



For refugees, reluctant acceptance of a new life

White tents fill Pakistani landscape as refugees seek shelter from Swat Valley fighting.

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NOWSHERA, Pakistan — Ibrahim Bahadur Ali began living the life of an “Internally Displaced Person” three weeks ago, when his family was forced to flee from the war raging between the Pakistan military and Taliban.

But bored with the drudgery of life for an 8-year-old boy in a refugee camp, Ibrahim decided to start something fresh: He borrowed 2,000 rupees (\$30) from his grandmother and opened his own shop in the camp.

With his grandmother sleeping inside the white tent, Ibrahim has laid across the flap a sheet that reads UNHCR in bold blue letters. He has cigarettes, chewing tobacco, gum, cookies, soap and other essentials piled in neat stacks under a makeshift canopy engineered from his mother’s veil.

His customers are mostly other children in the camp who trek a distance in the blazing sun, hand him a few coins and walk away with pieces of candy. It’s Ibrahim’s first day on the job and he holds up a transparent bag full of change numbering about 50 rupees.

The refugees from Pakistan's Swat Valley show other signs of a reluctant acceptance of this new life; some of them have been here since April. Near a large tent, which acts as a mosque and a Koranic school for young boys and girls, a group of workers from a local charity organization is wrestling with a large drill pointed into the ground. They’re hoping to find water.

“If these people are staying, we’ll need a source right here,” one of the workers in uniform says, wiping his brow of sweat. “We haven’t found anything yet.”

Deeper into the camp down the dusty, numbered aisles, Yar Muhammad, a 31-year-old from Mingora, points to the half completed brickwall that he’s building outside his tent. “At first they said we’ll be back home in two weeks so I didn’t bother, but we have to do something now,” he says. The women and girls in the family, he explains, need to step out of the tent in the 100-degree weather. “We need the wall for it, we’re modest people,” he explains.

This is the new Jalozai camp. The old one is now a ghost town and it looks like the ruins of an ancient civilization. The original camp was one of the homes for the about 5 million

refugees who poured into Pakistan from Afghanistan, fleeing after the Soviet invasion in 1979 and then the decade of civil war in their country.

They started, similarly, in large clusters of white tents in Pakistani towns along the Afghan border. But over the years, as a return home became a distant dream for these Afghans, they began building walls and then completed mud and brick houses. They began buying animals, some got involved in crime and some turned to militancy — refugee have few choices.

The last of the Afghan refugees left Jalozai last year, but within months Pakistanis escaping violence in their own country have started filling in these camps afresh. And they are slowly learning, like the Afghans, that the way back home is not easy to find.

Across the street from the camp for the refugees from Swat Valley, a refugee camp for people fleeing the tribal areas of Bajaur and Mohmand sits deathly quiet. Here a group of boys rides a donkey cart toward the road and other men walk in and out of the camp aimlessly. There's none of the bustle seen in the Swat refugee camp.

A group of men who have just visited the Swat camp and are returning home to this camp are feeling slighted. "We don't have any of the things they're giving them," says Naimatullah from Bajaur.

People in this camp are losing hope he says. "They said six months ago we would move back any day," he says, "but we speak to our people back home and they say the fighting's still going on." He says with some exasperation: "I just don't understand what will become of us."