

Gallup Pakistan History Project - Weekend Read 8 ‘Afghan Refugees in Pakistan’: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

The story of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is punctuated by instances and experiences of displacement, openness, ambiguity, hostility, illegality, fear and arbitrariness. The palette of these sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory experiences, approaches, and attitudes reveals a crucial reality about Pakistan’s attitude towards Afghan refugees: the Pakistani approach towards Afghan refugees over the last three decades has oscillated between acceptance and rejection, positivity and negativity, warmth and bitterness. This ambiguity, while seemingly puzzling, animates and underlines the realities of Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan.

Gallup Pakistan’s invaluable repository of public opinion data in Pakistan since 1980 provides a wealth of insights into this subject matter. The organization has been gauging and storing Pakistanis’ opinions and views on a wide variety of issues, including for the purpose of this discussion, the nation’s attitudes towards Afghan refugees since 1979. This data enables and facilitates a longitudinal dissection of the tenor of Pakistan’s attitude towards Afghan refugees, thereby revealing the ambiguity that underlines Pakistan’s understanding and treatment of Afghan refugees on its soil.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a landmark event in South Asian history. In retrospect, the event induced and unleashed tremendous geopolitical and historical forces that have, in one way or another, continue to impact the region’s politics, society, economy, and history; particularly, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The unfortunate victims of this grand interplay of historical forces and actors have been the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and most notably, the several million war-displaced Afghan refugees. For the bulk of Afghan refugees, repeatedly uprooted from their homes for over three decades, Pakistan has provided a convenient abode. It is in Pakistan that these refugees have gone about recreating their lives, livelihoods, and social networks. However, their integration and/or repatriation have been an issue clouded by ambiguity on the host community’s part.

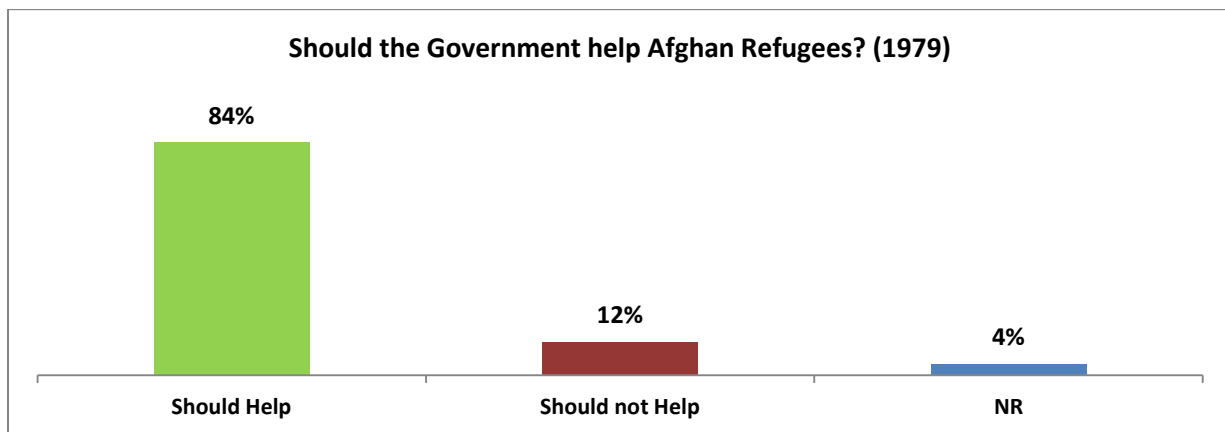
Today, Pakistan hosts nearly 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees – the largest protracted refugee population in the world. Various estimates also suggest that there might be between one and two million unregistered Afghan refugees spread across Pakistan’s urban and rural areas.

The sheer enormity of these numbers puts into perspective the significance of Afghan refugees' presence in Pakistan. Despite hosting this substantial Afghan refugee population for more than three decades, Pakistan's policy towards these refugees is defined by the conspicuous absence of a legal framework to deal with refugees. Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the additional Protocol of 1967. As such, The Afghan refugee population in Pakistan is not legally entitled to any legal status or protection by the state of Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan has managed Afghan refugees by recognizing and accounting for their numbers through the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards. Afghan refugees in Pakistan exist within this legal lacuna and face the real and present threat of refoulement.

