the Afghan-Pakistan border has further fuelled hostility towards the exiles. Many Pakistanis as well as refugees have been killed in recent air attacks by Soviet and Kabul forces on border villages, and there have been bombing incidents in Peshawar, Quetta and Karachi. The presence of Afghan resistance headquarters in Peshawar has given rise to fears that Pakistan will be drawn further into the war.

Local people have staged violent protests against the refugee presence and have demanded their repatriation. Afghans living in the towns have been periodically rounded up and resettled in the camps. So far this has not been carried out in a systematic way, but the Pakistani authorities are reported to be considering a new policy that would restrict refugees to camps throughout the country.

Tensions between refugees and local people have also developed in Iran. Refugees' health problems have fuelled Iranian prejudices. As in Pakistan, there is conflict over jobs and housing. Wages are very low and accommodation scarce, crowded and expensive in the cities. Refugees are a source of cheap labour and are employed in the worst-paid jobs, especially as farm workers. Iran's huge military mobilisation for the war with Iraq has maintained the need for cheap labour and prevented competition for jobs from becoming too acute, but Iranian workers resent the refugees for undercutting pay.

Afghan refugees also provide a scapegoat for the inflation and shortages caused by the Iran-Iraq war. As in Pakistan, they are held responsible for robbery, drug dealing, smuggling and other crimes. Sunni-Shi'a rivalries contribute to the negative view of Afghans many Iranians hold, and the tensions have occasionally erupted into violent clashes.

The growing antagonism towards Afghans in Pakistan and Iran underlines the heavy burden borne by these two countries in hosting the refugees. There is an urgent need for additional resources to be directed to local people in the areas where refugees are concentrated, as well as the long-term need for a negotiated settlement of the conflict so that the exiles can return home.

THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

Although UN-backed negotiations for a settlement of the war in Afghanistan have been underway since 1981, very little progress has been made. The Soviet Union has declared a desire to withdraw its troops, but differences have persisted over the timetable for such a withdrawal and the shape of a future Afghan government. The resistance has not been permitted to participate in the UN talks. For their part, the Mujahideen believe that only direct talks with the Soviet Union can bring about an end to the conflict.

Since Dr Mohammed Najib took over as head of the Kabul government in 1986, several apparent concessions have been made by his regime. In January 1987 a ''national reconciliation'' campaign was launched, including declaration of a ceasefire, promises of an amnesty and a call for refugees to return home.

The government has said it will permit formation of political parties – as long as they renounce the war and support continuation of the ''historic friendship'' with the Soviet Union – and has published a draft constitution proposing, among other things, to convene a traditional assembly of the Afghan people.

But at the same time there appears to have been an intensification of military activity, with greater numbers of war-wounded coming across the border in the past year. In October 1987, a report by UN special rapporteur Felix Ermacora found ''some improvement'' of human rights in Afghanistan, but also drew attention to recent incidents of Soviet and Afghan forces causing the deaths of many civilians – including women and children – as well as destroying villages and crops.

The Kabul government's conciliatory moves have been greeted with varying degrees of scepticism by the resistance and the refugees. The Mujahideen say that unconditional Soviet withdrawal remains the central demand, though they have expressed willingness to negotiate an effective ceasefire to allow this to happen. The exiles say the draft constitution contains no real safeguards of human rights if they should return, and that the traditional assembly it proposes would have little legitimacy while so many Afghans remain outside the country.

However, there has been some progress during the past year. Differences over the timetable for Soviet troop withdrawal were narrowed substantially at the UN-backed peace talks. The Kabul government, with Moscow's agreement, has called on the former king Zaher Shah to head an ''interim administration'' with limited powers which would act as caretaker during the Soviet departure.

The seven resistance parties have been receptive to the idea of a caretaker government but are divided over the return of the king, which the fundamentalists oppose. For his part, Zaher Shah has refused to serve in a government alongside Najib, but has not ruled out participation in some form.

