



Afghanistan Information Bulletin

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The year 2002 was truly a dramatic year for Afghanistan, with over 2 million refugees and internally displaced Afghans returning home under the Refugee Agency's largest repatriation program in recent history. The voluntary return of hundreds of thousands of Afghan families after years of fleeing conflict was undoubtedly a positive sign for the country's future, but it also posed an enormous challenge for the international aid community.

UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) launched this year a repatriation program worth US\$ 271 million to support Afghans returning voluntarily. But already by the 15th week into the repatriation operation that began in March, the number of homecoming refugees surpassed the initial planning figure of 1.2 million. Aid agencies then adjusted all programs to extend assistance to a total of 2 million returning Afghans in 2002.

Following the initial euphoria of having returned to their homes, many Afghans are now faced with the difficult challenge of re-establishing their lives in a country devastated by a quarter of a century of conflict and years of drought. Humanitarian agencies scrambled throughout the year to provide for the immediate needs of the returning families, especially in remote rural communities, to help them begin to rebuild their lives. But substantive reconstruction aid for infrastructure repair and employment is needed urgently if their returns are to be sustainable.

Afghanistan enjoyed the international support it deserved this year, after a decade of being forgotten by the world. But the peace process has just begun. Much has improved in the course of this year, but security remains a problem in many parts of the country and hundreds of thousands of people remain displaced internally. To reverse the effects of war and drought and building peace in Afghanistan require not only the continued efforts of the Afghan people but also the undivided attention of the international community.

More than 2 million Afghans return home

Despite the fragile infrastructure and the persistent security problems in parts of the country, more than 1.8 million refugees have returned to their homes assisted by UNHCR and the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR). In addition, more than 250,000 internally displaced people have gone home with assistance and another 200,000 Afghans have returned on their own.

The rate of returning refugees has declined toward the winter months, with weekly returns of about 2,000 during December compared to the height of over 100,000 a week in May. Since October, more refugees are returning from Iran than from Pakistan.

<u>Monthly returns</u>		<u>Countries of asylum</u>	
March:	122,000	Pakistan:	1,532,000
April:	298,000	Iran:	261,000
May:	413,000	Central Asia:	10,000
June:	292,000		
July:	303,000		
August:	197,000		
September	107,000		
October	49,000		
November	15,000		
December	6,000 (as at 20 Dec.)		

(These figures are assisted returns.)

There are up to another 4 million Afghans remaining outside the country, including an estimated 2 million in Iran and 1.5 million in Pakistan.

Managing the return flow

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, UNHCR provides transportation allowance ranging between US\$5 and \$30 per person, depending on how far they have to travel to reach their homes. Each returnee family also receives an aid package containing plastic sheets, soap and hygiene cloth, as well as 50kgs of WFP wheat flour.

Refugees requesting repatriation assistance are verified by at Voluntary Repatriation Centers established throughout Pakistan and Iran. A system has been set up also to identify and reject “recyclers” taking advantage of aid and the introduction in September of iris scan technology in Pakistan has proven to be quite effective in discouraging “recyclers”.

Despite the strong will of the Afghans to finally return to their homes, UNHCR considers that the security and living conditions in Afghanistan are not yet sufficient to encourage all refugees to return at this time. The repatriation program aims to facilitate those refugees returning on their own, to support their will and courage to begin rebuilding their lives under difficult conditions.

Winter assistance

Having assisted the return of 2 million Afghans, the current challenge for the aid community is to help the families get through the first winter back home. In support of the government’s winter plan, MoRR and UNHCR estimate that some 550,000 people may face hardships during the cold season, including 290,000 among the returnees and 260,000 of those who remain displaced internally.

Villages in the central highlands are particularly vulnerable as access routes will be cut off in snow. Other areas of concern include the southern region, where more than 400,000 internally displaced people are living in difficult conditions.

The distribution of winter supplies has started in various districts throughout the country to help the most exposed families. By mid-December, over 1,200 families in the north have received winter supplies, which include stoves, blankets, plastic sheeting and tents for some families. About 3,500 families have received additional blankets and stoves in the southern region and another 13,000 families received blankets in Herat.

Meanwhile, UNHCR has acquired over 11,000 tents, 36,000 stoves, 146,000 blankets and nearly 70,000 plastic sheets and 250,000 liters of kerosene. Another 50,000 stoves and 56,000 quilts are being produced through local employment projects and donors have been identified to purchase over 7,700 tons of charcoal and 2.5 million liters of kerosene. Other aid agencies are providing more food, clearing access roads and assisting also the destitute among the general population, including those in cities.

Shelter and water assistance

UNHCR gives priorities to assist Afghan returning to rural areas, where conditions are worse than in urban cities and the presence of aid is less. As agreed with the Afghan government, the provision of drinking water and shelter is the crucial first step toward helping families restart their lives in desolate villages.

With partner agencies, UNHCR has helped rebuild this year 3,000 wells in the communities of return. In addition, more than 2,200 baths and 5,300 latrines have been constructed throughout the country and returnees were employed to repair canals and minor waterways.

