OPERATIONAL UPDATE

Afghanistan

May 2025

Between 15 September 2023 and 31 May 2025, nearly 1.1 million Afghans have returned from Pakistan. In the same period, UNHCR has assisted over **147,000** Afghan returnees from Pakistan, including **92,000** Proof of Registration (PoR) Card holders. Approximately **50 percent** of the assisted individuals are women and girls, and **2.3 percent** of the total assisted beneficiaries have disabilities.

Out of households assisted, 31% are headed by women, and approximately **72 percent** of returnees from Pakistan intend to return to five provinces (Nangarhar, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Laghman). Out of **1.1 million**, over **274,000** returned in 2025, of which 45,400 were deported. The majority of those returning in 2025 (over 230,500 individuals) have returned since April, including 42,800 deportations and representing 51 percent of all deportations since 15 September 2023, surpassing November 2023 levels.

Some **1,000** were deported in January, 1,417 in February, 694 in March, and over 30,000 in April. Additionally, during January and May 2025, over 632,000 individuals returned from Iran including 364,800 deportations. Since 20 March 2025 over 367,600 have returned, out of which 209,000 (57%) have been deported. Since 1 January 2025, 669 households (929 individuals), who returned from Iran were assisted by UNHCR.

KEY INDICATORS FOR 2025

171,062

Individuals directly supported by UNHCR, receiving protection, cash, and in-kind assistance.

52 percent

of all individuals assisted in 2025 are women and girls.

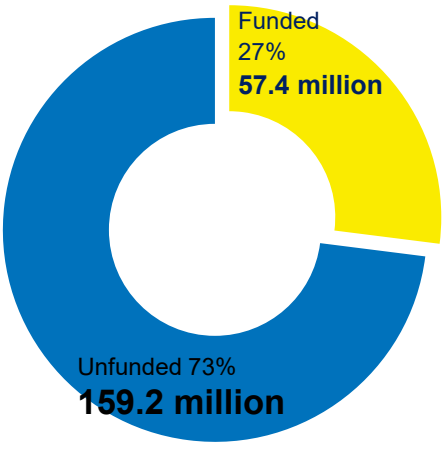
82,099

Individuals participated in assessments and monitoring exercises meant to understand gaps and inform targeted assistance.

FUNDING (As of 31 May 2025)

US$ 216.6 million

requested for Afghanistan



Setayesh, Tayeba, and Jawad, Afghan returnees from Iran, obtained their National ID cards (Tazkira) with UNHCR's assistance in Herat Province. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Update on Achievements

Operational Context

Afghanistan has an estimated **3.2 million conflict-induced** internally displaced persons (IDPs), **1.65 million IDP returnees**, and hosts around **20,900 refugees**[1], requiring immediate protection and humanitarian assistance, as well as medium to long-term support[2].

UNHCR has maintained response capacities at border crossing points and encashment centers to provide protection assistance for returns and deportations from Pakistan as part of the second phase of the Government of Pakistan's Illegal Foreigner Repatriation Plan (IFRP). There are **2.6 million Afghans**[3] living in Pakistan, including refugees (over 1.3 million PoR card holders) and those in refugee-like situations, with the implementation of IFRP Phase Two likely to result in more than **1.4 million Afghans (undocumented, refugees, and those in refugee-like situations)** returning to Afghanistan. UNHCR is working closely with the Border Consortium to ensure adequate response capacity at the borders and at the encashment centres to address the immediate needs of returnees.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are approximately 6.1 million Afghans, including refugees and those in refugee-like situations. This population includes 2.6 million Afghans who were recorded in a government-led headcount exercise conducted in 2022, which extended temporary protection to undocumented Afghans, including those who arrived following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. However, on 23 February 2025, the Government of Iran announced that headcount slips would not be extended beyond 20 March 2025, effectively stripping holders of access to healthcare and other essential services. While certain exemptions apply, this policy shift marks a significant change in the treatment of Afghans in Iran. Since the expiration of headcount slips, over 367,621 Afghans have returned to Afghanistan. UNHCR continues to engage with authorities to obtain updated data and remains focused on responding to the needs of Afghan populations.

