

## **Lenten Refugee Moment, Week 2: Afghanistan**

March 12, 2017

Last Sunday we started this Lenten series focusing on the global refugee crisis, challenging ourselves to embrace a definition of neighbor that transcends community, nationality, race, and religion to include the most vulnerable members of the human family. Each week, we're focusing on refugees in a different part of the world. Bulletin inserts provide additional background and resources, along with seven prayer suggestions—one for each day of the week.

We have not chosen a very easy Lenten path. We are traveling to some of the most humanly challenging places in the world, where there are no fast or easy solutions. Based on the current rate at which people are being forcibly displaced worldwide,<sup>1</sup> 120 more people will have fled their homes 5 minutes from now, more than 1,400 by the end of this service, more than 10,000 by dinnertime. How does one even begin to engage with a crisis this large?

Our commitment at Creekside<sup>2</sup> is simply this: to learn a little more about the causes of the massive displacement, to hear some personal stories so we might see refugees as fellow children of God and understand their situations with tenderer hearts, and to pray for them.

Last week we learned about Syrian refugees; today we'll be focusing on Afghan refugees.

Before the civil war in Syria resulted in the largest humanitarian crises of our time, most of the world's refugees came from Afghanistan—for 33 years in a row—making their experience of flight the world's largest protracted refugee situation.<sup>3, 4</sup> The Afghan crisis still continues, just in second place, so to speak, behind Syria. For almost 40 years, the Afghan people have been fleeing wave after wave of war and violence—starting when the Soviets invaded in the late 1970s, continuing 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 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, a war that is still going on 16 years later.<sup>5</sup> Much of the country is in ruins.<sup>6</sup>

At one time as many as 6 million Afghans were living in exile, most of them in Pakistan and Iran.<sup>7</sup> Many Afghan refugees voluntarily returned during intervening periods of calm, but more than 2 million remain in Pakistan, and nearly a million in Iran.<sup>8, 9</sup> Refugees have not been welcomed as full members of society in those countries but they live in relative stability compared with the economic and political conditions in Afghanistan. Most live in refugee villages rather than camps, where they have been free to find work or set up businesses, move freely within or between villages, and become self-sufficient. Many by now have spent most if not all of their lives there.<sup>10</sup>

In the past two years, however, because of deteriorating political relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistani authorities have mounted a campaign of harassment and intimidation to drive refugees back to Afghanistan, using daily police extortion, arbitrary detention, police raids on their homes, exclusion of Afghan children from Pakistani schools, and shutting down Afghan refugee schools.<sup>11</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, in the second half of 2016 nearly 600,000 Afghans were forced out—the world’s largest mass forced return of refugees in recent times.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Anti-refugee discrimination and summary deportations are occurring in Iran as well.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Afghans by the hundreds of thousands are making the perilous journey through Iran and Turkey and across the Aegean Sea to Greece in search of safety in Europe—taking their chances they won’t be denied asylum for not being ‘refugee enough’ compared with Syrians. The German government, for example, under pressure from constituents after more than a million migrants from the Middle East and Africa arrived over the past two years, has controversially maintained that parts of Afghanistan are “safe,” thus paving the way to classify a large number of asylum seekers as economic migrants and thus ineligible for asylum, and deporting Afghans back to the war-torn and impoverished country.<sup>15</sup>

“My wife and I were born in Iran, but [our parents were] from Afghanistan, which meant we didn’t have the same rights as citizens with Iranian parents,” said Nader, a 33-year-old Afghan at a refugee camp in Greece. “The Iranian authorities told us that they would give us ID cards if I went to Syria to fight ISIS. That’s the point that we decided to leave.”<sup>16</sup>

Golpari, a 23-year-old Afghan female at another refugee camp, left Afghanistan for different reasons: “If we sent the girls to school, the Taliban would beat them and carve in their leg with a knife. They say, ‘This is what we will do if you send your daughter to school’.”<sup>17</sup>

The forced expulsions and deportations of Afghans couldn’t come at a worse time. The fragile new Afghan national unity government is fighting a resurgent Taliban that now controls more territory than it held before US troops arrived in 2001<sup>18</sup>, and ISIS has established a foothold. There is fighting in virtually every province.<sup>19</sup> Civilian casualties in 2016 were the highest ever recorded by the United Nations, with nearly 11,500 noncombatants— one-third of them children—killed or wounded.<sup>20</sup>

