UNHCR REGIONAL BUREAU FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

AFGHANISTAN SITUATION UPDATE

March 2026

KEY FIGURES

3.1 million
Afghan refugees and others in need of international protection in the sub-region
as of end-December 2025

330,000
Afghan returns in 2026 from Iran & Pakistan, out of which 45% were deported
as of 31 March 2026

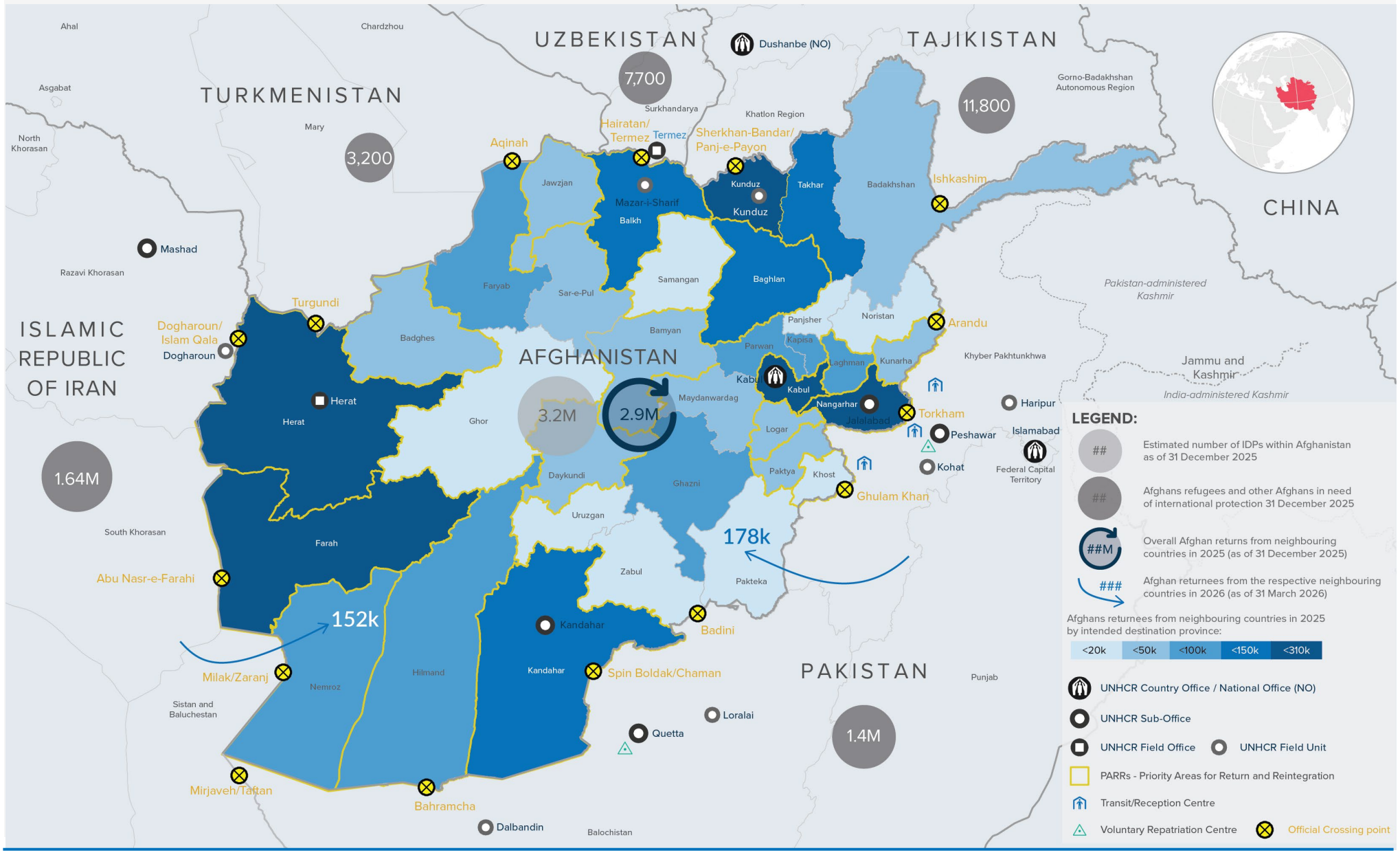
3.2 million
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan as of 2025, and **118.5k** new IDPs in 2026 in Afghanistan & Pakistan