Response capacities at the border with Iran have been strengthened in response, ensuring for the delivery of protection services to Afghan returnees and deportees including refugees and those in refugee-like situations. UNHCR is continuing advocacy efforts with the Government of Iran and Government of Pakistan, calling on all countries to ensure voluntary, safe and dignified returns.

Achievements

PROTECTION

UNHCR Assistance to Returnees: UNHCR assisted a total of 15,125 individuals (7,471 females and 7,654 males) in refugee or refugee-like situations who returned to Afghanistan in May 2025, assisting a total of 29,271 individuals including 14,226 females during January and May 2025. The overwhelming majority (28,056 individuals) returned from Pakistan which remains the primary country of asylum and departure for Afghan refugee returnees.

[1] Afghanistan Operational Data Portal

[2] These figures are expected to increase retroactively with ongoing assessments and considered indicative rather than overall statistical data of IDP returnees in Afghanistan.

[3] Afghanistan Situation Operational Data Portal

The assistance provided to returnees upon arrival included cash and protection services, basic health care, vaccination, mine risk awareness, access to child friendly spaces, overnight accommodation for transit, awareness raising on civil documentation, protection counselling and referral to the protection case management. These services were provided following verification and biometric registration processes in the encashment centers.

Those assisted include Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) holders, PoR card holders, Amayesh card holders, Gorizah/refugee card holders (Tajikistan), UNHCR slip holders, UNHCR certificate holders, and undocumented family members, with the majority returning from Pakistan.

The return figures significantly increased in May as compared to 11,918 returnees assisted in April, with the significant increase in returns from Pakistan resulting from the implementation of IFRP Phase II.

Returns from Iran and Tajikistan similarly continued in May. From January to May 2025, the refugee return figures from Iran (929 returns), and Tajikistan (254 returns) are significantly higher, compared to the 227 refugee returnees from Iran and 27 refugee returnees from Tajikistan recorded in the same period of 2024. The increase in return figures from Iran is linked to the rising anti-Afghan sentiment and increased push factors (increased police raids, harassment and arrest targeting Afghans) reported since June and July 2024. In Tajikistan, based on information provided by the local UNHCR Office and by UNHCR Afghanistan's border monitoring partner, the Government of Tajikistan has intensified the arrest of Afghans, including refugees, since early December 2024. In view of the current situation in Iran, particularly the continued emphasis by Iranian authorities on deporting undocumented Afghans and those holding headcount slip permits, the return of Afghans is expected to increase further during the remainder of 2025.

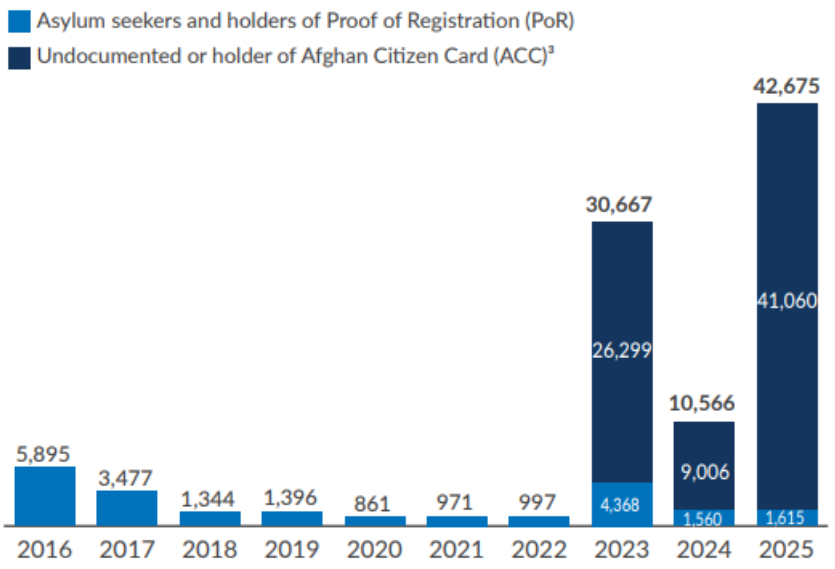
In 2024, UNHCR recorded the deportation of 79 Afghans from Tajikistan to Afghanistan, including refugees and those in refugee-like situations in December 2024 and a total of three deportees in November 2024. So far in 2025, 256 Afghans have been deported from Tajikistan.

