AFGHANISTAN

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

573 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED IN 2021

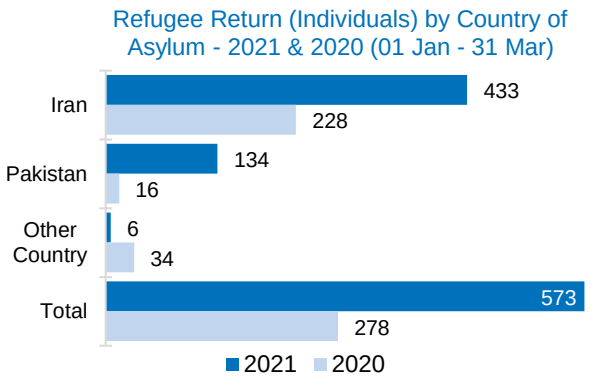
During 01 January – 31 March 2021, **573** Afghan refugees have returned from Iran (**433**), Pakistan (**134**), and other countries (**6**) including India and Kazakhstan. In comparison to previous years, these returns were **106%** higher than the **278** Afghans who returned during the same period in 2020 but slightly lower than the **643** returnees who came back during the same period in 2019.

The increase in the number of returnees, compared to 2020, is mainly due to the continuation of UNHCR's facilitated voluntary repatriation in 2021, while the process had to be suspended between March and August 2020 as a result of restrictions linked to COVID-19.

While Voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees through Islam Qala and Spin Boldak crossing points continues, voluntary repatriation through Torkham crossing point remain suspended as a result of restrictive customs formalities imposed by the authorities (Pakistan side) since November 2020. UNHCR office in Pakistan is following this issue with the authorities.

UNHCR will continue to facilitate the return of refugees throughout 2021 with planning for 60,000 Afghan refugee returnees from Pakistan, Iran and other countries.

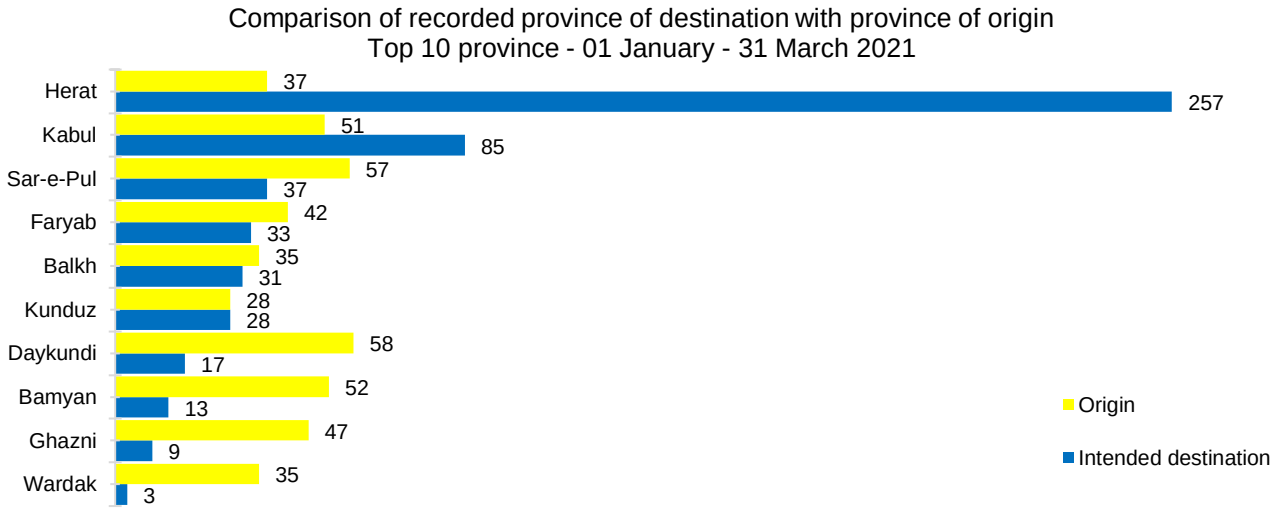
UNHCR partner staff during inteview with two returnee youth from Iran, Herat Encashment Center, Herat, Afghanistan
April 2021

