

Afghanistan situation: Emergency preparedness and response in Iran

05 October 2021

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

665,182 people have been internally displaced in Afghanistan since the start of 2021, of which 80% are women and children. A total of 33 out of 34 provinces had recorded some level of forced displacement.

Afghans continue to make their way to Iran in an irregular manner through unofficial border points. UNHCR is aware of **18,697 Afghans who arrived in Iran** from 1 January until 2 October. The numbers are very likely much higher.

Official borders between Afghanistan and Iran remain closed for asylum seekers. In various statements to the media and during the 2021 UNHCR Executive Committee Session, Iran noted that it had limited capacity to cope with the number of new Afghan arrivals.



SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

- On 29 September, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and the Heads of ICRC, OCHA, UNICEF, and WHO in Afghanistan issued a [Joint Statement](#) on the alarming situation facing people requiring healthcare in Afghanistan and the dire human consequences if the healthcare system is allowed to collapse. According to the statement, the organizations are working to “establish mechanisms that would allow funding to directly support health facilities and life-saving health responses across Afghanistan.”
- The security situation in Afghanistan remains highly volatile. On 3 October, several people, Taliban members and civilians, were killed in attacks in Kabul – the deadliest since US withdrawal. So far, no group has claimed the bombings; however, Islamic State (IS) militants have stepped up attacks against the Taliban since their mid-August takeover, including several bombings in the eastern city of Jalalabad, signalling a widening conflict between the two groups.
- The situation for women and girls continues to be extremely worrying:**
 - According to media reports in Afghanistan, [women-owned businesses have remained closed](#) since the Taliban take-over, leading many women who were the head and/or main breadwinners of their

- households to sell their assets and businesses at below-market prices. UNHCR fears this will lead to more women and children having to resort to negative coping mechanisms in order to survive.
- More than 220 female Afghan judges are **reportedly** in hiding due to fear of retribution under Taliban rule, following the release of thousands of convicted criminals from prison. Six female judges have received death threats from members of the Taliban whom they previously committed to prison.
 - A group of female teachers in Kabul protested against the closure of schools and universities for female students in the country. Public universities are said to soon reopen in Afghanistan after recruitment of teachers is completed, as **stated** by the Ministry of Culture and Information.
- In a recent meeting of the global **Core Group** of the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), which is chaired by the European Union (EU) and UNHCR, Member States and partners affirmed their commitment to scale-up international humanitarian assistance for internally displaced persons in Afghanistan in 2021, and for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries. The Core Group reiterated its support for UNHCR's advisory urging all states to refrain from returning Afghans to their country.

DISPLACEMENT TO IRAN

- From 1 January to 2 October, UNHCR identified **18,697 Afghans who newly arrived in Iran** (based on 4,561 heads of households who approached UNHCR directly at our receptions). UNHCR noticed a sudden increase in the number of new arrivals in August, in the lead up to and immediately after the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Due to ongoing instability, Afghans have continued to flee their country for Iran. However, it remains challenging for UNHCR to understand whether the number of arrivals from August to September have increased, decreased or stayed at the same levels. That said, UNHCR has increased its reception capacities and is now able to conduct protection screenings of larger numbers of newly arrived Afghans. To date, UNHCR interviewed 679 families (consisting of 2,788 individuals) of which:
 - **24%** were female-headed households.
 - **48%** were children (of which 16% were below five years old) and **61%** were female.
 - **41%** were Hazara and **38%** were Tajik.
 - **76%** crossed into Iran unofficially, with **65%** of families having experienced protection incidents (most common incidents reported are being robbed while crossing the borders and/or forced to pay extra money by smugglers).
 - **100%** reported fleeing due to general security situation and/or specific security threats, 12% fled due to discrimination. Only 3% reported the reason to be loss of livelihoods (which should be understood in the context of an ongoing economic collapse due to conflict).
- Additionally, as per information received by Iran's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA), UNHCR understands that **130 individuals are still currently being held by the Government in Alghadir**, in Sistan and Baluchistan province. It is understood that freedom of movement of new arrivals being kept at Alghadir is highly restricted, with Afghans needing permission from BAFIA Central to be allowed to travel outside the site. UNHCR is advocating to receive more information on if and how protection screenings are being conducted by the Government. An additional 88 individuals were being held by the Government in Sefid Sang, in Khorasan Razavi province, but UNHCR has been unable to obtain updates on whether they remain there, have been moved to another site or have been sent back to Afghanistan.
- However, **the number of newly arrived Afghans is much higher** than reported by UNHCR, as many Afghans continue to cross into Iran undetected and irregularly. Different government officials at different times and events, have unofficially stated that the number of new arrivals (who have managed to make it past border areas and have not been apprehended and returned to Afghanistan) may range between 100,000-300,000. However, UNHCR continues to face challenges in monitoring arrivals and verifying figures, due to the absence of a centralized registration system and continued lack of access to border areas.

RETURNS TO AFGHANISTAN

- The Government of Iran continues to return Afghans who are apprehended while trying to enter Iran, despite advocacy by UNHCR to provide asylum to those fleeing conflict. According to UNHCR's reports from Mashhad, the number of buses carrying Afghans to the border to be returned has recently doubled, with more than 2,000 individuals (in 90 fully packed buses) believed to have been deported on 30 September alone. Some 50 buses were also recorded on 1 October.
- In Sistan and Baluchistan, some local religious charities have reportedly been able to provide assistance to newly arrived Afghans at the Milak border. Media reports cite the charities as having **assisted more than 24,000**

Afghans who were being held to then be deported with food and water since 7 September. Some members of those charities have shared photos on social media, reporting on the lack of sanitation and wash facilities.