As of 10 April 2025, UNHCR reduced its cash grant package to returnees due to significant funding constraints. The new package provides AFN 11,000 (USD 156) per household and AFN 2,500 (USD 35) per person for transport. While aligned with the Border Consortium and Cash and Voucher Working Group, UNHCR retains high concern that the reduced amount is insufficient to assist in anchoring returnees in their intended destination, potentially prolonging their vulnerability and humanitarian needs.

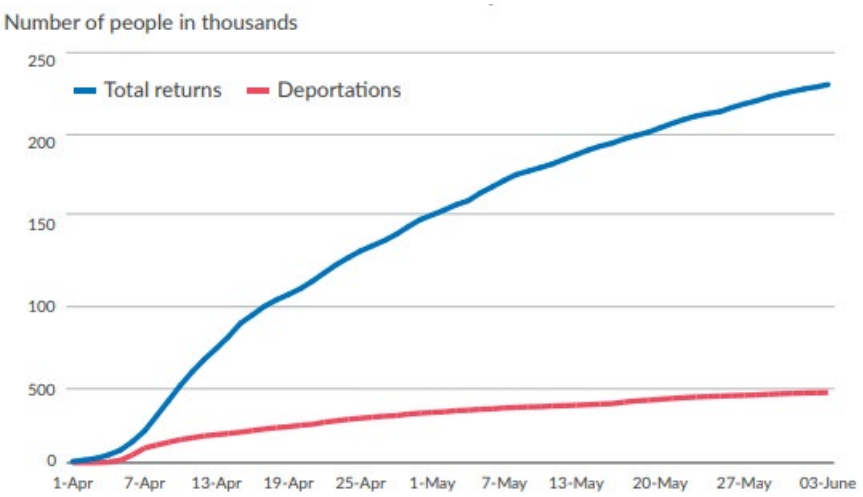
To manage expectations, awareness campaigns have been launched across host countries (Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan) and in Afghanistan at border points and encashment centers. Furthermore, UNHCR uses its complaints and feedback channels to respond to queries from returnees, expressing their concerns about the reduction of the cash assistance. Previously, the assistance provided was USD 375 per person for refugee returnees (PoR and Amayesh card holders), and USD 156 per household complimented with USD 35 per person for other returnee categories assisted by UNHCR.

Between January and May 2025, as part of return monitoring activities, UNHCR protection teams conducted a total of 1,362 interviews (883 males, 479 females) with newly arrived returnees from Iran, Pakistan and other countries. Based on the returnee monitoring findings, the primary reasons of return continue to be linked to protection concerns, including fear of arrest and or deportation, alleged abuse by police or state authorities, and strict border entry requirements, which limits the ability to commute to Afghanistan for temporary reasons.

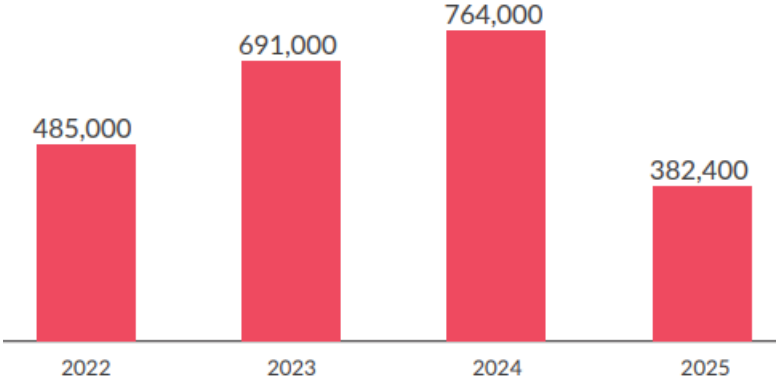
Arrests and detentions (from 2016 to 31 May 2025)



