



AFGHAN REFUGEE HOUSEHOLD ASSESSMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND, SUMMARY REPORT, APRIL 2013

Acknowledgements

The survey that informs this Summary Report was implemented by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) with the cooperation of its national NGO partners Fidokor and ASTI. Thanks are due to Fidokor and ASTI for their assistance, as well as to NGO “Majmaai Oriyono” for facilitating contact with Afghan refugees and subsequent data collection.

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Published 29 April 2013.

The survey and this report were funded by the European Union.



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ISBN 978-99947-954-5-1

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Abbreviations

AFSS	Afghan Somoniyon School
ASTI	Association of Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoT	Government of Tajikistan
HH(s)	Household(s)
HoH(s)	Head of Household(s)
INGO(s)	International Non-Government Organisation(s)
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NGO(s)	Non-Government Organisation(s)
RoT	Republic of Tajikistan
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme

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Executive Summary

Introduction

More than three decades of violent conflict, insecurity and continuous political upheaval in Afghanistan have resulted in millions of Afghans fleeing their country for asylum protection in neighbouring or more distant states. While the end of the Taliban regime in 2001 triggered the voluntary repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Afghans, several million Afghan refugees continue to face protracted displacement outside their home country – mainly in Pakistan and Iran. The Republic of Tajikistan (RoT) has been a receiving country for Afghan refugees since its independence in 1992, though the total number of asylum seekers has never been large. While the numbers of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the RoT are on a much smaller scale than in Pakistan and Iran, there has been a considerable increase in numbers since 2008. Also, the volatile security situation in Northern Afghanistan in recent years creates the possibility of an increase in future refugee flows to the RoT, as does the imminent withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from the country in 2014. The potential for future growth in refugee numbers has raised concerns among members of the Government of Tajikistan (GoT) that the RoT's fragile infrastructure could be overwhelmed by asylum seekers and refugees. The RoT is already the Central Asian country with the largest number of Afghan refugees.

A brief review of the conditions of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in the RoT immediately reveals that livelihood opportunities and protection issues are their major concerns. Though it is known that the majority of Afghan refugees in the country live in chronic poverty, as does about half of the population of their host nation,¹ there is little in-depth knowledge or literature available on the broader situation of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and its Tajik partner organisations, Fidokor and ASTI (Association of Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia of Tajikistan), sought to address this lack of readily-available information by conducting an assessment on the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in the RoT in the spring and summer of 2011.² The main tools of this assessment were a detailed survey of and focus group discussions with the Afghan refugee population in Tajikistan.

When discussing the assessment results set forth in this report, it is necessary to bear in mind that these results must be read in the context of the large-scale Afghan refugee crisis globally and the way that Afghan refugees perceive themselves in their displacement. When Afghan refugees speak about themselves, they use neither the Persian term for ‘refugee,’ *panohande*, nor the Tajik term, *gorize*. Instead, they use typically the term *muhajer* that translates as

¹ According to World Bank data, about 47% of Tajikistan’s population lived below the poverty line in 2009. See <http://data.worldbank.org/country/tajikistan>.

² Although the terms “refugee” and “refugees” are used throughout this report, the survey also included asylum seekers and, hence, it should be understood that asylum seekers were aggregated with refugees for purposes of this survey unless specifically indicated otherwise in the text.

‘traveller,’ or ‘migrant’. The Danish anthropologist Inger Boesen, who studied Afghan refugees in Pakistan, believes “that in doing so they express their desire to return, as well as their hopes that the circumstances that drove them into exile will end in the foreseeable future”.³

The term *muhajer* also has a different connotation, however: conveying that, contrary to popular perceptions, these migrants are not merely victims of a situation but persons who have taken control of their own destiny and have left their country to settle elsewhere in the hope and expectation of a better future. Thus, the use of this term *muhajer* can indicate that refugees perceive themselves as active shapers of their own destiny, with initiative, resolve, and the will to build a future of their own making. Effective humanitarian and development-oriented assistance can build upon this positive perception.

