

Six months extended stay for Afghan refugees: Pakistan

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Islamabad: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Wednesday granted an extension in the stay of registered Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan for another six months - till December 31, 2016.

Afghan Refugees

"Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of States and Frontier Regions shall immediately engage with UNHCR and Government of Afghanistan for gradual relocation of refugee camps in Pakistan to Afghanistan," spokesperson for the prime minister said.

Sharif issued the directive on Wednesday after reviewing the 'Repatriation and Management Policy for Afghan Refugees', said the Prime Minister's Office.

It is to mention that the validity period of the "Proof of Registration" cards - that allow Afghan refugees to stay in Pakistan - was set to expire on June 30, Dawn online reported.

But now, following the approval by the prime minister, the registered Afghan refugees can legally stay in Pakistan till the approved date.

The PM's spokesperson further said that in order to facilitate relocation and as a gesture of continued goodwill, Pakistan shall commit provision of free of cost wheat for the relocated camps in Afghanistan for a period of three years.

"Quantum of wheat shall be determined by a certified number of refugees returning from camps in Pakistan and authorised daily entitlement according to the standards of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)," the spokesman said.

However, this extension in stay will be given only to the Afghans who are "Proof of Registration" card holders and legally reside in Pakistan.

There are only 100,000 registered refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, said provincial information minister Mushtaq Ahmad Ghani.

"We don't suggest any aggressive campaign against Afghan refugees, but we have been hosting them for the past 35 years and it is time they should go back to their country," Ghani said.

Unregistered Afghans had become a major security issue for the government, he added. About 6,000 Afghans have chosen to return home from Pakistan in 2016, well below last year's figure of 58,211, the UN' Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has said.

Registration cards allowing a temporary legal stay for Afghan refugees last received a six-month extension after they expired in December 2015.

- IANS