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Pakistan: Refugee camps in tribal areas - a risky strategy

Amnesty International has written to President Musharraf of Pakistan expressing concerns about plans to open refugee camps in tribal areas.

"Plans to open refugee camps will go some way toward protecting those fleeing the US-led attacks on Afghanistan. However placing the camps in tribal areas will present problems for relief workers, the refugees themselves, local communities and outside monitors," Amnesty International said.

According to reports, some 30 camps may be set up in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan, to accommodate up to 200,000 people. Nine locations in NWFP have so far been identified and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations are currently preparing four sites.

The population in these areas are Pashtun, the main ethnic group in Afghanistan. Many Pashtuns in Pakistan's tribal areas have expressed their sympathies with the Taleban and hostility toward other ethnic groups. There have already been incidents in which building works were obstructed by local opponents of the camps.

The road infrastructure will not support regular traffic, and water and food are not available in adequate quantities locally. Competition for scarce resources would create or enhance local hostility against the refugees, which could turn into a security concern.

The location of the proposed camps, within a few kilometres of the Afghan border, may also expose them to easy infiltration by combatants from Afghanistan. The government of Pakistan has on a number of

occasions expressed concern that members of the Taleban or Islamist groups may pose as refugees. The UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) should be guaranteed access to monitor the screening procedures.

As at least 1,000 - 2,000 Afghans arrive every day through the long and porous border with Pakistan in search of refuge. Amnesty International urged the President of Pakistan to place the camps at a secure distance from the Afghan border, in order to guarantee safety and ensure the civilian and humanitarian character of the camps.

Amnesty International also reiterated its call for the borders to be reopened and is again urging the international community to provide the necessary assistance to the Pakistani government so that it can give adequate protection to refugees.

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