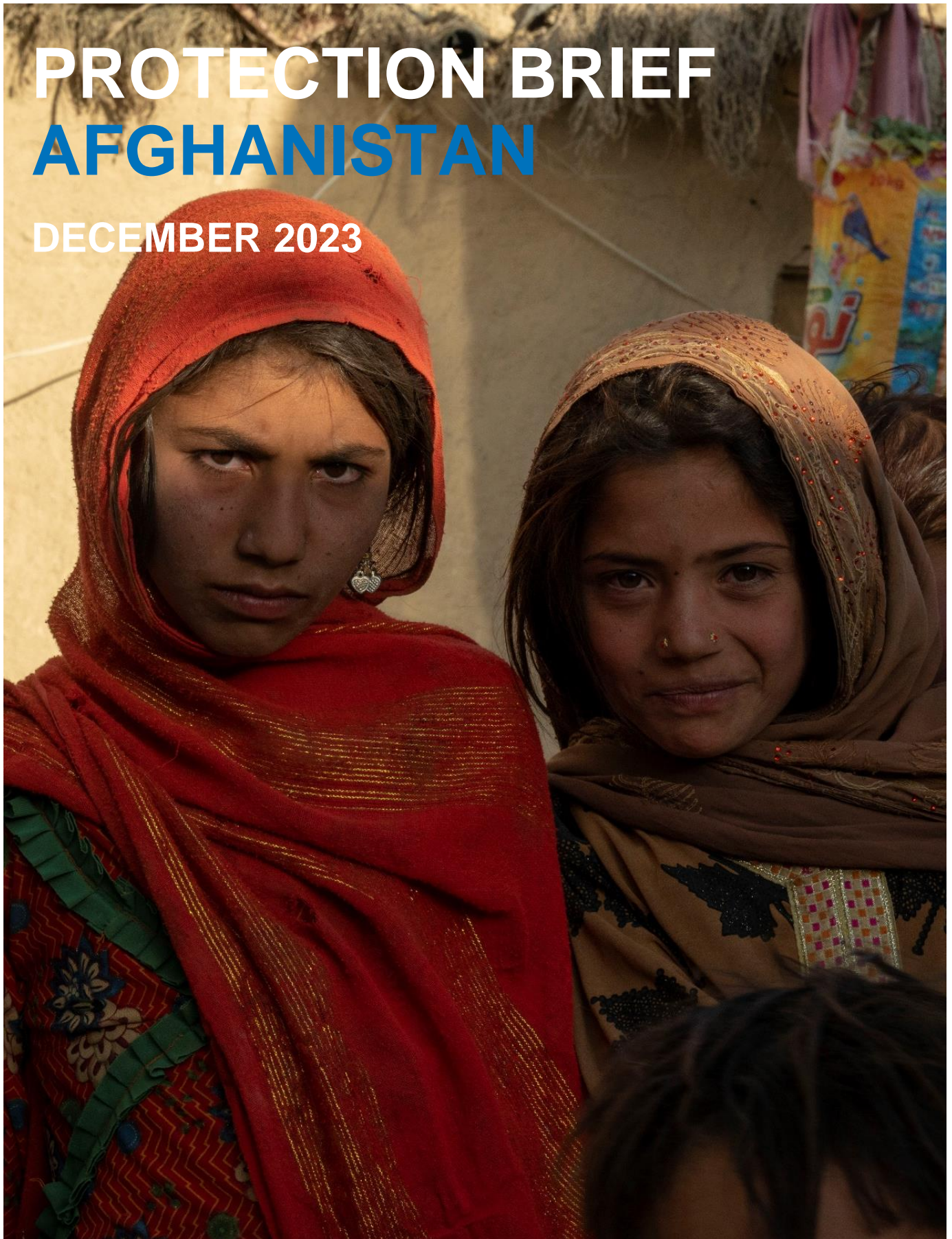


# PROTECTION BRIEF

## AFGHANISTAN

DECEMBER 2023



## Operational Context & Analysis

With the end of major hostilities in Afghanistan after 20 years and the consolidation of control by the de facto authorities in August 2021, conflict is no longer the primary driver of displacement. However, 3.25 million Afghans remain displaced within the country and over 5.53 million are registered refugees or Afghans in refugee-like situations in the region. The de facto authorities are reported to have committed serious human rights violations in Afghanistan, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Restrictions on the rights of Afghans to freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly were imposed and there is growing curtailment by the de facto authorities of the human rights of Afghan women and girls. In addition, the Afghan people are confronted with drastic rises in poverty, hunger and malnutrition, a near collapse of the national public health system as well as climate and natural disasters.

