



UNHCR organized one day workshop for public prosecutors in Karachi, Sindh

Summary of Key Events

11th FOSSAR Meeting, 12 July 2019

The 11th FOSSAR (Friends of Solution Strategies for Refugees) meeting was hosted by the US Ambassador, H.E. Paul Jones and attended by the international community, including ambassadors and heads of agencies. Major issues discussed included: 1) The Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) program: Both, the Minister of State for SAFRON, Mr. Shehryar Afridi, and the Representative of UNHCR encouraged reinvigorated financial support the RAHA program. The UNHCR Representative highlighted the beneficial impact RAHA programs have had in Pakistan and called for the next FOSSAR meeting would be dedicated specifically to the RAHA initiative, in view of its 10th anniversary this year. 2) Afghan Citizenship Cards: The Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees (CCAR) informed participants that 90-95 % of ACCs have now been distributed and that NADRA was requested to arrange mobile vans for door to door distribution of the remaining cards. 3) Flexible Visa Regime: The CCAR further informed that the flexible visa regime is still at “proposal stage” and not yet in place due to Government of Afghanistan’s concern regarding their ability to meet the potential increase in demand for machine readable passports. On the question related to the opportunity to revert to the refugee status in case of visa expiry/non-extension, the CCAR informed that visas will be extendable and extensions will likely be granted and as such there is no need for reversion of status. UNHCR continued to stress the need to include protection safeguards in any flexible visa regime. 4) On the Prime Minister’s citizenship proposal, the Minister of SAFRON informed that, while the PM firmly believed in his initial citizenship proposal, any such initiative requires the approval by the National Assembly and the Senate and can only be carried out on the basis of a consensus.

12th FOSSAR Meeting 19 September 2019

The 12th FOSSAR meeting was hosted by the Swiss Ambassador, H.E. Thomas Kolly, and was well attended by the international community, including ambassadors and heads of agencies. 1) RAHA was the lead topic of the meeting and it has been introduced by the Minister of SAFRON. The Minister pointed out that the RAHA project began in 2009 and was developed to help alleviate the burden on the communities hosting Afghan refugees in Pakistan, but also to promote peaceful co-existence and social cohesion. He stated that 4,258 projects have been implemented and explained that these public facility projects have benefitted both the refugees and the host communities thus contributed to peaceful co-existence. The Minister cautioned that giving up on RAHA would help fuel negative perceptions in the local communities related to Pakistan’s hosting of Afghan refugees. The UNHCR Representative reaffirmed the importance and successes of the RAHA program and stressed that more needs to be accomplished, particularly in view of the continued volatility in Afghanistan, the dramatically low voluntary return rates and the resultant need to envisage the long-term needs of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as the needs of the host communities which support them. 2) On Statelessness: The Minister of State for SAFRON pointed that Pakistan is hosting a significant stateless population, including those of Bengali and Bihari origin and suggested that up to two million people may be without proper status and documentation. 3) Alternative Stay in Pakistan: The CCAR informed the meeting that, in addition to the PoR Card and ACC holders, Afghans also arrive to Pakistan on a variety of different visas and noted that one million visas per year are issued to Afghans by the Government of Pakistan. He stated that the GoP plans to carry out an exercise to determine the numbers of the undocumented Afghans in Pakistan (estimated to be between 500,000 and one million individuals).

