

ONE IN TEN AFGHANS IS A REFUGEE

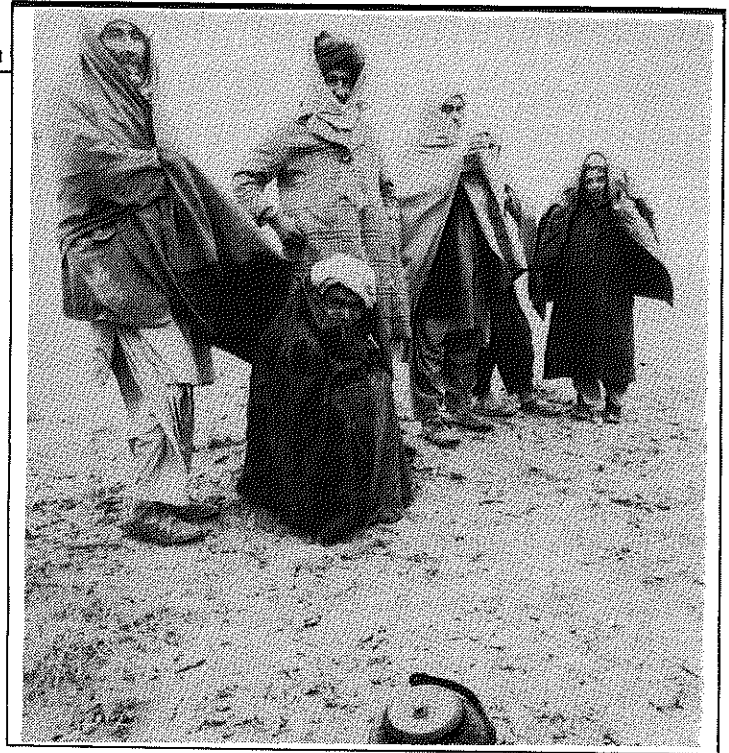
Mr. Dave Jenkins of Vancouver recently returned from fifteen months as chief delegate for the League of Red Cross Societies in Pakistan, where he helped the Pakistan Red Crescent Society run a relief programme for 100,000 Afghan refugees.

Mr. Jenkins estimates that there are close to two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 1.6 million being registered with the UNHCR. Of these, 30-40,000 are nomads who traditionally spend the winter in Pakistan, but in 1978 did not return to Afghanistan following the April coup that installed the communist People's Democratic Party government. The majority of the refugees are labourers and farmers, once homeowners, now living in tents along the border. Some urban and professional refugees are living in Pakistan's cities on their savings.

The most pressing material problem for these refugees, Jenkins said, is the extreme cold. For example, because the refugees are scattered wide apart in tribal clusters of tent villages - often so wide apart that they have to walk for days to receive their monthly rations - sanitation has not yet posed a health hazard, and disease is not more prevalent among the refugees than within Afghanistan or Pakistan. However, the cold means that the condition of anyone who does get sick can deteriorate rapidly: a child with the measles who would recover at home in bed may die on the cold ground in a tent. Jenkins turned most of his efforts to obtaining tents, blankets and warm cloth and clothing.

The refugees brought three million goats, sheep, and other livestock with them, so they aren't starving, "although that does not mean the people aren't hungry." International agencies provide wheat, oil, tea, and sugar, and the government of Pakistan provides the refugees with cash to purchase meat and vegetables locally.

The women face particular problems, Jenkins noted. In Afghan culture, it is unacceptable for a male doctor to examine a woman. The international agencies' medical teams therefore include "lady health visitors." Another problem facing women is that rations are distributed through heads of households or through tribal leaders. Women, especially



widows, sometimes do not get their fair share and special programmes have had to be developed to help feed women and children. Also, the girls receive no education.

Whatever time these refugees don't spend for survival they devote to religious education. A common sight, Jenkins said, was young boys huddled behind a stone wall to ward off the wind, learning the Koran by rote under the tutelage of the religious leaders.

When will these people be able to return home? Pakistan has discouraged the erection of mud buildings, because the land the refugees occupy is not government-owned. Jenkins speculated on an additional reason: such building would imply the long-term nature of the problem and, in turn, acceptance of it. But no one has gone home yet, and a few educated, urban refugees have turned to resettlement in third countries as the only possible solution to their problems. The rest continue to wait.

- K.H.

THE CANADIAN FOUNDATION FOR REFUGEES

Throughout the past spring many Canadians participated in local consultations held under the auspices of the Canadian Foundation for Refugees regarding the need for a national grass-roots organization on behalf of refugees. The Board of Directors of the Foundation has already decided to act on several of the 68 specific recommendations in the draft report:

Distribution of the report:

One copy of the full draft report will be deposited in a convenient place in each community where a workshop was held. Each participant will receive a copy of the summary of the workshop in his community and information on the location of the full report. Comments are welcome. (Although the report itself had recommended that copies of the recommendations should also be distributed to all workshop participants, the Directors felt this would be unnecessarily costly.)

Loans to help organize local networks:

In order to facilitate the development of local, regional

and provincial organizations, seed money will be made available in the form of loans, repayable if and when the organization obtains federal and provincial grants, to enable existing community organizations to organize local chapters of volunteers in association with settlement workers, language teachers, ethnic organizations concerned for refugees, etc. Details are being worked out.

Documentation Centre:

The Foundation is in the process of creating a Documentation Centre for the distribution of refugee-related materials in both English and French. The kind of documentation centre recommended in the draft report "should not originate needed documents but should solicit invitations to produce such documents by local organizations and assist to arrange the funding for their production" (p. 38).

- K.H.

Suggestions for additional members of the Board are encouraged.