The needs in Afghanistan are vast. The humanitarian country team expected 29.2 million people – two thirds of Afghanistan’s population – to need urgent humanitarian assistance in 2023. This estimate was made before the severe earthquakes that struck the province of Herat on October 7, 11, and 15, directly impacting 48,000 households, completely destroying some 10,000 homes and severely damaging 20,430 more. About 157,000 people are requiring urgent humanitarian assistance in this context alone, in particular with winter coming.

In addition, the Government of Pakistan is implementing its plans to deport an estimated 1.7 million foreigners, most of them Afghans. Significant deportations and population movements from Pakistan to Afghanistan have begun, leading to a total of over 420,000 returns by the end of November 2023.

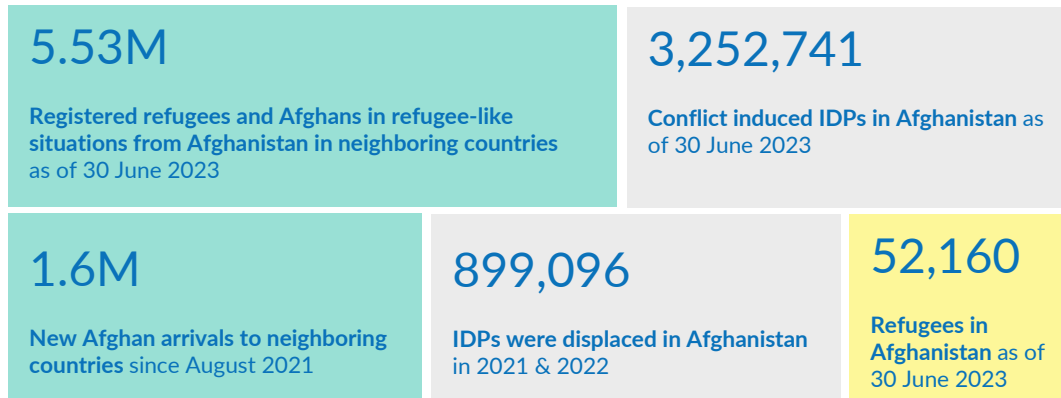
Despite their own needs, it is the Afghan communities that are welcoming returnees. Supporting them directly is imperative in view of the high numbers of returns. Without robust aid by the international community, local communities may become overburdened, resulting in further poverty, protection risks and displacement.

Linking the current emergency responses up with a forward-looking strategy is key. Humanitarian assistance alone is not sufficient to sustainably address the deep protection, humanitarian and basic human needs crisis that resulted from the effects of decades of conflict, the takeover of the de facto authorities in August 2021 and recurrent natural disasters.

The international community has recognised this and agreed, as specified in UN Security Council Resolutions 2615 (2021) and 2664 (2022), to continue to assist the Afghan people not only in addressing immediate humanitarian needs but also in meeting basic human needs through the sustained provision of essential services and livelihoods, thereby reducing the need for life-saving humanitarian support over time.

Finding durable solutions for forcibly displaced people, including returnees, is core to the mandate UNHCR was given by the UN General Assembly. It is with this in mind, that UNHCR has established the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs) programme in Afghanistan. The operation is furthering its work on the PARRs approach with a view to ensure close coordination and linking up the current emergency response and these sustainable programmes - to empower communities directly and allowing them to continue to receive returnees by improving their access to essential services and protecting and promoting livelihoods.

## Key Figures



Front page and above: Across 15 most heavily earthquake-affected villages in Barmal District, Paktika Province, and Spera District, Khost Province, UNHCR is providing 1,300 earthquake-resilient houses for families most affected by the 22 June 2022 earthquake. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production.