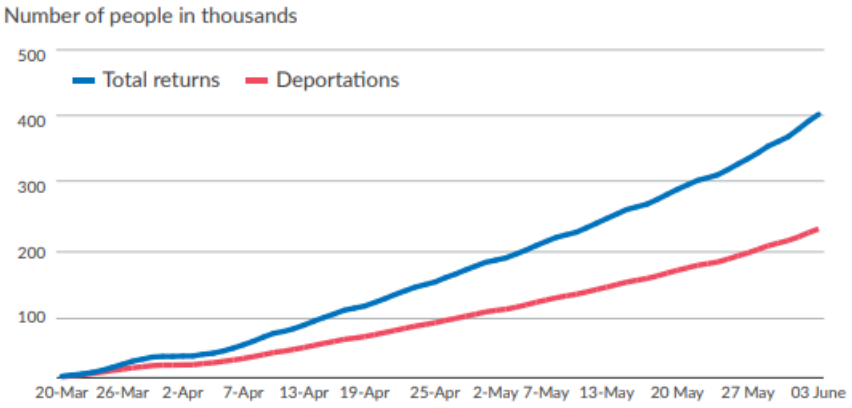
Total Returns from Pakistan since 1 April 2025



Deportations from Iran 2022 – 31 May 2025



Total returns from Iran since 20 March 2025



Border Monitoring: In the period of January to May 2025, UNHCR border monitoring teams conducted 57,883 household and individual-level protection border monitoring interviews (inflow and outflow) with Afghans at eight official crossing points with Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, with 14,891 interviews conducted in May alone. During the same period (January to May) a total of 442 key informant interviews have been conducted at unofficial crossing points, including 120 key informant interviews in May.

UNHCR's border monitoring seeks to assess people's access to the right to return and to map potential protection risks and human rights violations faced across official crossing points. UNHCR conducts inflow and outflow monitoring interviews at both individual and household levels across all eight official crossing points, including Afghanistan's borders with Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Major protection concerns reported by returnees and deportees from Iran during the border monitoring interviews are outlined below:

- Inhumane treatment, torture, and physical abuse of deportees while in detention centres and along their journey during deportations. Some deportees have reported feeling that "we are treated worse than animals."
- Deportees frequently report being forced to pay excessively high transport fees, often more than double the standard fare for buses or vehicles transporting them. Returnees and deportees expressed uncertainty about whether these inflated costs are official taxes imposed by the Iranian government or if local police are exploiting the situation through bribery and extortion.
- Reports of anti-Afghan sentiment as well as harassment, detention, and deportation are increasing significantly. There has been a rise in spontaneous returns, particularly family cases, many of whom are largely undocumented. According to interviewed deportees, locals in Iran reportedly tip off authorities about the whereabouts of Afghans, making it easier for the police to locate, arrest, and deport them.

Moreover, major protection concerns reported by returnees and deportees from Pakistan during the border monitoring interviews include:

- Interviewed returnees/deportees reported that continued raids by police created a challenging environment for Afghans which impacted their freedom of movement. The expiration of PoR cards on 30 June 2025 in Pakistan will further intensify the existing pressure, potentially prompting returns as refugees seek to avoid arrest, detention, or

forced deportation.

During the period from January to May 2025, an estimated 389,000 Afghan passport holders departed for Iran via Islam Qala, Zaranj and Abo Nasri Farahi, including 68,800 in May. An estimated 892,000 Afghans returned, out of which 632,000 were mainly undocumented Afghans and 260,000 were passport holder returnees. Out of 632,000 undocumented returnees, 364,800 were deported. In the same period, an estimated 72,2000 individuals, including 140,000 in May, crossed to Pakistan via the Torkham and Spin Boldak crossing points, and an estimated 936,000 returned, including 203,000 in May. In recent years, the majority of the inflow and outflow movements were reported via the Spin Boldak crossing.

