Kuchi Nomads: Displaced and Destitute in Afghanistan

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The Kuchis, nearly all of whom are Pashtuns or Baluch, are probably the most destitute, least regarded, and least attended group in the Afghan population. In the 1970s they numbered about 2 million. Now, perhaps only a few tens of thousands still follow their traditional livelihood of nomadic herding. Several tribes and clans of Kuchis spend the winters in the lowlands of eastern Afghanistan and migrate into the Central Highlands for summer grazing. However, the Hazara people of the Central Highlands have cut off access to most of the Kuchis who have grazed the high country since the 1890s. Hazaras that Refugees International recently spoke to near Bamyan were adamant that they would not allow the Kuchis to return to their region. Their grievances against the Kuchis are both old and new. Among the new grievances are allegations that the Kuchis were pro-Taliban and thus complicit in the massacres perpetrated against Hazaras in the 1990s.

Some Kuchis have become farmers, settled in cities, or are migrant laborers. We encountered one group of four Kuchi families belonging to the Ibrahim Khel tribe living in nine ragged tents in the countryside near Kabul. They had traveled by truck from eastern Afghanistan to near Kabul in search of agricultural work. They were landless and owned no livestock; their children were not in school; they were not registered to vote; and they were not beneficiaries of any of the government’s development or welfare projects. (Not all Kuchis are poor, however. A few have become wealthy through smuggling and other businesses and have traded in their camels for SUVs.)

The largest concentration of Kuchis is probably in the Registan, the sandy desert that covers a big area in southern Afghanistan. About 200,000 people live in the displaced person camps in southern Afghanistan, most of them Kuchis, and an equivalent number live in refugee camps across the border in Pakistan. Two groups of roughly equal numbers are in the camps: Kuchis from Registan and northern Kuchis who were settled in northwestern Afghanistan one hundred years ago but were recently expelled by their Uzbek and Tajik neighbors. A few of the northerners may be able to return home in the future, but the experts agree that an early return to nomadic grazing in the Registan is impossible, although the desert still supports grazing by a few animals. "There's nothing that can be done for the Registan Kuchis until three or four years of good rain restores their range land" is the bleak assessment of one agricultural expert.
It is unclear, however, how many Kuchis wish to return to the nomadic life and how many wish to pursue sedentary occupations. Many Afghan officials believe the Kuchis in the camps have become accustomed to schools and health clinics and want to settle down; but many Kuchis we talked to a year ago in refugee camps in Pakistan said they wanted to go back to nomadic herding. The ecological niche for the Kuchis still seems to exist: "There is no other economic alternative for the utilization of Registan than the Kuchi sheep/camel economy," says one recent report. Thus, it seems that, if and when the rains return, at least a minority of the Registan Kuchis will return to being nomadic herders.

In the meantime, however, the Kuchis are vegetating in Afghan and Pakistani camps that are believed to be heavily infiltrated by the Taliban. So severe are living conditions in these camps that refugees reportedly have difficulty even finding enough water to drink. The security situation in these regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan is so poor that few international aid workers are able to visit the camps.

The Afghan government and international organizations have prepared a draft plan to resolve the problem of the displaced Kuchis over a three year period at a cost of $60 million. The plan envisions a large public works employment project, returns of displaced northern Kuchis, and helping the Registan Kuchis reestablish their livestock herds. Another possible durable solution would be to establish new communities in the south to settle the Kuchis. Unfortunately, although there is plenty of land for new settlements, there is little money and little water. Thus, solutions to the problems of displaced Kuchis are elusive. Much of the plan to restock livestock seems unfeasible until the return of rains and the recovery of the range in the Registan and southern Afghanistan. Aid donors have shown little inclination to finance more than studies thus far.

UNHCR is now profiling the internally displaced population in southern Afghanistan. The results should be useful in designing long-term plans for the Kuchis, including alternative livelihoods to nomadic herding. Also, the Ministry of Agriculture has just concluded a rangeland policy and strategy document to begin to sort out the complex questions of rights to grazing lands throughout Afghanistan. It will likely be years, however, before conflicting land, water, and range rights are reconciled. In the meantime, many Kuchis are trapped in a cycle of misery and dependency in refugee and displaced person camps.

Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:

- The Afghan government include Kuchis in its development programs, including the National Solidarity Program (NSP) and provide temporary employment to Kuchis through the National Emergency Employment Program (NEEP).
- The Afghan government and UNHCR provide opportunities for Kuchis to return to their former homes in northern Afghanistan when it is safe for them to do so.
- The Afghan government and UNHCR facilitate the return and provide transitional support to herders who choose to resume their nomadic existence if and when rains return to the Registan.
• The Afghan and Pakistan governments, aid agencies, and NGOs initiate training and micro-finance programs in refugee and displaced person camps to prepare Kuchis for alternative livelihoods to nomadic grazing.

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