Afghanistan Situation: Afghan Returns Emergency Update #8

At Torkham border, UNHCR receives and assists Afghan returnees from Pakistan amid the aftermath of the devastating 31 August–1 September earthquake. UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

(5 September 2025)

2.5 million
Afghan returnees from Iran and Pakistan in 2025

1.68 million
Afghans have returned from Iran since 1 April as of 4 September

483,700
Afghans returned from Pakistan since 1 April as of 4 September

HIGHLIGHTS

- **More than 2.5 million Afghans** from Iran and Pakistan have returned so far in 2025.
- **Pakistan's Proof of Registration (PoR) grace period expired on 31 August,** putting many Afghan refugees at risk with over 483,700 returning since April, including 55,000 in the last four days of August.
- **Returns from Iran continue**, with daily returns averaging 7,100 over the last week.
- **Afghan border points face rising pressure** due to protection risks and limited resources.
- **The Afghanistan situation remains critically underfunded**, with only 29% of the needed $478 million for 2025 received.

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 2.5 million Afghans from Iran and Pakistan in 2025 have further exacerbated these challenges, while the recent catastrophic earthquake in eastern Afghanistan has compounded vulnerabilities. Based on initial needs assessments, UNHCR has prepared an emergency needs and response overview targeting an initial 5,600 households and 60,000 people with protection assistance.

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 expiry of the PoR grace period on 31 August triggered a sharp rise in returns: in August alone, returns increased by 254%, while deportations rose by 191% compared to July, coinciding with the start of Phase 3 of the IFRP. The end of the grace period has heightened uncertainty and fears among Afghans, as returns continue despite the protection risks. UNHCR has stepped up advocacy at all levels. Amid ongoing returns, High Commissioner Filippo Grandi has urged Pakistan to pause the repatriation plan, emphasising the dire humanitarian impact of the recent earthquake in eastern Afghanistan, which may affect over 500,000 people.

In Iran, conditions for Afghans have become increasingly precarious due to the expiration of Headcount Slips on 20 March and the rollout of a regularization and return scheme affecting two million Afghans. Returns from Iran were higher, with approximately 50,000 returns during the reporting period (compared with 42,000 last week). 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 has carried 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, UNHCR calls on all countries in the region to ensure returns are voluntary, safe, and dignified. However, many Afghans are returning involuntarily, often arriving without belongings or the means to support themselves. UNHCR and partners are on the ground providing life-saving assistance at key border points, but the scale and pace of returns are placing significant strain on resources and host communities.

Operational Highlights

Iran

- **Since 1 April 2025, over 1.68 million Afghans have returned from Iran, with more than 1.99 million returning since the beginning of the year.** Daily returns between 28 August and 3 September averaged 7,100 people – similar to last week's. *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Iran-Afghanistan Update here.*

- **Afghans continue to face challenges accessing services, education, and livelihoods.** Families with different types of documentation face difficulties opening bank accounts, enrolling children in school, and obtaining SIM cards, while some households are affected by deportations. Access to the labour market remains increasingly constrained, even for documented Afghans, amid misconceptions about work rights. UNHCR continues to advocate for equitable access to

education, services, and livelihoods to support the well-being and protection of Afghan communities.

Pakistan

- **From 1 April to 4 September, 483,700 Afghans returned to Afghanistan**, including 61,500 deportees (13%). Most were undocumented (61%), followed by ACC holders (11%), PoR card holders (26%) and asylum-seekers (3%).

- **The proportion of PoR card holders among returnees rose from 6% in April to 21–23% between May and July.** This figure increased sharply in August, reaching 54% (77,700). *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Pakistan-Afghanistan Update here.*

- **Afghan nationals in Pakistan continue to face serious protection challenges.** Detentions and deportations are reported across several provinces. Families face heightened risks of separation, limited access to essential services, and increased vulnerability due to fear of arrest or harassment. Communities report challenges in securing housing, livelihoods, and basic needs, highlighting the ongoing humanitarian concerns in affected areas. UNHCR continues to advocate at all levels to ensure the dignified return of Afghan nationals and that their rights are respected.

