

# The Diverse Experiences of Refugee Groups in Northeast Asia

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Due to the sensitive geopolitical situation of Northeast Asia, the borders of its respective nation-states are difficult to cross unless authorized by the government. Cross-border flows not sanctioned by the government, such as the movement of North Korean refugees or illegal migrant workers, have nevertheless been a visible aspect of human migration in the region since the turn of the millennium. However, recent conflicts in places located beyond Northeast Asia have led to a previously unwitnessed type of human movement into the region, involving displaced people from Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Russia. Due to a series of circumstances – some of which are historical and path-dependent, and others of which are purely of chance – it is in South Korea that these displaced people have found refuge; the number of those who have settled in the other nation-states of Northeast Asia is negligible.<sup>1</sup>

The contributions to this issue of *News from Northeast Asia* address the diverse experiences of refugee groups in South Korea. In “It’s Taking a Whole Village to Raise Children: A Focused Study on the Afghan Refugees in Ulsan, South Korea,” Gi Yeon Koo of Seoul National University Asia Center presents the case of the Afghan ‘people of special merit.’ Koo notes how the lessons learned from the public’s reactions to Yemeni refugees were considered in the process of accepting refugees from Afghanistan. Presenting a stark contrast to the case of

the Afghan refugees is that of the refugees from Ukraine, who are mostly ethnic Koreans. Their experiences are examined in detail by Ka Young Ko of Seoul National University Asia Center in “The Hospitality and Limitations of South Korea for the Ukrainian Refugees.” Finally, the issue of “Why Don’t Russian Relokants (War Immigrants) Choose South Korea as their Place of Permanent Residence?” is addressed by Vadim Stepchenko of Seoul National University Asia Center. The contents of, and issues raised by, these pieces can be used to understand

the wider socio-political and socio-economic outcomes and consequences that can occur for refugees across Northeast Asia.

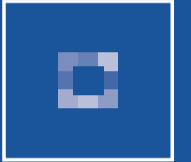
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Notes

- 1 The exception being Russian *relokants* in Mongolia.

## SNUAC

Seoul National University Asia Center



The Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) is a research and international exchange institute based in Seoul, South Korea. The SNUAC’s most distinctive feature is its cooperative approach in fostering research projects and international exchange program through close interactions between regional and thematic research programs about Asia and the world. To pursue its mission to become a hub of Asian Studies, SNUAC research teams are divided by different regions and themes. Research centers and programs are closely integrated, providing a solid foundation for deeper analysis of Asian society.

## It’s Taking a Whole Village to Raise Children: A Focused Study on the Afghan Refugees in Ulsan, South Korea

Gi Yeon Koo

In the first five months of 2018, 552 Yemenis, mostly men, claimed asylum on Jeju Island. This was an unforeseen result of a visa-waiver program intended for international tourists who would otherwise have needed visas to enter the Korean mainland.<sup>1</sup> The sudden increased inflow of Yemeni refugees to the island was heavily covered by Korean media outlets, and the so-called “Yemeni refugee issue of 2018” became a wake-up call for Korean society, highlighting the fact that South Korea could receive a large influx of refugees at any time. Four years later, after the fall of Kabul, South Koreans witnessed the influx of another group of refugees into the country, this time from Afghanistan. However, the experiences of these Afghans, as well as the Korean public’s reaction to them, differed greatly from the case of the Yemeni refugees.

On August 26, 2021, 391 Afghans who had worked for years at the Korean embassy in Afghanistan, at Korean hospitals, and at vocational training centers run with Korean support arrived in Korea with their families on a flight chartered by the Korean government “in search of lasting peace.” Upon arrival, they were granted special status by the Korean government as “special people of merit” rather than “refugees.” The news reports and scenes of their evacuation from Afghanistan – which was dubbed “Operation Miracle” – were broadcast in real time by the Korean media, acting as a reminder that South Korea was a responsible member of the international community. In addition, the public discourse on these Afghan “special people of merit” was noticeably different from the perception of refugees that had emerged in the years following the “Yemeni

Fig. 1: The largest number of Afghan students were enrolled in Ulsan Seoboo Elementary School. At the end of 2022, Afghan students put together a classroom book called “Shiny Jewelry Box.” This is one of the stories included in this book. The text beneath the picture says “There were a lot of people at the airport. There were so many cameras. They all said ‘Welcome to Korea.’ And we all got pretty dolls. It was so, so pretty.” (Image courtesy of Ulsan Seoboo Elementary School)



refugee issue of 2018” in that the universal human value of humanitarianism was strongly acknowledged in the case of the Afghan refugees.

Indeed, it can be said that the success and positive perception of “Operation Miracle” was the result of the various resolutions and (sometimes heated) discussions that took place within the religious, academic, media, political, and governmental sectors of Korean society that occurred in the years following the Yemeni refugee issue of 2018. It is of particular interest to note that, rather than being perceived as Muslim refugees, the Afghan refugees were seen as the agents of development and progress following the US invasion of Afghanistan. The term “special people of merit” – as opposed to “refugees” – also played an important role in granting them an identity distinct from the Yemeni refugees.

공함에 많은 사람 있었어요.  
카메라가 정말 많았어요.  
모두 말했어요.  
“welcome to KOREA”  
“한국에 오신 걸 환영합니다.”  
그리고 우리는 모두 예쁜 인형을 받았어요.  
너무 너무 예뻐요.

Although there were many concerns and controversies during the initial immigration and settlement process of the Afghan refugees, their main settlement area in Ulsan is now transforming into a space of hospitality for Muslim immigrants in Korean society. On February 8, 2022, 157 Afghan refugees, about 40% of the total arrivals, settled in Dong-gu, Ulsan. Twenty-nine heads

of households were employed at companies cooperating with Hyundai Heavy Industries, and a total of 85 students were integrated into the public education system in Ulsan: 21 children were assigned to kindergartens, and 64 students were assigned to elementary, middle, and high schools. The Ulsan Office of Education’s multifaceted approach to Afghan students was crucial during this settlement process. A total of five consultations were held before enrollment began, and in the process, the Ulsan Office of Education applied the motto of “education that does not give up on a single child” to persuade local Korean parents who opposed the enrollment of Afghan children.

It has been said that the issue of Muslim refugees in Korea, which arose with the Yemeni refugees, became internalized within Korean society with the case of Afghan refugees. The settlement process of these Afghan refugees is a seminal example demonstrating how Muslim immigrants were able to smoothly settle within Korean society through the multifaceted hospitality and policy support of the Ulsan Metropolitan Office of Education, the city government of Dong-gu District Office, Hyundai Heavy Industries, and the citizens of Ulsan. It is highly possible that this case of ‘hospitality’ towards Muslim immigrants in Ulsan may become a precedent for resolving conflicts in a multi-cultural society, which is a reality South Korea is inevitably headed towards. The diverse subjects and directions of hospitality displayed during the Ulsan settlement process for Afghans will undoubtedly remain a key example in South Korea, and indeed, in Northeast Asia more broadly.

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Notes

- 1 The visa-waiver program was introduced on May 1, 2002 as a part of a special government act to develop Jeju Island into a ‘international cosmopolitan city.’