In 2023 UNHCR has assisted some 76,000 returns\(^1\), (99% from Pakistan), with the fourth quarter alone representing 83% of this year’s returns. The main drive for such an increase during the last quarter of the year, was October 3rd Pakistan’s national Apex Committee endorsement of a plan to repatriate over a million foreigners without valid documents, largely Afghans, requiring them to leave the country by 1 November.

The 2023 overall return figure, is some twelve times higher than the one recorded in 2022 (6,506 individuals). The 2022 registered total refugee returns had been already five times higher than the 2021 overall returns.

Based on protection monitoring interviews, conducted upon arrival with returnees, most have stated that economic reasons for return movements still mean a lot in decision-making, however since early September 2023, the statements on shrinking protection space, particularly fear of arrest and deportation, continuous harassment, arrest and bribing, night raids by police influenced the decision to return.

Throughout 2023, 75% of the Afghans returns occurred predominantly in these five provinces: Nangarhar (25%), Kandahar (18%), Kabul (18%), Kunduz (8%) and Helmand (6%).

\(^{1}\) Including Facilitated Volrep, Proof of Registration card holders, UNHCR slip holders, their nuclear family members with or without documentation, UNHCR asylum certificate holders and protection referrals.
Throughout 2023, UNHCR has conducted voluntary returns monitoring at Encashment Centers in Afghanistan. The main reasons for leaving the country of asylum were (1) high costs of living/high rent 90%, (2) no employment opportunities 82%, and (3) strict border requirements 60%. However, if analyzed month by month (as per the chart above), it’s possible to note a considerable increase after September 2023 for five specific reasons: fear of arrest and/or deportation (93% in December), abuse by police or state authorities (53% in December), uncertainty related to the Proof of Refugee cards extension in Pakistan (46%), night raids and eviction notice by landlord, police and/or army in Pakistan.

As a result of the October 3rd Pakistan’s national Apex Committee endorsed a plan to repatriate over a million foreigners without valid documents, requiring them to leave the country by 1 November, UNHCR put in place a system to monitor and analyze these returns. The above charts reflect the problems reported by the returnees prior to the cross-border movement, and also at the border point.