Assisted Spontaneous Return

Context in Yemen

Yemen has generously hosted refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia for decades and, in 2024, Yemen is home to over 44,000 of them.

At the same time, Yemen is among the worst humanitarian crises globally. With continuous conflict in the country, over 80 per cent of Yemenis live below the poverty line. In addition to instability, there is rampant inflation, high cost of living, a lack of livelihood opportunities, and limited basic services.

Many struggle to meet their basic needs and face serious protection risks and turn to harmful coping mechanisms, including skipping meals, school dropout, child labour, taking out loans, moving to poorer quality shelter, and early marriage.

Left: UNHCR partner staff support Somali refugees to board the boat to Somalia at Aden seaport © UNHCR

What is Assisted Spontaneous Return (ASR)?

ASR is a process to help Somali refugees and asylum seekers make informed decisions about possible return to Somalia and then to ensure safe and dignified travel and return for those who wish to make the journey.

As of the end of 2023, and since the start of ASR in September 2017, UNHCR in Yemen had assisted 7,440 refugees from Somalia to return safely, 40 per cent of whom were children.

Why is ASR important?

There is a clear demand in Yemen among refugees from Somalia to return home.

Without support, and with limited resources, the journey to Somalia can be incredibly dangerous and expose those making the journey to serious protection risks and even endanger their lives. This is especially true for those with vulnerabilities and specific needs. Despite this, individuals and families, including children, choose to make these dangerous journeys.

ASR provides a safe and dignified alternative as well as access to counselling and information for those considering return to Somalia.

For example, the ASR programme has supported individuals with chronic medical conditions as well as those who'd spent months homeless in Yemen to return home safely.

Reasons for Return

In Yemen, there is a clear demand for ASR which exceeds available resources.

Based on data collected from counselling sessions with refugees from Somalia in Yemen who wish to return to Somalia:

- 58.7 per cent indicate a lack of income in Yemen as the primary reason for returning;
- 38.4 per cent indicate a wish to reunite with family as the primary reason for returning;
- Other reasons included seeking medical care, better education opportunities, improved security, no other durable solutions available, and the cost of living in Yemen.

In 2023, UNHCR provided 1,203 ASR counselling sessions for 1,692 refugees.

The main ASR steps:

1) Outreach through information campaigns.

2) Counselling
Individuals and families are counselled on the ASR process, information about area of return, and the current situation in Somalia to ensure informed decision making.

3) Assessment
Individuals and families register their interest and are assessed to identify protection concerns and missing or expired documentation such as missing birth or marriage certificates for targeted support.

4) Registration and verification
Those who are not registered as refugees with the authorities are registered. Already registered cases will have their records verified and updated if needed.

5) Medical clearance
Medical check-ups are conducted to determine fitness to travel, and referrals are made for medical treatment as needed.

6) Issuance of travel documents
The Somali Embassy in Aden checks and confirms the nationality of those in the ASR programme and issues travel documents.

7) Exit permits
Exit permits are issued by the Immigration, Passport, and Nationality Authority in Yemen.

8) Departure
On the day of departure, individuals and families board a boat which departs from Aden to Berbera seaport. The journey takes approximately 12 hours.

9) Arrival to Somalia and onward movement
Upon arrival in Somalia, support is provided, including cash assistance, transportation, information provision, and a SIM card, facilitating safe travel to areas of origin.

10) Arrival home
Once at the destination, support is provided for reintegration and access to rights, such as education and employment.

Above: documentation being checked prior to departure on a boat in Aden

Ali's story

Ali was in Yemen for 16 years.

He went through the ASR process and returned to Somalia late in 2023.

He moved back to his home village to farm.

Right: Ali

In 2024, UNHCR requires **3.7 M USD*** to ensure refugees from Somalia who wish to return home can do so **in conditions of safety and dignity**.

* The above figure is based on the use of passenger ferry; should flights be used, the figure is subject to change

Coordination: Cross-border movements with vulnerable individuals and families are complex and require coordination with multiple partners with a range of roles, as outlined above.

UNHCR works with Amal Bank, the Embassy of Somalia in Aden, the Field Medical Foundation, Human Access, the International Organization for Migration, the Immigration, Passport, and Nationality (IPNA-South) authority of the Ministry of Interior in Yemen, the Somaliland authorities, the National High Commission for Refugees and IDPs (NCRI) in Somalia.

2023 Achievements:

	Individuals assisted
Counselled on return	1,692
Assisted to return	1,422

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