

Afghans returning home face challenges and opportunities

Ghulam Saqi came back to Afghanistan from Pakistan with his family and 60 other families in August 2015. Many decided to return after residing near Quetta in Pakistan for nearly thirty years. Return in 2015 is significantly higher than in 2014: in the first nine months, nearly 54,000 registered Afghan refugees returned, mainly from Pakistan, as compared to 13,860 for the same period in 2014. The increase appears to be linked to the specific events in Pakistan which have also led to a focus on return of Afghans.



Figure 1: Families returning from Quetta Pakistan to Herat Afghanistan

However many families were from Kunduz province, which has been affected by recent conflict. As a result, the families decided to return to Herat. "Yes, we are happy, we returned to our homeland," explained Ghulam Saqi. However there are also challenges due to the limited services, access to water, economic opportunities and the security situation. "We had houses and land, but [we were] not able to bring anything." Bibi Gul explained that they did not have money to transport their belongings and had to sell them in order to return.

In order to determine the needs of returnees, how they use the initial assistance provided at the Encashment Centres and gaps in assistance, UNHCR conducts returnee monitoring which is a key protection tool for assessing the overall sustainability of the return process. In 2015, UNHCR launched an online returnee monitoring system. Returnee monitoring takes place at the Encashment Centres where UNHCR found that 59 per cent of Afghan refugees returned due to relocation campaigns or a deteriorating situation in their host country, as detailed by Ghulam Saqi and Bibi Gul.

The families selected agree to be monitored for 12 months through telephone interviews and home visits, to help monitor the progress and challenge to reintegration, identify needs, and support advocacy for key interventions. Returnee monitoring has found that 69 per cent of returnees have a worse economic situation than before return while 10 per cent are at the same economic level. Livelihoods and skills are frequently found to be the main needs after food and water for returnees to support themselves and reintegrate.

With targeted support from the European Union, the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of Korea, UNHCR is aiming to improve the conditions for return and support livelihood interventions. One of the reintegration projects currently taking place in Herat is vocational training for young returnee men and women. Together with CRDSA, a local Afghan NGO, UNHCR is training 40 women on computer skills and 40 men on electricity and mobile repair. The



Figure 2: Female returnees studying computer literacy in Herat



Figure 3: Practical demonstrations on home appliance repair

course which runs for six months aims to provide returnees with the skills needed to support livelihoods as well as toolkits and certificates upon successful completion.

One student explained “Definitely it [this training] is helping and benefiting us. We did not know about electricity or how to repair home appliances, we now understand these things.” Others explained that they will now be able to work at the bazaar and support their families. One of the female students explained that it would be useful for the future as previously she could only do unskilled labour, but being able to get skilled work would be a good opportunity for her family.

By Marguerite Nowak, UNHCR Afghanistan, November 2015