# Protection risks

## Protection Risk I

**Systematic discrimination of women and girls in the context of ongoing humanitarian crises.** Multiple studies conclude that Afghanistan is the worst place in the world to be a woman or girl, with the situation further deteriorating since the takeover by the de facto authorities. Since August 2021, deep cutting measures were imposed in a devastating blow to the human rights of women and girls in the country. Specifically, women and girls have been banned from public areas, ordered to travel only with a mahram (chaperone) beyond a certain distance, banned from working with NGOs and the UN and excluded from education past primary school. The ban on girls' education beyond grade 6 and the ban on women attending secondary schooling and university is devastating for the individuals, but also the future of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the lack of land and property rights for women constitutes a major cause of gender-based inequality, particularly given that land is often a household's most important asset.

These measures, that have also deprived many women of income earning opportunities, have significantly increased protection risks for displaced women and girls. They had a severe psychosocial impact, with an uptick in suicide rates in Afghanistan. As men and boys are more likely to flee to neighbouring countries, women remain in forced internal displacement for longer, especially those that are forced to flee their homes with children but no partner. Nine out of ten women who fled without a partner have no formal education, which limits their resilience. Advocacy for and consistent investment in education and livelihoods is therefore paramount for the future of girls and women in Afghanistan.

Displaced and returning Afghan women and girls are facing increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV), with women heads of households, women and girls with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ persons considered to be amongst those at highest risk. There are reports of beatings and detention of women protesters, the targeting of women's rights activists, female judges and police offices, as well as harassment and physical violence against women and girls at checkpoints. These violations are occurring in the context of long-standing gender inequalities in Afghanistan, with high rates of intimate partner violence and of early and forced marriage.

Bans on women working with NGOs and UN organisations have significantly reduced access to displaced women and girls and impacted the ability to provide assistance and services for women and girls (including the provision of safe spaces and lifesaving GBV services). With less female aid workers on the ground, the ability to ensure safe disclosure of GBV cases, including cases of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), is reduced, as well as the ability to capture the views and needs of women in humanitarian assessments, and to support local women-led organisations. While recent exemptions in relation to ongoing emergency situations have brought some respite in this regard, for example allowing women UN and NGO staff to receive Afghan women at the border or directly engaging with them in the response to the earthquakes in Herat, the overall policies remain in place. Female aid workers who have resumed work have also reported the need to be accompanied by a mahram and to wear specific clothing, as well as instances of intimidation and harassment.

The empowerment of women is the cross-cutting theme in all interventions in Afghanistan. This is done by recognizing the unique challenges faced by women through an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach, ensuring a principled, human rights-based response. The

design and delivery of programming by women and for women and the prioritization of women in beneficiary selection, financial inclusion, technical and vocational education and training is informed by the accountability to affected people (AAP) framework.

## Protection Risk II

**Protection risks stemming from ongoing humanitarian crises.** While there are signs that the economy is stabilising and a perception of improved security in Afghanistan, economic hardship and limited livelihood opportunities remain a core issue, with reliance on humanitarian support continuing to raise.

Afghanistan has experienced one of the worst droughts in decades, lasting three consecutive years. As a result, high levels of acute food insecurity are observed in rural and urban areas and there is a need for urgent lifesaving support and livelihood assistance to help households recover and prevent catastrophic levels. In 2023, 875,000 children are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition and 2.3 million children and 840,000 women from moderate acute malnutrition.

