

40 Days of Prayer—Lenten Focus on Refugees

Week 2: Afghanistan

The current situation: Before the upsurge in violence in Syria, the largest number of the world’s refugees came from Afghanistan—for 33 years in a row. According to the UN refugee agency, Afghanistan now has the second-largest global refugee population after Syria, with nearly 3 million externally displaced people—one quarter of the refugees worldwide—and 1.5 million internally displaced persons. Neighboring Pakistan and Iran have been the primary destinations for Afghan refugees, but human rights groups and journalists report increasing anti-Afghan hostility and deportation from those countries back to Afghanistan, as well as similar treatment from host countries in Europe. According to a Feb. 13, 2017, report from Human Rights Watch, Pakistani authorities have driven out 365,000 registered Afghan refugees and more than 200,000 undocumented ones since July 2016, making it “the world’s largest mass forced return of refugees in recent years.” The Pakistani government plans to return a similar number next year. Repatriated Afghans face expanding armed conflict between the fragile new Afghan unity government, a resurgent Taliban (which now controls a third of the country—more territory than it held before US troops arrived in 2001), and ISIS; as well as widespread poverty and a near-total absence of social services. Michael Kugelman, senior associate for South Asia at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, recently reported, “For many Afghans, neither staying nor going is a viable option.”

What caused the crisis? Afghanistan’s refugee crisis began nearly 40 years ago, when the Soviets invaded in the late 1970s, and continued during the decade-long Soviet occupation and war that followed, the civil war that followed that, the rise of the ultraconservative Taliban, and the US-led war that began in October 2001 in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The US and NATO officially ended combat operations in 2014 and transferred many of the combat roles to Afghan forces, though thousands of US/NATO troops remain in the country to assist with the continuing war against the Taliban and other insurgents.

What to pray for:

- For ourselves, to “stay woke” to the plight of Afghans, even though it no longer commands front page attention.
- Protection for refugees from those who would harm or extort them to force them out of a safe situation.
- Access to food and healthcare in Afghanistan, especially for children (1 in 3 children there are malnourished, more in high-conflict areas).
- Wisdom and sensitivity for the UN and government leaders regarding repatriation and reintegration of refugees, to ensure their safety and dignity. Reintegration assistance is particularly important for returnee youth, who are most susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist groups.
- Hope in the face of hopelessness—for the capacity to see God in the midst of

trouble. After nearly four decades of violence and displacement, many refugees are losing hope.

- Expansion of promising in-country community development initiatives to meet the needs of returnees beyond mere subsistence living.
- Peace.

For more information on the Afghan refugee crisis, see websites for the UN Refugee Agency (www.unhcr.org), Human Rights Watch (<https://hrw.org/asia/afghanistan>), International Red Cross (<https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/asia-pacific/afghanistan-war/afghanistan-news>), Costs of War (<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/refugees/afghan>), and the United States Institute for Peace (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/afghan-refugee-crisis-2016>), among many others.