The longitudinal analysis of Pakistan's attitudes towards Afghan refugees provides an indication of how the country's attitude on this subject has shadowed and imitated developments in regional politics and affairs. This discussion will proceed in stages to mark the key periods in which Pakistanis' approach towards Afghan refugees attained a specific color.

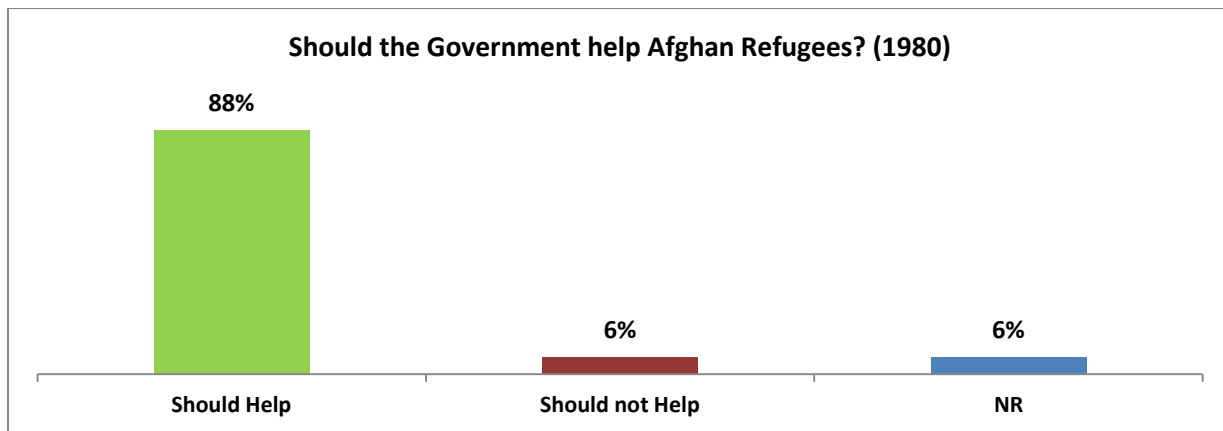
1979-1989:

Afghan refugees began pouring into Pakistan in 1979, after the Soviet Union formally invaded Afghanistan and war ensued. In that very first year, Pakistanis were significantly supportive of the Government's effort to help Afghan refugees, and provide them with shelter and assistance. This is how the people of Pakistan assessed the refugee situation in 1979:

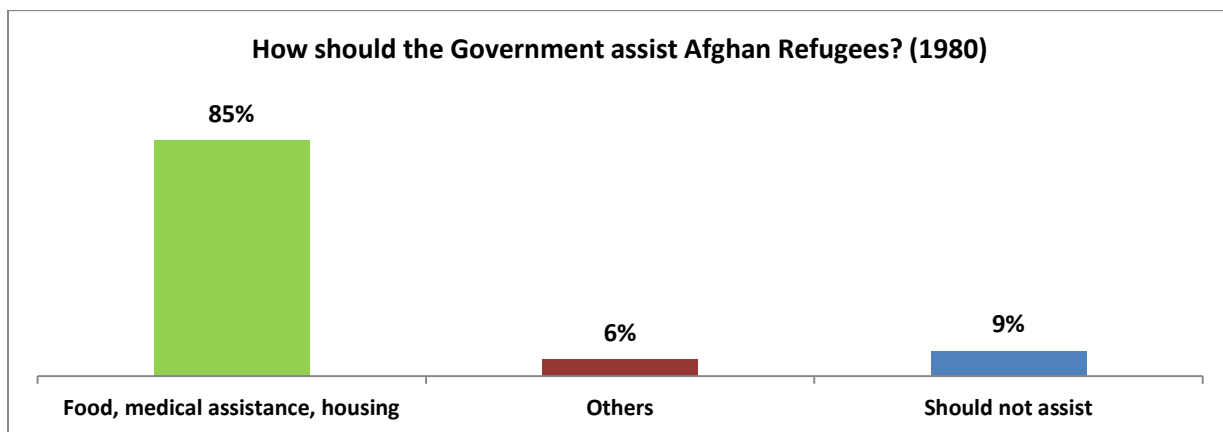


As the figure here shows, in 1979, Pakistani overwhelmingly favored the Government of Pakistan's efforts to help settle Afghan refugees fleeing the war-ravaged homeland. Politically, the Government of Pakistan, aligned with the US, recognized that Afghanistan had drifted into