³ Inger W. Boesen, “Honour in exile: continuity and change among Afghan refugees,” in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds., Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford Refugee Studies Programme (1990), p.160. Quoted in Ghazal Keshavarzian, *The Transformation of the Afghan Refugee*. Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University 2005, p. 9.

About the Survey and this Report

This summary report on the living conditions of Afghan refugees households (HHs) in the RoT is based on a survey prepared and undertaken by DRC, Fidokor, and ASTI, which was conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 (see above). In-depth interviews were conducted with the heads of 404 households; in addition, 230 individuals were included in focus group discussions (FGDs). The survey was undertaken in six Tajik regions where most of the Afghan refugees and asylum seekers live, as well as in other areas in Tajikistan where Afghan refugees reside. The survey thus provides an insight into the views and situations of a broad cross-section of refugees.⁴ The main purpose of the survey was to give DRC, as well as duty-bearers and other interested stakeholders, detailed information on the Afghan refugees' socio-economic, educational, legal and other conditions, and to provide up-to-date analysis regarding their current situation, which can serve as a basis for developing support strategies and activities. The survey's coverage rate was around 45% of all Afghan refugees living in the RoT. What follows are brief highlights of some of the key findings of the survey in each of the question areas.

Due to the length of the full survey and FGD results report, DRC is publishing this summary report regarding the survey in addition to the full survey report. This has been done to ensure that the most pertinent information gathered by DRC and its partners as part of the survey of Afghan refugees in

⁴ All data on HHs and its members was based on information retrieved from the head of household.

Tajikistan will be readily available to duty-bearers and stakeholders in the asylum field in Tajikistan in a short, easy-to-use format.⁵

The HH assessment questionnaire for Afghan refugees in Tajikistan consisted of 11 parts: demographic characteristics; work and employment; legal status and support; education; housing status; food security; health status and medical services; access to education; self-help conditions and support rendered by the Afghan refugee community; the level of integration into local society; and vulnerability. Six different kinds of focus groups were assembled in each of five different districts and cities. These FGDs consisted of young girls aged 10 to 15 years old; young women 16-20 years old; female heads of households; young boys aged 10 to 15 years old; young men aged 16-20 years old; and male heads of households above 25 years old. Ten questions were used to instigate discussion on the specific living conditions and views of these Afghan refugee groups at the FGDs.

There were several major findings based on the results of the survey and the FGDs. The vast majority of refugees stated that they had entered Tajikistan legally and held valid residence permits as refugees. Only a few HHs reported that they did not have appropriate or up-to-date documents. The Afghan refugees surveyed also provided positive feedback on the organisations which offered legal advice to refugees. The size of HHs included in the survey ranged between one and

⁵ The full report regarding the survey is available from the DRC office in Dushanbe or online at <http://www.drc.dk>.

thirteen persons with an average HH size of six individuals. About 50% of all HHs had children, of whom 75% were found to be of school age, or between the ages of 6 and 17 years. Nearly two thirds of HHs belonged to nuclear families. The share of single parent HHs appeared high, at 13%. Seventeen percent of HHs involved in the survey were headed by women.

The overall survey population was split nearly equally between males and females. On average, female heads of households (HoHs) were 44 years old compared to male HoHs who had an average age of 41 years. The average age of all HH members was 18 years for males and 19 for females. More than 60% of the adult survey population were married. There were more single men than women. Most women HoHs were widows. The average amount of time an Afghan refugee had resided in the RoT was about four years.

Past and present occupation profiles of the refugees surveyed, which included both their time living in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, were quite similar, with most refugees primarily engaged in the trading sector. Three out of four male adults stated that they had work in the RoT, but only half were working full-time. Even compared to that of refugee men, many of whom were un- or underemployed, the work status of women was even worse; only 16% of females stated that they worked, and those that did were frequently employed only in part-time jobs. The job situation for women HoHs was particularly challenging. Out of all the working female HoHs, less than half worked full-time.