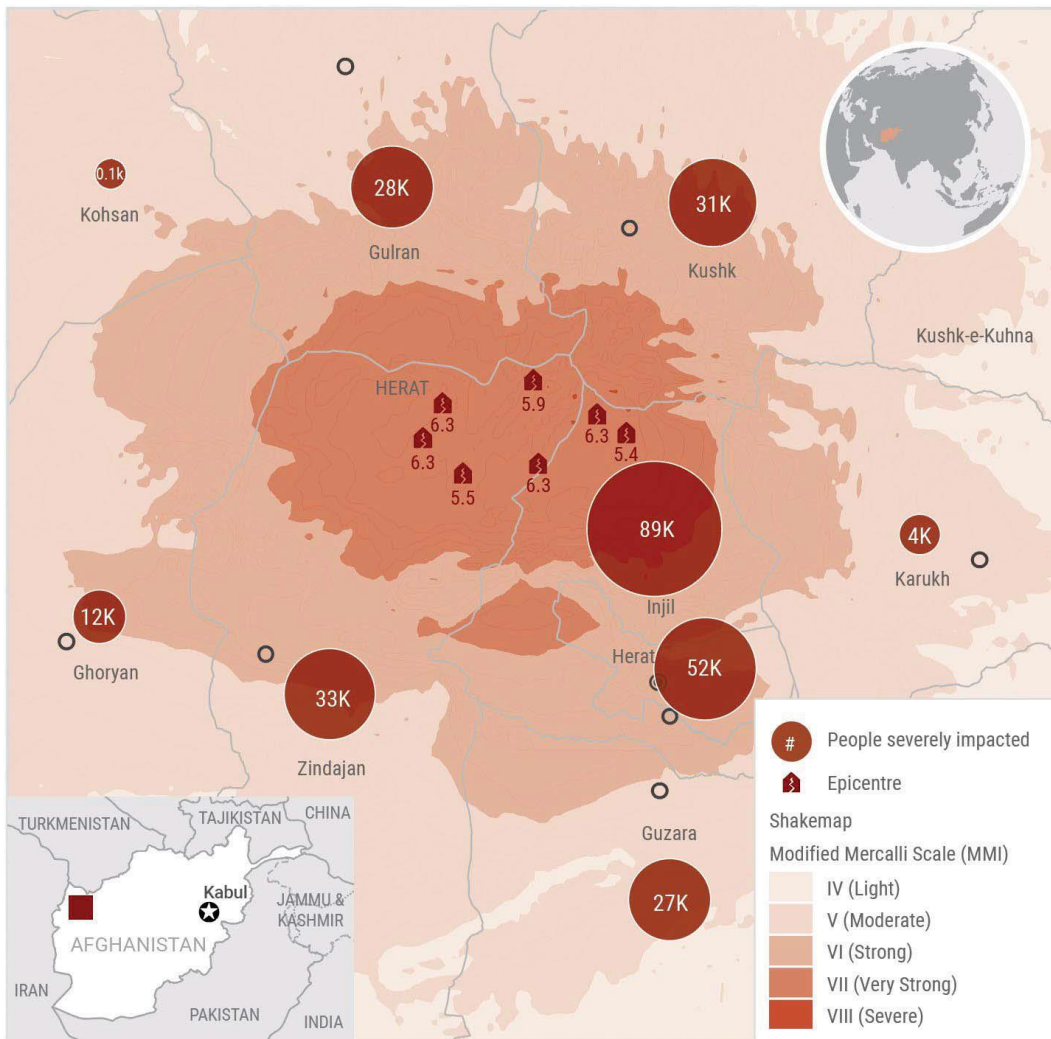
These factors, which may vary across provinces, combined with policies and practices introduced by the de facto authorities, such as restricting freedom of movement and opportunity for livelihoods by women, persistent social and cultural challenges compound protection risks and limit reintegration prospects and durable solutions for refugees, IDPs and refugee returnees. As a result, displaced populations are often exposed the most to the impacts of a humanitarian crisis resulting in harmful coping mechanisms such as delaying seeking medical treatment, child labour, early and forced marriage, exploitative labour, debt, or secondary displacement to survive. Among IDPs, women and girls, older people, and persons with disabilities are subject to higher protection risks as their specific needs are not being met and their voices not heard, thus resulting in their vulnerability becoming entrenched.

Analysis undertaken through the 2022 Multi-sectorial Rapid Assessment shows higher vulnerability for female Heads of Households, with 76 per cent indicating one or more vulnerability factors, as opposed to 39 percent for Male Heads of Household. Preliminary results show a similar picture for 2023. In UNHCR's discussions with communities, households and individuals, including women and girls in 34 provinces in Afghanistan, the most common protection concerns raised were related to risk of sexual harassment for girls and hazardous and dangerous forms of work for boys. Additionally, community members face challenges to access existing services in their communities, mainly due to their inability to pay for the services and lack of civil documentation.