the USSR's direct orbit of influence. This posed a substantial threat to Pakistan's geopolitical interests. Accepting Afghan refugees provided an opportunity to the Government of Pakistan to establish connections and support with the fleeing refugees of Afghanistan, and the support of the international community – with expectations of aid and assistance from the West. The substantial public support for the hosting of Afghan refugees provided legitimacy to the Government of Pakistan's strategic aims at the onset of the Afghan saga. This support grew over the next year:



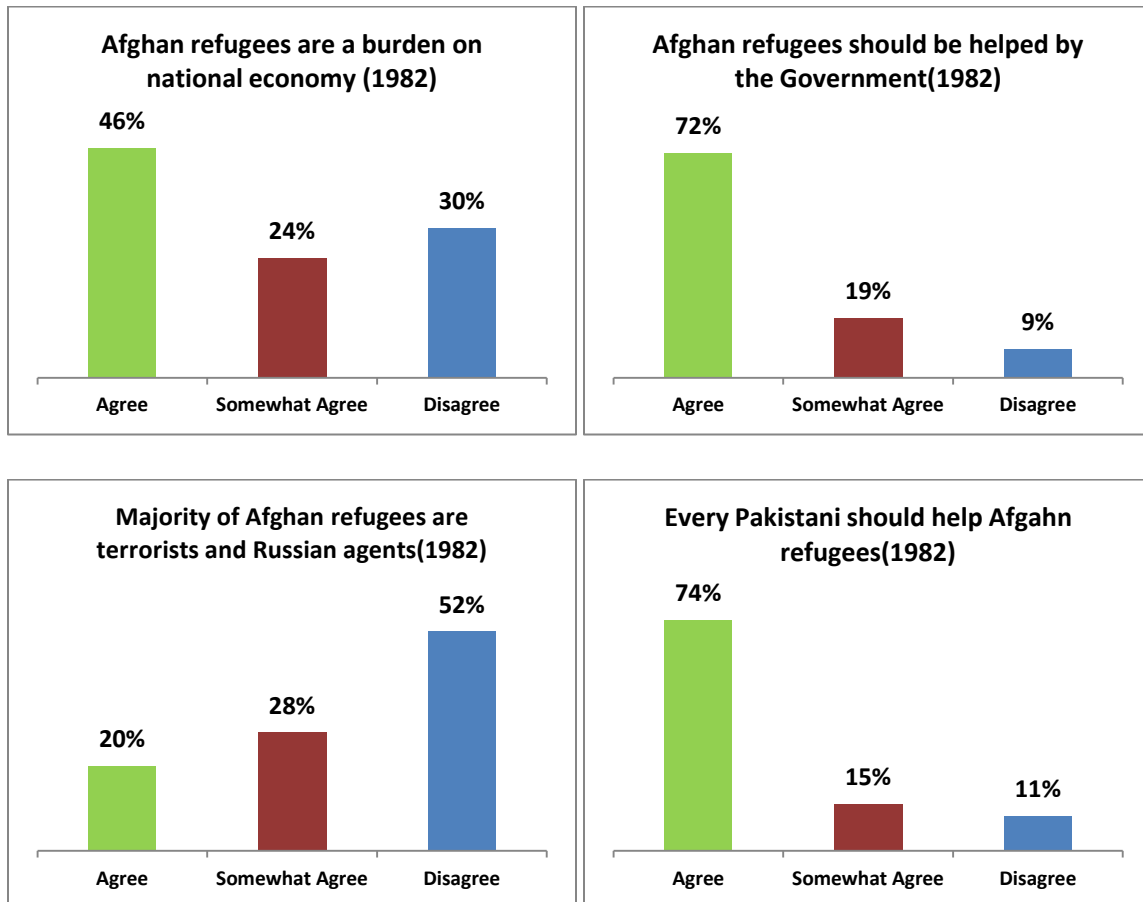
In 1980, the people of Pakistan had already formed concrete views on the form of aid ought to be given to Afghan refugees:



Pakistanis wanted their Government to provide succor, shelter, and basic assistance to Afghan refugees. This support provided further strength to the Government's effort to host Afghan refugees, and crucially receive international assistance in the process. A natural by-product of this strategy was to get the international community, particularly the United States, invested in

the region, and act as a buffer against Soviet strength and intentions – which posed a direct danger to Pakistan.

