

UNHCR Pakistan

Refugee Operation 2014



An Afghan refugee family going back to their homeland from Voluntary Repatriation Centre Baleli (C) UNHCR

Background

Since 1979, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Pakistan has been assisting Afghans fleeing conflict in their homeland. For more than three decades, Afghans have been one of the largest groups of persons of concern to UNHCR as asylum-seekers, refugees or returnees.

UNHCR is responsible for facilitating the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Afghan refugees, assisting them in the initial phase of return, as well as supporting and advocating for their longer-term reintegration.

Key Statistics

At present, some 1.61 million registered Afghans reside in Pakistan. Approximately 33% of the population live in 76 Refugee Villages (RVs) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Punjab. The remaining 67% live in urban and rural areas. The majority of Afghan refugees come from five Provinces in Afghanistan - Nangarhar, Kabul, Kunduz, Logar and Paktya.

Protection

The world's refugee protection regime was designed to offer international protection to refugees who cannot rely on the protection of their own state. For more than six decades, UNHCR has been responsible for supporting states in their primary obligation to provide protection.

Global Protection Framework

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol remain the cornerstones of the international refugee protection system. The 1951 Convention is a universal human rights instrument designed to protect refugees from persecution, prevent their refoulement and guarantee their rights.

Registration of Refugees

In 2006-7, the Government of Pakistan (GoP), with the support of UNHCR, conducted a 15-week registration exercise of Afghan citizens living in Pakistan. Some 2.15 million Afghans were registered and Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, valid until December 2009, were issued.

In view of the continued challenges impeding return to Afghanistan, the Government of Pakistan (GoP) adopted the Afghan Management and Repatriation Strategy (AMRS) in March 2010. This sought durable solutions for the protracted population. In December 2012, the Cabinet agreed to extend the stay of Afghan refugees in Pakistan until 30 June 2013 as an interim measure whilst the GoP formulated a national policy on Afghan refugees for the period beyond June 2013.

In July 2013, the Government of Pakistan (GoP) approved a new policy on Afghan refugees, which includes the extension of the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards and the Tripartite Agreement on Voluntary Repatriation until 31 December 2015. A draft refugee law outlining the legal status, rights and obligations of applicants for refugee status and persons recognised as refugees in the country has been submitted to the Cabinet for its consideration.

Following the extension of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, on 25 February, NADRA launched a countywide project at the inaugural ceremony in Haripur district, KP. The renewed PoR cards are in the process of being issued through 34 PoR card renewal centres across the country, starting with six centres in Haripur, Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Quetta, to be followed by more centres due to open in May.

Refugee Status Determination

In the absence of a national legal framework for refugees in Pakistan, UNHCR conducts refugee status determination (RSD) under its mandate. As of 31 December 2013, the total number of individually recognized refugees was 5,509 individuals. This included 4,878 Afghan nationals, as well as 456 Somalis, 54 Iraqis, 46 Iranians, and a number of other nationalities.

Pakistan accepts UNHCR decisions on RSD and allows asylum seekers, as well as recognized refugees, to remain in Pakistan pending the identification of a durable solution.

Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)

Three main themes underscore the Solutions Strategy: Creating conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation through community-based investments in areas of high return, building Afghan refugee capital based on livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan in order to facilitate return; and preserving asylum space in host countries, including enhanced support for refugee hosting communities, alternative temporary stay arrangements for the residual caseload, and resettlement in third countries.

The launch of the SSAR in May 2012 and the extension of the validity of the PoR cards for Afghan refugees until the end of 2015 are key achievements. The GoP's endorsement of the SSAR - including repatriation, the RAHA initiative, continued hosting of refugees until a durable solution is found and enhanced resettlement to third countries – represent important steps forward in preserving asylum space for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The facilitated return from Pakistan to Afghanistan remains UNHCR's largest voluntary repatriation operation globally.

Durable Solutions

The ultimate aim of refugee protection is to secure lasting solutions for refugees. These solutions may be achieved by voluntary repatriation (returning voluntarily to the country of origin), resettlement (settling permanently in a third country) and local integration (remaining in the host country).