Diba, an 18-year-old Afghan refugee also in Greece, “is tired of her war not counting enough. Back home, the Taliban killed her grandfather and came after her family when they refused to give Diba’s sister to a Talib for marriage. So the family escaped, walking through snowdrifts in freezing mountains, dodging border guards who sometimes shoot refugees on sight, and finally sailing across the Aegean in a rubber dinghy that nearly sank. But when it comes to getting asylum in Europe, Diba and her family have one major problem: They’re not Syrians. “They prioritize the

Syrians, like they're the ones with real problems,' Diba says. 'Their country is in war for [six] years. We've been in war for 40 years. ... In my own village, I've seen with my own eyes young boys lose their lives — killed by the Taliban, turned into suicide bombers. My grandfather himself — the Taliban brought his head to us.'"<sup>21</sup>

Life on the run is difficult for everyone, but female refugees are at far greater risk of becoming victims of violence, robbery, and extortion at all stages of the journey, from smugglers, from border authorities, from camp guards, particularly when travelling alone.<sup>22</sup> "We never sleep [at the same time], says 38-year-old Samaher from Iran at a refugee transit center in Europe, where she fled with two female friends. "One of us always stays awake. Even when it's my turn to sleep, I can't. I am always afraid something might happen."<sup>23</sup>

Still, several women at 18-year-old Diba's Ayoubi's refugee camp speak of choosing suicide if faced with deportation.<sup>24</sup> Though the new unity government has made strides toward restoring women's rights, Afghanistan is consistently rated one of the worst places for a woman to live—with women and girls often denied basic human protections.<sup>25, 26</sup> Human Rights Watch has estimated that half of imprisoned Afghan women and about 95 percent of girls in juvenile detention have been arrested for so-called "moral crimes," including running away from home to escape forced child marriage or domestic violence, and having sex outside marriage, even it was forced on the woman.<sup>27</sup>

In Afghanistan the number of forcibly repatriated Afghans combined with internally displaced persons—those who fled their homes to other places within the country—is nearly 2 million and counting; refugees unable to return to their original homes often live in informal settlements where many people have died due to environmental conditions and illness. One in three Afghan children are malnourished. Access to health care is limited—and dangerous. The insurgents do not respect the neutrality of medical facilities.<sup>28</sup> Earlier this week ISIS gunmen disguised as doctors and medics drove an ambulance into Kabul's main military hospital, then opened fire on patients and staff members and battled Afghan security forces for hours. At least 30 people were killed, most of them civilians, and twice as many were wounded.<sup>29</sup>

Both the government and aid organizations are struggling to handle the humanitarian crisis. Khayr Mohammad in Kabul can attest to this. "Today we will get a sack of flour from one aid organization and tomorrow another will bring us firewood," he said. "But we aren't animals that you can just throw something at. We are asking for a chance to educate our children. And we need a hospital."<sup>30</sup>

It is tempting to despair, but I suspect despair is not what drives these refugees. Desperation to be sure, but also hope—hope for life, hope for a better future for their children, hope that tomorrow will be better than today, as fragile as that hope may be at times. Hope is a holy thing—it's what keeps us seeking God. As we continue to witness the most widespread refugee crisis since World War II, with a

scope and complexity that frankly defies comprehension, let us pray for God to be a constant source of hope for all who suffer from violence and dislocation. And let us add our hope to theirs, out of compassion for fellow sojourners—for the stories of our Christian tradition are also stories of wandering, of flight, of forced migration.

“You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Deut. 10:19.

And let us always, always, pray for peace.

Closing song: “Now It Is Evening,” *The Faith We Sing* 2187.

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<sup>1</sup> Rate of displacement in 2015 was 24 persons per minute. UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015,” page 2, <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Creekside UMC, Sutter Creek, CA

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Putz, “Afghanistan’s 32-year Refugee Crisis,” *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/afghanistans-32-year-refugee-crisis/>

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014,” page 17, Figure 7: Historical review of 50 major source countries of refugees, [http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html#\\_ga=1.108498886.570440503.1431013767](http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html#_ga=1.108498886.570440503.1431013767)

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Putz, “Afghanistan’s 32-year Refugee Crisis,” *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/afghanistans-32-year-refugee-crisis/>

<sup>6</sup> Andre Vitcek, “Afghanistan in Ruins: ‘Small’ Western Propaganda Lies, Huge Impact,” Global Research, April 8, 2017, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/afghanistan-in-ruins-small-western-propaganda-lies-huge-impact/5584030>

<sup>7</sup> Rupert Colville, “The Biggest Caseload in the World,” *UNHCR Refugees Magazine* Issue 108 (Afghanistan: The unending crisis), June 1, 1997, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/refugeemag/3b680fbfc/refugees-magazine-issue-108-afghanistan-unending-crisis-biggest-caseload.html>