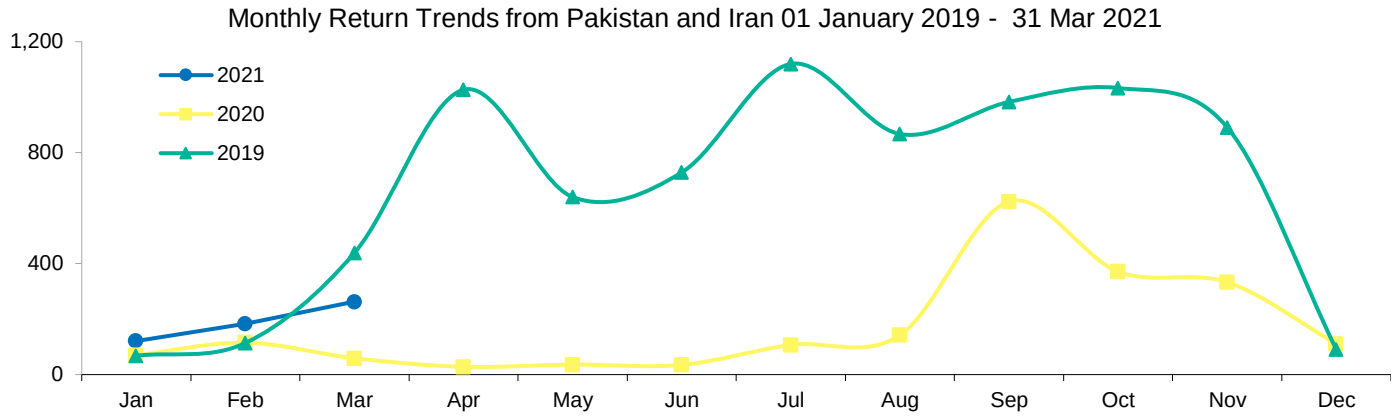


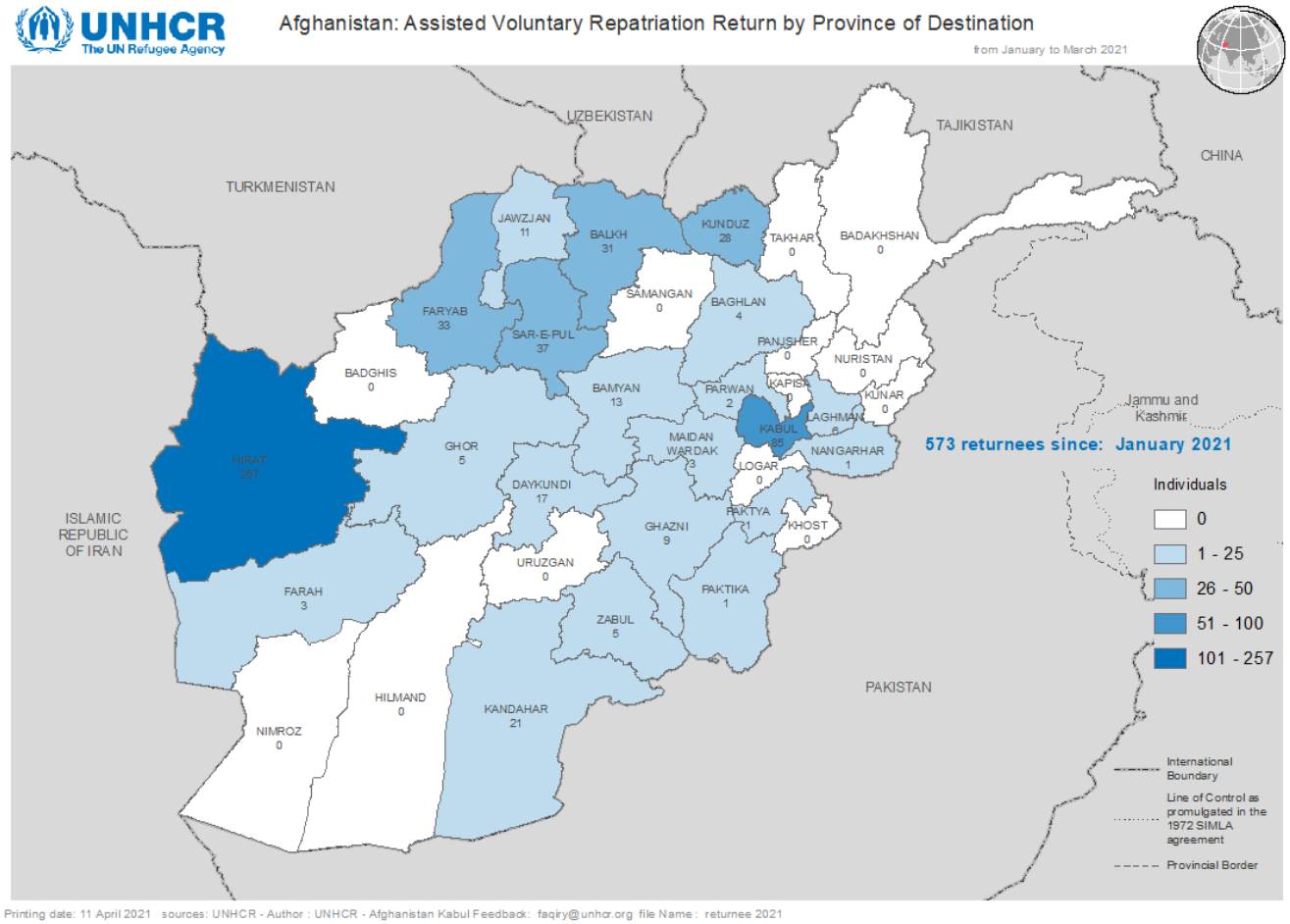
Return Trends

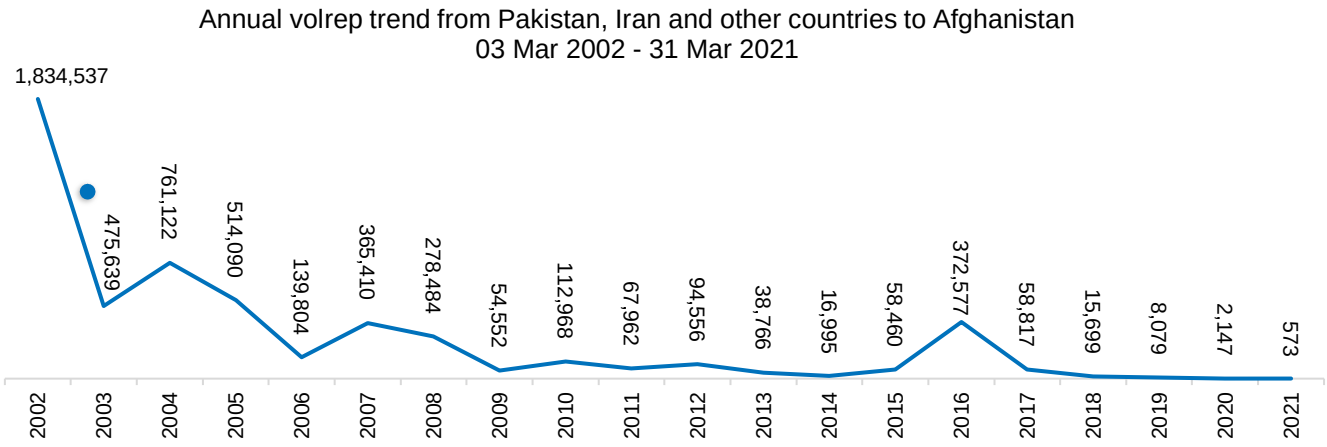
Some **77% (443)** of refugee returnees in 2021 have returned to Herat, Kabul, Sar-e-Pul, Faryab, and Balkh provinces.

Since the beginning of large-scale repatriation in 2002 UNHCR has facilitated the return of nearly **5.3 million** Afghan refugees, mainly from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.




Monthly Return Trends from Pakistan and Iran 01 January 2019 - 31 Mar 2021
1,200
800
400
0
2021
2020
2019
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec


Afghanistan: Assisted Voluntary Repatriation Return by Province of Destination
from January to March 2021
UZBEKISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
CHINA
TURKMENISTAN
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
PAKISTAN
Jammu and Kashmir
JAWZJAN 11
BALKH 31
KUNDUZ 28
TAKHAR 0
BADAKHSHAN 0
SAMANGAN 0
BAGHLAN 4
FARYAB 33
SAR-E-PUL 37
PANJSHER 0
NURISTAN 0
BADGHIS 0
BAMYAN 13
PARWAN 2
KAPISA 0
KUNAR 0
LAGHMAN 6
KABUL 85
MAIDAN WARDAK 3
NANGARHAR 1
HIRAT 257
GHOR 5
LOGAR 0
DAYKUNDI 17
PAKTYA 1
KHOST 0
GHAZNI 9
URUZGAN 0