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

Afghanistan remained shaped by large-scale returns from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, as well as conflict-related internal displacement linked to Afghanistan–Pakistan hostilities along eastern and south-eastern border areas. Insecurity restricted access to affected communities and disrupted operations, including the closure of Torkham border crossing for most of March and the temporary suspension of UN road missions along the Jalalabad–Asadabad corridor and in border districts. Despite these challenges, UNHCR and partners maintained immediate effective response capacity, providing protection and humanitarian assistance to returnees where possible while conducting border monitoring across 10 official and 65 unofficial crossing points. Response capacity was supported by the re-opening of Torkham at the end of the month, surge capacity at reception centres, and continued coordination with the de facto authorities and partners.

Security incidents across several provinces in **Iran** further compounded an already fragile humanitarian situation. The escalation of hostilities from 28 February led to increased protection needs with humanitarian capacities and host communities coming under growing pressure. Government estimates indicated that up to 3.2 million people temporarily left their homes in search of safety, primarily from Tehran and other major urban centres to northern and rural areas. UNHCR maintained operations with adjustments to staff presence, movements and access while offices in Tehran, Esfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz and Kerman operated at reduced capacity. Essential services continued and reception centres and helplines remained operational. In response to the evolving situation, a three-month Inter-Agency Flash Refugee Response Plan was launched in March with nine partners seeking $80 million, including $36.23 million for UNHCR.

Pakistan continued to face a complex protection environment, particularly along the Afghanistan border following a series of several cross-border incidents affecting Afghan populations. Since September 2023, the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP) has resulted in the return of over 2 million Afghan Citizenship Card (ACC) holders, Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders and undocumented individuals, including more than 1 million in 2025. In March, the protection environment deteriorated further due to increased police raids, arrests and detentions. In Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, insecurity and enforcement measures restricted mobility, while border closures at Torkham led to substantial economic losses. Despite these challenges, UNHCR continued operations across all provinces, including Punjab, Sindh and Islamabad, in close coordination with authorities and partners, focusing on safeguarding at-risk Afghans.



For the latest figures and updates on UNHCR's broader response in sub-region, visit the Afghanistan Situation page on UNHCR's Operational Data Portal. For any queries, please contact: RBAPEXT@unhcr.org

Central Asia – comprising Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – continued to be characterized by a complex protection environment, hosting mostly Afghan refugees in countries bordering Afghanistan as well as stateless populations, including former Soviet Union citizens and their descendants. While national asylum systems remained in place across most countries, differences in capacity and legal frameworks affected access to protection and solutions for many. In Uzbekistan, UNHCR advocated for the development of a national asylum system, including implementation of Universal Periodic Review recommendations and accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Across the sub-region, operations focused on strengthening protection frameworks and advancing solutions in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics.

KEY PROTECTION AND SOLUTIONS ISSUES

Returnees and conflict-affected communities in **Afghanistan** faced heightened protection risks linked to returns, displacement, documentation gaps, family separation, limited access to services and insecurity in areas of return. Women and children accounted for a large share of returnees. Access to women and girls remained constrained by the ban on Afghan female UN staff and the limited presence of female partner staff at key locations. Afghan deportees from Iran and Pakistan reported arrests, detention, extortion, confiscation of belongings and limited ability to recover assets before return. These accounts highlight challenges related to due process and ensuring dignified, voluntary returns. In response, UNHCR and partners strengthened protection monitoring, referrals, case management, legal support and cash-based assistance to mitigate these risks.

In **Iran**, key protection concerns included temporary internal displacement, limited access to services for affected populations, and heightened vulnerabilities among refugees, primarily Afghans. Insecurity compounded the impact of displacement from urban centres, damage to infrastructure and disruptions to service, constraining access to assistance and basic services. Risks associated with returns persisted amid broader population movements, with some departing for Afghanistan despite ongoing fragility there. UNHCR prioritized protection and assistance in response to these evolving risks, while strengthening outreach and referrals for vulnerable groups, including women and children.