Considering the foregoing, Afghan returnees, IDPs and refugees as well as the communities that generously host them need access to essential services to sustain an enabling protection environment where people can make their own choices and provide for their families, but also to preserve their dignity and livelihoods. Meeting basic human needs is essential to recovery and building communities' resilience, also in view of the large number of Afghans returning to their communities. Should communities not have the capacity to welcome them, this could have a cascading negative effect on the protection environment in Afghanistan for displaced people, returnees, and host communities alike.

## Protection Risk III

**Impact of Herat earthquakes.** On 7 October 2023, a 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck 40 kilometres west of Herat City in Herat Province, western Afghanistan. The initial quake was followed by two more earthquakes and several powerful aftershocks. The **disaster** directly affected 275,000 people, left at least 1,400 people dead, and destroyed or damaged more than 48,000 homes.



Map produced based on rapid community level needs assessment for Herat Earthquakes, OCHA, 2023.

Natural disasters, climate change and other environmental risks frequently contribute to displacement and heightened vulnerability in Afghanistan. With its location in a seismically active region, Afghanistan remains highly susceptible to catastrophic damage due to earthquakes – particularly across several densely populated urban areas. Afghanistan has an Inform Risk Index of 8.1, the second highest out of 191 countries profiled. At the same time, the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index ranks it as the 11<sup>th</sup> least-prepared country against climatic shocks and the 10<sup>th</sup> country in the world most vulnerable to climate change.

The earthquakes have further exacerbated the situation of already vulnerable communities, who are now grappling with the loss of many lives, homes and livelihoods. Among them are many returnee refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) who had been displaced as a result of previous natural disasters and conflict and had returned and are now forced to start over once again. There has been extensive damage to vital water and sanitation facilities, further compounding the challenges faced by the affected communities. With the onset of winter, the situation has taken a critical turn, posing a severe risk to the well-being of these vulnerable populations.

Among the vulnerable groups 17,358 pregnant women, 17,146 infants, 3,976 individuals with severe disabilities, 3,207 vulnerable elderly families, 6,806 female-headed households and 3,176 chronically ill people have been identified. Orphaned, separated or unaccompanied children require specific case management and psychosocial assistance. Psychosocial support will be essential to help affected populations cope with the trauma of the loss of life, homes and livelihoods.

Refugee and IDP returnees who have recently arrived in Herat Province will need additional support in the absence of long-established resilience support networks in the community.

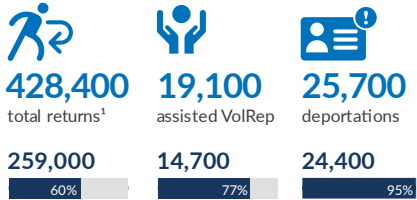
## Protection Risk IV

**Large scale return movements under the Government of Pakistan's deportation plan to an already dire humanitarian situation and protection risks in Afghanistan.** While UNHCR underscores that any refugee return must be voluntary and in dignity without any coercion, to ensure protection for those seeking safety, undocumented Afghan arrivals are reporting that house rental agreements were not renewed by landlords in Pakistan and that since 1 November 2023, the deadline given to undocumented Afghans to leave Pakistan, there have been police raids and round-ups. Fear of arrest is the most common reason prompting departures and return to Afghanistan.

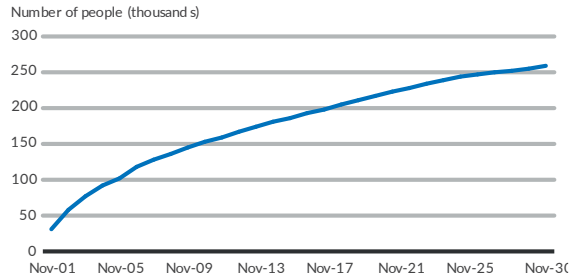
UNHCR and its partners have strongly advocated with the Government of Pakistan to reconsider its stance, maintain protection space, provide exemptions for refugees holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, undocumented Afghans with at-risk profiles, and ensure that any returns to the country take place in a safe, dignified, and voluntary manner.