FARAH 3
PAKTIKA 1
ZABUL 5
HILMAND 0
KANDAHAR 21
NIMROZ 0
573 returnees since: January 2021
Individuals
0
1 - 25
26 - 50
51 - 100
101 - 257
International Boundary
Line of Control as promulgated in the 1972 SIMLA agreement
Provincial Border
Printing date: 11 April 2021 sources: UNHCR - Author : UNHCR - Afghanistan Kabul Feedback: faqiry@unhcr.org file Name : returnee 2021

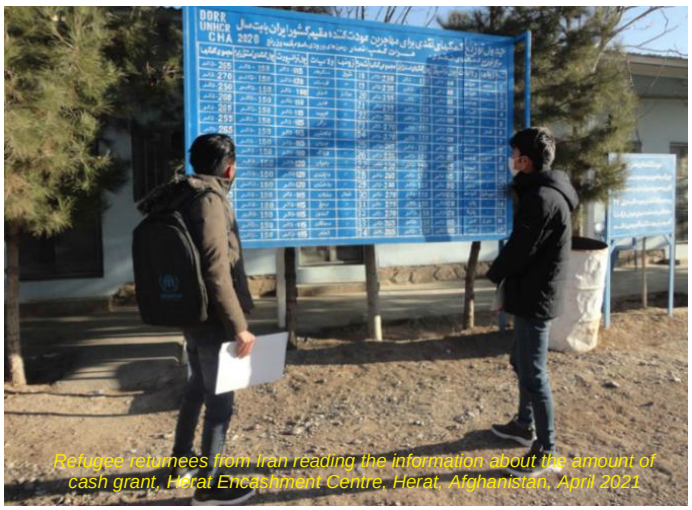

Annual volrep trend from Pakistan, Iran and other countries to Afghanistan
03 Mar 2002 - 31 Mar 2021
1,834,537
475,639
761,122
514,090
139,804
365,410
278,484
54,552
112,968
67,962
94,556
38,766
16,995
58,460
372,577
58,817
15,699
8,079
2,147
573
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021

Process of return

➢ UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in Iran and Pakistan process refugees willing to return to Afghanistan and issue a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) for each family. Two VRCs are located in Pakistan: one in Azakhel in Peshawar (KPK) and the other in Baleli in Quetta (Baluchistan). Repatriation from Iran is facilitated through all UNHCR Offices, including the VRC in Soleimankhani.

