

Afghanistan situation: Emergency preparedness and response in Iran

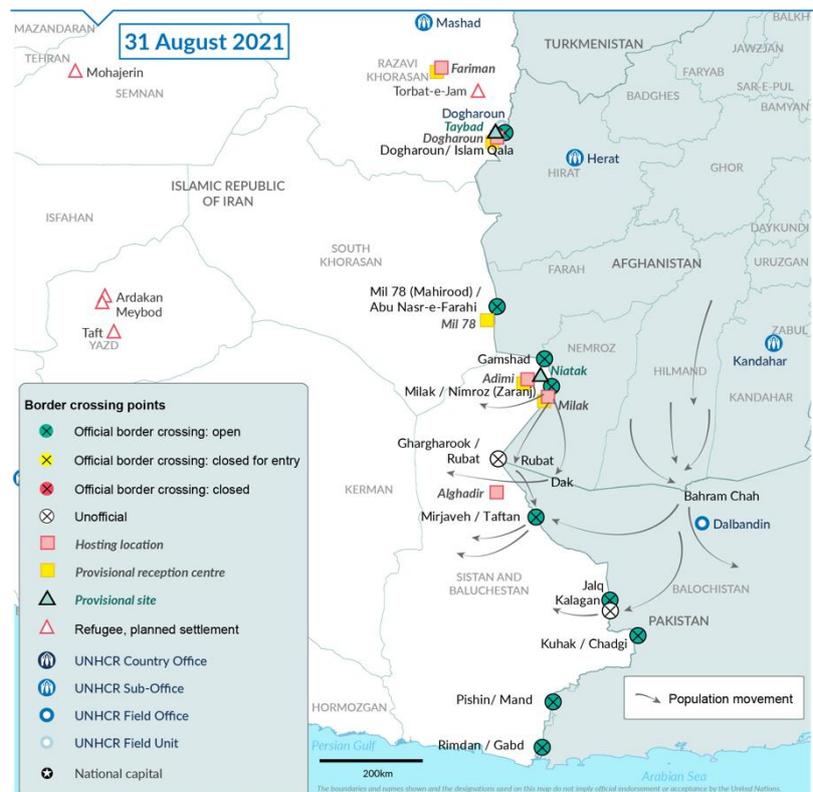
20 September 2021

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The Afghanistan crisis remains overwhelmingly within Afghanistan itself. Since the beginning of the year, 634,800 individuals have been displaced, joining the 2.9 internally displaced persons in the country by end of 2020.

Afghans continue to make their way to Iran in an irregular manner and through unofficial border points. UNHCR is aware of 16,335 Afghans who arrived in Iran from 1 January up until 18 September. Out of the 502 families that UNHCR interviewed so far, 71% indicated having had to resort to using smugglers.

Official borders between Afghanistan and Iran remain closed for individuals seeking asylum, while borders are open for commercial purposes and foreign-national passport-holders with valid visas for Iran.



SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

- The security situation in Afghanistan remains **calm, yet unpredictable**. UNHCR and its partners have largely been able to continue with operations in nearly all of Afghanistan's provinces, undertaking ongoing activities and programmes in some two-thirds of all districts.
- On 7 September 2021, **the Taliban announced a new government** and published a list of newly appointed cabinet members, all male. The new Taliban mayor of Kabul has reportedly told female employees in the city to stay home unless their jobs cannot be filled by a man. About a third of the city's 3,000 employees are thought to be women. Several protests in Kabul and Herat by **women demanding their rights** and inclusion in government were violently broken up by the Taliban.
- The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, on 20 September **called** for maintained dialogue with the Taliban in Afghanistan. He said discussions are a must "if we want Afghanistan not to be a centre of

terrorism, if we want women and girls to not lose all the rights acquired during the previous period, if we want different ethnic groups to be able to feel represented."

- UNHCR has **not observed mass outflows of refugees from Afghanistan through regular border crossings yet**, as Afghans have so far largely fled within Afghanistan's borders – since the beginning of the year, **634,800 have been internally displaced**. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain UNHCR's operational priority.