In **Pakistan**, mass arrests, detention, and deportation risks under the IFRP increased protection risks across the country (particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan), affecting Afghans regardless of documentation status. UNHCR's Helpline operated five days a week and responded to high volumes of calls, including reports of arrests, deportations, family separations, housing discrimination, as well as requests for emergency cash assistance. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, hundreds were detained and families left stranded due to border closures, while communication barriers (including SIM card blockages) limited outreach efforts and heightened risks for women and children. In Balochistan, fear of detention and deportation persisted. Countrywide, UNHCR and partners provided legal aid, counselling and case management, securing releases, facilitating referrals, and strengthening access to protection services.

In **Central Asia**, refugees and stateless populations include many who have lived in the region for years and often have strong local ties. In March, they continued to face limited access to rights and services, including legal employment, social protection, and pathways to naturalization. Protection frameworks remained influenced by national security considerations, with limited access to territory in some contexts. In Kazakhstan, initial barriers to asylum were addressed through UNHCR advocacy, enabling Afghans to access procedures in line with national legislation and international standards. In Tajikistan, the return of Afghan nationals under adverse circumstances remained a serious protection concern despite ongoing advocacy efforts.

UNHCR RESPONSE

In **Afghanistan**, UNHCR maintained protection-sensitive assistance despite insecurity and the closure of the Torkham border crossing, which disrupted border operations and reduced movements from Pakistan. In March, UNHCR provided cash-based assistance to around 1,000 households (3,300 people). Support covered livelihood assistance and shelter repairs for urban refugees and asylum-seekers as well as cash-based assistance for returnees under the Voluntary Repatriation and Forcibly Returned Afghans Enrollment programmes. This support addressed immediate needs and helped mitigate protection risks for households facing limited resources, displacement, documentation challenges and constrained access to services. UNHCR also supported the conflict-displacement response through inter-agency assessments and partner coordination in eastern and south-eastern provinces, identifying priority needs and risks as well as households eligible for assistance. Border protection monitoring was linked with area-based reintegration and self-reliance support. Monitoring at points of return helped identify risks, including deportation, detention, family separation, documentation gaps and extortion. In parallel, livelihoods programming promoted self-reliance for returnees, IDPs and host communities through skills development, women's economic inclusion, market linkages and community-level assets.

UNHCR's Helpline in **Iran** remained a critical access point for affected populations, supporting over 4,170 Afghans amid heightened information needs driven by displacement and service disruptions. During this period, the helpline received 26,066 calls, providing guidance on available services, documentation and assistance, while enabling timely identification and referral of urgent protection cases. This remote modality also helped ensure the continuity of protection support despite access constraints and reduced mobility during periods of heightened insecurity.

In **Pakistan**, UNHCR scaled up targeted protection interventions in response to rising vulnerabilities. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, support included legal assistance, counselling, referrals and case management, leading to detainee releases. Coordination strengthened gender-based violence and child protection systems despite operational constraints. Community-based protection expanded via outreach and improved referral systems. Progress included transitioning services to national partners to support sustainable responses, alongside livelihoods support through vocational training and police capacity building to reduce risks of wrongful detention. Service mapping identified gaps and overlaps, while the rollout of digital tools, including the Digital Gateway for resettlement processes, helped make assistance more targeted and accessible.

Across **Central Asia**, UNHCR focused on strengthening national asylum systems, advancing local integration and resolving statelessness, while supporting preparedness for potential emergencies. Advocacy continued in March for the inclusion of asylum and statelessness issues in national plans and UN frameworks, including through engagement with governments and UN partners in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks at different stages across the region. In Kazakhstan, UNHCR and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population signed a joint workplan to strengthen protection for forcibly displaced and stateless people and improve access to asylum procedures and rights, reinforcing Government ownership and alignment with national priorities.