➢ Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted at four Encashment Centers (ECs) located in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar for returnees from Pakistan and other countries, and in Herat for those returning from Iran.

➢ At the ECs, all returnees with a valid VRF receive a multisectoral assistance consisting of a cash grant amounting USD 250 per person (based on their area of origin) to prevent, reduce, and respond to immediate protection risks and vulnerabilities upon return to Afghanistan and to cover their transportation costs. Most of the interviewed returnees stated that they will spend the cash grant to pay transportation cost to their destination and buy food and other basic commodities. In addition to cash grants, a range of inter-agency services are provided to returning refugees, including basic health and malnutrition screening and vaccination (by the Ministry of Public Health supported by WHO and UNICEF), mine risk awareness (by the Danish Demining Group supported by UNMAS), information on school enrolment (by the Ministry of Education supported by UNICEF), and overnight accommodation when needed.



Refugee returnees from Iran reading the information about the amount of cash grant, Herat Encashment Centre, Herat, Afghanistan, April 2021

UNHCR and the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation also conduct returnee monitoring and identify persons with specific needs to be referred to specialized service providers for assessment and assistance.

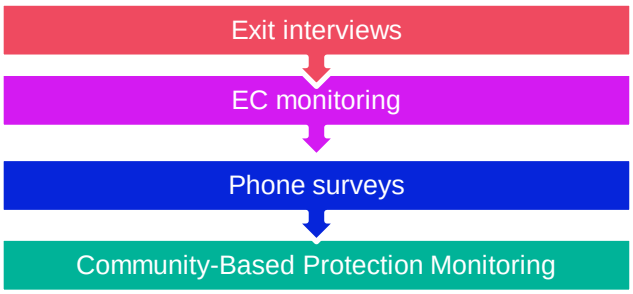
Mine risk education is important as a protection intervention to raise awareness of the threats associated with landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and unexploded ordnances to prevent injury and loss of life, particularly for children and those returning to rural areas.

In addition, UNHCR, in line with the measures recommended by MoPH and WHO, adopted a new SOP in all ECs, which is aimed to prevent the spread and transmission of COVID-19. This includes awareness-raising sessions for all returnees using materials provided by MoPH and WHO, health screening, referral of suspected cases to health facilities, additional handwashing facilities, distribution of face mask for returnees and provision of PPEs for staff including partner staff working in the ECs.

Returnee Monitoring

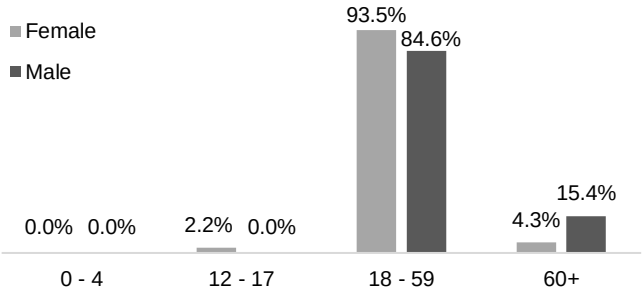
Returnee monitoring is an inherent part of the **protection monitoring** carried out by UNHCR in Afghanistan. UNHCR monitors refugee returnees through the entire process of voluntary repatriation.

UNHCR interviews refugees willing to return at the VRCs in the country of asylum, monitors the return condition at the ECs in Afghanistan and follow up on the returnee's situation in the areas of return one to six months later through phone survey.



UNHCR also monitors the situation of refugee returnees through its community-based protection monitoring, which allows UNHCR to assesses the protection environment, identify human rights violations and potential protection concerns returnees may face after return in Afghanistan to inform timely interventions and advocacy by UNHCR and other stakeholders.

Age/Sex of returnees interviewed at the ECs
01 January - 31 March 2021



ENCASHMENT CENTRE (EC) MONITORING

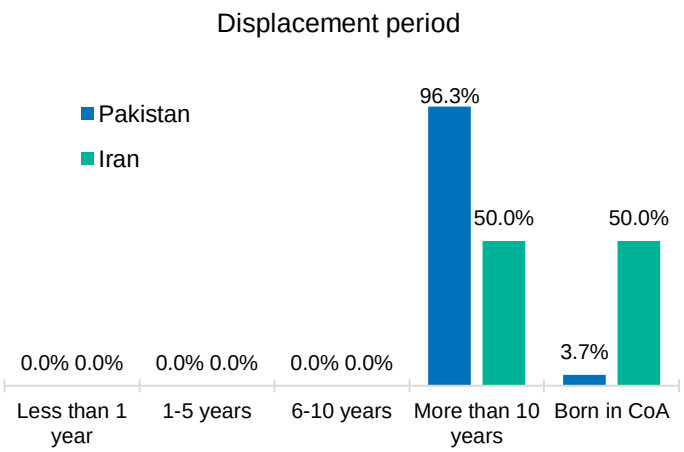
Encashment Centre monitoring is conducted with refugee returnees upon their arrival in Afghanistan. It aims at identifying return trends, through an assessment of the voluntariness of return, reasons for return, the level of information that returnees received in countries of asylum to allow them to make a well-informed decision to return, identifies persons with specific needs to be referred for appropriate response , the conditions of return and respect for basic rights as well as the human rights violations during the return to be reported for appropriate response, and returnees' plans for the future.