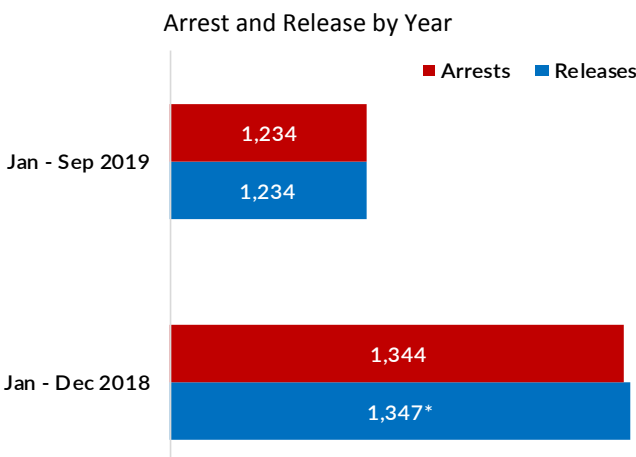
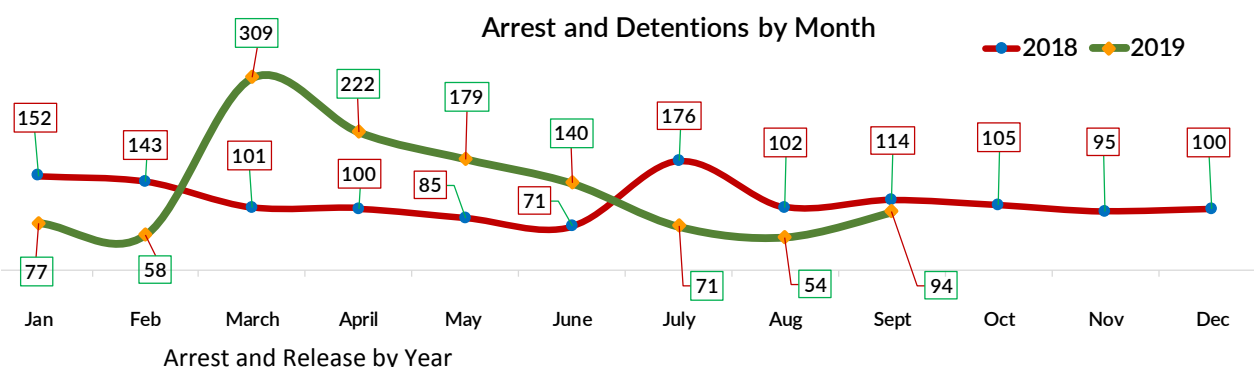
The CCAR referred to the low numbers of returning Afghan refugees and reiterated that Afghanistan was receptive to returns but experienced limited absorption capacity. The CCAR highlighted the cooperation between the two States in the context of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) forum. 4) Announcement of Additional Funding: The Swiss Ambassador closed the meeting by announcing that the Swiss Government has approved (and channels through the Swiss Development Cooperation) an amount of CHF 500,000 for UNHCR's interventions after phasing out their development funding and noted that there is the possibility that CHF 500,000 more may be approved for UNHCR next year.

Commencement of UNHCR Statelessness Project

In August, UNHCR together with a local partner, initiated a legal assistance project for stateless persons in Karachi. The project will cover the populations of Bengalis, Biharis and Rohingyas in Machar Colony, Karachi. This population is estimated to form 68% of the population of the Machar Colony, amounting to approximately 700,000 individuals. The project will focus on: 1) Legal assistance and advice to stateless persons, including interventions with the local law enforcement agencies in cases of arbitrary arrest and police harassment due to lack of identity documents; and 2) Advocacy and awareness-raising with governmental and semi-governmental organizations to address issues faced by stateless persons, including those pertaining to civil/identity documentation and access to rights and services.

1. Advice and Legal Aid Centres (ALAC)

From 1 July until 30 September, 219 PoR cardholders were detained by the security authorities, as compared to 392 during the same period in 2018. This figure represents a 79% decrease from the previous year and, in part, may be attributed to the improved security situation in the country. Sixty five percent of the refugees detained from 1 July to 30 September were released without being formally charged, 10% were charged and detained under the Foreigners Act, for being on the territory illegally, while 25% of the refugees detained were charged under Preventive Laws.



All of the refugees were released with the assistance of ALAC interventions. UNHCR continues to work proactively against any harassment of persons of concern through continued visits and interventions of the ALAC teams to the checkpoints and police stations in the refugee-hosting areas. The majority of arrests and detentions (70%) took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (KP), followed by Punjab and the Islamabad Capital Territory, Pakistan Administered Kashmir and Sindh (26%).

*Three persons were arrested in 2017 but were released in 2018

2. Evictions/ Eviction Notices

On 21 August, Commissioner of Hazara division, in a high level meeting, considered initiation of administrative action for closure of Ichrian and Berari Refugee Villages (RVs) and not to allow any further extension in the final deadline set for 10-11 June 2019. The district authorities along with the District Administrator for CAR (DA-CAR), Mansehra communicated the outcome of the meeting to the refugees of both the RVs and as a result, 20 families have relocated from Ichrian RV to Khaki and Panian RV.

