



UNHCR's staff meeting with the Afghan refugees affected by recent rain in Malgagai Refugee Village in Balochistan © UNHCR Pakistan

## Summary of Key Events

On 6 February 2019, NADRA and CAR resumed the distribution of the Afghan Citizenship Cards (ACC) at the PoR Card Modification (PCM) Centres in Peshawar and Quetta. As of 26 March, 88,964 ACCs (53,964 in Peshawar and 35,000 in Quetta) have been distributed since the distribution resumed, bringing the total number of ACCs distributed since February 2018 to 415,996. CAR and NADRA expect completion of the exercise within 60 days and some 160,000 ACC holders are expected to benefit. UNHCR is monitoring the distribution exercise to ensure that PCM core activities for PoR Cardholders are not affected during the ACC distribution.

Tensions between Pakistan and India escalated to unprecedented levels after a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack in Pulwama town of Indian Administered Kashmir killed 40 Indian Central Reserve Police Force personnel. Both States declared a high security alert following Indian Air Force (IAF) strikes in Pakistan. On 27 February, Pakistan responded against the Indian incursion by shooting down two IAF jets. The events raised tensions and led to a closure of Pakistan airspace and a partial shutdown of Indian airspace. The closing of airspace had a direct impact on UN operations in Pakistan, with the cancellation of all travel and missions to and from Pakistan on the 27 and 28 February. Due to the heightened security situation, UNHCR increased field protection monitoring in anticipation of any movement restrictions and possible increased levels of arrest and detentions of refugees.

Due to the heightened security situation, some district authorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province imposed restrictions on the movement of Afghan refugees outside RVs. While no arrests were reported from other districts, a mass arrest did occur in the district of Kohat, where police detained 192 PoR cardholders, all of whom were subsequently released without being formally charged due to the intervention of UNHCR and ALAC teams. The travel restrictions lasted four days and were finally lifted on the instructions of Minister of State for Interior, Mr. Shehryar Afridi.

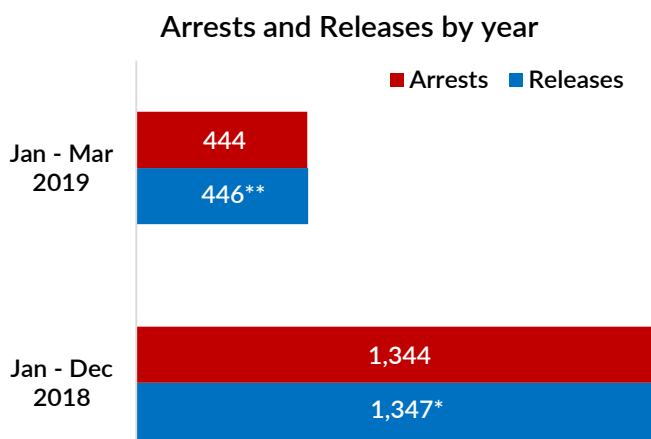
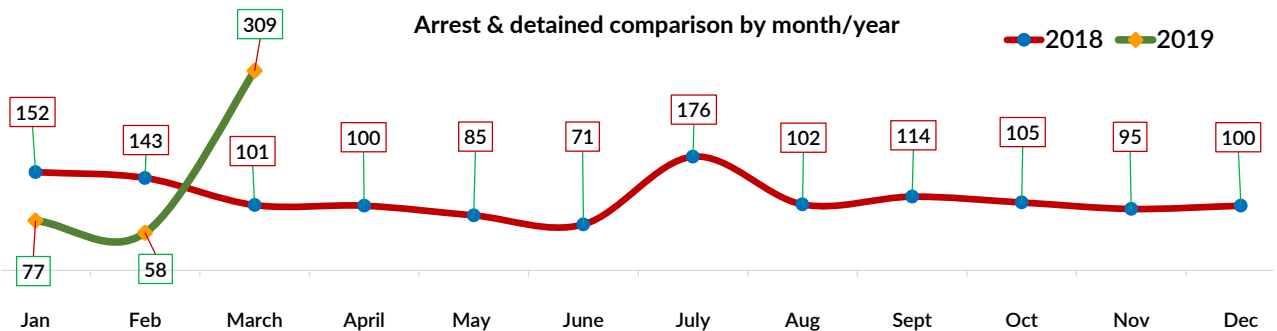
On 25 February, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that registered Afghan refugees would be allowed to open bank accounts in Pakistan, an issue that UNHCR had been advocating for several years. The business community in Pakistan welcomed the announcement as a positive measure. On 28 February, the State Bank of Pakistan issued an official circular advising banks to accept Proof of Registration Cards (PoR Cards) as a valid document for opening bank accounts under its relevant rules and regulations. NADRA is in the process of updating its verification system to enable banks to verify refugees biometrically who apply to open bank accounts. UNHCR Pakistan welcomes the decision enabling greater refugee resilience and self-reliance and allowing them to contribute better to the economy of Pakistan. UNHCR will reach out to local banks and other relevant stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of the Prime Minister's decision.

In early March, heavy rains and snow caused severe flooding in parts of Balochistan, including Quetta, which affected 637 refugee families (1,274 individuals). UNHCR field teams conducted rapid damage assessments in the affected areas of Balochistan, including Pishin, Qilla Saifullah, and Loralai. UNHCR teams distributed 285 Family Tents and 547 Plastic Tarpaulins to the affected families and to the most vulnerable members of the Pakistani hosting communities that were also severely impacted.