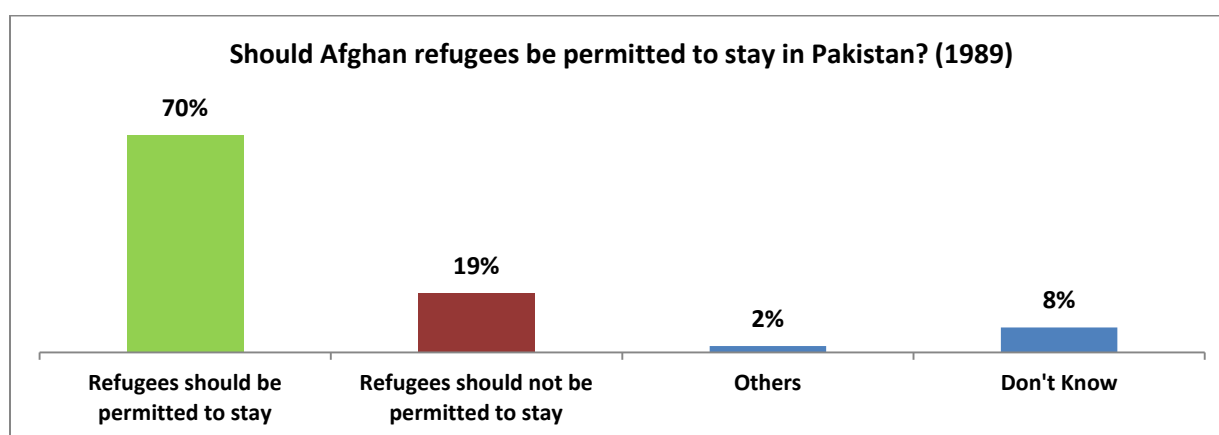
By 1982, the picture had evolved slightly under the three year experience of hosting Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Gallup’s public opinion polling in that year provides a more varied picture of Pakistani attitudes towards Afghan refugees. The following figures display Pakistani opinions on this subject in 1982:



In the year 1982, Pakistani opinions of Afghan refugees exhibited slight shifts that are indicative of the country’s evolving understanding of becoming a home to war-affected refugees. In the three years since Afghan refugees began flooding into Pakistan, society began recognizing that the cost of hosting a substantial refugee population was significant. Most Pakistanis (46%) concurred with the opinion that refugees were a burden on national economy. But this debate was contested, in that nearly a third of all Pakistanis (30%) believed that Afghan refugees were not a burden on Pakistan’s economy. Notwithstanding this recognition, most Pakistanis agreed

(72%) that the Government of Pakistan and Pakistani citizens (74%) should play their roles in helping Afghan refugees settling in the country. While this was indicative of the favorable opinion vis-à-vis refugees in Pakistan, the support had climbed down from the peak in 1979. Furthermore, it can be deduced that despite the contestation over the economic impacts and costs of hosting a large refugee population, the clear majority of Pakistanis still favored supporting and hosting Afghan refugees. Crucially, this support provided the necessary foundation and fillip to the Government of Pakistan to continue seeking the United States' help in countering the influence exerted by Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan via overt support for refugees, and covert support for Afghan Mujahideen.

