

Back to Afghanistan

Interviews with Returnees from Austria

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Introduction

This report is based on interviews conducted with five former Afghan asylum seekers in September 2004. The visit of the returnees was part of the project “Evaluation of voluntary repatriation” carried out by asylkoordination österreich in co-operation with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). The project was co-financed by the European Refugee Fund.

Besides visiting the returnees, the project included researching the support provided in Austria to people returning to Afghanistan. One of these programmes – the repatriation programme of the International Organisation on Migration (IOM) – was presented at an information meeting with Afghan refugees. From the debate at this meeting, recommendations for repatriation projects from the view of the people concerned could be derived.

All visits took place in September 2004. They were made possible through private contacts of project team member Mir Ghousuddin and through intermediation of IOM Kabul. Interviews were conducted with five returnees from Austria, one returnee from the Netherlands, several returnees from Pakistan and Iran and UNHCR and IOM staff members, one of the latter being a returnee from Denmark himself. His experiences are similar to those of the “Austrian” returnees presented here. The concluding recommendations are partly based on the results of all these interviews. The case examples provided refer to returnees from Austria only.

We wish to express our thanks to IOM Vienna and Karl Bader from the Repatriation Support Programme of Caritas Vienna (“Caritas Rückkehrhilfe”) for providing us with information and contacts. Without this support, the travel to

Afghanistan would have been meaningless.

Summary

Voluntary repatriation of asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan is still a very rare phenomenon, not only in Austria but across Europe. Since the Karzai government assumed office, a total of 2,400 Afghan refugees returned from Europe to Afghanistan. In Austria, a total of 70 Afghan citizens decided to return between April 2003 and May 2004.¹ Within the framework of this project, five of them could be traced in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, all of which agreed to be interviewed.

All interviewees returned under programmes of voluntary repatriation, yet a closer look reveals that the “voluntariness” is not that clear-cut. Even after assessing whether the “push” factors, i.e. deterrence by the situation in Austria, or the “pull” factors, i.e. attraction by the home country prevail², the decision remains a difficult balancing act. Though none of the interviewees had to decide under threat of physical force, the lack of perspectives in Europe played a role for each of them. The actual decision was taken in a moment where this lack of perspectives was compounded by an additional negative development, whether a threat of rejection during a Dublin procedure or the grave illness of a child left back in Afghanistan.

A repeated concern expressed refers to the problem of returning “with empty hands”. After all, enormous sums had been invested to get to Europe, and both family and friends simply can’t believe that there was no financial return at all. The start-up cash provided by IOM clearly helps in saving face in this situation but it’s by no way sufficient. The lack of long-term support is definitely a problem, as had to be concluded in all the other countries examined. Two of the interviewees were granted a business start-up credit of 1.700 US\$. That was a great help, but the business is not going well. There are not enough plants and factories to improve the economic situation, the returnees say. Currently

¹ Information by IOM Vienna, June 2004

² The use of this yardstick is recommended also by UNHCR in its Manual (UNHCR Note on Basic Considerations Regarding Returns to Afghanistan from Non-Neighbouring States, 2.3.): “The difficulty of identifying true „voluntariness“ enhances the need for UNHCR to scrutinize objectively the refugees situation. (...) as a General Rule, UNHCR should be convinced, that the positive pull-factors in the country of origin are an overriding element in the refugees’ decision to return rather than the possible push-factors in the host country or negative pull factors, such as threats to property, in the home country”.

practically all goods are imported from Pakistan. "The reconstruction in Afghanistan is more of a help to Pakistan than to Afghanistan", says one of the interviewees.

Unlike the returnees to Bosnia and Kosovo examined within the framework of our project, the Afghan refugees had returned just a few months before being interviewed. In each case the return was organised by IOM, and all of them received some start-up money from IOM.

In striking contrast to the returnees to Bosnia and Kosovo, they maintain an extremely negative view of their situation in Austria. This may be due to the fact that all Afghan refugees went through a protracted asylum procedure, were left with no clear status for several years and had no access to the labour market. Most of the Bosnians and Kosovars, on the other hand, did not have to go through an asylum procedure and were granted a temporary residence as war-displaced persons relatively fast. These groups also benefited from the existence of better networks in Austria, a result of the traditional migration patterns in their home regions.

The table below outlines some of the most important factors which determined the return of the five interviewees from Austria. The classification in the column "voluntariness" is based on an assessment of the positive and negative factors (motives and constraints) that influenced the decision to return.