Between 01 January and 31 March 2021, a total of 72 refugee returnee households (representing 75% of total returnees) were interviewed, including 26 male and 46 female respondents. Interviewees are selected randomly among returning families at the ECs, the first point of contact between refugee returnees and UNHCR in Afghanistan.

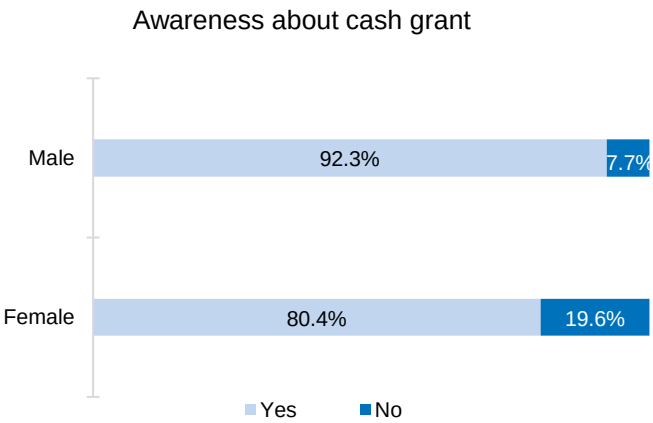
Encashment Center Returnee Monitoring Findings

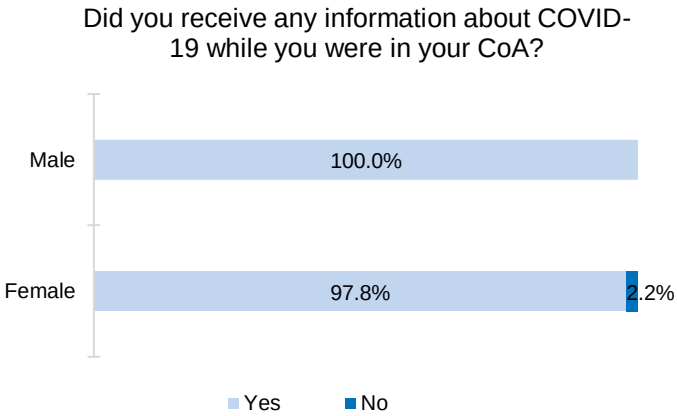
IN BRIEF

- 74% of Afghan refugee returnees interviewed at the ECs stated that they intend to return to their province of origin, while 26% stated that they would return to other provinces to reunify with their relatives, seek income opportunities and due to perceived insecurity.
- 96% of interviewed returnees from Pakistan and 50% from Iran returned after spending more than 10 years as a refugee.
- 50% of returnees from Pakistan and 4% from Iran were born in the country of asylum.
- 86% of returnees stated they had information about the overall situation in Afghanistan, including the security situation in their place of origin, before leaving the country of asylum. Majority of the interviewed returnees (91%) stated that they received information from the Afghan communities in the country of asylum (CoA).

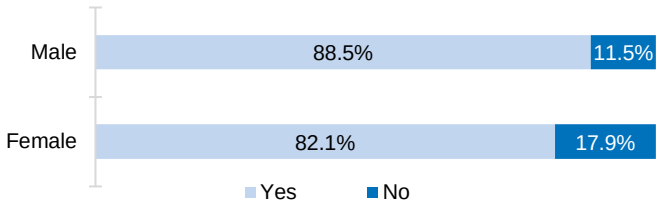


Refugee returnees from Pakistan receiving Cash Grant, Kandahar Encashment Centre, April 2021

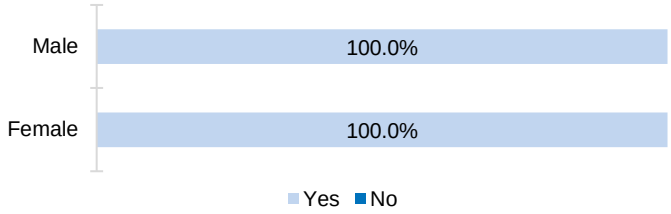




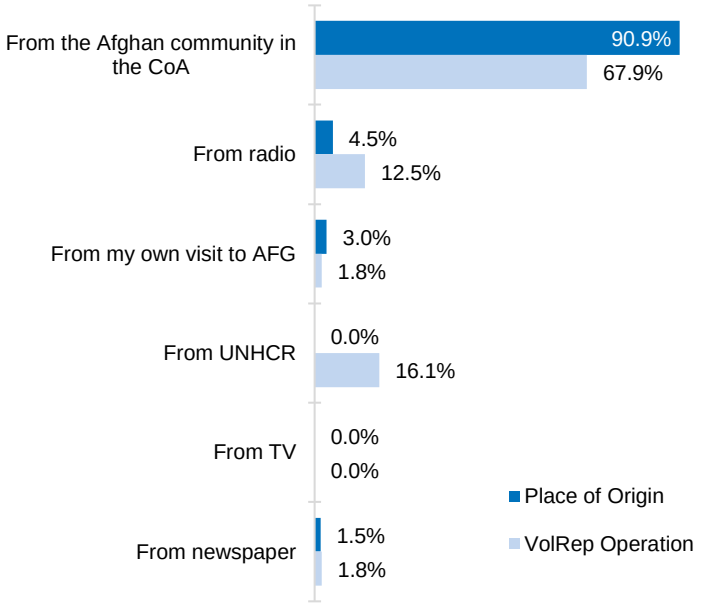
Awareness about the situation in country of origin



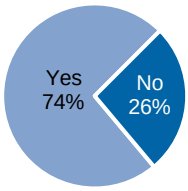
Did you receive any information about COVID-19 in the ECs?