UNHCR is concerned that those forced to return, including many of those who left after August 2021, may face serious protection risks. In addition to women and girls, UNHCR considers people at particularly high risk on return to their country of origin that are associated with the former government or with the international community in Afghanistan; with the Afghan national security forces and Afghans associated with the former international military forces in Afghanistan; journalists and other media professionals; human rights defenders and activists, as well as defence lawyers supporting them; members of minority religious groups and members of minority ethnic groups, including the Hazaras; and Afghans of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and/or gender expression ([Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan \(Update I\)](#)).

Significant population movements from Pakistan to Afghanistan have however begun, leading to a total of over 420,000 returns by the end of November 2023, some of them forced. Among those, it is estimated that 80 per cent are women and children, with 47 per cent being women and girls.

**Key figures**


The **blue figures** above correspond to the period 15 September to 30 November, while the **navy figures** refer only to those who arrived in November (1-30 November).

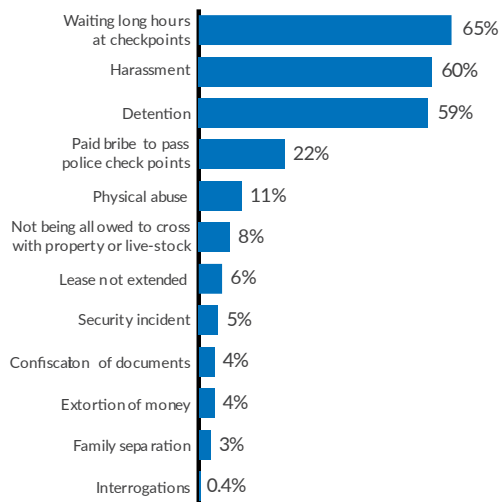
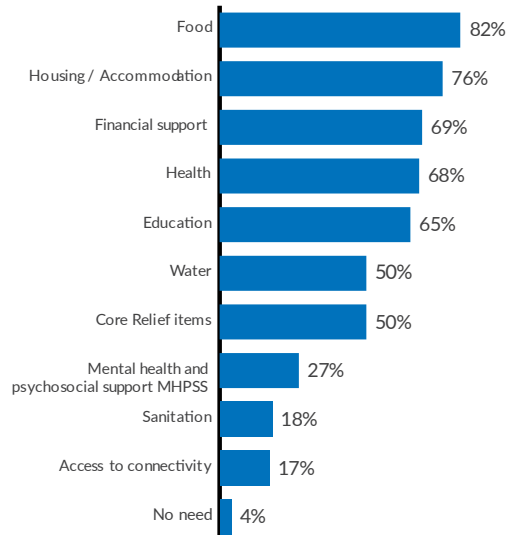
**Total returns (cumulative since 1 Nov. 2023)<sup>2</sup>**


With 1.3 million undocumented Afghans estimated to reside in Pakistan, approximately 720,000 undocumented individuals and 50,000 assisted voluntary repatriations (Proof of Registration cardholders) are expected to require support at border points through July 2024. While Proof of Registration and Afghans Citizen Card holders are exempt from this deportation plan, UNHCR is observing that many are returning too due to the hostile conditions in Pakistan.

**Situation map**


UNHCR and its partner WADAN in Afghanistan have scaled up protection activities at the border. Daily presence consists of Border Protection monitoring through interviews with returnees including deportees to identify protection concerns and risks, as well as, their intended areas of return in Afghanistan.



**Problems experienced in Pakistan prior to the cross-border movement\***

**Needs upon arrival in final destination\***


\* Multiple choice questions, may add up to over 100%.

Returnees are worried about their future, job opportunities, accommodation and food to support their families. They are also worried about lack of money to travel to their places of origin. Many expressed concerns about access to health facilities and education, especially for girls – current estimations indicate that 4.2 million children are out-of-school. Families have been separated during deportations and support with family reunification is a key need for returnees. 19 per cent of the households enrolled by UNHCR are women-headed, who are expected to face additional challenges in (re-)integration and meeting their basic needs. Additionally, there are Afghans forced to leave Pakistan that have never lived in Afghanistan or were away for decades, thus having no property or land on which they could build a living, no connection with the place of origin or wider families. All these factors fuel serious child protection risks, such as early and forced marriage and child labour, risks of gender-based violence and risks for people with disabilities during their return journey, while staying in temporary reception facilities, while awaiting registration, and upon return.