Meanwhile the suffering of people both inside Afghanistan and in exile continues. Whatever the outcome of the negotiations, an enormous task of resettlement, reconciliation and reconstruction will remain. More than 5 million refugees and several million displaced within Afghanistan will have to be resettled. The country's shattered agricultural base will take immense effort and resources to restore. Health, education and other services will have to be rebuilt almost from scratch. Large numbers of technicians, administrators, professionals and skilled workers will have to be trained.

The full involvement of the international community is desperately needed. This must include practical help for the victims of the conflict, support for diplomatic initiatives to reach a settlement, and a long-term commitment to assist the Afghan people in the future rebuilding of their country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the last eight years, Afghanistan has undergone massive disruption. There has been death, destruction, suffering and wholesale displacement of people, resulting in the world's largest refugee population. The fundamental right to self-determination has been lost and the very survival of Afghan society is now threatened. The scale of humanitarian needs has grown immeasurably and the efforts of the international community to meet the situation have not been adequate.

The following recommendations point to ways in which governments, intergovernmental organisations and voluntary agencies could do more to assist the people of Afghanistan.

1 All governments should actively support diplomatic initiatives to bring about a political solution which would restore the right of self-determination to the Afghan people.

2 All agencies – governmental or non-governmental – should substantially increase the amount and scope of their assistance to the Afghan people, both inside and outside Afghanistan.

3 Such assistance should reflect the needs, values and aspirations of Afghans, allowing them to sustain and develop their society and culture and restoring their ability to manage their own lives.

4 Governments and voluntary agencies should channel more development aid to communities inside Afghanistan, thus enabling them to remain in their home areas instead of being forced to flee abroad or become internal refugees.

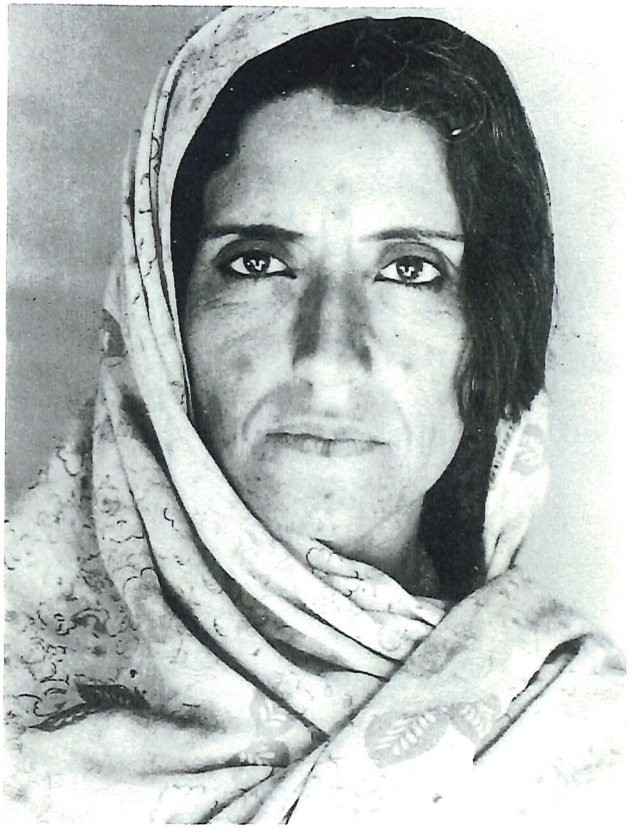
5 UNHCR should investigate, as a matter of urgency, the non-registration of new arrivals of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

6 Assistance to Afghan refugees should not only address their immediate needs but should also be directed toward development programmes and initiatives which would allow them to preserve and develop their society and culture.

7 Governments, inter-governmental agencies and NGOs must fully recognise the heavy burden borne by Pakistan and Iran in giving sanctuary to the refugees, and should where possible direct additional resources to local people in the areas of greatest need in these countries.

8 NGOs should play a more active role in publicising how ordinary Afghans, both inside and outside the country, are organising themselves to sustain their society.

Afghans face an enormous task of rebuilding their lives and country



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