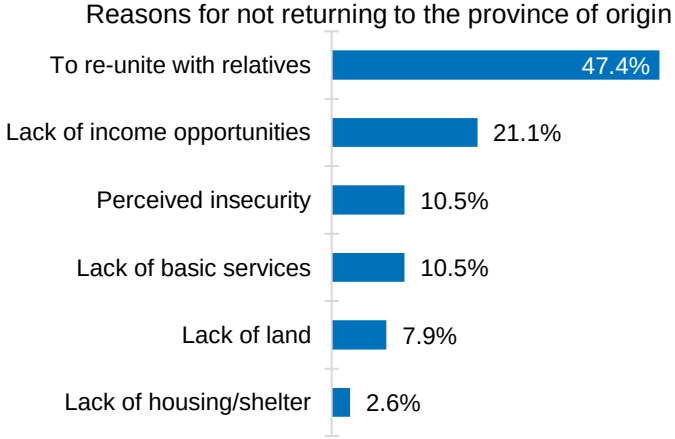
Sources of Information on Place of Origin and VolRep Program



Do you intend to return to your province of origin?



Reasons for not returning to the province of origin

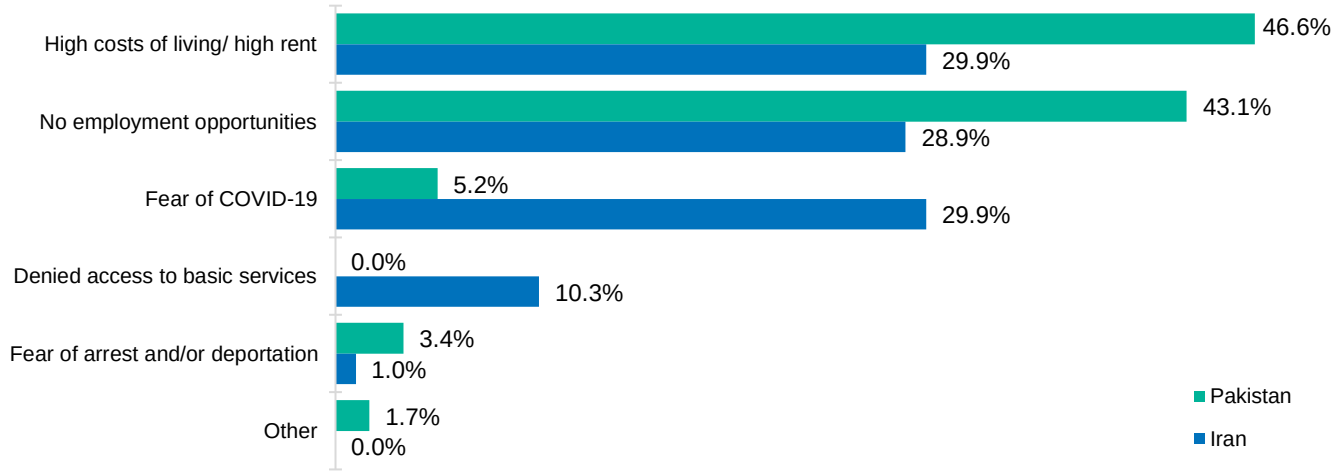


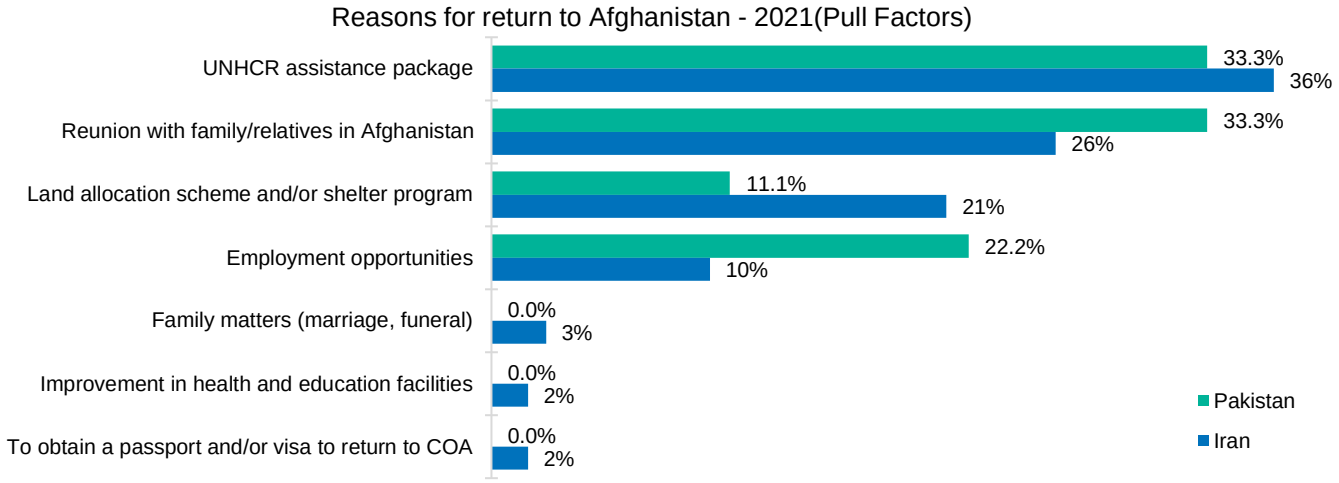
Reasons for Return (Push and Pull Factors)

