

Afghanistan Situation: Afghan Returns Emergency Update #9

(12 September 2025)



At Torkham border, UNHCR receives and assists Afghan returnees from Pakistan amid the aftermath of the devastating 31 August–1 September earthquake. UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

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HIGHLIGHTS

- **More than 2.6 million Afghans** from Iran and Pakistan have returned so far in 2025, with the 31 August earthquake in Afghanistan exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.
- **A ban by de facto authorities in Afghanistan on national female UN staff access to work** is disrupting humanitarian operations. The UN is [strongly advocating](#) for their full access.
- **Pakistan's Proof of Registration (PoR) grace period expired on 31 August**, putting many Afghan refugees at risk of forced returns.
- **The Afghanistan situation remains critically underfunded**, with only 29% of the required \$478 million for 2025 received. Additional support is needed to scale up the response to multiple emergencies. UNHCR's [updated regional returns appeal](#) calls for \$258.6 million.

Operational Context

Afghanistan is facing a [deepening humanitarian crisis](#), fuelled by a deteriorating human rights situation, prolonged economic hardship, recurring natural disasters and limited access to critical services. The large-scale return of 2.6 million Afghans from Iran and Pakistan in 2025 have further strained resources.

The catastrophic earthquake in eastern Afghanistan on 31 August has compounded vulnerabilities. An estimated 498,800 people are in need of humanitarian assistance. In response, the OCHA-led multi-sectoral [Eastern Region Earthquake Response Plan](#) was launched, targeting around 456,000 people in high-intensity impact areas, particularly those whose homes were severely damaged or destroyed. US\$139.6 million is required to deliver life-saving assistance over the next four months (September–December 2025). As part of the inter-agency response, UNHCR has [prioritized three key areas](#) based on identified needs: needs assessments to guide interventions, emergency shelter and essential items, and protection support for the most vulnerable, including recent returnees.

In Pakistan, the second phase of the ‘Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan’ (IFRP) began in April 2025, targeting undocumented Afghans and holders of Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC). On 31 July, the Government expanded the plan to include Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders. The expiry of the PoR grace period on 31 August triggered a sharp rise in returns: in August alone, returns increased by 273%, while deportations rose by 191% compared to July, coinciding with the start of Phase 3 of the IFRP. The end of the grace period has heightened uncertainty and fears among Afghans, as returns continue despite the protection risks. Alongside the returns crisis, recent floods in Pakistan have affected communities in Shangla and Swat districts. UNHCR, through the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, has provided core relief items (CRIs) and shelter kits to flood-affected families, with discussions ongoing on further support.

In Iran, conditions for Afghans have become increasingly precarious following the expiration of Headcount Slips on 20 March and the rollout of a regularization and return scheme affecting two million Afghans. Daily average returns from Iran were slightly higher this week, with approximately 7,400 returns (compared with 7,100 last week). Many Afghans also continue to report discrimination and harassment.

In Tajikistan, borders remain open only to those with valid passports and visas. At the same time, the Government has carried out arbitrary deportations, including of recognized refugees and asylum-seekers, generating deep anxiety and distress within the community. Recent announcements and media reports have heightened concerns about the safety and rights of those affected.

Against this backdrop, UNHCR calls on all countries in the region to ensure Afghan returns are voluntary, safe, and dignified. However, many Afghans are returning involuntarily, often arriving without belongings or the means to support themselves. UNHCR and partners are on the ground providing life-saving assistance at key border points, but the scale and pace of returns are placing significant strain on resources and host communities.