DISPLACEMENT TO IRAN

- From 1 January to 18 September, UNHCR identified **16,335 Afghans who newly arrived in Iran** (based on 3,937 head of households who approached UNHCR directly at our receptions). Amongst them, **511 families** (consisting of **2,120 individuals**) were interviewed, of which:
 - **39%** were Hazara and **38%** were Tajik.
 - **23%** were female-headed households.
 - **31%** of new arrivals do not have any identity documents.
 - **84%** report having no legal registration status in Iran.
- An additional **172 Afghans are understood to be in Iran** (out of the 2,988 who arrived during the second week of August, as informed by Iran's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs) and are currently hosted by the government (88 in Khorasan Razavi and 84 in Sistan and Baluchistan).
- UNHCR estimates that the actual number of new arrivals in Iran is likely to be significantly higher, as many have entered through informal routes. UNHCR has especially received reports of **increased informal movements** through Pakistan, into Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province, due to the prevalence of smugglers there and fewer natural barriers. The number of families crossing in has also reportedly increased.
- There however continues to be challenges monitoring arrivals and verifying figures, including due to the absence of a centralized registration system. Sistan and Baluchistan remains a no-go province, yet a crucial one in terms of border movements, thus UNHCR continues to advocate for access. Advocacy also continues, aimed at establishing centralized registration and documentation of new arrivals to facilitate assistance provision and enhance protection.
- Iran already hosts some **4 million Afghans** (refugees, undocumented, and passport-holders) and has maintained inclusive policies towards refugees for over 40 years, despite its own economic challenges.

RETURNS TO AFGHANISTAN

- UNHCR's Dogharoun office continues to observe an estimated average of **2,000 persons being returned per day**, based on observations of 50 to 60 buses to the border every day, each carrying 40-50 persons. **UNHCR is concerned that some of these returns may not be voluntary**.
- **Of the 3,000 new arrivals** reported by BAFIA in the second week of August, half were **immediately returned**, while others were temporarily hosted in sites by BAFIA. Most seem to have now returned and only small numbers remain hosted by BAFIA.
- Those attempting to enter irregularly are reportedly being particularly targeted. UNHCR observes mounting **fears of deportation** amongst Afghans – especially those whose visa is about to expire or who are undocumented. Typically, *Amayesh cardholders*, who are considered *de facto* refugees by the Government of Iran, have been protected from deportation, and there is no indication that this has changed.
- UNHCR issued a **non-return advisory** for Afghanistan on 16 August 2021, which remains in place. UNHCR reiterates its call for a bar on returns of Afghan nationals, including asylum seekers who have had their claims rejected. UNHCR is seeking further clarity and reiterating the principle of non-refoulement to the Government.

APPROACHES TO UNHCR OFFICES

- Late August and early September saw **a peak in the number of persons approaching UNHCR offices**, mainly to request resettlement or registration. Despite the ongoing pandemic, approximately 400-500 Afghan persons of concern were gathering daily outside certain UNHCR premises. This was largely linked to

misinformation on resettlement and confusion around public announcements from some States of additional resettlement opportunities for Afghan refugees.

- At this moment, information-sharing remains the main response that UNHCR can provide to resettlement requests. For this purpose, a [help page](#) has been set up for Afghans who recently arrived in Iran and additional [hotlines](#) have been opened to answer more calls. This help page includes key information on how UNHCR can or cannot help and provides these UNHCR hotlines for further information. In addition, in response to this misinformation, UNHCR liaised with embassies and diplomatic missions in Iran and issued common guidance in the form of a dedicated [Note on Referrals](#) shared on 26 August, as well as a donor briefing on 1 September.
- UNHCR continues to advocate for States to [include Afghan refugees in Iran in any resettlement programming](#), including as a tool to reduce the number of vulnerable refugees attempting secondary movements. In 2022, 80,000 refugees in Iran will need resettlement (10% of the refugee population). UNHCR can best support those most in need of resettlement if countries provide flexible criteria for resettlement (i.e., not only focusing on women and girls). Resettlement is a tangible sign of international responsibility-sharing, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees.

REGIONAL REFUGEE PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE PLAN (RRPRP)

On 25 August, UNHCR launched the [Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan](#) (RRPRP). This is an inter-agency plan with 11 partners working on a coordinated response to potential outflows, by supporting the host countries of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This plan focuses on preparedness, limited emergency response, and expanded support to regular programmes.

