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Europe Makes Deal to Send Afghans Home, Where War Awaits Them

By ROD NORDLAND and MUJIB MASHAL

OCT. 5, 2016

Afghan migrants at a temporary camp on the Greek island of Lesbos last year. Under a new deal, tens of thousands of migrants, whose asylum applications were rejected in Europe, will be forced to leave. Credit Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

BRUSSELS — The European Union and Afghanistan announced a deal on Wednesday that would send tens of thousands of Afghan migrants who had reached Europe back home to an increasingly hazardous war zone.

The agreement is the most specific effort yet by Europe to divert or reverse a wave of hundreds of thousands of migrants from war-torn countries including Afghanistan and Syria. But unlike a major agreement with Turkey this year to have that country host more Syrian refugees, the new deal as worded would forcibly send Afghans whose asylum applications were rejected directly back to an intensifying war that has taken a severe toll on civilian life — seemingly at odds with international conventions on refugees.

“The E.U. and the government of Afghanistan intend to cooperate closely in order to organize the dignified, safe and orderly return of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan who do not fulfill the conditions to stay in the E.U.,” the agreement read.

The repatriation deal was announced alongside an international conference in which governments pledged \$3.75 billion in annual development aid to Afghanistan over the next four years. But few of the keynote speakers even hinted at the worsening security in the country in recent weeks, and none publicly discussed the repatriation deal, which was reportedly signed on Sunday.

As speakers at the conference praised improvements in Afghanistan, the very idea that even important Afghan cities could be secured was under direct assault.

Taliban fighters on Wednesday attacked Afghan security forces who were fighting for a third day to maintain control of the main government buildings in Kunduz, a vital provincial capital that briefly fell to insurgents last year. In the Afghan south, another of the few remaining government-held districts in Helmand Province has been seized by the insurgents this week. At no time since before the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan have the Taliban controlled more territory in the country.



An Afghan family at a refugee camp last year on the island of Lesbos. Afghans deported by Europe would be sent home just as the war on the Taliban has intensified in Afghanistan.

“While donors are preoccupied with deterring refugee flight, they should focus instead on security force and Taliban abuses and children’s lack of access to education, and address the reasons people are so desperate to leave,” said Brad Adams, the Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

In 2015 alone, 213,000 Afghans arrived in Europe, with 176,900 claiming asylum that year, according to European Union data. Fifty to 60 percent of such Afghan requests have been denied so far, meaning that tens of thousands of people could be returned to Afghanistan under the deal.

European officials denied that the repatriation deal was a condition for aid to Afghanistan. Federica Mogherini, the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security, told reporters, “There is never, never a link between our development aid and whatever we do on migration.”

But Ekram Afzali, head of Integrity Watch Afghanistan and part of the Afghan delegation meeting with the Europeans in Brussels, said delegates were told by Afghan and international officials that the repatriation deal was a quid pro quo for European aid. A leaked European Union memo dated March 3 discussed openly making pledges of aid at this week’s conference conditional on Afghanistan’s agreement with the repatriation deal.

At the conference, Secretary of State John Kerry said Wednesday that American funding of civilian programs would continue “at or near current levels, on average, all the way through 2020.” Such funding in the current year is about \$1.1 billion, according to John Kirby, the State Department spokesman.

Europe pledged 1.3 billion euros annually, or about \$1.46 billion, making it the single biggest donor, while British officials were expected to provide aid of more than \$900 million a year.

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None of those aid commitments were tied to the security situation, but they were linked to progress by the Afghan government in meeting goals outlined by an international donors’ conference that was held in Tokyo in 2012. This year’s conference was one of a series in which Afghanistan’s progress on benchmarks, called the Tokyo Framework, was evaluated.

Participants at the conference seemed determined to look on the bright side.

“The past four years have not been easy,” Mr. Kerry said. “But Afghanistan’s upward trajectory continues.”

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan cited success on many fronts: “Our new development partnership with the United States is condition-based and we’ve met all the conditions.”

But this year’s conference was distinguished less by what was publicly discussed than by what was not — among them some of those benchmarks for aid.

