Afghanistan Situation: Afghan Returns Emergency Update #17

(19 December 2025)

Abdul Wahid, a returnee from Iran, staying with his family at the UNHCR transit centre after returning to Afghanistan through the Islam Qala border. © UNHCR/Samand Ibrahimi

2.8 million
Afghan returnees from Iran and Pakistan in 2025

1.6 million
Afghans have returned from Iran since 1 April as of 13 December

931,700
Afghans have returned from Pakistan since 1 April as of 13 December

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Almost 2.8 million Afghans** from Iran and Pakistan have returned so far in 2025.
- **Afghans remain in a precarious situation in Pakistan** following the end of the grace period for Proof of Registration (PoR) cards on 31 August.
- **The Afghanistan situation remains critically underfunded**, with only 37% 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 humanitarian situation has been compounded by recent earthquakes, leaving many at heightened risk and in urgent need of assistance. On 3 November, an earthquake struck Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. Details are still being gathered, but preliminary reports indicate more than 20 casualties and hundreds of injuries. UNHCR is closely monitoring the situation and coordinating with partners to assess needs and respond rapidly. Earlier, the 31 August earthquake in eastern Afghanistan left an estimated 498,800 people in need of humanitarian assistance. UNHCR and partners are responding through the OCHA-led multi-sectoral Eastern Region Earthquake Response Plan, 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 between September and December 2025. UNHCR's priorities include 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 end of the grace period on 31 August has heightened uncertainty and fears among Afghans, as returns and deportations continue despite the protection risks. Alongside the returns crisis, 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.

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. 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 its 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, some 1.6 million Afghans have returned from Iran, with more than 1.8 million returning since the beginning of the year**. *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Iran-Afghanistan Update here*

Pakistan

- **From 1 April to 13 December, 931,700 Afghans returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan**, including 135,200 deportees (15%). Most were undocumented (52%), followed by PoR card holders (46%)

and asylum-seekers (2%). *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Pakistan-Afghanistan Update here.*

- **In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, authorities have begun scaling back services in some Refugee Villages to encourage voluntary return to Afghanistan.** Electricity has been cut in certain locations and some child-friendly spaces, women and girls' safe spaces, and health units have been closed. Schools in several areas are also being affected although UNHCR is coordinating with the Department of Education to maintain access for remaining residents. While authorities have reportedly offered transport for those choosing to return, UNHCR emphasises that any return must be fully voluntary, safe, and dignified, and continues to follow the situation closely to support those who remain.

- **UNHCR continues to monitor a difficult protection situation for Afghans in Pakistan, with increasing reports of vulnerability in several areas.** Documented Afghans, including those holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards and Afghan Citizenship Cards (ACC), have faced evictions, intimidation, and other enforcement measures. Many families are struggling with loss of livelihoods, limited access to essential services, and delays at border crossings, which impact their ability to cover basic needs. UNHCR and partners are providing counselling, legal assistance, and referrals to urgent protection and humanitarian support, prioritizing women and children. These efforts aim to ensure that those most at risk receive timely support and protection despite the challenging circumstances.

Afghanistan

UNHCR and partners aim to maintain a presence at key border entry points – Milak (Nimroz) on the Afghanistan–Iran border and Torkham (Nangarhar) and Spin Boldak (Kandahar) on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border – while navigating a highly volatile operational environment.

- **At Torkham (Nangarhar), UNHCR and partners provided cash assistance and protection services to vulnerable returnees during the reporting period (7 – 13 December).** Around 540 families (over 1,250 people), including holders of Voluntary Repatriation Forms and people returning under the Forcibly Returned Afghans Enrolment programme, received cash support. Most were female-headed households, alongside families (including people with disabilities and others referred for specialised protection support). Legal awareness sessions and counselling reached about 3,800 people, while protection interviews with returnees highlighted risks such as arbitrary arrest, detention, exploitation and harassment, as well as specific challenges for unaccompanied children. Some families also reported administrative pressures in Pakistan and a few raised concerns about protection risks upon return, reinforcing the importance of ongoing monitoring and support.

- **At Milak (Nimroz), protection and assistance services continued during the reporting period (7 – 13 December):** 270 households (over 1,400 people) were referred for access to essential health, protection, WASH and food services at Zaranj Zero Point and the IOM Reception Centre. Protection interviews were also carried out for people with heightened protection needs, reflecting sustained efforts to identify risks early and connect people with the support they require.

- **Returnees are experiencing disruptions in cash and protection assistance, prompting a mobile response and scale-up at border centres.** Following the de facto authorities' directive preventing Afghan female staff from working, UNHCR closed the Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad Encashment Centres. In response, return processing and cash distribution have been expanded at Omari (Torkham) and Takhtapul (Spin Boldak) Reception Centres, operating two shifts daily, where female staff are able to work.

Mahva, a young girl arriving in Afghanistan for the first time, receives UNHCR assistance alongside her mother in Herat. © UNHCR/Samand Ibrahimi

- **UNHCR continues to work 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.

Tajikistan

- **Forced returns from Tajikistan continue despite protection concerns.** Since January, over 1,700 Afghans (including more than 1,500 refugees and asylum-seekers, among them over 600 women and 400 children) have been deported. Since 1 September, 206 Afghan nationals have been deported, including around 185 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 **37% 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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