The Angor Adda border crossing in Paktika province reopened for returnees on 3 April 2025. UNHCR's border monitoring partner observed the return of Afghans holding ACC who received transportation cash assistance from the DfA. The crossing point currently remains open for transit in both directions, supporting continued returns and commercial movements.

The Ghulam Khan crossing point in Khost province is open, facilitating the movement of cargo trucks. Nomads (Kuchi), patients, and families who were displaced from North Waziristan to Khost are also allowed to cross in both directions.

The Dand Patan crossing point in Paktya province has remained closed since November 2024 due to sectarian clashes between Sunni and Shia groups in the Kurram Agency (Parachinar area) of Pakistan.

Dak unofficial crossing point in Nimroz province remains closed since 18 January, to ensure the implementation of the decree issued by the DfA Supreme Leader to prevent illegal movement and trafficking of Afghans abroad facilitated by smugglers. According to border monitors, the DfA has fully sealed the crossing point to prevent irregular pedestrian outflow movements. However, the crossing point remained open for the movement of commercial goods. Further details available in UNHCR border monitoring report – January and May 2025.

UNHCR has continued to biometrically process and provide cash assistance, reaching a total of 4,271 families composed of 14,362 Afghans in refugee and refugee-like situations returning or facing deportation from Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan in 2025 (including 2,079 families and 6,547 individuals in April). The categories include PoR card holders and their nuclear family members, UNHCR slip holders, asylum-seeker certificate holders, Amayesh card holders (from Iran), Gorizah/refugee card holders (from Tajikistan) and other protection referrals.

Mixed-gender UNHCR teams are stationed at Spin Boldak and Torkham border crossing points, conducting protection interviews with the newly arrived Afghans from Pakistan, including women. Help desks are available to identify people with sensitive protection profiles and to conduct referrals to available services, including to the UNHCR protection team for further assessment of protection concerns and needs. Shelter, livelihood, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene were identified as the most critical needs during this period. The same procedure has been established in the borders with Iran to assess and assist deported refugees (Amayesh card holders) and persons with protection profiles.

As an initiative to streamline assistance delivery process and minimize delays for returnees, UNHCR established an encashment facility at the Islam Qala Reception Center close to the border with Iran, effective 1 May 2025, in response to the increased return from Iran. This initiative is designed to ensure timely screening, assessment, biometric registration, and immediate provision of assistance to refugee returnees and deportees directly at the border. By enabling returnees and deportees to collect their assistance on the border, this approach reduces the need for onward travel to the Herat Encashment Center, unless overnight transit accommodation is required, thereby supporting a quicker return to their intended destinations.

Prior to this, returnees and deportees were screened at Islam Qala but had to travel to the Herat Encashment Center in Herat city to receive assistance, often resulting in delays and logistical challenges. The encashment center in Herat will remain operational to provide overnight accommodation and assistance to returnees and deportees who intend to return to Herat province.

Complaints and Feedback Mechanism (CFM): In May 2025, UNHCR and partners received a total of 4,748 questions, feedback, suggestions, and complaints through various complaint and feedback channels. The gender breakdown shows an increase of females reaching out, with 40 percent of queries originating from women and girls in May, compared to 31 percent in April. This highlights the accessibility of UNHCR's CFM for different population groups.

As in the previous month, returnees remained the most frequent users of the CFM, accounting for 57 percent of the total queries. This was followed by host communities at 18% and internally displaced persons (IDPs) at 13 percent.

Email was the preferred communication channel in May 2025 (Over 64 percent of all queries), with 3,046 email queries received. This was followed by hotlines, which accounted for 908 calls, which is 19 percent of the queries and protection help helpdesks by recording 550 queries accounted for nearly 11.5 percent of the total queries lodged during the reporting month.

The queries included requests for assistance or intervention on issues such as specific needs, food, cash assistance, shelter, livelihood, food, and health.

In response to these queries, a total of 1,545 referrals were made to relevant UNHCR offices and partners for tailored follow-up. Notably, around 61 percent of the queries recorded in May have already been closed.