- The worst-case contingency planning figure is of **515,000** new Afghans displaced across borders over six months, with **150,000** arrivals in Iran.
- UNHCR is also pre-positioning Core Relief Items (CRIs) along the eastern border and providing basic assistance to newly arrived Afghans, including counselling through hotlines, offices, and email. These items shall be dispatched as and when needed in coordination with BAFIA provincial offices.
- UNHCR and BAFIA signed on 13 September an amendment to an [agreement to commence infrastructure work for the development of the Niatak camp](#) in the eastern border district of Sistan and Baluchistan. Once fully completed (with the co-contribution of other specialized agencies), the camp is expected to be able to host some 7,500 new arrivals. The amendment also includes the upgrade of two transit/reception areas in South Khorasan and Khorasan Razavi, to enable dignified reception and short stays of persons of concern.
- In line with standing global arrangements, the Refugee Coordination Model has been activated in Iran under the leadership of UNHCR and in support of the Government of Iran, and regular sector working group meetings are taking place. UNHCR has instituted a biweekly bilateral Task Force meeting with the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA) to discuss the operational response for the new arrivals. On 12 September, under the overall auspices of BAFIA, UNHCR facilitated the second interagency meeting with the sector leads and co-leads to discuss the sectoral priorities for Iran defined by the agencies under the recently launched Regional Refugee Response Plan and expedite a coordinated response in all sectors.

NATIONAL CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The Government of Iran informed UNHCR that, under a worst-case scenario, they anticipate that up to **500,000 new arrivals from Afghanistan could enter Iran over 6-months**. In case of an influx, new arrivals would reportedly be granted access to Iranian territory and settled in locations along the border. Shelter, health and food would be the priorities to cope with the Government's scenario.

Such contingency planning is a Government-led process. UNHCR continues to seek additional guidance and clarity on various issues, including the status that will be conferred to new arrivals and the process for receiving them.

UNHCR coordinates the refugee response among international actors in Iran, with 18 participating UN agencies and international NGOs under its leadership, in line with the [Refugee Coordination Model](#). UNHCR and BAFIA convene on a regular basis, through an agreed-upon biweekly/bilateral meeting. Discussions are ongoing around options for more inclusive coordination.

FUNDING NEEDS

The interagency regional funding needs are of USD 299 million, including almost **USD 131 million for UNHCR alone**.

For Iran, interagency needs are of USD 135 million, including **USD 58.9 million for UNHCR**.

UNHCR Iran overall funding needs for 2021: **USD 118.9 million**.

FUNDING UPDATE

As of 7 September 2021, UNHCR's **overall programmes in Iran** (regular and emergency programming) were **31% funded**.

UNHCR is grateful for the critical support provided by donors who have contributed to the operation in Iran, as well as those who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with broadly earmarked and unearmarked funds. Whilst interest in the current emergency is relevant and opportune, UNHCR wishes to also highlight ongoing regular programming needs which are severely underfunded.

Earmarked contributions | USD

Earmarked contributions for the Iran operation amount to some **14.3 million**.

European Union 9.2 million | **Denmark** 2 million | **Finland** 1.79 | **Japan** 1.25 million | **Norway** 0.36 million | **Russian Federation** 0.1 million | **UNAIDS** 0.03 million

Major softly earmarked contributions | USD

Private donors **Australia** 6.1 million | **Germany** 3.6 million | **Japan** 2.9 million
Canada | Luxembourg | Norway | Spain | Czechia | Private donors

Major unearmarked contributions | USD

Special thanks to the major donors of unearmarked contributions.

Norway 80 million | **Sweden** 66.9 million | **Private donors** **Spain** 49.7 million | **Netherlands** 36.1 million | **Denmark** 34.6 million | **Germany** 26 million | **Private donors** **Republic of Korea** 25 million | **Japan** 23.4 million | **France** 20.2 million | **Private donors** **Japan** 17.6 million | **Switzerland** 16.4 million | **Ireland** 12.5 million | **Private donors** **Italy** 12.3 million | **Belgium** 11.9 million | **Italy** 10.7 million | **Private donors** **Sweden** 10.6 million

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