

# Afghanistan situation: Emergency preparedness and response in Iran

11 October 2021

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

**665,182 people have been internally displaced in Afghanistan** since the start of 2021. 143,125 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are estimated to have returned to their places of origin, including nearly 37,000 IDPs in 15 priority areas of return and reintegration (PARRs) districts, where UNHCR has ongoing projects.

**Afghans continue to make their way to Iran** irregularly through unofficial borders. UNHCR is aware of **19,102 Afghans who arrived in Iran** from 1 January until 7 October. The numbers are very likely much higher.

**Official borders between Afghanistan and Iran remain closed for asylum seekers.** UNHCR continues its advocacy with the Government to open borders and allow individuals in needs of international protection to get it.



## POLITICAL & SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

- Afghanistan was already among the world's worst humanitarian situations prior to the Taliban assuming power in August, which has deepened existing needs and vulnerabilities. On 6 October, UN agencies in Afghanistan stated that **nearly half the population of Afghanistan - more than 18 million people - require aid assistance to survive**. In the last month, humanitarians provided food assistance to more than 3.8 million Afghans, and treated some 21,000 children under five, as well as 10,000 women, for acute malnutrition. The UNHCR Deputy Representative in Afghanistan underlined the urgency, saying millions will struggle to survive the coming winter.
- Boys (7-12 years old) have been allowed to go back to school, but the **Taliban have said "a safe learning environment" was needed before girls in the same age group could return to school**. On 11 October, the UNHCR Deputy Representative in Afghanistan met the Vice-Chancellor of Kabul University and Afghan refugee returnee DAFI scholars and stressed that continuing inclusion of female students in higher education remains a priority for UNHCR. The Vice-Chancellor assured support for existing students and newcomers.

- Violence continues to punctuate the lives of Afghans. On 8 October, a packed mosque was the target of a **bomb attack killing at least 55 people and wounding more than 140 Afghans** in Kunduz province, in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban spokesperson, Bilal Karimi, stated that the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (known as ISKP or ISIS-K) was behind the attack. The Taliban also **reported** that there would be no cooperation with Washington on containing the increasingly active Islamic State group in Afghanistan.
- On 9 October, **the first meeting between representatives from the United States (US) and the Taliban** took place since the withdrawal of foreign troops. The two-day discussions focused on security, counter-terrorism, human rights, including the rights of women and girls, as well as the provision of safe passage for foreign nationals and Afghans wishing to leave Afghanistan. The State Department spokesman Ned Price said the discussion was candid and professional, adding that the US will continue providing humanitarian aid and delivering it directly to people in need. US officials said the talks were a continuation of “pragmatic engagements” with the Taliban and “not about granting recognition or conferring legitimacy” to the group. Meanwhile, the de facto foreign ministry in Kabul “welcomed the US offer of humanitarian assistance” but said such assistance “should not be linked to political issues”. The Acting Foreign Minister for Afghanistan, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, also requested for the US to “unfreeze” some \$10bn worth of assets.

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## DISPLACEMENT TO IRAN

- From 1 January to 7 October, UNHCR identified **19,102 Afghans who newly arrived in Iran** (based on 4,650 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 753 families (consisting of 3,148 individuals, out of the 19,102 new arrivals) of which:
  - 24% were female-headed households. **47% were children** (of which 17% were below five years old).
  - **34% were in Tehran**, followed by Razavi Khorasan (27%) and Isfahan (18%).
  - 24% stated that they had been previously voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan, while **10% said they had been previously deported to Afghanistan**.
  - Access to documentation (40%), food (33%) and education (23%) are amongst the most required needs by newly arrived Afghans. This is a shift compared to the beginning of the Taliban takeover when resettlement was the highest reported need by Afghans in Iran. The latter is much related to UNHCR’s mass distribution of information to those approaching its offices regarding the limited number of resettlement slots.
- A **video posted on Instagram** showed thousands of people waiting to cross the Zaranj border in Afghanistan’s Nimroz province to Iran. UNHCR reached out to provincial BAFIA counterparts to corroborate these reports; provincial BAFIA confirmed to UNHCR that, based on their cameras in border areas, there were no large crowds of people making their way towards and/or gathered at the border; they further confirmed they will inform UNHCR, should the situation change, and movements of large groups become apparent. Due to continued lack of access to border areas, UNHCR is not able to independently confirm these movements, although we are liaising with regional colleagues to better triangulate this information.
- According to official figures shared by the Government of Iran to UNHCR, **807 individuals remain in Iran and are being held by the Government** in facilities in border areas (107 in Al-Ghadir, in Sistan and Baluchistan province, and 700 individuals in Sefid Sang, in Khorasan Razavi province). These are among the 3,646 persons previously communicated by the government to have arrived in Iran in August. The majority of these 3,646 individuals have returned to Afghanistan, though UNHCR is seeking clarity on the voluntary nature of these returns.
- **The number of newly arrived Afghans is much higher** than what UNHCR is able to report, as the vast majority of 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**. Additionally, on 10 October, the border commander for Nimroz province in southwestern Afghanistan, Mohammad Hashem Hanzaleh, stated that the number of persons crossing the borders to Iran has risen to 3,000 and 4,000 individuals per day, as compared to the 1,000 to 2,000 crossing monthly before the Taliban takeover. 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 comprehensive and sustained 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. On 16 August 2021, UNHCR issued a **non-return advisory** for Afghanistan, which remains in place. UNHCR is seeking further clarity on the voluntary nature of returns and continues to reiterate the principle of non-refoulement to the Government.
- UNHCR is actively engaging with the Iranian authorities to be able to visit the Government-managed Fariman facility at the border, where it is understood Afghans who have been intercepted while trying to enter Iran are being held to be deported, to assess the conditions and identify potential ways to assist vulnerable persons of concern who remain at the facility. As a matter of principle, UNHCR does not support returning people to a territory where their life or freedom would be threatened, taking into account the still applicable Non-Return Advisory.

## 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 10 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.
- Discussions are ongoing between UNHCR, partners and BAFIA representatives to **accelerate site construction**, which has been delayed due to slow disbursement of funds from BAFIA Central to their provincial counterparts. Construction activities for Niatak will likely start this month and it is anticipated that some blocks will be ready to receive arrivals by the end of the year, assuming there are no further administrative delays or access challenges.
- In light of newly arrived persons moving towards urban centres, UNHCR is strongly advocating with BAFIA for a **complementary urban 'out-of-camp' response**. This is also to avoid an encampment policy at the border and have a hybrid response, in line with UNHCR global policy. Activities being proposed for an urban response include cash-based assistance, as well as reinforcing UNHCR's regular activities like education and health support.
- 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 10 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 5 October 2021, UNHCR's overall programmes in Iran (regular and emergency programming) were 36% 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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