Child Protection: In May 2025, UNHCR and its implementing partners successfully conducted awareness-raising sessions on child protection, focusing on topics such as the importance of education, hygiene, and the risks and adverse consequences of child labor. These sessions educated parents, children, and communities about child labor's :14 and social implications while offering alternative resources. The initiative engaged a wide range of community members, with significant participation from women, girls, and persons with disabilities. A total of 7,560 individuals (3,383 males and 4,177 females) attended the awareness-raising activities in Kandahar, Herat, Bamyan, Kabul, Mazar, and Jalalabad. Additionally, 207 new cases of children facing specific child protection risks were identified and registered for case management services (151 boys and 56 girl). Furthermore, 1,043 children (271 boys, 772 girls) benefited from psychosocial support and recreational activities provided in the child-friendly spaces and after-school programs.

Continuing efforts to enhance partner capacity and ensure the provision of quality services, UNHCR organized a two-day training on child protection core principles and programmatic activities for 40 staff members (16 women and 24 men) from UNHCR's partner organizations. These partners are operating and implementing child protection programmes in the southern, western, and northern regions. The training aimed to enhance the technical skills and knowledge of newly onboarded staff, equipping them to better address child protection concerns and support individual cases with quality interventions.

Women Protection: UNHCR and its implementing partners facilitated 104 dialogues with 511 female and male community leaders to engage them as active partners in preventing and responding to violence in their communities and facilitating referrals to services. A total of 912 women and girls received support through individual and group counselling to address the acute mental health needs of women and girls.

Over 4,450 women, girls, boys, and men were reached through information-sharing activities, empowering the community with the necessary knowledge and skills to overcome the negative impact of violence and harmful practices on individuals, families, and communities. Most importantly, these sessions aim to inform women and girls about available support, encouraging them to seek help and facilitating their safe access to multi-sectoral response services.

UNHCR's Women Community Centers provide a safe space for women and girls to engage in a variety of well-being and capacity-building activities, receive information on available services and topics of concern to the community, and seek support through direct interventions by UNHCR partners and referrals. Over 513 women and girls attended UNHCR's centers in May.

A total of 42 incidents were directly disclosed to UNHCR partners. Survivors were provided with counselling; among these, 1 referral was facilitated to different specialized services through inter-agency referral pathways.

Protection Case Management: As part of UNHCR's efforts to continuously strengthen capacities of UNHCR and partner staff on UNHCR's new protection case management (PCM) tools, an orientation session was facilitated jointly with the IM Unit, targeting UNHCR PCM focal points, partner PCM case workers, and case supervisors across the country. The session focused on training the staff on KOBO PCM forms. PCM case management flowcharts and case management platforms have been developed, helping UNHCR PCM focal points and PCM case supervisors to closely monitor implementation.

During the reporting period, PCM partners conducted 437 intake assessments to determine clients' eligibility for case management. Additionally, 226 protection risk assessments were carried out, leading to the development and implementation of case action plans, with female beneficiaries constituting 47% of the PCM caseload.

Legal assistance and civil documentation: Legal assistance partners, ARAA and WADAN, continued the legal assistance activities across the country including in Encashment Centers where returnees are provided with information on the importance of civil documentation to access essential services and with referrals to legal counseling and legal aid (cash for civil documentation) in areas of return. In total, 631 refugee returnees, IDPs, and host community members benefited the legal counseling, and 310 individuals received legal awareness as of the end of May.

Community-Based Protection Monitoring: As part of UNHCR's community-based protection monitoring (CBPM), UNHCR used household surveys, key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD) to monitor protection risks and coping mechanisms of IDPs, returnees, host community members, refugees and asylum-seekers. In May 2025, 302 male-headed households and 255 female-headed households were interviewed by UNHCR's CBPM partners (557 household assessments total), representing 3,039 individuals. Assessments were conducted in 37 districts of 22 provinces to collect household-level data, indicating the broad geographic reach of UNHCR's CBPM activities. Some 77% of the interviewees were from rural areas.