On 25-26 February, UNHCR Pakistan hosted the South West Asia Sub-Regional meeting attended by UNHCR colleagues from Iran and Afghanistan. The meeting was chaired by the Director of the Regional Bureau of Asia and the Pacific. The meeting discussed global and regional priorities and their impact on country operations and reaffirmed the continued importance of the Solution Strategies for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) as a regional platform aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). Participants at the meeting agreed on some key elements to be prioritized for the future, including a consolidation of the RAHA Program in Pakistan, the continued need for investments in education and health sectors in Iran, and an increased analyses of and focus on fifteen areas of high return in Afghanistan.

## 1. Advice and Legal Aid Centres (ALAC)

From January until 26 March, 444 PoR cardholders were detained by the security authorities, as compared to 396 during the same period in 2018. This 12% increase from the previous year can, in part, be attributed to the arrest of 192 individuals in Kohat during the above mentioned tense period between Pakistan and India. Of the refugees detained from January to March: 59% were released without being formally charged; 3% were charged and detained under the Foreigners Act for being on the territory illegally;



38% were charged and detained under preventive laws. All but one were released within a day after arrest by court orders obtained with the assistance of ALAC interventions. UNHCR continues to work proactively against the harassment of persons of concern through continued visits of ALAC teams to the checkpoints and police stations in the refugee-hosting areas. The majority of arrests and detentions took place in KP province (72 %), followed by Punjab and Islamabad Capital Territory including Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Sindh (38%).

\*Three persons were arrested in 2017 but were released in 2018. \*\* Two persons were arrested in 2018 but were released in 2019

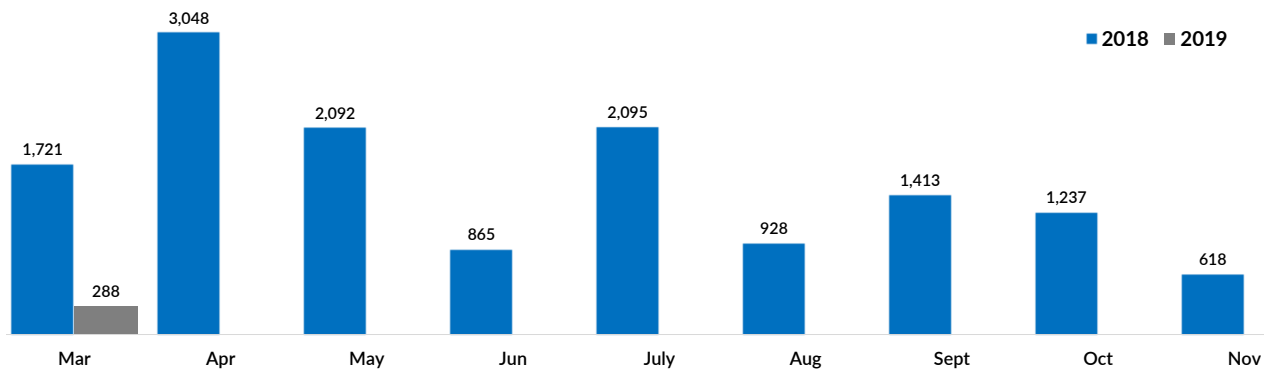
## 2. Evictions/ Eviction Notices

From the beginning of January to March, the police department served 16 refugee families in Mera Kachori, Peshawar, with eviction notices, reportedly to enable the KP government's plan to construct a building for the Provincial Prosecution Academy. The land of the RV belongs to the KP police department. A UNHCR team, the District Administrator (DA), and CAR KP visited the site and found that, in addition to the 16 refugee houses, some 80 houses belonging to Pakistani families will also be affected by the proposed construction. The DA informed the affected refugee families that the issue will be taken up with KP Home Department and assured them that alternate housing would be found for them if relocation became inevitable, possibly within the same RV or the nearby Shamshatoo RV. UNHCR continued to follow up on the matter in close coordination with the DA for Mera Kachori. However, on 8 March, the Assistant Commissioner, Peshawar, led a demolition team which cleared approximately 40 houses without giving prior notice. The demolition included the 16 refugee houses which affected 21 PoR cardholders and 7 ACC holders. A UNHCR field team conducted an immediate assessment and found that all the affected families had managed to find alternative housing, either with their relatives, friends or in rented accommodation. UNHCR delivered 29 Core Relief Items (CRI) kits and 21 tents, to the affected families. UNHCR will also pursue the issue with CAR in order to find a lasting solution for the families and to ensure that measures are put in place to prevent the recurrence of such events.

## 3. Voluntary Repatriation (VOLREP)

On 1 March, 2019, UNHCR resumed the facilitated Voluntary Repatriation Operation for Afghans. Prior to the resumption, UNHCR ran a five day mass information campaign (20-24 February), including the issuance of press releases to inform refugees. From 1<sup>st</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> March, 83 families / 288 individuals were facilitated through the voluntary repatriation centers (VRC) in Azakhel, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baleli, Balochistan. This represents an 83% decrease in voluntary returns from the same period in 2018, when 1721 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned. The lower return rate is likely due to the uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan's political environment, ongoing peace talks with the Taliban, and the potential withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. The main Afghan provinces of return were Nangarhar (21%), Kunduz (13%) and Jawzjan (12%).

## 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 across the country, representing refugees in legal cases, updating law enforcement agencies (LEAs) on the GoP's extension of PoR cards' validity and other refugee-related matters. From January until March, UNHCR and ALAC staff organized 179 (as of 26 March) legal outreach and *shura* meetings, reaching out to 3635 participants (42% of whom were women). Of the total number of legal sessions, 52% were held in refugee villages and the rest were held in urban areas, allowing refugees to share various issues affecting their communities.

During the period January to March, UNHCR and ALAC teams organized six capacity building sessions with LEAs on refugee protection and refugee status in Pakistan (in total 98 LEA personnel, 17 judicial officers, 18 public prosecutors and 20 persons from the civil society participated in capacity building sessions).