More than half of all HHs appeared to be economically vulnerable, since only a few family members in each HH had steady work. In 16% of HHs, no family member was economically active at all. In 13% of HHs, only one family member had a job, and in 23% of cases just two HH members had work. In view of the relatively large number of members in most HHs, this lack of employment resulted in extreme economic vulnerability as the wages of one or two family members cannot typically cover the expenses of these large households. The situation was worse for female-headed households; in a quarter of these families, no family member was employed at all. Nearly a quarter of all surveyed HHs relied solely on financial and other support provided by an Assistance Committee composed of government agencies, international and national organisations, and community representatives.

A quarter of the adult Afghan refugees have no or little education. The rate of no schooling among females is four times higher than among males. The assessment results indicate that the education gap among Afghan refugee children currently at school-age (7 to 17 years old) is alarming: a quarter of school-aged children and youth never attended, dropped out, or did not complete school education. In fact, the results suggest that 10% of refugee HHs with school-age children do not enrol any of their children in school, while a further 26% only educate some of their children. These poor school enrolment and drop-out figures for refugees are in sharp contrast to education statistics for

Tajik children, who have very high enrolment and completion rates for primary and secondary levels according to official GoT statistics.

There is a clear correlation between school attendance and HH size. The more children families have, the lower the attendance rate of their children in school. Bigger families cannot afford to enrol all of their children and have to select whom to enrol. Factors like employment of HoHs, complete family structures and literacy of the parents in the Tajik-Cyrillic script have a positive impact on school attendance of refugee children, while the absence of these factors increases the risks of non-enrolment or of children dropping out.

Though a majority of refugee families send their children to Tajik public schools, a full quarter of respondent HHs prefer to enrol their children in the private Afghan Somoniyon School in Dushanbe that follows the curriculum of the Afghan Ministry of Education and conducts its teaching in the Perso-Arabic script, in which Dari is written. Dari is the native language of the vast majority of Afghan refugees in Tajikistan. The preference given to this school over Tajik schools can be seen partly as a negative indicator for the integration possibilities for Afghan refugees in Tajikistan. Parents, who do not believe that their family will settle in Tajikistan for good or who do not wish to stay in Tajikistan, apparently prefer to send their children to a school where they can learn the Persian script used in

Afghanistan and Iran and not the Tajik-Cyrillic script that is only used in Tajikistan.⁶

A quarter of HHs with school children received some form of educational assistance from outside sources, mainly for textbooks and school uniforms. The main provider of such educational assistance is UNHCR. Three quarters of adult refugees had major difficulties learning to read and write the Tajik-Cyrillic script, while young Afghans did comparatively better. Among the latter, about one-third were not familiar with the Tajik-Cyrillic script, but many of these children and youth had only recently arrived in the RoT.

The GoT does not provide accommodations for refugees, so rental housing was utilised by nearly all HHs. Additionally, even if they were financially able, refugees in the RoT, as with other foreigners, are not allowed to own real estate, which usually left renting as the sole housing option. Most HH residences had two or three rooms available for living space, plus a kitchen and a bathroom. On average, there were three HH members per habitable room, resulting in very limited space for each individual. Six out of ten HoHs felt that the condition of their dwelling was insufficient for their family, with lack of space being cited as the main problem, followed by high rental costs and bad sanitary conditions. Affording even these suboptimal housing units was difficult for refugee

⁶ The selection of the school can only be seen only partly as an indicator for potential local integration, as considerations such as school fees for the private Somoniyon School as well as distance and transportation-related considerations are important aspects as well.

families, as only 11% of HoHs reported that they could pay their rent without problems. These rent difficulties were found for refugees across Tajikistan despite there being significant regional differences regarding housing costs.