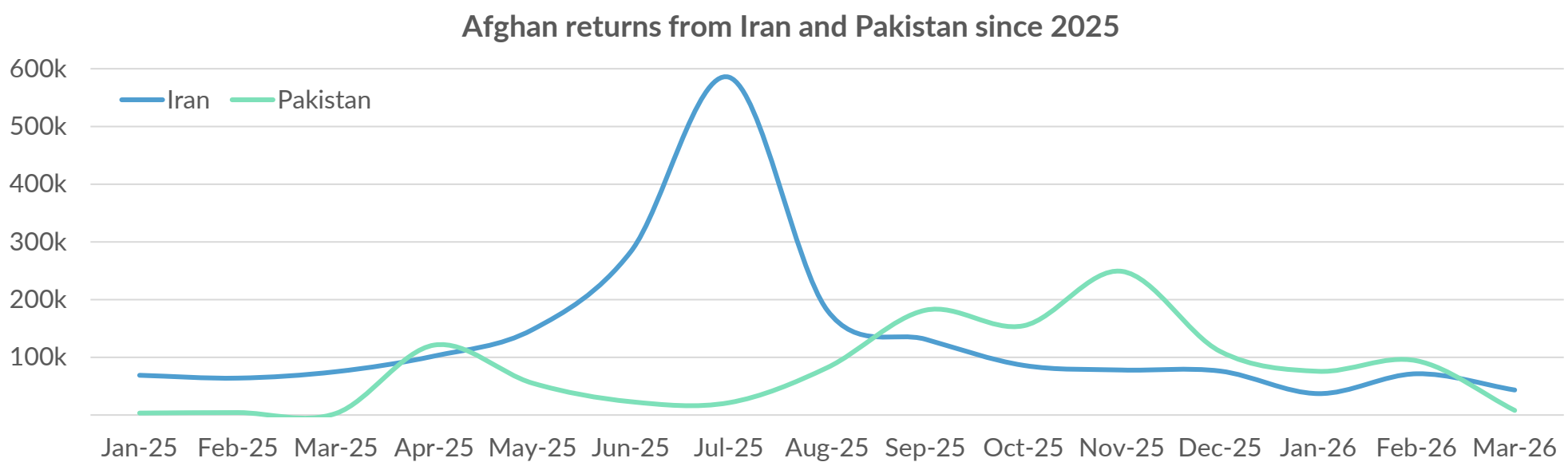
AFGHAN RETURNS

Afghan returns continued largely driven by fear of arrest, enforcement measures, and deteriorating protection conditions. By end-March, around 330,000 Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan, including 45% deportations.

Returns from **Iran** remained significant with 151,800 people returning as of end-March, including over 123,600 deportations, representing 79% of total returns. Since the escalation of hostilities on 28 February, deportations decreased by approximately 40% compared to February levels. This follows a broader trend in 2025, when more than 1.9 million Afghans returned or were deported from Iran, many not by choice. Despite the recent decline, continued movements placed considerable pressure on basic services, housing, livelihoods and host communities in Afghanistan.

Returns from **Pakistan** continued at reduced levels with 177,700 people returning during the same period. Movements were largely limited to deportations and returns due to significant border restrictions, including the partial closure of Chaman to traders and pedestrians since October 2025 and the suspension of voluntary repatriation at Torkham, which left hundreds of families stranded. Returns declined sharply compared to February mainly due to Ramadan, Eid, border restrictions in response to security incidents, alongside the continued suspension of key Voluntary Repatriation Centres.

Returns from **Tajikistan** were smaller in number with 179 Afghan nationals returning in adverse circumstances since January 2026, including 153 refugees and asylum-seekers. Returns reportedly took place without due process, legal assistance, or access to appeal. In response, UNHCR continued cross-border verification, assistance and advocacy for non-refoulement and fair asylum procedures.



HIGHLIGHTS FROM OPERATIONS

UNHCR showcased its support to women-led businesses and self-reliance initiatives for returnees, IDPs and host communities in **Afghanistan** through the Integrated Services and Facilities Centre in Kabul. During visits by the World Bank and UNODC, women shopkeepers and entrepreneurs highlighted how access to facilities, skills training, cash assistance, equipment and market linkages supported the establishment and growth of small businesses despite the difficult economic environment. Several expressed interest in expanding their businesses and creating employment opportunities for other women. The visit also bolstered engagement with development actors on women's economic inclusion and market-based reintegration support. The initiative illustrates how targeted reintegration support can help rebuild livelihoods and bolster local markets and community resilience.

