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SSAR Support Platform
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UNHCR AFGHANISTAN

POST RETURN MONITORING SURVEY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DECEMBER 2025

We would like to thank first and foremost the thousands of returnees who agreed to take the survey and contributed invaluable information.

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At the border crossing point in Torkham, UNHCR receives and assists Afghans being returned from Pakistan. Returns are taking places in the context of a devastating earthquake which hit eastern Afghanistan on 31 August and 1 September.

Executive Summary

UNHCR's Post-Return Monitoring (PRM) tracks the protection, well-being, and reintegration of Afghan returnees. The August 2025 round, now expanded to include returnees from Iran alongside those from Pakistan and undocumented returnees, draws on 1,658 interviews with recently arrived returnee households and covers January and August 2025, a period during which an estimated 1.8 million individuals returned.

The expansion of UNHCR's post-return monitoring stems from the need to explore new angles of returnee experiences in light of the massive increase in returns in 2025, as well as the changes in the profiles of those returning, and the changes in the nature of the returns – many of which happened under duress or under adverse circumstances. 2025 has been marked by multiple waves of large-scale returns driven by orders and policies issued by neighbouring countries and by the deteriorating conditions for Afghans in those countries.

Pakistan resumed the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP) on 7 March 2025, first targeting Afghan Citizenship Card (ACC) holders and from 31 July extending to Proof of Registration (PoR) holders. From mid-2025, returns from Iran surged due to regional tensions, deportations, and the expiry of temporary permits held by Afghans in refugee-like situations in Iran, with arrivals peaking at over 40,000 per day in some days in June and July. Between January and November 2025, over 1.8 million Afghans have returned from Iran and some 900,000 from Pakistan.

The different cohorts of returnees face varying and unique challenges. Returnees from Iran generally have higher levels of formal education, better food security, and more durable housing, but fewer job opportunities and greater barriers to girls' schooling. Returnees from Pakistan face higher levels of debt and are more likely to rely on daily wage labour. The timing of return also has an impact on the return experience. Those arriving after April 2025 were found to be more likely to find short-term work but struggle more with food insecurity and finding housing. Stark gaps also emerge when considering the experiences of returnee women or of returnees with disabilities. For example, 24 per cent of female respondents reported a source of income, compared to 66 per cent of returnee men.

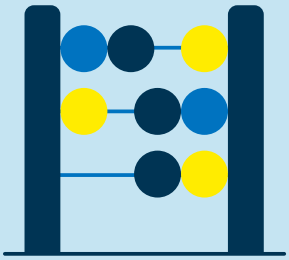
Commonalities also emerge in the experiences of all returnees, namely in the difficulties of returning and reintegrating after years, sometimes a lifetime, in exile, and in a country grappling with crises. Returnees are settling in fragile areas with collapsed or overstretched public services, struggling communities and limited economic opportunities. Many cannot return to their areas of origin due to lack of land, housing, or jobs, and over half of households lack complete civil documentation.

During 2025, UNHCR assisted over 475,000 Afghans returning from Iran and Pakistan despite significant operational and funding challenges that prevented more people from being reached

Key Findings

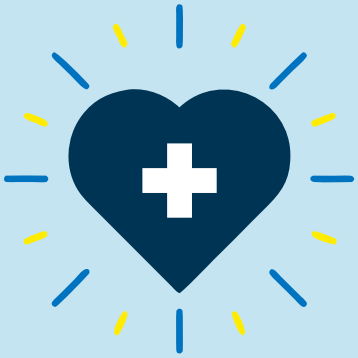
Cash Assistance

All documented returnees assisted by UNHCR received a onetime cash grant, mainly used for food, transport, and rent, but only 41 per cent found it sufficient. Female-headed households were least likely to consider it adequate, and post-April returnees from Pakistan, who received a reduced USD 156 package following a change in UNHCR policy, were the most financially strained. Many households exhausted funds within weeks.



Education

Education access remains severely restricted: one-third of households reported that girls could not attend the same schools as host communities, compared with one-fifth for boys. Returnees arrived from Iran most often cited legal and policy restrictions, whereas returnees from Pakistan pointed to economic barriers as enrolment obstacles. Non-enrolment was highest among post-April arrivals from Pakistan (81 per cent of girls, 71 per cent of boys).



