

Pakistan: Displaced families piece together their lives outside IDP camp

Fatemay Bibi's family has been displaced twice from their village in Khyber Agency, north-western Pakistan, over the past year, due to security operations against militants in the area.

"It's becoming harder each time we have to leave our homes to save our children," said the 35-year-old mother of six.

When the security operations intensified in March, Bibi's family was among thousands that either sought refuge in Jalozai camp, the largest camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Pakistan, or among host communities in Nowshera and Peshawar districts.

"We first went straight to Jalozai camp, got registered and received food, shelter and various relief items. As the warm weather set in, it became harder to stay in the camp, so we rented a place to stay in Peshawar," Bibi narrated.

About 90 per cent of more than 52,000 families displaced from Khyber Agency since January 2012 are staying with host communities in Peshawar, Nowshera and Kohat districts.

OCHA is working with Government authorities and humanitarian partners to address the needs of the off-camp displaced families.

"We conduct regular humanitarian community meetings to plan assessments of the needs of the families coordinate relief assistance provided to them," explained Shaista AttaUllah, OCHA's field officer in Peshawar.

Bibi said initially some of the displaced children in Peshawar were not going to school, but aid workers helped them to enrol in local schools. "Now they are able to continue with their education," she said.

Security operations in north-western Pakistan's tribal areas and sectarian violence have caused significant population movements since 2008. Recent operations in Bara sub-district (*Tehsil*), Khyber Agency, have caused an influx of IDPs to Jalozai camp and various off-camp locations.

Before their displacement, Bibi and her extended family cultivated wheat, rice and barley on their land in Bara sub-district and sold more than half of their harvests at local markets. Her husband and two of his brothers work overseas.

"Despite the security operations, some of the elderly women in our village volunteered to stay in the village to take care of our houses and cattle," Bibi narrated. "We decided that some younger women would also go back and stay with them to help out."

She said it's difficult for men to stay in the villages because both security forces and the militant groups often demand proof of innocence from them. "Both groups regard us with suspicion and it has become difficult to separate ourselves from the war that's taking place outside our homes," Bibi said.

“Many men from our village have been kidnapped and killed by the militants because they were suspected of working for the security forces as informants. Although there was no proof to back the claims, they also didn’t have proof of their innocence. I would never want any man from my family to end up with the same fate,” Bibi added.

Although it is possible for women to travel back to their homes in Khyber Agency, it takes more than four hours to walk to the place where they can get safe means of transport.

Once they get there, as long as the women are covered up in their traditional ‘burqas,’ they often travel back to their homes without any restrictions or interference from the militant groups. And security forces offer them protection as they walk long distances to get to their homes.

Last year, Bibi and her family were displaced for three months due to security operations. “We are not sure how long we’ll stay away from our homes this year,” she said.

Since it’s difficult for men to go back to their homes at the moment, Bibi said, some women are planning to go back to harvest their crops and cut the losses caused by the displacements.

Reporting by Humaira Mehboob, OCHA Pakistan