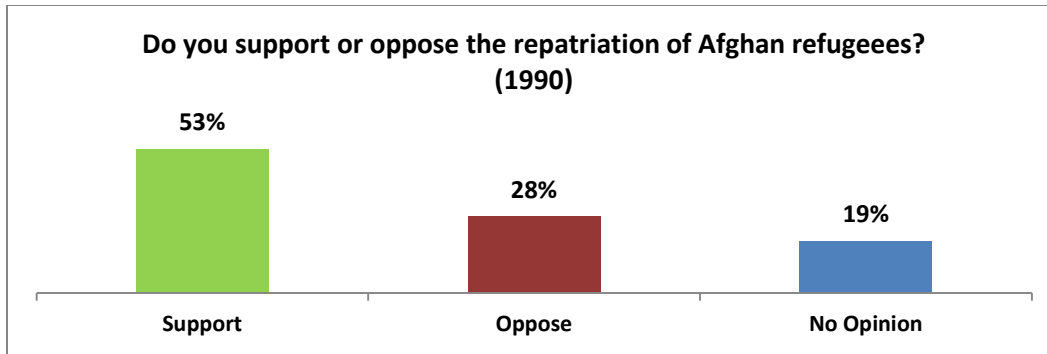
This support for Afghan refugees continued throughout the 1980s. At the tail end of the decade, another public opinion assessment on the subject by Gallup Pakistan revealed the following:



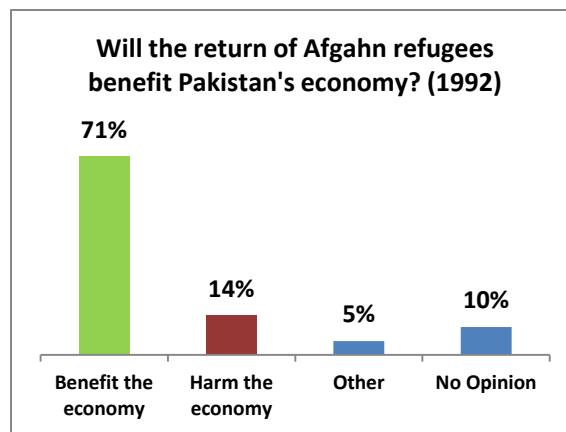
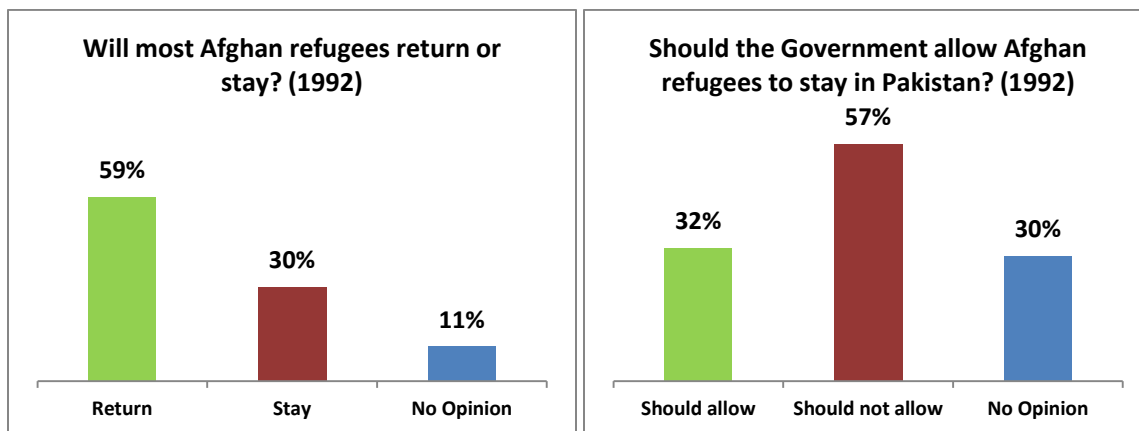
In 1989, Pakistanis still supported the presence and hosting of Afghan refugees, especially under the condition that warfare continued in Afghanistan. However, the data analyzed in this discussion also shows that this was a crucial point in Pakistan's support for Afghan refugees. Things changed dramatically for Afghan refugees in the following decade.

