Afghanistan Situation: Afghan Returns Emergency Update #11

(26 September 2025)

At Torkham border, UNHCR receives and assists Afghan returnees from Pakistan amid the aftermath of the devastating 31 August–1 September earthquake. UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

2.8 million
Afghan returnees from Iran and Pakistan in 2025

1.8 million
Afghans have returned from Iran since 1 April as of 25 September

659,700
Afghans have returned from Pakistan since 1 April as of 25 September

HIGHLIGHTS

- **More than 2.8 million Afghans** from Iran and Pakistan have returned so far in 2025, with recent earthquakes in Afghanistan exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.
- **Although Encashment Centres in Afghanistan remain closed due to restrictions on female staff,** UNHCR continues to operate in border areas, providing cash assistance and other support.
- **Afghans remain in a precarious situation in Pakistan** following the end of the grace period for Proof of Registration (PoR) cards on 31 August, putting many at risk of arrest and deportation.
- **The Afghanistan situation remains critically underfunded**, with only 32% of the required $478 million for 2025 received. Additional support is needed to scale up the response to multiple emergencies. UNHCR's updated regional returns appeal calls for $258.6 million.

Operational Context

Afghanistan is facing a deepening humanitarian crisis, fuelled by a deteriorating human rights situation, prolonged economic hardship, recurring natural disasters and limited access to critical services. The large-scale return of 2.8 million Afghans from Iran and Pakistan in 2025 have further strained resources.

The recent earthquakes in eastern Afghanistan have compounded vulnerabilities. An estimated 498,800 people are in need of humanitarian assistance. In response, the OCHA-led multi-sectoral Eastern Region Earthquake Response Plan was launched, targeting around 456,000 people in high-intensity impact areas, particularly those whose homes were severely damaged or destroyed. $139.6 million is required to deliver life-saving assistance over the next four months (September–December 2025). As part of the inter-agency response, UNHCR has prioritized three key areas based on identified needs: needs assessments to guide interventions, emergency shelter and essential items, and protection support for the most vulnerable, including recent returnees.

In Pakistan, the second phase of the 'Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan' (IFRP) began in April 2025, targeting undocumented Afghans and holders of Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC). On 31 July, the Government expanded the plan to include Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders. The expiry of the PoR grace period on 31 August triggered a sharp rise in returns, including some 143,200 in August and around 210,800 so far in September. The end of the grace period has heightened uncertainty and fears among Afghans, as returns continue despite the protection risks. Alongside the returns crisis, recent floods in Pakistan have affected communities in Shangla and Swat districts. UNHCR, through the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, has provided core relief items (CRIs) and shelter kits to flood-affected families, including 30 Refugee Housing Units to the Provincial Disaster Management Authority.

In Iran, conditions for Afghans have become increasingly precarious following the expiration of Headcount Slips on 20 March and the rollout of a regularization and return scheme affecting over two million Afghans. Daily average returns from Iran were lower this week, with approximately 3,700 returns (compared with 4,300 last week). Many Afghans also continue to report discrimination and harassment.

In Tajikistan, borders remain open only to those with valid passports and visas. At the same time, the Government continues to carry out arbitrary deportations, including of recognized refugees and asylum-seekers, generating deep anxiety and distress within the community. Recent announcements and media reports have heightened concerns about the safety and rights of those affected.

Against this backdrop, and in line with UNHCR's updated Guidance Note on Afghanistan, UNHCR urges States to exercise caution when considering forced returns to Afghanistan of people found not to be in need of international protection, given the ongoing large-scale humanitarian crisis and the potentially destabilising impact that such returns could have on the country's fragile situation.

Operational Highlights

Iran

- **Since 1 April 2025, over 1.8 million Afghans have returned from Iran, with more than 2.1 million returning since the beginning of the year.** Daily returns between 18 and 24 September averaged 3,700 people, down from 4,300 the previous week. *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Iran-Afghanistan Update here.*

- **Return movements at Dogharoun border remain below July levels.** During the reporting period, around 270 buses carrying close to 11,000 returnees were recorded, alongside nearly 30 people returning voluntarily under the Voluntary Repatriation (VolRep) programme.

Pakistan

- **From 1 April to 25 September, 659,800 Afghans returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan**, including 76,300 deportees (12%). Most were undocumented (53%), followed by ACC holders (10%), PoR card holders (35%) and asylum-seekers (2%).

- The proportion of PoR card holders among returnees rose from 6% in April to 21–23% between May and July. **This figure increased sharply in August, reaching 61% (87,200), while in September PoR card holders have so far accounted for 55% (116,000) of all returns.** *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Pakistan-Afghanistan Update here.*

- **Growing pressure on Afghans, with UNHCR providing protection support and advocating for solutions.** Authorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have intensified return measures, including directives for Afghan traders to close businesses and public announcements urging return. UNHCR is engaging with authorities at all levels to advocate for an extension of the grace period and ensure safe, dignified treatment of affected communities. In line with its updated Guidance Note on Afghanistan, UNHCR calls on all countries to allow access to civilians fleeing Afghanistan, uphold the right to seek asylum, and respect the principle of non-refoulement.