The fact that around 46% of the households assessed were headed by women (in addition to 42% female key informants) underlines UNHCR's ability to reach women and girls as well as the operational commitment to ensure women's voices are meaningfully reflected in assessments despite the restrictions in place.

UNHCR also conducted 115 interviews with 67 male and 48 female key informants in 37 districts of 23 provinces. 52% of the interviews were conducted in rural areas. Additionally, a total of 175 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with women, men, girls and boys of different age groups and displacement statuses in 40 districts of 25 provinces. Female participation accounted for 38% of the FGDs.

Community Engagement: As part of UNHCR's strategic objective to enhance its accountability to affected people (AAP), UNHCR is continuing its country-wide network of community outreach volunteers (COVs), nearly 50 percent of whom are female. Placing communities at the centre of the response and empowering them to become agents of their own protection has significantly improved UNHCR's outreach to the most vulnerable population groups, establishing effective two-

way communication and ensuring access to information and services for communities in remote areas.

Throughout May, UNHCR partners have proceeded with the recruitment and training of COVs – including thematic COVs - and community outreach focal points across all regions. Through community dialogues, information desks and other outreach activities COVs have reached 11,114 community members. A total of 6512 individuals were informed about UNHCR's complaints and feedback mechanisms, 331 community elders were sensitized on protection related issues, 1,635 people attended information desks, 2,636 people were reached through outreach activities with intended information,59 community members with protection risks were identified and referred for specialized services.

In addition, UNHCR has continued preparations for its new social cohesion project funded under EU INTPA, which will enhance UNHCR's community engagement project with additional activities directly supporting and empowering women and community structures, including community- and youth-led initiatives and grants for community-based and women-led organizations. Dedicated consultations were organized with UNESCO, WHO and UNFPA to support thematic outreach on health and literacy interventions under the project.

CASH BASED INTERVENTIONS (CBI)

UNHCR delivered cash assistance to 15,570 individuals (8,252 females and 7,318 males) in May 2025, through various CBI programs, including FARE, VolRep, cash for urban refugees and CARE for refugee returnees. The assistance, which covered a wide range of services, has also supported families in reintegrating, addressing protection and other lifesaving concerns, and contributing to durable solutions. UNHCR continues to provide cash assistance to refugees and persons in refugee-like situations to assist families in meeting basic needs and contributing to sustainable reintegration processes.

SHELTER

Shelter assistance continues to be a critical and widely reported need across Afghanistan, driven by multiple compounding factors. These include the high volume of returnees, frequent and devastating natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, and the deepening economic crisis marked by rising poverty and unemployment rates. The lack of adequate housing remains a significant barrier to achieving sustainable protection outcomes for affected populations.

Access to safe, secure, and dignified shelter is not only a basic human necessity but also a vital component in promoting physical and mental well-being. It helps to reduce household stress, anxiety, and exposure to protection risks by lessening the reliance on negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour, early marriage, or unsafe migration. Furthermore, appropriate shelter solutions restore a sense of stability, privacy, and dignity, thereby enabling families to rebuild their lives with a greater sense of safety and self-reliance.

As of the end of May 2025, under the ongoing 2025 shelter interventions, a total of 458 permanent shelters are planned for construction across seven provinces—namely Mazar, Kunduz, Kandahar, Bamyan, Kabul, Jalalabad, and Paktia. These interventions are part of a broader effort to address the persistent and widespread shelter needs among returnees, internally displaced persons, and other vulnerable populations affected by conflict and natural disasters.

Progress is already underway, with 34 permanent shelters successfully completed in Jalalabad, demonstrating early momentum in implementation. In the remaining targeted provinces,

preparatory activities are actively progressing, including comprehensive market assessments to ensure cost-efficiency and sustainability, as well as beneficiary identification processes to ensure that assistance reaches the most vulnerable and in-need households.

The overarching aim of these shelter interventions is to provide durable, safe, and dignified housing solutions that not only address immediate humanitarian needs but also contribute to longer-term stability, protection, and community resilience.

Acknowledgements

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External Relations

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LINKS
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