- **Helpline calls rise amid ongoing concerns.** Afghan refugees continue to face escalating protection threats, including unlawful detentions, police raids, forced deportations, harassment, and eviction threats. UNHCR's helpline received multiple reports from Attock, Quetta, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Taxila, with urgent cases referred to UNHCR legal teams. Refugees also face challenges related to voluntary repatriation, limited access to education, child mental health concerns, and the impacts of recent floods. Through counselling, legal aid referrals and guidance, UNHCR is addressing these complex protection needs, but sustained international support is critical to ensure refugees can access safety, services, and durable solutions.

Afghanistan

- **UNHCR and partners maintain a presence across key border entry points** – Islam Qala (Herat), Milak (Nimroz), Torkham (Nangarhar), Spin Boldak (Kandahar), as well as at the Encashment Centre in Kabul – scaling up protection, coordination, and preparedness in response to evolving return trends. Border monitoring has highlighted significant protection challenges faced by Afghan returnees from Iran, including limited access to essential services and instances of discrimination.

- **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), selected based on several factors, including the ratio of returnees to host communities, previous UNHCR and UN investments, and findings from assessments. This 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.

- **UNHCR prepares for return uptick at Islam Qala (Herat):** In coordination with de facto authorities, UNHCR is strengthening reception arrangements at Islam Qala, including expanding shaded waiting areas and enhancing the provision of critical services such as registration, health support, and humanitarian assistance. These measures aim to ensure that returnees are assisted safely and with dignity. UNHCR continues to advocate for sufficient resources, coordinated planning, and the protection of returnees' rights to promote sustainable reintegration.

Returnees receive various forms of assistance, including cash-based interventions, CRIs, and referrals to appropriate services. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

- **Returnee support at Milak (Nimroz):** An average of 1,150 returnees arrived daily, with deportations increasing by 28% from the previous week. Returnees reported challenges including low wages, unpaid salaries, high rents, forced evictions, extortion, harassment, and limited access to food, and healthcare in detention centres. UNHCR and partners provided general assistance and referrals for hundreds of households at Zaranj Zero Point and IOM Reception Centre, including support for health, protection, water, health and sanitiation (WASH), and food needs. The scale of arrivals and reported vulnerabilities underscores the urgent need for continued donor support, coordinated responses, and strengthened protection measures to ensure returnees' rights and dignity are upheld.

- **Returnee assistance at Torkham:** Samarkhel Encashment Centre supported a surge of returnees in August, assisting nearly 11,700 people through Voluntary Repatriation (5,200) and Forcibly Returned Afghans Enrollment (6,500) cash programmes (almost 60% of all returnees assisted since January). To manage the high number of returns, de facto authorities deployed 60–70 staff and simplified biometric procedures. Border monitors reported 400–500 trucks queued between Peshawar and Torkham, carrying returnees mostly from Punjab, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, many of whom spent several nights at Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) and Omary camp before reaching the Encashment Centre. The uptick in arrivals highlights the need for continued humanitarian support and coordinated efforts to ensure timely assistance and enhance protection.

- **Support for returnees at Spin Boldak (Kandahar):** Afghans report significant protection challenges linked to their recent return, including the expiry of the PoR grace period on 31 August, which triggered a sharp rise in returns. Families also reported unpaid wages, lost income, confiscated belongings, and separations, including unaccompanied children, while limited access to food, water, sanitation, and healthcare compounded existing vulnerabilities. UNHCR referred over 1,100 households at Spin Boldak Zero Point and Takhtapul Reception Centre for essential support such as health, protection, WASH, and food.

- **Support for returnees in Kabul:** UNHCR and partners continue to support returnees at the Encashment Centre, which has processed over half of all assisted returns in 2025, mostly from

Pakistan. More resources have been mobilized to scale up processing, prevent overcrowding, and ensure timely delivery of essential assistance.

- **The top three protection services requested upon arrival** by Afghan returnees from Iran were documentation and legal assistance (66%), family reunification support (28%), and information on services and assistance (14%). The top three needs upon arrival were food (89%), housing or accommodation (83%) and financial support (80%).

- **The top three protection services requested upon arrival** by Afghan returnees from Pakistan were documentation and legal assistance (76%), information on services and assistance (36%), and protection services for children (34%). The top three needs upon arrival were food (82%), housing (81%), and financial support (80%).

Tajikistan

- **Forced returns from Tajikistan continue despite protection concerns**. Since 1 April, around 1,450 Afghans (including some 550 women and 330 children) have been deported, with most occurring in the past two months. 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 **29% 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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