The sudden surge in returns in recent weeks is putting pressure on already strained resources in receiving communities in Afghanistan, including for shelter and basic services. Arrivals back to Afghanistan are adding to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, as winter temperatures start to rapidly drop to minus °C Degree temperatures in some locations. Many Afghan returnees are vulnerable and could lose their lives in a harsh winter if left without adequate shelter.

Additional support is urgently required. UNHCR and partners in Pakistan and Afghanistan are currently working together to ensure a harmonized and coordinated cross-border response to this new emergency, to identify protection concerns and risks but also to understand their intended areas of return in Afghanistan to support preparedness of receiving communities across the country. The [Border Consortium Appeal](#) provides for a joint and harmonized approach to the provision of assistance, ensuring optimal use of resources to assist the high volume of persons in need and in line with contingency plan scenarios.

## Challenges & Opportunities

While each emergency situation in Afghanistan presents its own set of challenges, the overlay of several emergencies at the same time makes the current situation in the country exceptionally complex. Afghans are confronted with severe restrictions to their human rights, especially women and girls, with economic hardship, climate and natural disasters, poverty and food insecurity. In Herat, recent earthquakes took many lives and destroyed homes and livelihoods with winter approaching very fast. And finally, returning Afghans from Pakistan at a large scale will have difficulties re-establishing their lives in Afghanistan and risk overburdening receiving communities.

The main opportunity in this context are the established and mature [Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration \(PARRs\)](#) programmes developed under the [Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees \(SSAR\)](#) and fully aligned with the [United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan](#). Located in the most significant areas of origin of people forcibly displaced, the PARRs seek to build the resilience of communities by linking humanitarian and basic human needs investments in essential services such as education, health, and livelihoods. This approach has already assisted some of the over 1.4 million internally displaced persons who have returned since 2021 to reintegrate.

Projects within the PARRs support the entire population in an area, thereby increasing the ability of receiving communities to welcome forcibly displaced people and returnees. Importantly, support is delivered directly to the communities and individuals.

Available data indicates that a significant number of those returning over the coming period will go to PARRs. Building the response on the fundament of these already established programmes and continuing an area-based and community level approach therefore presents a key opportunity to managing the current crisis in the country as efficiently and sustainably as possible.

However, while data shows that the PARRs cover many key areas of return in the current context of deportations from Pakistan, they do not do so in full. UNHCR is therefore closely analysing return movements to adjust its priority engagement areas where necessary and explore, together with partners, where assistance gaps exist and where services need to be expanded to. This with a view to ensure that the capacity of communities to welcome back returnees is maintained and strengthened in all key areas of return.

Finally, while bans for women working with NGOs and the UN remain in place, there is currently a window of opportunity due to exemption for female staff related to ongoing emergencies.

## Key Advocacy Messages and Asks for all Stakeholders

- Actively advocate for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan and invest in programming addressing their basic needs, education and access to lifesaving GBV and child protection services – this is paramount for the future of girls and women and the country itself.
- Support principled and human rights-based engagement with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan in line with Security Council Resolutions 2615 (2021) and 2664 (2022).
- Provide support for UNHCR’s programmes in Afghanistan, which are fully in line with Security Council Resolutions 2615 (2021) and 2664 (2022).
- Directly support NGOs and civil society in Afghanistan through partnerships, including women-led organizations.
- Continue to advocate with the Government of Pakistan to suspend deportations, reconsider its stance, maintain protection space, provide exemptions for undocumented Afghans with at-risk profiles, and ensure that any returns to Afghanistan take place in a safe, dignified, and voluntary manner.
- Continue to support an area-based approach building on existing programmes in Afghanistan as key to finding sustainable solutions for Afghans. In the context of large scale returns from Pakistan, such an approach is crucial to maintain and increase the capacity of local communities to receive returnees.
- Provide multi-year funding for UNHCR’s protection operations in Afghanistan to ensure sufficient staffing and sustainability of programmes.
- Provide additional funding for the immediate emergency responses in Herat and related to the large-scale returns from Pakistan.

# PROTECTION BRIEF AFGHANISTAN



**UNHCR Afghanistan**

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