**AFGHANISTAN- PAKISTAN HUMANITARIAN COUNTRY TEAM (HCT) –**

**2017 KEY MESSAGES ON RETURN of AFGHANS**

The Humanitarian Country teams of both Afghanistan and Pakistan remain committed to proactive advocacy efforts, engaging the governments of both countries to identify solutions to the issue of both registered Afghan refugees and undocumented Afghans. There is an understanding that the situation of registered refugees is different from undocumented Afghans particularly in host countries. This document seeks to clarify these issues through joint advocacy messaging endorsed by both HCTs, which can be used as a guide for further discussions and interaction with key stakeholders.

In 2016, over 370,000 registered Afghan refugees and more than 248,000 undocumented Afghans returned from Pakistan, in addition to some 444,000 returns from Iran. This was the largest single return in more than a decade, and has severely challenged the absorption capacity of local host communities and already overstretched basic services and systems in Afghanistan.

On 03 April 2017, voluntary repatriation resumed from Pakistan with over 41,000 refugees having repatriated as of 26 July. Since 1 January 2017, some 77,000 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned from Pakistan.

While concrete efforts have been made by the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to improve conditions upon return, including post-arrival services a significant and well-coordinated response by both governments and the humanitarian community is required to avert a potential humanitarian crisis. The HCTs call for the renewed commitment of the international community to mobilise greater international support to create conditions inside Afghanistan that are conducive to return, and ensure that reintegration is sustainable**.**

Pakistan continues to host approximately 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees. In addition, as per the Government of Pakistan there are an estimated 600,000 undocumented Afghans on the territory of Pakistan. The HCTs stress the willingness of the United Nations and the international community to support the Government of Pakistan to ensure that the process of return for registered refugees is voluntary, dignified, safe and gradual. Similarly the return of undocumented Afghans should be carried out with respect to national laws and due process with safety and dignity and with bilateral coordination.

As the return of Afghan nationals (both registered refugees and undocumented Afghans) continues in 2017, the Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT):

1. **Acknowledge Pakistan’s generous hosting of Afghan refugees for 40 years**

The generous hospitality of the Government of Pakistan is noted and appreciated, in particular the efforts made to ensure access to education, skills training and to health services. In order to meet the needs of the current Afghan population, over 70% of whom are children and youth, and to demonstrate solidarity and equitable responsibility-sharing, Pakistan needs continued support from the international community, in particular for targeted youth empowerment actions through education, livelihoods and vocational training.

The HCTs welcome the decision of the Pakistan Federal Cabinet on 07 February 2017 which: extends the validity of the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards until 31 December 2017; approves the adoption of a visa regime for different categories of registered Afghans; agrees to adopt a national refugee law; tasks Pakistan’s the National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA) to undertake documentation of the undocumented Afghans in Pakistan which will document and regulate their stay. These far-reaching decisions are welcomed by the HCTs which pledge to work with the Pakistani Government on their implementation and to advocate with the international community to also support Pakistan’s Comprehensive Policy in line with the regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR).

1. **Call upon the Government of Pakistan to ensure that return is voluntary safe, gradual and dignified**

The HCTs call upon the Government of Pakistan to ensure the voluntary, safe, gradual and dignified nature of return as current trends are severely overstretching existing absorption capacity in Afghanistan and affecting the sustainability of return.The HCTs also urge the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to work closely with the humanitarian community to provide detailed information on conditions of return in Afghanistan to facilitate fully informed decision-making of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. The HCTs call for extension of the PoR cards beyond 31 December 2017 in order to safeguard the voluntariness of return decision-making of registered Afghan refugees and requestcontinuing advocacy support and consistent messaging by the international community vis-à-vis the Pakistani authorities to maintain protection space for the remaining refugees.

The HCTs stress the importance of the registration of undocumented Afghans in Pakistan in order to document and regulate their stay and insulate them from arrests and harassment. Undocumented Afghans who have decided to voluntarily leave Pakistan should be able to bring all of their personal possessions and business assets with them without facing confiscation. The HCTs also request that any undocumented Afghan arrested for unlawful presence in Pakistan be given the right to appeal the decision to deport them. Finally, the HCTs call for bureaucratic impediments, i.e. No Objection Certificates, Allowed to Work Status, etc., to be removed to enable humanitarian actors to respond to the needs of refugees and undocumented Afghans in Pakistan in a timely manner with resources made available to humanitarian agencies to respond to the needs of vulnerable Afghans in Pakistan.

1. **Call for greater support from the Government of Afghanistan for return and reintegration in Afghanistan**

The HCTs note that effective humanitarian action is predicated upon immediate government actions to reform existing procedures and legislation around land allocation/land tenure and civil documentation issuance in Afghanistan.Government ownership and accountability of returnee response activities and longer term durable solutions via the Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiREC) should be enhanced by clarifying roles and responsibilities of key ministries and pushing for streamlined procedures and the removal of bureaucratic hurdles.

In addition to new policy and governance bodies at the national level, the HCTs stress that provincial level authorities in Afghanistan should be adequately resourced to meaningfully implement designated activities in cooperation with the international community and national NGOs. Given the scale of current returns, additional resources should be devoted to scale up emergency shelter and the provision of basic services.Moreover, services at the reception centres should include updates on conditions in areas of origin or return. The Government should take immediate steps to ensure authorities with the appropriate technical profiles and abilities are deployed to areas most affected by returns and empowered to act on the revised DiREC Action Plan.

The HCTs also request that compliance with national policies and laws is ensured, including at the provincial level. The Comprehensive Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration Strategy should be followed and the Government of Afghanistan should effectively apply the waiver on tazkeras and other forms of civil documents as a requirement for accessing schools. Moreover, the national NGO Law should be enforced and the government should address the bureaucratic impediments that have hindered humanitarian action.

Finally, since the Pakistani Government recently scaled up their visa issuance, the HCTs call on the Afghan Government to accelerate the issuance of passports and other travel documents to Afghans so they can apply for visas in a timely manner.

1. **Advocate for greater responsibility-sharing by the international community**

Greater synergies between humanitarian and development actors are needed to ensure that both refugees and their host communities in host countries; and returnees and displaced in Afghanistan benefit from joint investments in public service delivery systems in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the New York Declaration and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF).