

Afghanistan: Who will assume the responsibility?

"There were people like sheep, they were everywhere," an Afghan refugee describing the scene as he fled Kabul a week ago.

The bombing of Afghanistan is causing thousands of people to flee their homes. Some cross the border to Pakistan, others are internally displaced within Afghanistan. Amnesty International challenges the coalition behind the bombing to assume a larger responsibility for the refugees and internally displaced seeking refuge from the bombs.

"After having interviewed a number of refugees that have reached Pakistan recently, one thing has become very clear to me," says Carl Soderbergh, head of Amnesty International's delegation in Pakistan. "All those we are meeting tell us that they are fleeing Afghanistan because of the bombing campaign."

After analyzing the testimonies from Afghan refugees, it is clear that the overwhelming majority are saying they fled because of the bombing. This picture is strengthened by discussing the findings with NGOs and others who are also in close contact with refugees.

"The bombing campaign has exacerbated the problems that already existed," says Soderbergh. "People can't work and aid is hampered. Support structures are being disrupted, forcing women to take to the road on their own and placing them in an extremely vulnerable position. These are only some of the problems."

The vast majority of the over 100,000 refugees who have come to Pakistan since the beginning of the current crisis are depending on family and relatives for survival. A very few of those who have been able to cross the closed border into Pakistan find themselves in makeshift refugee

camps lacking in almost everything. All of these people have one thing in common, they have no formal status, which renders them under a continuous threat of deportation.

"I have visited two of the camps where the new arrivals are gathered," Soderbergh continues. "One was only 200 metres from the border, putting the refugees in a high risk situation. The other camp provided very little shelter for the refugees, some of whom are using sticks and thin plastic sheets to build tents. With winter coming, these conditions are very worrying. Moreover, there is an impending humanitarian disaster for those internally displaced who can't make it across the border."

Amnesty International calls on the US, UK and other countries in the coalition to assume a much larger responsibility for the refugee problems caused by the bombing. The organization has also previously raised concerns about the Pakistani authorities closing the border with Afghanistan, and setting up camps for new arrivals in unsafe areas.

"As the bombing of Afghanistan continues it is time for the nations behind the bombing campaign to take a larger responsibility for the refugee flow they are creating. They must press for open borders, refugee status for those arriving, and proper refugee camps at a safe distance from the conflict area. But they must also share the burden the refugees are placing on Afghanistan's neighbours, " Soderbergh ends.

*Visit Amnesty International's electronic press kit on 11 September crisis:
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