

Displaced Persons in Afghanistan

About 150,000 Afghans are displaced within Afghanistan -- driven from their homes. The United Nations Refugee Agency, or UNHCR, reports that most of them are in camps in the embattled southern part of the country. They are refusing to return to the north, where the German army is located.

The story of the daily wage earner Abdul Qayoom is far from unique. He is an Afghan internally displaced person from northern Afghanistan living in the embattled south. When the Taliban was ousted, he fled and ended up in Kandahar. He explains: "I am from Badghis in the north. There are powerful people there who won't allow us to live there. We have land but we left everything behind. Now I live at Zherai camp in Kandahar. Things are not great here. We don't have enough work. But we can't go back."

Abdul Qayoom feels safer in the refugee Zherai camp, about 25 kilometres west of Kandahar than in northern Afghanistan. Safer than in the region where the German army is supposed to ensure safety and stability. He is a member of the Pashtun tribe -- just like most of the Taliban. Pashtuns are a minority in northern Afghanistan, which is populated mainly by Tajiks and Uzbeks who fought against the Taliban there. Since the fall of the Taliban, Pashtuns have been forced to pay retribution for the crimes of the Taliban.

Ahmadullah also fled to southern Afghanistan: "I am from the province of Jawzan. We fled from the fighting. We're not wanted there any more. We left everything behind. Now we live in this camp. Sometimes I find work, sometimes I don't. We can't go home."

Helpless helpers

In total, there are about 150,000 internally displaced Afghans in Afghanistan. About 35,000 are Pashtuns from the north. Almost all of them are living in camps in Kandahar and Helmand province. They can't be reached by international aid organisations, says Mohammed Nader Farhad from the UNHCR in Kabul:

„Because of security reasons we don't have access to the refugee camps. Thus we work together with our local partner organisations. We observe the situation as close as possible but the current security situation won't allow us to directly help the displaced people."

The Afghan refugee ministry wants to dissolve the camps as soon as possible. The administration of President Karzai has made it clear people will not be provided for unless they return to their homes. So far, however, only 15 families have declared themselves willing to go back.

Nowhere to go

The others are holding out -- they don't know what to do, where to go, says local district chief Niaz Mohammad Sarhadi: "I confirm that these people have huge problems. If someone is ready to help in Zherai they will first have to look after the

displaced people in the camp. The people from the north have lost everything. The warlords took everything away from them."

The stranded displaced people symbolise two long-term problems in Afghanistan -- the growing ethnic tensions and ineffective governance on the part of Kabul.

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