Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries

Concept Note

Following recent confirmation by the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, this note explores how a support platform, in the framework of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), can mobilize additional political, financial and technical support for the implementation of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (SSAR).

The Afghan Refugee Situation: 40 Years On

The Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran have hosted millions of Afghan refugees since war first broke out in Afghanistan in 1979. Subsequently, the three States have cooperated in solidarity to ensure the protection of refugees and to achieve lasting solutions for large numbers of them. Since 2002, over 5.2 million Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan from the two neighbouring countries. Even so, today these two countries continue to host more than 950,000 and 1.4 million registered refugees, respectively, while voluntary repatriation has gradually decreased. Since 2016, some 2,000 refugees have voluntarily repatriated each year from the Islamic Republic of Iran; voluntary repatriation from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has decreased from some 59,000 in 2017 to 6,000 in 2019.

As three generations of Afghans enter the fifth decade of their displacement, the international community must stand with the refugees and the countries and communities that have so generously hosted them for so long. United Nations Member States' affirmation of the need for international burden- and responsibility-sharing through the GCR provides an important means to redouble efforts toward solutions for returnees inside Afghanistan and equitable responsibility-sharing with the principal host countries. This is imperative at a time when Afghanistan is halfway through its Transformation Decade and the host countries endure their own challenges in a complex geopolitical and economic context.

Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees

Recognized as a model for the comprehensive regional response strategies contained within the GCR, the SSAR was launched in 2012 by the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, together with UNHCR, and has been maintained and updated since then. With country-specific chapters united in a regional approach, the strategy promotes burden and responsibility-sharing at regional and global levels, with the primary objectives of facilitating voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration, while at the same time providing assistance to host countries. Indeed, the SSAR pioneered what have become key elements of the GCR.

Under the auspices of the SSAR, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan have upheld the principle of international protection and demonstrated exceptional hospitality and generosity towards Afghan refugees. By linking humanitarian and development initiatives, the SSAR has enhanced access to education, healthcare, livelihoods, and documentation for refugees and host communities alike. Moreover, some 663,000 registered refugees have voluntarily repatriated since the SSAR was launched. Yet more can and must be done to enable refugees to return and to sustainably reintegrate in Afghanistan.

Global Compact on Refugees and the SSAR Support Platform

The Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan were among Member States that affirmed the GCR in the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018. Rooted in the fundamental principles of humanity and international solidarity, the GCR seeks to operationalize international burden- and responsibility-sharing to better protect and assist refugees while also supporting host countries and communities.

Among possible burden and responsibility-sharing arrangements, the GCR contemplates that host countries and countries of origin may seek the activation of a "support platform" to galvanize support for a large-scale and protracted refugee situations. This support would come from the international community, including States, development actors, civil society and the private sector. The support platform for the Afghan refugee

situation will be anchored in the strategy and priorities of the SSAR, serving to reinforce it. Thus the SSAR remains the central framework for achieving responsibility-sharing and solutions in the context of Afghan refugees

Objectives of the SSAR Support Platform

With guidance from the host countries and the country of origin, and assisted by UNHCR with the partnership of a broad range of committed States, the SSAR Support Platform will seek:

- **Enhanced international solidarity and burden-sharing** for the Afghan refugee situation, resulting in stronger political and financial commitments to achieve solutions.
- **Additional investments and expanded partnerships for coherent humanitarian and development responses** that increase absorption capacity for voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan, while easing the burden on host communities in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan.
- **Sustained visibility for the Afghan situation** by linking the SSAR to the GCR and the Global Refugee Forum, enabling the sharing of regional good practices, prioritization of gaps and meeting the need to work towards enhanced international burden- and responsibility-sharing.

Operational priorities for engagement through the Support Platform are fully aligned with the three pillars of the SSAR and include:

- *Enhancing capacity for voluntary return and sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan by leveraging humanitarian and development partnerships in the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs).* The PARRs link short- and medium-term community-based protection projects to longer-term development programmes and also encourage private sector investment in these areas. They are aligned with the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework and relevant National Priority Programmes, notably the Citizens' Charter, as well as the Displacement and Return Executive Committee's Policy Framework and Action Plan on Returnees and IDPs.

- *Creating conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation*, including by i) regularly sharing updated information on the development of the PARRs with refugees in the host countries to ensure well-informed decisions on return, ii) supporting the Government of Afghanistan in land distribution to returnees, iii) investing in the human capital, resilience and portable skills of refugees in host countries to enhance the potential for return and reintegration, and iv) tailoring the provision of assistance to enable initial anchoring upon return.

- *Channeling additional investment into the national public service delivery systems in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan* (education, healthcare, social protection, vocational skills development) to support inclusive policies of the host governments that benefit both host communities and refugees pending their return to Afghanistan.

Composition and Structure of an SSAR Support Platform

Under the GCR, support platforms are to be led by States committed to providing new and additional support and mobilizing others to do so, including development actors, private sector, civil society and international financial institutions, as appropriate. The SSAR Support Platform will seek to include those partners who demonstrate solidarity with the Afghan situation and intend to make concrete commitments in support of the SSAR, with emphasis on additional contributions.

The Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan will provide regular input to identify strategic priorities and needs, with UNHCR secretariat support. Following a high-level launch, the Support Platform could meet bi-annually at the ministerial level, with technical meetings more regularly. The Chair of the Support Platform would be elected on a rotational basis.

The SSAR Support Platform will complement and interact with existing coordination mechanisms linked to the Afghan situation, including relevant political and peacebuilding initiatives and the Tripartite and Quadripartite Committees of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and UNHCR. UNHCR will ensure regular reporting on the work of the Support Platform to its Executive Committee and the UN General Assembly.

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