

Understanding Refugee Returns and Humanitarian Assistance in South Asia

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Abstract

Within humanitarian and governmental settings, the return of refugees is often portrayed as the most effective way to address the issue, usually accompanied by assurances of safety, assistance, and voluntariness. However, such promises often exist only on paper and don't reflect the realities of return. These assumptions have become especially significant in South Asia due to the widespread return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. This paper seeks to understand the actual experience of refugee return and how humanitarian aid shapes these processes on the ground. It examines the gap between official narratives of voluntary return and the realities faced by refugees before, during and after return. Drawing on reports from humanitarian organisations, government statements, court documents and media sources published between 2015 and 2025, it shows how returns often take place amid legal ambiguity, shifting protection policies and limited long-term support. It also highlights everyday conditions that influence refugees' decisions to return, which are restrictions on legal status, difficulties in accessing employment and recurring demands for documentation. Although humanitarian aid is often presented as support, it is usually short-term and does not address the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrants. The paper approaches the return of refugees as a process rather than an isolated incidence. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative interpretive approach to analyse how return is shaped by shifting legal frameworks and conditional assistance. The paper argues that humanitarian aid often limits refugee choices thus making returns 'formally voluntary' but 'technically forced'.

Keywords: Conditional Assistance; Legal Ambiguity; Structural Vulnerabilities