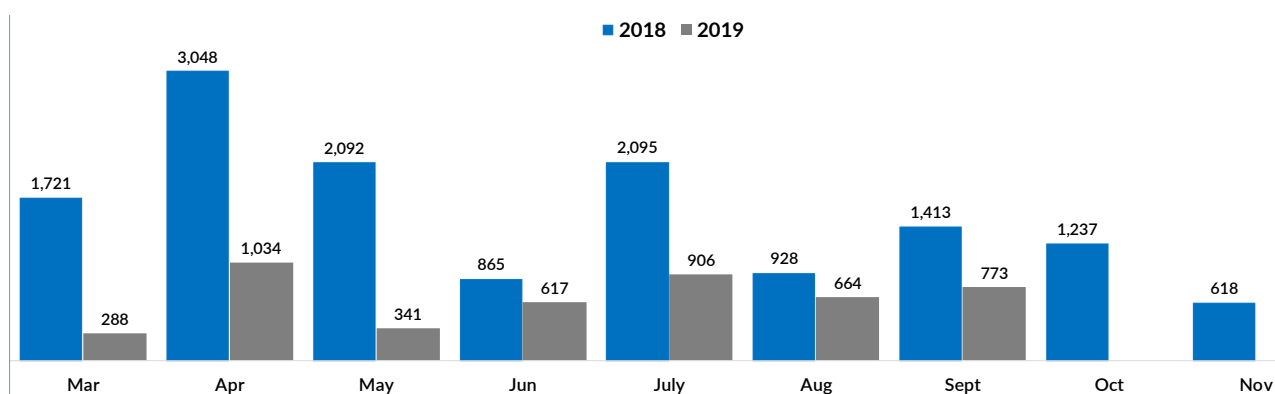
In a series of subsequent meetings, UNHCR has communicated to the refugees all available options including, relocation to Khaki RV, Panian RV, urban areas or voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan making it clear that it will not be advocating with the authorities for any further extension in the deadline which has already passed. Some of the refugees have challenged the relocation in the local court which has been fixed for hearing on the 9 October. Additionally, 108 families from Ichrian RV expressed willingness to relocate to Panian RV but are awaiting a decision on moving the school to Panian RV. UNHCR field team is in the process of assessing infrastructure and additional capacity for alternative arrangements for the relocating students. No further movement from either of the RVs was recorded in the month of September.

In another development, in late September, the District authorities and military officials in Kohat communicated to the DA-CAR, Kohat the relocation of 40-50 refugee houses in Oblan RV, which are close to the firing range of the Pakistan Army. The DA has deputed staff to collect information on households, assess their needs and find an alternative place for relocation within the RV. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation closely.

3. Voluntary Repatriation (VOLREP)

From 1 March, to 30 September 1,206 families/4,623 individuals were facilitated through the two voluntary repatriation centers (VRCs) in Azakhel, KP and Baleli, Balochistan. This figure represents a 62% decrease in voluntary returns from the same period in 2018, when 12,162 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned. The lower return rate is the result of the ongoing volatile security situation in Afghanistan and uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan’s political environment. The economic situation is also a factor in any decision to return home. Afghan refugees have also stated that the increasingly strict border entry requirements were another factor influencing the decision not to return. The main Afghan provinces of return were Kabul (18%), Nangarhar (17%) and Saripul (15%).

VOLREP Monthly Trends Comparison 2018 & 2019



4. UNHCR’s Interventions and Capacity Building Activities

Advice and Legal Assistance Centre (ALAC) teams continued to visit police stations and courts across the country in order to represent refugees in legal cases and update law enforcement agencies (LEAs) on the Government of Pakistan’s extension of PoR card validity and other refugee-related matters. From 1 July to 30 September 2019, UNHCR and ALAC staff organized 183 legal outreach and *shura* meetings, reaching out to 3,557 participants (43% of whom were women). Fifty seven percent of these sessions were held in RVs and the rest were held in urban areas, and allowed refugees to voice and share various issues affecting their communities.

Throughout July and September, UNHCR and ALAC teams also organized eleven capacity building sessions with LEAs on refugee protection and refugee status in Pakistan. In total, 247 LEA personnel, 53 public prosecutors, 35 lawyers and 32 persons from the civil society participated in different capacity building sessions.