One-third of the survey population was suffering from an inappropriate balance of foods and nutrients in their daily diet. Female HoHs, bigger families, and those with more unemployed HH members were more likely to have poor diets. In case of illnesses, a medical practitioner or pharmacist had been contacted by half of HHs at some point during their stay in the RoT. Home treatment was the first measure taken by two out of three HHs in the case of a sickness in the family, but treatment at a clinic also occurred frequently. Two-thirds of HoHs stated that they believed that the professional medical treatment received by their HH was beneficial, and said that it was mainly a lack of money that prevented HH members from requesting professional medical treatment (72% of cases). Eighty percent of HoHs stated that they had to pay for medical treatment themselves.⁷ Chronic health problems were also prevalent in 7% of all HH members, and acute illnesses in 11% of HH members. Nearly half of heads of households mentioned stress disorder or mental health problems as prevalent in their families. Afghan refugees who were dependent on financial assistance or had no work also showed

⁷ While refugees in Tajikistan are entitled to free primary and secondary education as well as free medical care pursuant to the Law “on Refugees” of the RoT, see Articles 10(1) and 12(1), the reality of the situation is that informal payments were almost always required to actually access these services.

a much higher prevalence of stress disorders (61%) than refugees who were fully employed (27%).

HHs relied on various sources of income contributed by various HH members. Employment with an Afghan enterprise or business in Tajikistan was the most important source of income among refugees (28% of HHs), followed by working for one's own private business (20%), and employment with a Tajik enterprise or business. A remarkable number of HHs were dependent on relief organisations, mainly relying on direct financial support from UNHCR and its implementing partner organisations. Thirteen percent of HHs stated that they drew their entire income from financial assistance from aid agencies, and another 11% were being assisted but had additional income as well.

Only a few HHs seemed to be able to meet their basic financial needs on a consistent basis. Eight out of ten HoHs said that they experienced great financial difficulties. The most significant expenditure for refugee HHs was for food and rent, which made up 75% of the total HH expenditures. Most assistance was needed with respect to food support (94% of all HHs), followed in scale by housing assistance (66%), medical care (57%), and education (53%). The research concluded that the majority of Afghans refugees surveyed were living at an extremely marginal economic level with female-headed households being the worst off.

One third of HHs reported that they had good interactions with other Afghan refugee HHs, but another 33% of HH said

that they had no relationship with other Afghan refugee HHs at all. Engagement in self-help organisations was relatively limited (27%) with big regional differences present. Only 12% of HHs assessed stated their household's problems in the past could have been solved with the help of a community-based organisation, perhaps accounting for the low level of participation by refugees in such associations. In cases of dissatisfaction with community-based organisations, lack of capacity, disorganisation and insufficient resources are mentioned as reasons for dissatisfaction.

Two of out of 3 HoHs stated that they had good contacts within Tajik society, mainly with their Tajik neighbours. The most important reason for Afghan refugees not having made contact or relationships within Tajik society seems to be that refugees themselves were not interested in local integration into the host society as they did not see it as a viable option; rather, refugees were focused on waiting for opportunities to be resettled in, or migrate to, a third country. Afghan refugees had a clear vision of their future as refugees, as most saw resettlement to a third country as the only durable solution possible for them, with a preference for moving to Canada or a European country. Returning to Afghanistan was not seen as an option for the vast majority of respondents, even if the country became safe in the future. Eighty percent said that 'under no conditions' would they return to any part of Afghanistan, and only 5% thought they would be able to safely return to a different area in Afghanistan from their home region. Strengthening this desire to be resettled in a third country is the perceived difficulty in integrating into Tajik

society. Some of the key barriers to integration into the host country named by the respondents to the survey were: “no jobs in Tajikistan”, “difficulty to get Tajik citizenship”, “insufficient support by relief organisations”, and “discrimination”.