IN BRIEF

- Some **44** newly arrived refugee returnees from Iran, **27** from Pakistan and **one** from other countries were interviewed upon arrival at the four encashment centers as part of UNHCR's returnee monitoring in 2021. This sample size represents 75% of the total returnees in 2021.
- The main reasons for leaving Pakistan and Iran (push factors) stated by interviewed returnees were high cost of living, lack of employment opportunities and fear of COVID-19. While UNHCR's cash grant, reunifications with family/relatives, land allocation by the government of Afghanistan and perceived employment opportunities were mentioned as the reasons for return (pull factors) to Afghanistan.

Reasons for Leaving Pakistan and Iran - 2021 (Push Factors)

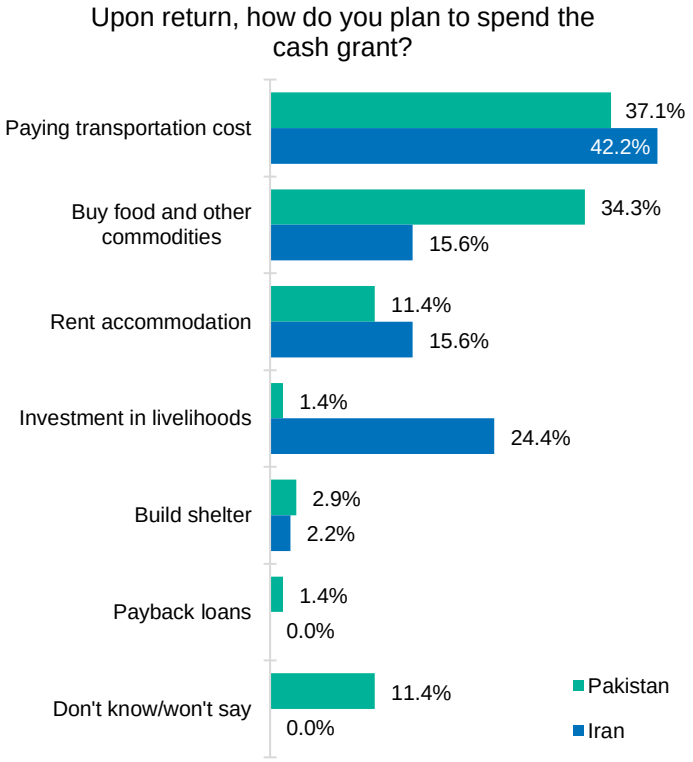


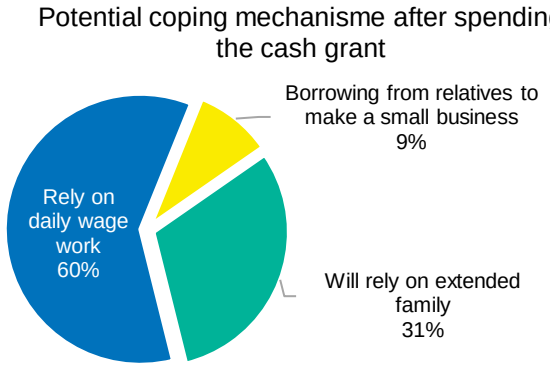


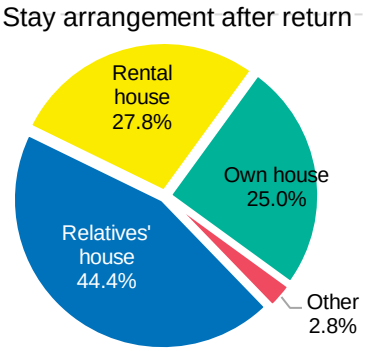
Note: except the fear of COVID-19, the main reasons of return to Afghanistan (push and pull factors) in both 2021 and 2020 for returnees from Pakistan and Iran are similar.

Intentions after leaving the Encashment Centre

These findings give an indication of returnees' intentions upon return, which may change after returnees settle in their communities. These findings also help compare dynamics among returnees during the return and reintegration phases.