Healthcare

Although 89 per cent of returnees report physical access to a health facility, one-third had a household member unable to access care when needed, primarily due to treatment costs, transport expenses, and medicine shortages. Women were disproportionately affected because of movement restrictions and the need for a mahram (male guardian) to accompany them. Returnees from Pakistan, especially those arriving after April, reported the highest unmet needs.

Food Security

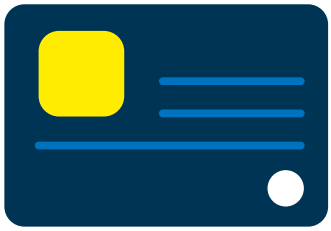
Food insecurity is a significant challenge. 63 per cent of returnees reported inadequate access, and 82 per cent said they skipped or reduced meals. Returnees from Pakistan are most affected, with 62 per cent in the “high coping” category on the Reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) compared with 43 per cent of those returning from Iran. Many households survive with minimal food stocks and rising debt.

Housing and Shelter

Housing remains precarious: three-quarters of returnees live in mud dwellings, only 13 per cent in concrete structures. Nearly half rent their homes, and three-quarters of renters cannot afford rent. Overcrowding is severe, with 80 per cent of families sharing rooms with up to four people. Women-headed households are the least likely to own property.

Livelihoods

Just 60 per cent of households reported earning an income, and the gender gap remains stark (men 66 per cent, women 24 per cent). Daily wage labour dominates, especially among returnees from Pakistan. Average monthly income is between AFN 1,500–10,000 (USD 22–147), while debt affects nearly nine in ten households.



Civil Documentation

Less than half of households' report that all family members hold a Tazkira, the principal Afghan citizenship identification document. Returnees from Iran report the highest levels of ownership (63 per cent) and post-April returnees from Pakistan the lowest (31 per cent). Missing documents continue to block access to basic services and prevent the full enjoyment of rights.

Complaints and Feedback

Awareness of complaint mechanisms is extremely low: only 16 per cent of returnees knew where to raise concerns about assistance received. Barriers include lack of systems, mistrust, and language constraints, particularly for women.

Recommendations

These findings highlight the urgency of sustained, multi-sectoral, and multi-stakeholder support to assist returnees, guarantee their protection and help them get back on their feet. Interventions must be evidence-based and tailored to the differing profiles and needs of returnees, as well as to the distinct circumstances behind their return which might make them more vulnerable or might affect their ability to reintegrate in Afghanistan.

- Continue and strengthen post-return to track the evolving challenges faced by returnees, identify gaps, and adapt programming. It is essential to adapt the dataset, data points observed, and other aspects of methodology to changing circumstances, as well as to consider other monitoring and assessment exercises being undertaken by other UN agencies and key actors to avoid assessment fatigue and ensure a comprehensive overview of needs and gaps.

- Expand hybrid assistance models that combine cash assistance with in-kind support, wherever feasible, while linking emergency relief with longer-term, sectoral initiatives to advance self-reliance.

- Scale up community-based approaches and programmes as they can enable more flexibility and expand reach, especially for women and girls affected by cost or mobility barriers.

- Deploy mobile outreach services for returnees with access constraints and/or in hard-to-reach areas, as well as to expand access to vital information and raise awareness about available assistance. This can include, for example, mobile health services for returnee women to safely access care when reaching a formal health facility is difficult or impossible, or scaling up mobile documentation campaigns to ensure safe, inclusive access to identification for populations most at risk of exclusion, such as women and persons with disabilities.

- Prioritise durable shelter support for vulnerable households, including rent assistance and locally sourced construction schemes, to stabilise families and prevent secondary displacement.

- Expand market-driven vocational and business training, particularly for women, youth, and persons with disabilities, to diversify income sources and reduce dependence on casual labour and borrowing.

- Strengthen information and feedback channels, through radio, hotlines, and community facilitators, to ensure all returnees can safely report issues and access information; and explore the root causes behind information gaps and mistrust when it comes to provision of assistance.

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