The living standard in Afghanistan at the time they departed was rated “good” or even “very good” by three out of four refugee HoHs. The vast majority of those interviewed claimed that they had left Afghanistan because of security-related reasons, namely a “threat to family members” (74%) and the “war situation and feeling insecure” (61%). Only 8% of HHS stated economic difficulties were a main factor for their flight from Afghanistan, demonstrating that recognised refugees in Tajikistan by and large fit into the 1951 Refugee Convention requirements for obtaining refugee status. Demographically, the vast majority of the Afghan refugee survey population were of Tajik ethnic origin (85%), coming mainly from the provinces of Kabul (36%), Balkh (17%), Kunduz (11%), and Baghlan (9%). The remainder of refugees were ethnically Hazara, Pashtun or Uzbek.

Results of the focus group discussions with HoHs, youths and school children, showed that Afghan refugees in the RoT live under stress and strain resulting from stringent restrictions on movement and residence,⁸ lack of employment, and poor

⁸ GoT Resolutions Nos. 325 and 328 restrict refugees from living in the cities of Dushanbe and Khujand, as well as several other districts of the RoT. See Danish Refugee Council, *Gap Analysis Report: A Review of Tajikistan's Asylum Law and Practice*, June 2012, p. 6, available at: http://drc.dk/about-drc/publications/?eID=dam_frontend_push&docID=8419.

livelihood opportunities. The majority of refugees in the country felt that they had few opportunities in the RoT, and that their future outlook was bleak. Thus, many respondents expressed feelings of frustration, depression, powerlessness and vulnerability.

The assessment results describe a population that, in its majority, is extremely vulnerable and is living at a marginal economic level. Social indicators demonstrated that the standard of living and condition of the Afghan refugees remained very much below that of the host population's standards. In the absence of resettlement opportunities and with integration options perceived as limited, many of the refugees feel they live in a limbo-like situation, as the title of a recent UNHCR report on refugees and asylum seekers in Tajikistan suggests.⁹

⁹ See generally UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Lives in Limbo: A review of the implementation of UNHCR's urban refugee policy in Tajikistan*, May 2011, PDES/2011/03, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e4b78c32.html>.

Background Information

Worldwide, most refugees flee to neighbouring countries rather than seeking refuge further afield. By the end of 2010, three-quarters of the world's refugees were residing in a country neighbouring their own. Afghanistan, which is one of the main source countries of refugees in the world, is in this respect a typical case. The vast majority of Afghan refugees have fled to neighbouring countries, and in excess of 3.5 million Afghan refugees currently reside in Pakistan and Iran.¹⁰

The RoT is the only country in post-Soviet Central Asia that has accepted refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan in more than miniscule numbers; however, it only hosts a small population compared to Pakistan and Iran. The RoT's relatively accommodating policy towards Afghan refugees may, in part, be an act of reciprocation for the many thousands of Tajiks that sought refuge in Afghanistan during Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s.

The majority of the Afghan refugees in the region, whether they reside in Iran, Pakistan or Tajikistan, live in so-called protracted situations, which a senior UNHCR official defined as living "in exile for more than five years and ... [having] no immediate prospect of finding a durable solution to their plight

¹⁰ See UNHCR, 2012 UNHCR Country Operations Profile - Islamic Republic of Iran, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486f96.html>, and UNHCR, 2012 UNHCR Country Operation Profile - Pakistan, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e487016>.

by means of voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement.”¹¹

According to information provided by the GoT, the number of Afghan refugees seeking refuge in the RoT has significantly increased during recent years, reaching more than 5,000 refugees and asylum seekers in total currently resident in the RoT. Earlier statistics, as reflected by Table 1.1 below, show a significant drop in numbers in the RoT in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan by ISAF, from approximately 15,000 refugees in 2001 to about 1,000 in 2005. Since 2008, however, the increase of violence and lawlessness in the Northern parts of Afghanistan, among other reasons, has led to a steady rise in refugee numbers in Tajikistan.