Transparency International, for instance, criticized the progress on fighting corruption — one of the Tokyo benchmarks — charging that of 22 central commitments of anticorruption measures made by the Afghan government, only two had been carried out.

Other benchmarks that were discussed were progress on women's issues, human rights and elections. Afghanistan was to have held parliamentary elections by 2015, and to have finalized procedures for future elections, neither of which has happened. That was the one area where Mr. Kerry was critical, if mildly.

"I urge them to move forward as a matter of urgency to appoint electoral authorities and unveil a realistic time frame for parliamentary elections," he said.

Mr. Kerry was among several leaders at the conference who repeatedly praised Afghanistan for enrolling millions of girls in schools, which was not done until 2002, after the Taliban were ousted from power. Doubts have long been raised that Afghan figures on girls' enrollment are exaggerated, however, and recently, there have been reports that girls' schools have been closing because of rising security concerns.



Afghan refugees at the detention center on Lesbos last year. European officials are denying that continued aid to Afghanistan is tied to the deportations of refugees, as some Afghan officials and nongovernmental agency workers have said.

Progress on human rights and women's rights was severely criticized as well. "We've actually gone backwards since Tokyo in the extent that human rights are included in the measurable benchmarks," said Heather Barr, a researcher for Human Rights Watch who has worked extensively in Afghanistan.

Against that backdrop, the new repatriation deal with Europe instantly rankled Afghan officials and international aid workers, some of whom said that by any measure of stability, Afghanistan was a hazardous place.

Though the language of the deal, called the Joint Way Forward, did not provide information on the number of Afghans who would be returned home, the details available suggested preparations for a major undertaking.

“Both sides will explore the possibility to build a dedicated terminal for return in Kabul airport and express their willingness to carry out nonscheduled flights at the best convenient time,” read a document describing the deal.

The government’s agreement to the deal was bound to anger many in Afghanistan, particularly because the families of a large number of the government’s senior officials live abroad.

“We call on European countries to suspend the deportation of Afghan refugees in Europe,” said Maiwand Rahyab, of the Afghan Institute for Civil Society, a delegate in Brussels. “We call on the international community to uphold their principles and their European values, and respect the rights of Afghan refugees until such time as Afghanistan is a peaceful country.”

Timor Sharan, senior analyst for Afghanistan at the International Crisis Group, said the European motivation for sending a large number of Afghan asylum seekers back was not based on the realities in Afghanistan, but rather on anti-immigration sentiment in Europe.

“This is a political response to a humanitarian situation,” Mr. Sharan said.

Dan Tyler, the Norwegian Refugee Council’s protection officer for Asia and Europe, said the deal was part of an “extremely concerning” trend in Europe on what has been called migration-sensitive aid.

“Return conditions are on every indicator deteriorating: People are faring extremely badly, there are huge spikes in malnutrition, displacement internally, and the E.U. is striking deals to return asylum seekers,” Mr. Tyler said.

In addition to the fact that even Afghan districts and major highways once declared safe are now threatened or overrun by the Taliban, the returnees from Europe will go back to a dire economic crisis, with an unemployment rate of about 35 percent and about 400,000 young people entering the job market every year.

“Their logic is that provincial capitals are safe. But the reality — look at Kunduz, Helmand, Uruzgan, and even Kabul with the recent suicide bombings — clearly indicates they are not safe,” Mr. Sharan said. “With nearly 10,000 troops in Kunduz, the government is not able to secure a provincial capital.”

In Kunduz on Wednesday, residents fled in increasingly large numbers despite Taliban roadblocks on the main roads out. More than 1,000 families arrived in neighboring Takhar Province, its governor said.

Shops in Kunduz remained closed, and the city was without electricity and running water for a third day.

Marzia Salam Yaftali, the head doctor at Kunduz’s central hospital, said the Taliban’s roadblocks left many unable to bring in their wounded. Even the hospital where she works did

not remain safe: Several mortar shells hit the compound in the afternoon, forcing the workers to move patients to the basement.

“The opposition group is able to capture the city in a single day, but government with all its power is not able to recapture the city in three days,” said Sayid Assadullah Sadat, a member of the Kunduz provincial council. “The fighting is house to house.”