Pakistan: Sharif turns against refugees

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When the international media talk about ?the refugee crisis? they generally mean the situation in Europe, ignoring the plight of millions across a vast area stretching from the Atlantic to the Himalayas. In Afghanistan, for example, decades of imperialist bombing and invasion, followed by civil war, have driven much of the civilian population from their homes. Now their situation is to be made even worse by the actions of the Pakistan government.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, is planning to force up to 3 million Afghans back over the ?Durand Line? which the British declared to be the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Since the Soviet invasion of 1979, many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, whose homeland straddles the border, have sought refuge in Pakistan, their numbers now include a second and even a third generation who, according to the Pakistan Constitution, are entitled to full citizenship. Although the Pakistani state and ruling class did not prevent refugees from settling, they never allowed them to become an integral part of society, rather most of them lived their lives as an oppressed and exploited layer.

More recently, there have been repeated threats to send the Afghans back and there have even been some small scale deportations. However, the December 2014 massacre at an army run school in Peshawar by Tehrik-i-Talibans, the Pakistan Taliban, which killed 144, gave the pretext for a much harsher turn in Pakistan?s Afghan refugee policy.

Shortly afterwards, the army mobilised 30,000 soldiers into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, parts of Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Their declared aim was to clear ?terrorist cells? but the actual effect was to displace up to one million people. The army then closed the borders to prevent any new arrivals and in June 2015 the government stopped issuing visas for Afghans. This year, the government declared that all people should start to return to Afghanistan, initially setting a six month deadline.

The imperialist legacy

It was a very different story in 1979, as soviet tanks entered Afghanistan. Then, Pakistan's military dictator, Zia ul Haq, welcomed the refugees, strengthening his position by stressing solidarity with Muslim co-religionists. In reality, Pakistan could not have sealed its 2,400 kilometre border anyway but ul Haq's position was driven by geo-strategic considerations, rather than any humanitarian sentiments.

It was the prospect of using the refugees for anti-soviet and anti-Indian politics that mattered. Fearful of facing a pro-soviet Afghanistan and a hostile India at the same time, he calculated that keeping the border open would allow support for the Mujahedin in alliance with the United States. At the same time, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence gained valuable experience in the building of Islamist organisations.
When the Taliban won the war, the Pakistan ruling class thought it had succeeded with its strategic "depth doctrine" against India, which basically meant keeping Afghanistan as Pakistan's unofficial "fifth province". Unfortunately, for them, great imperialist powers like the US are not known for their gratitude or loyal friendship. This was a lesson that had to be learnt after the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and told the Pakistani government that if they would not support them, they would also be "bombed back into stone age".

Where they had once secured supply lines for the Mujahedin at the request of the US, now they had to secure them for NATO troops to fight the Taliban. Where they had once directly built up Islamist forces for their own reactionary geo-strategic goals, their foreign policy now strengthened those forces indirectly. It was the Islamists who could take the lead in the fight against injustice, exploitation and wars, because the Pakistan state had done everything it could to destroy working class and left opposition first. Ironically, most often with the help of Islamist and terrorist organisations.

This does not just show the connections between imperialism, the Pakistan ruling class and its policy makers, civilian and military, and the phenomenon of Islamism. It also shows the reactionary consequences of Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy turns. This is important because most of the liberals and also many on the Left seem to forget about it when it comes to today's actions in the war against terror by the Pakistani state.

Divide and Rule

Of course, one motive in Sharif's policy is to keep the population divided, the better to rule over all sections. Although Afghan refugees have not been able to integrate fully and only about 20 percent have found jobs, a minority have built up small businesses, particularly in the carpet industry. Now, the prospect of deportation is forcing many to sell whatever they have at knockdown prices, easy pickings for other, Pakistani, small businesses.

Nor is it only Sharif and the governing party who are blaming the refugees for the appalling economic conditions facing Pakistan's working class and peasantry. Noor Alam Khan, of the Pakistan People's Party is on record saying, "They have overstayed their welcome, scattered across our cities and taken up our jobs?.

Nonetheless, it is not only domestic politics that explain Sharif's turn against the refugees, there is also the bigger, international, picture. For the Pakistan ruling class, the possibility of improving relations between Afghanistan, India and the US is a threat to their own goals. Destabilising Afghanistan by forced repatriation of 3 million refugees is one way of "neutralising" that threat.

Maybe even more important is Pakistan's developing relationship with China and, specifically, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC, a $46 billion project to build highways and rail links between the Chinese-built and operated deep sea port of Gwaidar, on the Arabian Sea, and central China. Those links pass through Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the areas in which most of the refugees have settled. Justifying military operations in those provinces as part of the "War on Terror" is a convenient cover for actually suppressing any resistance by local nationalists.

Catastrophe

Many NGO's have warned of a major humanitarian crisis if the deportations go ahead. Already there are reports of thousands having to camp alongside the roads to the border, with no protection from the fierce sun and no access to food and water. Across the border, there can be no doubt that Afghan government
promises of building 48 new towns to house returning refugees will never be realised. How could they be when the country is still gripped by war as the Taliban continue their advance?

Despite this desperate situation, there are few protests in Pakistan. Sharif seems to have succeeded, at least so far, not only in intimidating the refugees but also suppressing any serious opposition from within Pakistan society. It is, therefore, unlikely that the government can be stopped from implementing this reactionary deportation. Nonetheless, even if the left and revolutionaries cannot have a significant impact on the government’s actions, it is still their duty to speak out, to make themselves the champions of the oppressed in the whole of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, the Awami Workers’ Party, the biggest left organisation, outnumbering all other left organisations put together, seems to have forgotten this duty and, indeed, the Afghans themselves altogether. There have been no articles on the issue in their publications although the whole of Pakistan society is talking about it.

Revolutionaries, therefore, have to take responsibility for opposing the deportations as well as the government and media campaigns against the refugees. At the same time as exposing Sharif’s crude divide and rule tactics, we have to argue for a positive programme to mobilise all the workers and peasants of Pakistan, regardless of ethnicity or origin, to demand housing, education, healthcare and employment for all, at the expense of the rich and their international backers. That is a task that supporters of the League for the Fifth International in Pakistan are proud to accept.

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