Table 1.1: Total Number of Afghan Asylum Seekers and Afghan Refugees in Republic of Tajikistan

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Afghan refugee population in Tajikistan	15,336	3,427	3,304	1,815	1,006	929	1,133	1,799	2,679	3,131	3,184	3,323
Afghan Asylum seekers	720	153	243	--	244	449	749	1,366	2,541	786	1,654	2,072

¹¹ See Jeff Crisp, UNHCR, “No solutions in sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa,” in *New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper No. 75* (2003), p.1, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/3e2d66c34.pdf>.

Data compiled from UNHCR sources, and numbers were ascertained at different months of the respective year.

Compared to other recipient countries of Afghan refugees neighbouring the country, the number of refugees and asylum seekers is low in the RoT. However, like its neighbours, Tajikistan faces numerous challenges generally and in caring for refugees. The RoT is a fragile post-conflict state with few resources and no functioning welfare system. At only \$816 USD per annum, it has the lowest per capita GDP of all post-Soviet countries.¹² The RoT is not only the poorest of the CIS countries, but ranked 127th out of 187 countries and territories on the Human Development Index in 2011. It is also the structurally weakest post-Soviet country, with limited governmental capacity in all spheres and rampant corruption. The country suffers from weak infrastructure and has limited agricultural and industrial production output.

The lack of employment opportunities inside of Tajikistan has caused nearly half of the adult male labour force to work as migrant workers outside the country, primarily in Russia. This continues to deplete human capital and has had a profound impact on the demographics of the country, leaving many women as heads of households. According to the World Bank, 42% of the country's GDP in 2010 was from

¹² According to UN data from 2011, Tajikistan ranks 160 out of 193 countries worldwide in per capita GDP. See National Accounts Main Aggregates Database, December 2011, United Nations Statistics Division. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)_per_capita#cite_note-7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)_per_capita#cite_note-7).

remittances.¹³ Threats of natural disasters and generalised insecurity, not least as a result of drug trafficking from neighbouring Afghanistan, are other important challenges. Due to the weakness of its institutions, the Tajik state has little resilience to cope with natural disasters, economic crises or any political shocks, including refugee flows.

There are no refugee camps in Tajikistan, but GoT regulations prohibit Afghans who arrived after 2000 from living in the capital city Dushanbe, the Northern economic hub of Khujand, and most border areas.¹⁴ Instead, many refugees settle in the former industrial town of Vahdat, some 20 kilometres from Dushanbe, and in other districts where economic prospects are bleak. Many refugees residing in Vahdat work or study in Dushanbe, or commute to the capital in order to access health services and legal assistance. According to the *Verification and Profiling Exercise of Asylum Seekers and Refugees* conducted by the GoT and UNHCR in 2011 and 2012, 91% of the refugees and asylum seekers in the RoT live in urban settings, with 38% residing in Dushanbe proper despite the legal barriers, 53% in the Districts of Republican Subordination, which includes Vahdat, 6% in Sughd region and 3% in Khatlon.¹⁵

¹³ United Nations Joint Monitoring Programme 2010.

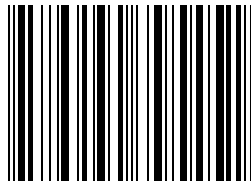
¹⁴ See *supra* note 8.

¹⁵ Department on Citizenship and Work with Refugees (DCWR)/ Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan and UNHCR Representation in Tajikistan, Report on the Joint Verification and Profiling exercise of Asylum Seekers, Refugee and Other Persons of Concern in the Republic of Tajikistan. May 2011 - January 2012. June 2012, p. 19.

DRC's assessment of the living conditions of the Afghan refugees was guided by the following objectives:

- To provide detailed information regarding the conditions of the Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers' households, their socio-economic and living conditions;
- To help DRC and its partners to plan their activities in the country; and
- To collect and provide information to other partners, including state organisations, NGOs, and donors for the purpose of supporting the Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers.

ISBN 978-99947-954-5-1



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