- UNHCR issued a **non-return advisory** for Afghanistan on 16 August 2021, which remains in place. UNHCR is seeking further clarity and reiterating the principle of non-refoulement to the Government.

APPROACHES TO UNHCR OFFICES

- During the first week of October, **the number of persons approaching UNHCR offices** remained low (10-20 Afghans). UNHCR has been further renovating its refugee reception areas to make them COVID-19 compliant, so that in-person reception of refugees can resume; on average, 80 persons were received at the reception in Tehran on a daily basis. Given that most of the approaches are still related to resettlement requests (both by new arrivals and the old caseload), group counselling was provided, followed by individual counselling.
- UNHCR's **help page** for Afghans who recently arrived in Iran is updated regularly. Embassies are encouraged to further share UNHCR's **announcement** on what services are available to undocumented Afghans, as they deem necessary.
- UNHCR continues to advocate for States to **include Afghan refugees in Iran in any resettlement programming**, including as a tool to reduce the number of vulnerable refugees attempting secondary movements. In 2022, 80,000 refugees in Iran will need resettlement (10% of the refugee population). UNHCR can best support those most in need of resettlement if countries provide flexible criteria for resettlement (i.e., not only focusing on women and girls). Resettlement is a tangible sign of international responsibility-sharing, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees.

REGIONAL REFUGEE PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE PLAN (RRPRP)

On 25 August, UNHCR launched the **Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan** (RRPRP). This is an inter-agency plan with 11 partners working on a coordinated response to potential outflows, by supporting the host countries of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This plan focuses on preparedness, limited emergency response, and expanded support to regular programmes.

- The worst-case contingency planning figure is of **515,000** new Afghans displaced across borders over six months, with 150,000 arrivals in Iran. UNHCR continues to advocate with the Government to understand whether they have updated planning figures.
- Following the recent mission to the Niatak site by UNHCR, UNICEF, NRC, PDA (local NGO) and BAFIA representatives, the **shelter** strategy is being finalised, which will enable BAFIA Central to disburse disturb funds to provincial BAFIAs to enable construction. UNHCR is following up with BAFIA to convene an education sector meeting, to explore possibilities for education infrastructure in Niatak.
- In line with standing global arrangements, the Refugee Coordination Model has been activated in Iran under the leadership of UNHCR and in support of the Government of Iran, and regular sector working group meetings are taking place. UNHCR has instituted a biweekly bilateral Task Force meeting with the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA) to discuss the operational response for the new arrivals.

NATIONAL CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The Government of Iran informed UNHCR that, under a worst-case scenario, they anticipate that up to **500,000 new arrivals from Afghanistan could enter Iran over 6-months**. In case of an influx, new arrivals would reportedly be granted access to Iranian territory and settled in locations along the border. Shelter, health and food would be the priorities to cope with the Government's scenario.

Such contingency planning is a Government-led process. UNHCR continues to seek additional guidance and clarity on various issues, including the status that will be conferred to new arrivals and the process for receiving them.

UNHCR coordinates the refugee response among international actors in Iran, with 18 participating UN agencies and international NGOs under its leadership, in line with the globally-agreed **Refugee Coordination Model**. UNHCR and BAFIA convene on a regular basis, through an agreed-upon biweekly/bilateral meeting. Discussions are ongoing around options for more inclusive coordination.

FUNDING NEEDS

The interagency regional funding needs are of USD 299 million, including almost USD 131 million for UNHCR alone.

For Iran, interagency needs are of USD 135 million, including USD 58.9 million for UNHCR. As of 5 October, 3 of the 11 agencies participating under the RRRP have reported receiving a combined USD 4.36 million, indicating that the RRRP is 3% funded. This analysis is based on partners reporting new funding; however, the actual funding is likely higher, as many partners have not yet reported on the funding they have most recently received.

UNHCR Iran overall funding needs for 2021: USD 118.9 million. As of 28 September 2021, UNHCR's overall programmes in Iran (regular and emergency programming) were 34% funded.

FUNDING UPDATE

UNHCR is grateful for the critical support provided by donors who have contributed to the operation in Iran, as well as those who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with broadly earmarked and unearmarked funds. Whilst interest in the current emergency is relevant and opportune, UNHCR wishes to also highlight ongoing regular programming needs which are severely underfunded.

Earmarked contributions | USD

Earmarked contributions for the Iran operation amount to some 14.3 million

European Union 9.2 million | Denmark 2 million | Finland 1.79 | Japan 1.25 million | Norway 0.36 million | Russian Federation 0.1 million | UNAIDS 0.03 million

Major softly earmarked contributions | USD

Private donors Australia 6.1 million | Germany 3.6 million | Japan 2.9 million
Canada | Luxembourg | Norway | Spain | Czechia | Private donors

Major unearmarked contributions | USD

Special thanks to the major donors of unearmarked contributions

Norway 80 million | Sweden 66.9 million | Private donors Spain 49.7 million | Netherlands 36.1 million | Denmark 34.6 million | Germany 26 million | Private donors Republic of Korea 25 million | Japan 23.4 million | France 20.2 million | Private donors Japan 17.6 million | Switzerland 16.4 million | Ireland 12.5 million | Private donors Italy 12.3 million | Belgium 11.9 million | Italy 10.7 million | Private donors Sweden 10.6 million

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