In 2014, UNHCR has been continuing its programmes to protect and assist refugees while identifying durable solutions in the form of assisted voluntary repatriation and resettlement. UNHCR also plans more targeted interventions through the refugee status determination process with the aim of strengthening legal aid and assistance to vulnerable individuals. Interventions benefitting urban refugees and their host communities will also continue through the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative.

Voluntary Repatriation

More than 3.8 million Afghans have returned to their country of origin since UNHCR began its assisted voluntary repatriation programme in 2002.

In 2013, voluntary repatriation took place through three Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs): Baleli (in Balochistan), Timergara and Chamkani (in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). From 1 January to 31 December 2013, a total of 31,224 Afghans voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan, with 52% of this number processed through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 30% through Balochistan.

Over 85% of the returnees were Pashtun and 7% were Tajik in ethnicity. Some 70% of the returnees were from urban or semi-urban areas of Pakistan and 30% were from refugee villages. Almost 30% of the Afghans returned to the northern region provinces of Baghlan, Balkh, Jawzjan, Kunduz and Takhar, and around 23% went back to eastern provinces while 21% of the Afghans returned to the Central Region provinces of Kabul, Kapisa, Logar, Parwan, Ghazni & Wardak.

From 1 January to 31 March 2014, a total of 221 families (1,162 individuals) repatriated to Afghanistan.

Resettlement

For a small number of the most vulnerable refugees, UNHCR looks to third-country resettlement as a solution. Recognising the serious protection concerns faced by some Afghan refugees in the region, Australia allocated an additional 1,000 places specifically for the resettlement of Afghan refugees from Pakistan in the 2012-2013 fiscal year.

In November 2013, UNHCR's Representative in Pakistan, Mr. Neill Wright, inaugurated a new building in Quetta for the purpose of processing resettlement cases.

Despite facing numerous challenges, UNHCR Pakistan managed to increase its resettlement submissions significantly. In 2013, a total of 481 cases/1,514 individuals were submitted throughout the year. Some 411 cases/ 1,345 individuals were accepted while 336/ 1,107 individuals departed. In 2014, 120 cases/325 individuals have so far been submitted to resettlement countries, while 74 cases/ 211 individuals were accepted and 91 cases/ 292 individuals have departed.

While the majority of these were Afghan refugees, 53 cases/108 individuals were of other nationalities, primarily Somali, Iranian, and Iraqi. A total of 62% of resettlement submissions were to Australia, 30% were submitted to the United States, 4.8% to Canada, and the rest to European countries. In 2013, a total of 336 cases/1,107 individuals were able to depart for resettlement from Pakistan. In 2014, UNHCR aims to refer 2,200 individual refugees for resettlement.

Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA)

The RAHA initiative supports infrastructure, environment, education and health systems in the hosting areas inhabited by refugees to mitigate the impact of an additional population living alongside the local community. The initiative also aims to create and support basic services through development interventions both for Afghan refugees and for Pakistani communities. Together with UNHCR as the convening agency for RAHA, other actors, including sister agencies UNDP, FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNIFEM, WFP and WHO, are also participating in the initiative.

Since RAHA's launch in 2009, the Government of Pakistan, UN Agencies and GiZ have carried out 2,089 projects for the benefit of some four million people, of whom 15% are Afghan refugees and 85% are from host communities. These projects have been undertaken in 41 districts of the Provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh and in five agencies across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The initiatives cover the sectors of health; education; water and sanitation; community infrastructure (including irrigation, farm-to-market roads and flood protection walls); environment, and livelihoods. Around 60% of projects address infrastructure and a further 25% of them address water and sanitation needs in communities.

The total number of projects currently under implementation is 217, with 92 by UNHCR and 125 by GiZ and other UN partners.

Community-Based Assistance in Refugee Villages

UNHCR, in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organisations, assists refugees with community-based services, including the provision of primary and secondary

school education to approximately 79,109 children enrolled in UNHCR-funded schools in refugee villages (RV). In collaboration with the authorities, Provincial Education Officers and School Management Committees (SMCs), UNHCR has continued to strengthen the provision of quality education, to raise enrolment and reduce dropout rates with special attention to girls' education.



Refugee families prepare for departure at UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Centre Baleli, outside Quetta ©T. Sharif/ UNHCR