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Putz, “Afghanistan’s 32-year Refugee Crisis,” *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/afghanistans-32-year-refugee-crisis/>

<sup>9</sup> Belquis Ahmadi, “The Afghan Refugee Crisis in 2016,” United States Institute of Peace, February 27, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/afghan-refugee-crisis-2016>

<sup>10</sup> Rupert Colville, "The Biggest Caseload in the World," *UNHCR Refugees Magazine* Issue 108 (Afghanistan: The unending crisis), June 1, 1997, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/refugeemag/3b680fbfc/refugees-magazine-issue-108-afghanistan-unending-crisis-biggest-caseload.html>

<sup>11</sup> Asad Hashim, "Afghan Refugees Return Home amid Pakistan Crackdown," *Al Jazeera*, February 26, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/afghan-refugees-return-home-pakistan-crackdown-170225103737546.html>

<sup>12</sup> Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, "Refugees in Afghanistan Caught Between Winter and War," *Deutsche Welle*, October 1, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/refugees-in-afghanistan-caught-between-winter-and-war/a-37078781>

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Pakistan Coercion, UN Complicity: The Mass Forced Return of Afghan Refugees," February 13, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/02/13/pakistan-coercion-un-complicity/mass-forced-return-afghan-refugees>

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Strickland, "Why Are Afghan Refugees Leaving Iran?" *Al Jazeera*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/afghan-refugees-leaving-iran-160511103759873.html>

<sup>15</sup> "Afghanistan Displacement Casts Shadow over Germany's 'Safe' Claims," *Deutsche Welle*, October 1, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-displacement-casts-shadow-over-germanys-safe-claims/a-37071390>

<sup>16</sup> Action Aid/Oxfam: "Europe, Don't Let Us Down: Voices of Refugees and Migrants in Greece," June 2016, page 5, <https://actionaid.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Voices-of-Refugees-and-Migrants-in-Greece.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Subodh Varmal, "After 15 Years, Taliban Still Control as Much Afghanistan Area as When War Started," *The Times of India*, October 7, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/After-15-years-Taliban-still-control-as-much-Afghanistan-area-as-when-war-started/articleshow/54728908.cms>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Afghan Civilian Casualties at Record High in 2016: UN," *Al Jazeera*, February 6, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/afghan-civilian-casualties-2016-170206062807210.html>

<sup>21</sup> Jina Moore, "Here's Why Afghan Refugees Are Finding Europe So Unwelcoming," BuzzFeed News, July 12, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/jinamoore/this-is-how-europes-rules-discriminate-against-afghan-refuge?utm\\_term=.ubqyRzWVe#.ckK3EnOM2](https://www.buzzfeed.com/jinamoore/this-is-how-europes-rules-discriminate-against-afghan-refuge?utm_term=.ubqyRzWVe#.ckK3EnOM2)

<sup>22</sup> Roopa Mathews, "Behind the Green Eyes: The Fate of Afghan Women Refugees," Iguacu, February 3, 2016, <https://weareiguacu.com/the-fate-of-afghan-women-refugees/>

<sup>23</sup> Renate van der Zee, "Life as a Female Refugee: 'You Don't Know Who to Trust'" *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/life-female-refugee-don-trust-160210092005932.html>

<sup>24</sup> Jina Moore, "Here's Why Afghan Refugees Are Finding Europe So Unwelcoming," BuzzFeed News, July 12, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/jinamoore/this-is-how-europes-rules-discriminate-against-afghan-refuge?utm\\_term=.ubqyRzWVe#.ckK3EnOM2](https://www.buzzfeed.com/jinamoore/this-is-how-europes-rules-discriminate-against-afghan-refuge?utm_term=.ubqyRzWVe#.ckK3EnOM2)

<sup>25</sup> Karishma Vyas, "Afghanistan: No Country for Women," *Al Jazeera*, July 3, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2015/06/afghanistan-country-women-150630115111987.html>

<sup>26</sup> Trust in Education, "Life as an Afghan Woman," <http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/>

<sup>27</sup> Magdalena Mis, "Afghan Draft Law Must Stop Punishing Women over 'Moral Crimes' - Rights Group," *Reuters*, May 25, 2016, <http://in.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-rights-women-idINKCN0YG27W>

<sup>28</sup> Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University: "Costs of War," <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/refugees/afghan>

<sup>29</sup> "Afghanistan: IS Gunmen Dressed as Medics Kill 30 at Kabul Military Hospital," BBC News, March 8, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39202525#>

<sup>30</sup> Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, "Refugees in Afghanistan Caught Between Winter and War," *Deutsche Welle*, October 1, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/refugees-in-afghanistan-caught-between-winter-and-war/a-37078781>