Operational Highlights

Iran

- **Since 1 April 2025, over 1.7 million Afghans have returned from Iran, with more than 2 million returning since the beginning of the year.** Daily returns between 4 and 10 September averaged

7,400 people, which is slightly higher compared to last week's 7,100. *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Iran-Afghanistan Update [here](#).*

- **Return trends and irregular entries at the Iran–Afghanistan and Pakistan–Iran borders.** Recent observations show increased bus movements of Afghan nationals returning through the Dogharoun crossing, with an estimated 36,000 people recorded over the past week. While overall return numbers remain relatively stable, local authorities report a sharp rise in irregular entries from Pakistan into Iran, estimated at around 1,500 people per day. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation closely, including by triangulating data from Afghanistan.
- **Afghans continue to face challenges accessing services, education, and livelihoods.** Families with different types of documentation face difficulties opening bank accounts, enrolling children in school, and obtaining SIM cards. Access to the labour market remains increasingly constrained, even for documented Afghans, amid misconceptions about work rights. UNHCR continues to advocate for equitable access to education, services, and livelihoods to support the protection and well-being of Afghan communities.

Pakistan

- **From 1 April to 11 September, 554,800 Afghans returned to Afghanistan**, including 64,500 deportees (12%). Most were undocumented (53%), followed by ACC holders (10%), PoR card holders (35%) and asylum-seekers (2%).
- The proportion of PoR card holders among returnees rose from 6% in April to 21–23% between May and July. **This figure increased sharply in August, reaching 61% (87,200).** *For more details, see the latest UNHCR CORE Pakistan-Afghanistan Update [here](#).*
- **Afghan nationals in Pakistan face serious protection challenges.** Detentions and deportations continue to be reported across several provinces. Families face heightened risks of separation, limited access to essential services, and increased vulnerability due to fear of arrest or harassment. Communities report challenges in securing housing, livelihoods, and basic needs, highlighting ongoing humanitarian concerns. UNHCR continues to advocate at all levels to ensure dignified returns and respect for the rights of Afghan nationals.
- **Helpline calls highlight escalating protection concerns.** Afghan refugees continue to report unlawful detentions, police raids, forced deportations, harassment, and eviction threats. UNHCR's helpline received multiple reports from Attock, Quetta, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Taxila, with urgent cases referred to UNHCR legal teams. Refugees also report limited access to education, child mental health support, and additional challenges resulting from the impacts of the recent floods. Through counselling, legal aid referrals and guidance, UNHCR is addressing these complex protection needs, but sustained international support remains critical so that refugees can access safety, services, and durable solutions.

Afghanistan

- **UNHCR and partners maintain a presence at key border entry points** – Islam Qala (Herat), Milak (Nimroz), Torkham (Nangarhar), Spin Boldak (Kandahar) – scaling up protection, coordination, and preparedness in response to evolving return trends. Border monitoring has highlighted significant

protection challenges faced by Afghan returnees from Iran, including limited access to essential services and instances of discrimination.

- **UNHCR continues to work closely with UN agencies and other partners to support returnees and promote sustainable reintegration.** Using an area-based approach, UNHCR targets 20 province-level Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs). These areas are selected based on several factors, including the ratio of returnees to host communities, previous UNHCR and UN investments, and findings from assessments. The approach focuses on high-return areas as models for predictable interventions, which enhance host communities' absorption capacity and enable the delivery of assistance and services to those in need.
- **The suspension of Encashment Centres is affecting returnee support.** UNHCR has had to suspend all Encashment Centres in Afghanistan following instructions from the de facto authorities restricting national female staff from UN premises. Female staff are essential in enabling Afghan women and families to safely access assistance, including cash support and related services. This suspension comes at a critical time, as thousands of Afghans return from Iran and Pakistan, many in vulnerable conditions. On 7 September, the UN [issued a public statement](#) calling for the lifting of restrictions and on 12 September UNHCR issued a [briefing note](#) on the dire returns situation. UNHCR continues to [advocate with de facto authorities](#) at all levels for the immediate resumption of female staff access, which is critical for an effective and inclusive humanitarian response.
- **UNHCR strengthens shelter and support at Islam Qala (Herat).** During the reporting period, UNHCR provided three Rubb Halls for family housing and four Refugee Housing Units (RHUs) for a temporary health facility, with plans to expand protection and assistance as the compounds become operational. These measures aim to ensure returnees are assisted safely and with dignity.