1992-2000:

Public opinion in Pakistan switched remarkably following the mass support and sympathy available for Afghan refugees till 1989. When a similar public opinion assessment was conducted in 1990, the following numbers emerged:



As seen here, within a year, in the aftermath of the Soviet expulsion and withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistanis' support for Afghan refugees shrank dramatically. The majority of Pakistanis supported the repatriation of Afghan refugees undertaken by UNHCR in 1990. This reverse sentiment took over Pakistani society and public perspective over the 1990s. In 1992, Gallup Pakistan delved deeper into this growing antipathy towards Afghan refugees in Pakistan by asking a series of inter-connected questions. The results are shown below:

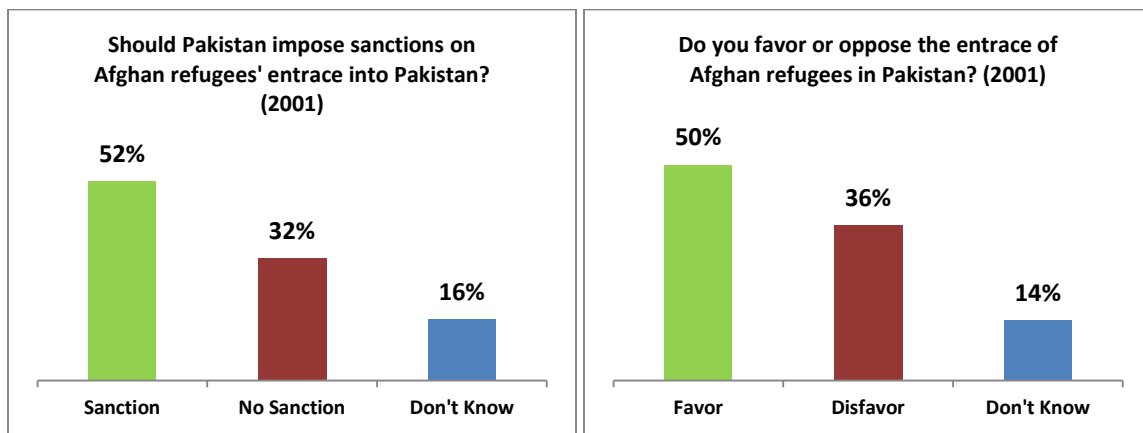


As seen above, public opinion in Pakistan regarding Afghan refugees had shifted markedly into the negative territory, with increasing support for repatriation. Furthermore, most Pakistanis viewed the exit of Afghan refugees as benefitting the national economy. This sentiment was aligned with the Government of Pakistan’s strategic perspectives and interest vis-à-vis Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the subsequent withdrawal of US support for Pakistan, the Government of Pakistan found the space to exert its own influence and pursue its interest in Afghanistan. In this environment, most Pakistanis supported the official position that Afghan refugees should repatriate to their homeland.

The 1990s ushered in an era for Afghan refugees when Pakistan became an increasingly difficult and dangerous place to build a life. However, at the turn of the millennium, another remarkable swing took shape.

2001-2015(?)

In 2001, Gallup Pakistan re-evaluated Pakistanis’ perceptions regarding Afghan refugees. The following information was gleaned from this exercise:



In 2001, the Pakistani public had begun warming up to the return of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. There was disagreement over the state’s policy towards such refugees. Crucially, this indicates another period of open and widespread warfare in Afghanistan’s modern history. After the overthrow of Taliban in Kabul and the entrance of NATO coalition in Afghanistan, Pakistanis recognized the emergence of another wave of refugees as a result of renewed warfare in Afghanistan. While the Government of Pakistan ostensibly supported the US War on Terror,

the country entered a phase of ambiguity, anger, and muddled thinking over where it stood vis-à-vis this shift in global affairs.

In 2015, Pakistan's policy towards Afghan refugees has witnessed another shift – much in line with the shifts recorded over the last three and a half decades. After the December 16th attack on APS in Peshawar, the Government of Pakistan seems to have arrived at a firm decision to push for Afghan refugees' repatriation.

These shifts in Pakistani public's opinions regarding Afghan refugees are in line with the state's shifting interests and strategic understanding of Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan. When Afghanistan has been overtaken by widespread warfare, Pakistanis have supported the hosting of Afghan refugees in the country. Contrarily, in times where Afghanistan has experienced the absence of such widespread, open warfare, Pakistanis have turned their support into opposition for Afghan refugees.

Crucially, this shifting sentiment towards the refugees is also reflective of the problems and troubles they face in Pakistan. In an environment of ambiguity, both legal and societal, refugees cannot rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and remake their homes. Politics has played a crucial role in affecting this long-term instability and lack of clarity for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.