Skills/Education Mapping and Satisfaction Survey

To ensure a smooth VolRep procedure in the ECs, on 10 August 2020, UNHCR established a new online tool using Kobo. It is a short (5 min) survey conducted with all refugee returnees' Head of Households (HoHs) at ECs. It is aimed to assess returning refugees' satisfaction of the services provided at the ECs including the mitigating measures linked to COVID-19. In addition, this survey will provide information on skills/qualifications and education level of returnees' HoHs that will enable ECs/field offices to immediately provide information/referrals related to potential employment opportunities or ongoing training programs, as well as to collect data at the village level for the purpose of designing future livelihoods programmes in priority areas of return and reintegration.

Total Interviews: 413 (208 M and 205 F)

Education

- **10%** of the interviewed returnees stated that they have no education (**13% F and 8% M**)
- **5 %** stated that they have minimal education (up to grade 6);
- **5%** up to grade 9;
- **5%** up to grade 12;
- **1%** went to madrasa; and
- **76%** went to university. This figure is high because **72%** of the total refugee returnees from Iran are students who returned to Afghanistan.

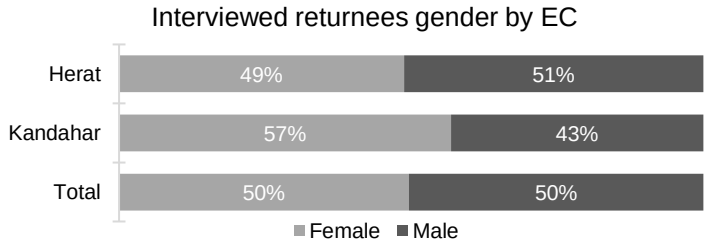
Skills

- **45%** stated that they have no skills
- Tailoring: 19%;
- Shopkeeper: 6%;
- Agriculture (farming): 4%;
- Teaching: 3%;
- Electrician: 2%;
- Stone carving: 2%;
- Health worker: 1%;
- Embroidery: 1%;
- Computer repair: 1%
- Carpet weaving: 1%;
- Other skill: 15%;

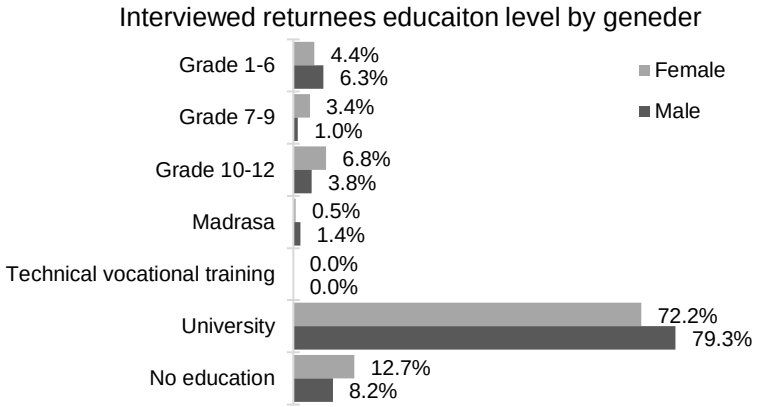
Note: The list of skills, which consist of 37 skills, is also used by other partners including the government. UNHCR has collected data on returnees' skills and qualification at the village level.

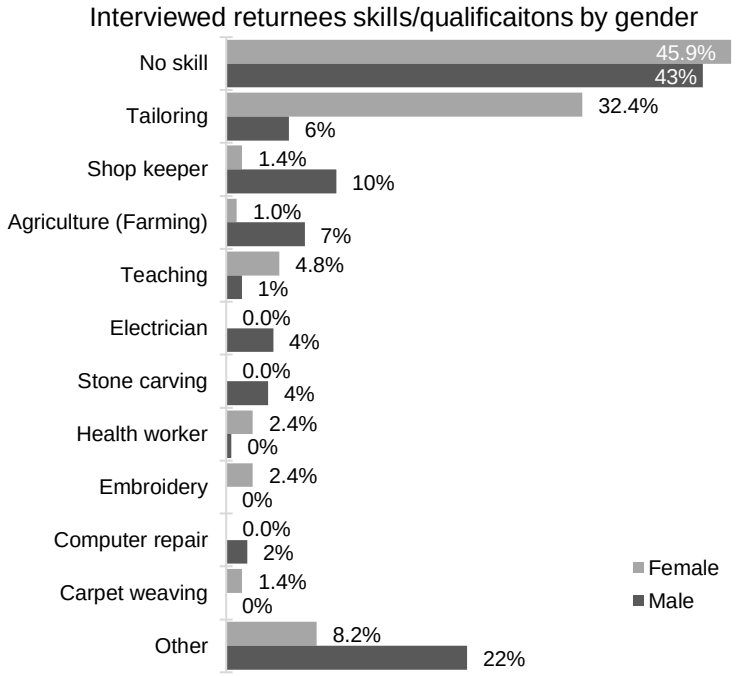
Satisfaction from the services in the ECs

- All interviewed returnees expressed their satisfaction from the services provided by UNHCR and other partners at all encashment centers.



Note: No refugee returns through Jalalabad and Kabul ECs due to customs formalities imposed, since November 2020, by the authorities (Pakistan side) in Torkham.





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UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is grateful for the support of: