

Update on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Displaced Mahsuds Set to Return to Homes

The civil and military authorities are planning to start sending the first batch of displaced Mahsud tribes people to their villages in South Waziristan by the second week of August. "We want to return 30,000 to 40,000 displaced persons to their homes in the first phase. We hope they would be able to celebrate Eid ul Fitr in their villages. South Waziristan's political agent Syed Shahab Ali Shah said 44,000 IDPs have been registered at centres in Tank, Dera Ismail Khan, Wana and Razmak and their repatriation would start soon. The registered IDPs are being issued cards that would facilitate their return and ensure payment of cash compensation and supply of food rations and other relief goods. Almost the whole Mahsud tribe inhabiting roughly half of the vast South Waziristan tribal region was displaced due to the military operation launched in their area against the militants in October last year. Most of them have been living in Tank and Dera Ismail Khan districts located close to the militancy-stricken South Waziristan Agency, though many have shifted to Peshawar and even Karachi, where the Mahsuds have traditionally migrated to find work and do business such as trucking and other forms of transportation.

There are no camps for the IDPs from South Waziristan. The tribal people didn't want to live in tented camps where maintaining privacy is well nigh impossible. The displaced families have been living mostly in rented houses or with relatives. Some own houses in Tank and Dera Ismail Khan as many Mahsud families migrate to the warmer plains in winters when it snows in their mountainous villages in South Waziristan. Exact figures aren't available, but some Mahsud households stayed back in their villages despite the obvious dangers due to the military operations and the US drones targeting militants in the remote and forested parts of the area. But most of the Mahsud-populated areas of South Waziristan were emptied of inhabitants, providing the military an opportunity to go after the militants without worrying about 'collateral damage.' Not all the displaced families could be registered and this is the reason that widely divergent figures of 160,000 people getting uprooted from South Waziristan to more than 300,000 have been mentioned on different occasions. Though the militants have been occasionally and increasingly attacking security forces entrenched in the deserted Mahsud towns and villages, the military authorities are confident that the conditions were now right to allow repatriation of the displaced people. In fact, the repatriation was to take place by spring or early summer, but it was delayed due to a host of reasons, one being security concerns and the other the protracted negotiations between the Mahsud tribal elders and the South Waziristan administration regarding the terms to which the tribe would have to adhere after repatriating to their villages.

One of the terms is to take responsibility for security of their villages and not to harbour the wanted militants. Mahsud tribal elders who took part in these negotiations said they had agreed not to let any militants or outsiders take refuge in their villages and to deal with them on their own or seek government help in tackling them. They call this time-honoured tribal security arrangement "chalweshti" though it is being referred to as village defence committees by the military authorities. The tribal chieftains said they won't be responsible for security beyond their villages and would not be held accountable for anything happening in the nearby mountains. Along with the village defence committees, the government is raising a Levies force from among the Mahsud tribe to provide overall security in the area. The security forces would stay deployed in South Waziristan and it isn't clear for how long. In fact, the new security arrangement comprising village defence committees ringed by the Levies force and then by the army troops would be tried when the IDPs return to the Chagmalai, Barwand, Maula Khan Serai and Spinkai Raghzai areas in the first phase. Repatriation to the more difficult and dangerous areas such as Srarogha, Makeen, Ladha, Kaniguram, etc, where the militants pose bigger threat would take place in the next phases and the whole process would take a year.

The Hakimullah Mahsud-led Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants, who lost their headquarters and secure bases in South Waziristan as a result of the military action, have been watching the developments with concern and threatening the IDPs not to return to their villages or join the Levies force. Through leaflets and word of mouth, the TTP has warned fellow Mahsuds of the consequences if they took the side of the Pakistan military, which they consider an enemy due to its alliance with the US. Alarmed tribal elders met the TTP commanders to request them not to impede their repatriation, but their pleas were turned down. There seems to be a standoff now between the tribal chieftains and the TTP and it could lead to confrontation as the IDPs start returning to their homes and try to secure their villages. The Mahsuds at this stage are, however, unlikely to raise armed lashkars like elsewhere in the tribal areas and districts to fight the Taliban militants. Most commanders of the TTP, which was founded by late

Baitullah Mahsud and his fellow Mahsud militants in South Waziristan, largely survived the military action and would continue to intimidate their tribe, particularly those siding with the government. Meanwhile, civil and military authorities are expediting work on road and other development projects in South Waziristan and finalising preparations to receive the repatriating IDPs. An army officer said all mosques in the conflict area have been repaired and renovated. "Our jawans now give the call for prayers in these mosques and pray there. The soldiers have been keeping the mosques open to seek Allah's blessings," he remarked.

The army officer said officials of the political administration have been sent to the places where the IDPs are returning first and staff of the Tribal Electric Supply Company (TESCO) and other line departments including education and health are being posted there to provide the needed services to the people. As a first step, a member of every family would be taken to their villages under the escort of security forces to see the conditions and inspect their houses. A few days before the date of repatriation, some members of the repatriating families would be allowed to return to their villages to clean houses and prepare for the arrival of the remaining family members. Each family would be paid Rs25,000, food rations for six months and certain other relief items. A gas cooking kit including cylinder and stoves costing around Rs10,000 would also be gifted to each repatriating family. "We want the Mahsuds to use gas for cooking instead of cutting trees for use as firewood. It will also help keep the environment clean," argued a military official. There have been heated discussions among the Mahsuds about the compensation package they would get while repatriating and for the losses that they have suffered. Senator Maulana Saleh Shah, who is also from the Mahsud tribe, said he would have preferred getting food rations for two instead of six months and being paid cash compensation in place of the rations for the remaining four months. "Our people need money to rebuild their destroyed houses and revive their livelihoods," he stressed.

Many Mahsud tribesmen said they spent their lifetime savings building the houses in the harsh mountainous terrain and were now worried how to manage the reconstruction with the meagre amount of cash compensation that the government would be providing. "Besides, every house was a heritage carrying memories of our grandparents, parents and each and every family member. Every home was full of our cherished belongings. There is no way someone would be able to return to us what we have lost," remarked Maulana Saleh Shah. No doubt there is a touch of emotionalism at play as the Mahsuds prepare to return home and wonder about the life ahead due to concerns about security and livelihoods. Still every displaced Mahsud family is desperate to go back. Life has been hard away from home in the hot plains of Tank and Dera Ismail Khan and the Mahsuds are keen to get back to their spacious homes in the familiar and pleasant surroundings of their villages after having lived in misery in cramped accommodation in overcrowded houses with relatives or in small and costly rented places.

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Threats Halt Registration of Displaced People in Peshawar

The registration of IDPs from Kurram Agency was suspended here after the officials concerned received threatening letters, sources said. They said that the officials at the two registration centres in Peshawar received threatening letters, asking them to stop the process or face a Kacha Pakha-like suicide attack. On April 17, this year about 40 IDPs from volatile Orakzai tribal region were killed and around 70 injured when two suicide bombers blew themselves up at a registration centre in Kacha Pakha village of Kohat district. "It is a threat but we have to take it serious," said an official.

Adnan Khan, the spokesperson for Provincial Disaster Management Authority, which was tasked to register Kurram IDPs with the help of Social Welfare Directorate, also confirmed the reports. He said that the registration centres had been closed for the time being owing to security concerns. Both the registration centers were closed on July 22 and the process of registration would remain suspended till the authorities decided when was safe to restart it, he said. Mr. Khan said, "we are reviewing the security situation and would restart the registration process very soon. The PDMA would complete registration work till the last internally displaced person is registered. He added that authorities would make sure that strict security measures were taken before restarting the registration process. "The suspension will delay the process for the time being but the lives of IDPs and those involved in the registration process are also very precious and government cannot afford to take this threat lightly," he said. The process of registration was started about four months ago in Kohat, Hangu and recently in Peshawar but due to some problems it remained suspended from time to time. In April, Kacha Pakha bombing caused suspension of IDPs registration in Kohat. Then the process was started at a centre at Pachagi Road but due to hot weather and a scuffle between the registration staff and IDPs it was suspended again. Then on June 28 the registration was

started at Hayatabad and Kohat Road centers. The IDPs at Hayatabad have already complained of slow process of registration owing to shortage of staff. So far 15,923 IDPs had been registered at both the centres, an official said.

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