Women entrepreneurs at the INSAF Centre in Kabul showcase how skills training, cash assistance and market linkages are supporting women-led businesses, strengthening livelihoods and community resilience in Afghanistan. © UNHCR/ Barzin

For the latest figures and updates on UNHCR's broader response in sub-region, visit the Afghanistan Situation page on UNHCR's Operational Data Portal. For any queries, please contact: RBAPEXT@unhcr.org

COORDINATION, COLLABORATION AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING

In **Afghanistan**, UNHCR maintains strong coordination with United Nations sister agencies, clusters, partners, and other stakeholders to support a protection-sensitive response to returns, conflict-induced displacement, and other humanitarian needs. Border coordination mechanisms reviewed cross-border movements, reception capacity and operational gaps at key crossings, including Zaranj, Spin Boldak and Bahrām Chāh. Coordination with IOM and partners supported adjustments to reception procedures at Zero Point and Takhteh Pol to reduce delays for returnees. UNHCR also contributed to inter-agency assessments and Protection Cluster analysis in eastern and south-eastern provinces, while maintaining preparedness through reception arrangements, partner surge capacity and contingency planning at key border points.

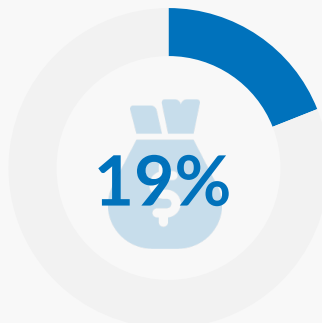
In **Iran**, UNHCR maintains close engagement with government counterparts, UN agencies, and partners. Close coordination with UNHCR offices in Afghanistan supports cross-border information sharing, return movement monitoring, and aligned assistance on both sides of the border. Inter-agency mechanisms remain active, facilitating joint planning and operational coherence in a fluid and evolving context.

In **Pakistan**, UNHCR strengthens coordination with authorities, UN agencies, and partners to sustain operations amid rising security and policy pressures and advance a protection-centred, evidence-based response. Coordination focuses on maintaining protection and access to services through border monitoring, referral systems and advocacy for protection-sensitive approaches. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Refugee Coordination Model has been activated to align contingency planning and preparedness for potential regional displacement. In Balochistan, coordination focused on protection advocacy, border monitoring and referral systems, including humanitarian exemptions from deportation. In Karachi, engagement through UN coordination platforms and gender-based violence working groups continues to support service mapping, improve referral pathways and bolster access for survivors. Coordination with IOM has also been reinforced through joint planning, data-sharing and referral systems, while a joint programming review is underway to reduce duplication and improve resource use.

Across **Central Asia**, UNHCR maintains close cooperation with key government counterparts across relevant ministries, judicial authorities, border services, parliamentary and oversight institutions, and inter-agency committees. These partnerships underpin UNHCR's advocacy-based approach to advancing protection and solutions for refugees and stateless people. UNHCR also works closely with UN agencies, development partners, academia, and NGO partners to implement protection activities and strengthen legal and institutional frameworks. In Turkmenistan, coordination with the UN Resident Coordinator and UN agencies continues, including joint contingency planning and preparedness efforts in relation to developments in the Middle East and Iran.

FUNDING SITUATION

In 2026, UNHCR requires USD 454.2 million to support the response to the Afghanistan situation; to date, only 19% has been received.



UNHCR is grateful to the following donors who have stepped forward with funding, enabling life-saving assistance and protection to reach those most in need:

Austria | Australia | Belgium | Canada | Denmark | European Union | Germany | Ireland | Japan | the Netherlands (Kingdom of) | Norway | Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan | Sweden | Switzerland |

With thanks to the following private donors from:

España con ACNUR | UNO-Flüchtlingshilfe