The Agency’s shelter program providing material (door, windows, timber, nails, hammer, shovel, door hinges and pick axe) to build 40,000 houses, has benefited more than 300,000 people this year, despite the logistical challenges in keeping up with a large flow of returning Afghans especially to rural communities.

Internally displaced Afghans

The strategy for UNHCR and MoRR has been to focus assistance in villages of origin to create conditions for the return of not only refugees but also internally displaced people. So far, the Agency has assisted over 250,000 internally displaced people to return while another estimated 200,000 have gone home on their own. But there are still some 700,000 internally displaced Afghans in the country. The displacement problem is particularly acute in southern provinces, where an estimated 400,000 people are living away from their communities due mainly to the severe drought but also due to ethnic tension in the north.

Regional breakdown of IDPs	
North:	51,000
South:	413,000
Center:	124,000
East:	70,000
West:	66,000
Estimated TOTAL:	724,000

Another problem in the south is the displacement near the border towns of Spin Boldak on the Afghan side and near Chaman in Pakistan. In response to both governments' concerns about security at the border, UNHCR has agreed to relocate the displaced families to a new temporary settlement in Zhare Dasht, west of Kandahar, where they can be better assisted. Since the relocation began in August, nearly 5,000 families have voluntarily moved to this temporary site, but there are still some 30,000 people who insist on staying near the border because of better job opportunities in the area.

Together with the Afghan authorities, UNHCR is working to address the root-causes of displacement so that people can eventually return in safety. The displacement of Pashtuns from the north due to their perceived affiliation with the Taliban regime is only the latest in the cycle of violence that involved persecution of various ethnic groups in the past. But as a first step to allow the return of Pashtuns and to encourage co-existence, the Agency has facilitated the creation of a Return Commission, composed of the leaders in the north and the Afghan government, to begin dealing with claims of abuses and disputes in the north.

But there are still many issues that cannot be solved by UNHCR alone. To reverse the effects of drought in farming communities, for example, requires the involvement of actors beyond humanitarian agencies. Other UN agencies -- both political and development -- are looking at the problems of drought, especially in the southern region, so that many of the displaced farmers can return to their land someday. Together with the Afghan government, the UN is also seeking solutions for nomadic Kuchis who lost their livestock and became dependent on aid.

Bridging the gap between relief and development

At the Afghan Support Group meeting in Oslo on 17 December, High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers stressed the importance of security improvements and reconstruction assistance to help Afghan society absorb millions of returning refugees. Without the two, he warned, the success of this year's massive repatriation efforts could quickly be reversed.

The Refugee Agency for its part continues to seek non-traditional ways to strengthen ties between humanitarian relief and longer-term development aid, which are expected to increase next year. UNHCR has transferred this year senior staff to work directly with the Afghan government to help formulate coordinated policies between the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) and the two development ministries: the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development and the Ministry of Urban Planning.

UNHCR is reaching out also to strengthen ties with development agencies, which are not the Agency's usual partners, such as the World Bank, UNDP and ILO. To support the reintegration of

Afghans, the Agency continues to lobby for the inclusion of returnee families and communities in the larger reconstruction and development schemes.

Meanwhile, helping the Afghan government build its capacity is another crucial task for UN agencies so that Afghans can become independent of humanitarian aid. UNHCR this year has spent nearly USD 2 million to help the MoRR departments throughout Afghanistan with office equipment, vehicles and basic skills training. In addition, the Agency's experienced Afghan staff have formed a task force to directly work with the ministry offices and transfer the working knowledge in the areas of administration, programming, refugee protection, information and gender issues.

Tripartite agreements and returns from non-neighboring countries

While the waves of returning Afghans are welcome sign for the country's future, both the government and UNHCR are concerned about the capacity of the war-torn country to absorb the sudden influx of millions of people. The reasons for flight may have ceased to exist for many of the Afghan refugees, but there are still others who need continued international protection. For those wishing to return to Afghanistan, the Agency appeals to the host governments to support them, provided the returns are phased and coupled with development and reintegration support to increase the capacity in the communities of return.

To ensure that the returns are orderly and sustainable, the Afghan government has been discussing joint return programs with governments hosting Afghans, supported by UNHCR. During 2002, three tripartite agreements have been signed with the governments of Iran, France and the United Kingdom. Another agreement is expected to be signed with the Government of Pakistan in early 2003.

Funding

UNHCR's regional budget for the Afghan repatriation program: US\$ 271 million
(October 2001 – December 2002)
Funding level as at 15 December: US\$ 269.7 million (99.5%)

2003 Budget

The Refugee Agency plans to assist another 1.2 million refugees and 300,000 internally displaced people to return to their homes in 2003. As agreed under the government's Transitional Assistance Program for Afghanistan (TAPA), UNHCR's approved budget for the Afghan repatriation program from January to December 2003 is US\$ 194.7 million, which includes 127 million for Afghanistan, US\$ 35 million for Pakistan and US\$ 26.8 million for Iran country operations.

UNHCR Offices and Staff in Afghanistan

UNHCR operates from 27 offices throughout Afghanistan with more than 700 staffers, which includes 600 Afghans. Under the Office of the Chief of Mission in Kabul, its regional sub-offices are in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Gardez.

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