Returnees receive various forms of assistance, including cash-based interventions, CRIs, and referrals to appropriate services. © UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

- **Returnee inflows rise in Milak (Nimroz), with UNHCR support ensuring protection and services.** Compared to last week, overall returns increased by around 25%, with voluntary returns up nearly 40%. UNHCR and partners assisted around 200 returnees with mobility needs, provided luggage support to over 300 households, and referred nearly 500 households to essential services. Legal awareness sessions reached more than 3,100 returnees, with protection concerns addressed as needed. Border monitoring facilitated the screening of approximately 12,700 returnees and deportees. UNHCR continues to advocate with de facto authorities to address challenges affecting returnees, including access to housing, livelihoods, and essential services.
- **Torkham Encashment Centre faces operational challenges due to suspension.** Between 1 and 10 September 2025, UNHCR assisted around 22,000 returnees through Voluntary Repatriation (8,400) and FARE (13,000) cash assistance programmes before the suspension of activities. Over

the past few days, return rates have slowed, partly due to the recent earthquake and suspension of activities. UNHCR continues to advocate with de facto authorities to promote safe, dignified, and uninterrupted access to services for returnees.

- **Spin Boldak (Kandahar) border implements new procedures to manage returnees.** Since 4 September, new crossing procedures introduced by the de facto authorities allow only 1–2 family members to accompany trucks with household items, while others cross via the pedestrian gate and reunite at the Transit Gate for joint screening. While these measures were introduced to streamline processes, they have created logistical challenges for families.
- **The top three protection services requested upon arrival** by Afghan returnees from Iran were documentation and legal assistance (66%), family reunification support (28%), and information on services and assistance (14%). The top three needs upon arrival were food (89%), housing or accommodation (83%) and financial support (82%).
- **The top three protection services requested upon arrival** by Afghan returnees from Pakistan were documentation and legal assistance (87%), information on services and assistance (33%), and protection services for children (30%). The top three needs upon arrival were housing (84%), food (82%), and financial support (78%).

Tajikistan

- **Forced returns from Tajikistan continue despite protection concerns.** Since 1 April, around 1,450 Afghans (including some 550 women and 330 children) have been deported, with most occurring in the past two months. Families are being removed without due process, legal assistance, or the chance to appeal. UNHCR is coordinating on both sides of the border to verify cases, provide protection interventions and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, and support vulnerable families left behind in Tajikistan. Advocacy with the Government continues to halt forced returns and ensure fair asylum procedures in line with national and international obligations.

UNHCR Earthquake Response

- **UNHCR and partners are providing life-saving shelter, NFIs, and protection support to displaced families in eastern Afghanistan.** Around 1,100 family tents, 900 NFI kits, shelter repair toolkits, blankets, and 700 winter clothing kits have been delivered across Kunar, Nangarhar, and Laghman by UNHCR, cluster partners, IOM, and Shanti Volunteer Association. These interventions protect families from harsh weather and address basic household needs. Complementing these efforts, the [OCHA-led emergency plan](#) has appealed for \$139.6 million to assist 456,000 people. UNHCR leads on shelter, NFIs, and protection, but additional resources are urgently needed to replenish stocks and maintain readiness amid ongoing large-scale returns and future humanitarian needs.
- **UNHCR is expanding protection support for affected communities.** Priority areas include mental health, prevention and response to gender-based violence, child protection, and assistance for those with specific needs. A rapid protection assessment is planned across all affected areas. While female partner staff participated during initial distributions, recent restrictions have limited their involvement. UNHCR continues advocacy at both local and national levels to ensure national female staff can fully participate in delivering these critical services.

Financial Information

The Afghanistan situation this year is only funded at **29% against the required \$478 million**. UNHCR appreciates the generosity of donors who have stepped up to support the Afghanistan situation response with earmarked, softly earmarked and unearmarked contributions, ensuring life-saving assistance reaches those most in need:

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