Table Returnees

Name, Age	Stay in Austria	Decisive reason for return	Repatriation situation	Voluntariness
Mr. S., 39, AS ³	June 2002- April 2004	Asylum application rejected; humiliating treatment as asylum seeker	Mentioned wish to return in the refugee camp; repatriation organised by IOM. Would like to re-open his company – a pharmaceutical factory – but the authorities demand enormous bribes. Received start-up money of IOM, but the amount is insufficient. Lives off savings.	lack of perspectives
Mr. M., 35, AS	May 2001 – November 2003 In UK : November 2003 – May 2004	Threat of re-transfer to Austria, longing for the family	Felt in Austria like in a prison, travelled to UK where he found some work, though without legal residence. Disillusioned by Europe, especially by Austria, expected a country that respected human rights. Returned by way of IOM, received assistance in Kabul. His view is that it is difficult to come back from Europe empty-handed. Survives with help from friends only.	lack of perspectives
Mr. N., AS	February 2001- April 2004	His long waiting for a decision in the asylum procedure and news that his son was very ill.	Wish to return forwarded to IOM by care persons. Opened a store in Kabul with IOM start-up money. But the store is not exactly thriving and suffers from a lack of money for equipment and electricity.	lack of perspectives
Mr. D., 33, provisional residence	April 2002- July 2004, including a stay in UK	Long waiting time, relatively safe situation in Paktia, his home region, longing for home and family	Was informed on the home country situation by the family. Support for many issues by the Caritas Repatriation Programme. “There was no question they would not answer.” Currently mainly financial problems. Neither family nor friends can believe that he came back practically without any money. Now working in a friend's store, was granted one-time funding of 1.700 US\$ for goods by IOM.	partly
Mr. H., 34, provisional residence	2001-2004	News that the family was badly off	Enjoyed a relatively good situation in Austria, own apartment. Information by Caritas, amnesty international. Travel organised by IOM from “door to door”. Happy to be with his family again.	yes

All interviewees live now in Kabul, the former home town of two of them, while the other three moved to Kabul with their families and would like to stay there. Thus, the example of this group confirms the problem of mass-migration to the

³ AS: residence title based on asylum application

big cities mentioned by most reports on the repatriation situation in Afghanistan, especially to Kabul.

Case Example: Decision to return to Afghanistan

Mr. D. belongs to those which had an alternative to return, namely the option to stay in Austria based on the non-refoulement principle. With this residence title, at least his livelihood was assured, and he had a better chance to get an employment permit than those with a residence title based on their asylum application only. However, several times during the interview Mr. D. emphasised that the temporary nature of this residence title was a strain on him. The decision on an extension of his residence was postponed again and again. He was worn down by the insecurity of his residence title, and this was ultimately one of the reasons for his decision. His goal, namely to be granted asylum in Austria or in the United Kingdom and to build a new future on this foundation, remained unreachable. With his residence title merely temporary, his future seemed to remain uncertain; he was not able to find work in Austria, something he had achieved in the UK, though by ignoring the law. The overriding issue during the interview was his aimlessness and his lack of perspectives, with the improving security situation playing only a subordinated role. Though the rather stable situation was mentioned by Mr. D. as a necessary precondition, it was not the crucial factor for his decision. His most important source of information in this regard was his family. Still, he took up repatriation counselling, obviously mainly to get financial and organisational support. According to him, repatriation counselling should include still more detailed information on the security situation and the life conditions. Even more important, he says, is assistance after returning. He works in the textiles shop of a friend. With the IOM's start-up money they were able to acquire a basic stock of goods, but judging by the way their business is going he's got only a slim chance to pay back his debts. In part, these debts go back to the time before his flight: "I spent more than one million Kaldar to flee to Europe and I came back with 2.000 dollar." In his opinion, the most important measure to assist returnees is to give them a chance to work. "As long as refugees live in Europe they should have the opportunity to work. Because if they want to return to Afghanistan one day, they should return with their hands full and not empty."

Decision against return to Afghanistan

From debates with refugees who decided to stay in Austria it emerged that the bad security situation is the main reason for not returning, in particular for members of groups still in opposition and for women.

A further reason for not returning is the problem that their substantial financial investment did not pay off. It would be very humiliating to return with no money and no hope to be able to contribute to the family's livelihood. One would be living off the family, they say; anybody coming back from the West should be an enrichment, not a burden for society.

Many returnees simply don't understand that they were forced to do nothing in Europe instead of getting a chance to earn money or learn a profession so that they could be useful to their families once back home. This is an important issue for the "non-returnees" as well: A main criticism in regard of the IOM repatriation programme was that an offer of practice-oriented vocational training in Austria would be much more meaningful than the "crash" courses in Kabul.

Conclusions

From the conversations with Afghan refugees and returnees, the following consistent messages emerge:

1. Wider definition of security: Security must be the priority number one. The EU member countries' wish for the refugees to return quickly must not lead to overly optimistic and superficial assessments of the situation. Seen with the refugees' eyes, security has to be understood in a wider sense: The end of hostilities must not be the only criteria, the chances of survival in the long term have to be examined as well; concerns expressed relate in particular to the situation in regard of health care and school education for the children.
2. Opportunity to work, preparing for return already in Europe.
Many refugees want to go back to Afghanistan. But debt-loaded and without jobs and income as they are, they would just exchange a hopeless situation abroad with a hopeless situation at home. Who's got work in

Europe is able to send money home or bring it with him/her and thus to preserve a reputable position in society. The shame of not being able to contribute or to pay back others' investments is an important reason for not returning.

Photos:

- Mr. D. and his partner in their store
- Mr. S. in his destroyed pharmaceutical factory. Reconstruction is impossible because of corruption.
- Mr. M. in his home
- Children in Kabul – hobby soccer players and single bread-winners