For Afghan Refugees, No Return Is in Sight; With or Without Taliban, Nation Is Still Poor
By Daniel Pearl

SHAMSHATU REFUGEE CAMP, Pakistan -- The Taliban era appears to be drawing to a close in Afghanistan, and fighting has stopped in most of the country, but Afghans here are making no plans to return to their native land.

"Under the current situation, I can't go back," says Mahmood, an 18-year-old who left Kabul a year ago after his father died and a drought made it difficult to get by as a farm day laborer. True, the Taliban have been replaced in the Afghan capital, and Kabul is peaceful now. But "apart from peace, the poverty is so deep that people like me cannot think to go back," he says, pausing in front of a bakery under construction at the camp, a collection of 25,000 mud-and-brick homes east of Peshawar, with electricity and well water.

This isn't like the conflict in Kosovo, which ended with a flood of refugees rushing to return from makeshift camps to relatively prosperous home villages. Refugees from Afghanistan have settled deeper in neighboring countries as their homeland has endured two decades of war and slid into economic ruin; the United Nations says it doesn't expect any substantial return of refugees to Afghanistan before winter.

Pakistan has an estimated two million Afghan refugees, and Iran had about 1.5 million as of the end of last year. Neighboring countries have become resentful of the strains of hosting so many foreigners, and are hopeful an end to the Taliban era will bring eventual repatriation of refugees, especially if new levels of foreign aid flow into Afghanistan and a post-Taliban government proves stable. The search for a government is plodding forward at three interlocking levels: the U.N. is trying to organize a meeting this weekend of Afghan groups; Afghanistan's long-exiled king, Mohammed Zahir, is weighing a return as a unifying figure; and the Northern Alliance, which holds Kabul, is trying to consolidate its hold on the northern half of Afghanistan.

Pakistani authorities have maneuvered to prevent the newest refugees from becoming too settled. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) said it wasn't allowed to provide any assistance to new refugees who showed up at a desolate camp, near here, called New Jalozai, set up after the Taliban took Kabul in 1996. Pakistan warned new arrivals not to try to settle in Shamshatu, either. Instead, the government wanted refugees to be kept near the Afghan border.

After weeks of negotiations, the UNHCR finally began moving busloads of refugees from New Jalozai on Monday to a new camp near the border. New Jalozai has about 50,000 individuals, and the new, more comfortable camp can accommodate 20,000, the agency said. Still, it isn't clear the new camp will be filled: Only Pashtuns can make the move, since the camp is in an area with a strong Pashtun identity. More important, the isolated camp offers few work opportunities.
The more established camps have their own economic activity: brick kilns, carpet workshops and, at Old Shamshatu, a bustling main street of shops and small factories. Ahmad Shah, a 19-year-old student who left eastern Afghanistan two years ago as the Taliban and the Northern Alliance warred, sells posters of the country from Old Shamshatu. "If there is a permanent peace and schools and other basic services, I'll go back," he says.

Reham Dil, a 60-year-old refugee who left the same region in the early 1980s, makes doors and windows for fellow refugees expanding their "temporary" homes in Pakistan. He says orders haven't slowed in the past few weeks. "I think people would start going back at a time when peace has come back across the country," he says, "not just in pockets."

With Afghanistan itself in turmoil, much of Afghan culture and business simply shifted to Pakistan's northwestern tribal areas over the years. In Peshawar, Afghans dominate retail trade, though they aren't allowed to own businesses or real estate in their own names. Pakistanis grumble about the Afghans, blaming them for crime and prostitution. Nervous about the Afghan influence, authorities have closed down most of their universities in Peshawar.

Most Afghans escaping the bombing and fighting of recent months simply moved in with relatives and friends in cities. Some Pakistani authorities want those refugees to move to the new camp, too, but U.N. officials say that is unlikely to happen.