- **UNHCR continues to monitor protection risks for Afghan communities.** Between 18 and 24 September, UNHCR's helpline received around 9,900 calls reporting protection concerns, including arrests, detentions, harassment, and evictions. Callers included women, children, and PoR/UNHCR card holders seeking guidance and support. Reports also highlighted challenges such as disrupted access to basic services, education, and livelihoods. UNHCR, through its community-based feedback mechanisms and casework, provided counselling, and facilitated legal referrals and protection support, ensuring accountability to affected populations and continuous follow-up on complaints and concerns.

Afghanistan

- **UNHCR and partners maintain a presence at key border entry points** – Islam Qala (Herat), Milak (Nimroz), Torkham (Nangarhar), Spin Boldak (Kandahar) – scaling up protection, coordination, and preparedness in response to evolving return trends.

- **Restrictions on Afghan female staff remain in effect, with UNHCR advocacy ongoing.** Activities at Encashment Centres, including in Kabul, continue to be disrupted following instructions from de facto authorities. UNHCR remains active in border areas, providing cash assistance and continues to engage constructively with the de facto authorities to restore full operations and access to essential services.

- **UNHCR works closely with UN agencies and other partners to support returnees and promote sustainable reintegration**. Using an area-based approach, UNHCR targets 20 province-level Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs). These areas are selected based on several factors, including the ratio of returnees to host communities, previous UNHCR and UN investments, and findings from assessments. The approach focuses on high-return areas as models

for predictable interventions, which enhance host communities' absorption capacity and enable the delivery of assistance and services to those in need.

- **At Islam Qala, UNHCR continues to provide protection and support to returnees, with particular attention to women and female-headed households.** Many female returnees, including those without male guardians, report delays in registration at the reception centre, contributing to fear and uncertainty. Gender-based violence survivors are identified through protection screening and provided with referrals and support. Women and children make up around 70% of returnees, with nearly half of those assisted being female-headed households. Limited livelihood opportunities and restrictions on women working outside the home continue to heighten vulnerabilities. More funding is urgently needed to expand reception centre services, strengthen protection support, and ensure timely assistance for the growing returnee population.

UNHCR assists returnees, mostly women and children, including female-headed households and gender-based violence survivors at the Islam Qala border in Herat. © UNHCR/Samand Ibrahimi

- **At Milak (Nimroz), UNHCR and partners are helping returnees access services and support on arrival.** During the reporting period, around 130 people with limited mobility received assistance with wheelchairs and trolleys, bringing the total to more than 1,250 since July. Trolleys for transporting luggage have supported nearly 80 households this week and almost 470 in total. Referrals ensured access to healthcare, protection, water, sanitation, and hygiene services as well as food for more than 500 people. In addition, legal awareness sessions on civil documentation reached about 2,900 returnees, while around 100 people received individual counselling. Since July, over 4,500 returnees have benefited from these efforts, helping to ease their transition and safeguard their rights.

- **At Spin Boldak (Kandahar), UNHCR extended Reception Centre hours to support faster processing of returnees.** In coordination with the de facto Head of the Returnee Committee, extended hours aim to reduce waiting times, improve access to services, including health checks, psychosocial support, cash assistance, as well as ensure a smoother registration process, benefiting hundreds of returnees each day. More support and resources are needed to maintain these extended operations and meet the growing needs.

- **The top three protection services requested upon arrival** by Afghan returnees from Iran were documentation and legal assistance (66%), family reunification support (28%), and information on services and assistance (14%). The top three needs upon arrival were food (89%), housing or accommodation (83%) and financial support (82%).

- **The top three protection services requested upon arrival** by Afghan returnees from Pakistan were documentation and legal assistance (92%), information on services and assistance (35%), and protection services for children (27%). The top three needs upon arrival were housing (85%), food (83%), and financial support (78%).

Tajikistan

- **Forced returns from Tajikistan continue despite protection concerns**. Since January, around 1,600 Afghans (including close to 600 women and nearly 400 children) have been deported. Since September, 45 Afghan nationals have been deported, including around 40 refugees and asylum-seekers. Families are being removed without due process, legal assistance, or the chance to appeal. UNHCR is coordinating on both sides of the border to verify cases, provide protection interventions and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, and support vulnerable families left behind in Tajikistan. Advocacy with the Government continues to halt forced returns and ensure fair asylum procedures in line with national and international obligations.

Financial Information

The Afghanistan situation this year is only funded at **32% against the required $478 million**. UNHCR appreciates the generosity of donors who have stepped up to support the Afghanistan situation response with earmarked, softly earmarked and unearmarked contributions, ensuring life-saving assistance reaches those most in need:

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Contact

UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific: rbapext@unhcr.org

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