

AFGHANISTAN QUARTERLY PROTECTION MONITORING SUMMARY

JANUARY TO MARCH 2026



Figure 1: Thousands of Afghans return via the Islam Qala border in Herat as mass returns from Iran surge, with many arriving in difficult conditions and limited belongings. @UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

**373 assessments** conducted**2,706** persons reachedCoverage: across 28 districts in **15 provinces****55%** of interviewed households are headed by women. Out of the overall household members, **51%** are female.**10% heads of households** with disabilities

INTRODUCTION

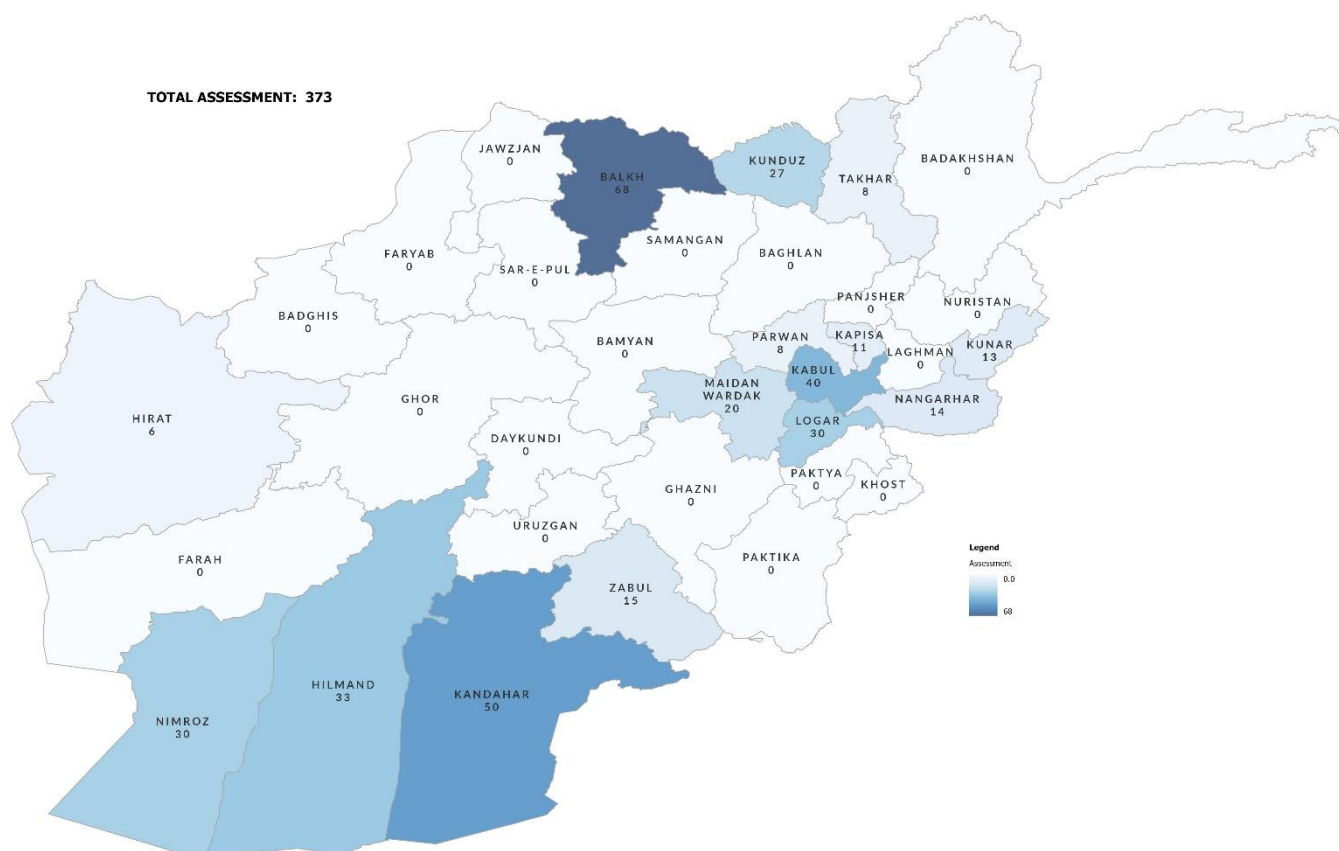
In Afghanistan's complex protection context, characterized by continued returns, ongoing displacement, economic hardship, and sustained protection risks, Community-Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM) plays a central role in informing protection analysis and response. CBPM enables UNHCR and partners to systematically collect community-reported information on protection risks, vulnerabilities, and coping mechanisms affecting returnees, internally displaced persons, and host communities. By generating regular, area-specific evidence, CBPM supports the identification of priority protection concerns, facilitates the monitoring of protection trends over time, and informs UNHCR programming, coordination, and advocacy efforts.

The analysis presented in this report is based on data collected through UNHCR's CBPM tools in the first quarter of 2026, including household-level surveys, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). These tools are designed to generate evidence-based information on the protection needs and risks faced by returnee, displaced, and host communities, and to inform UNHCR programming, strategic decision-making, and advocacy, while also feeding into the [Afghanistan Protection Cluster's analysis](#) and information products. Survey locations are selected based on the concentration of returnees and displaced populations. The CBPM covers UNHCR population groups of concern, including returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), IDP returnees, refugees and asylum seekers, as well as members of host communities.

This report presents the findings and analysis of the CBPM exercise for the first quarter of 2026, providing an overview of key protection trends and highlighting the main findings during the period from January to March 2026.

KEY Highlights

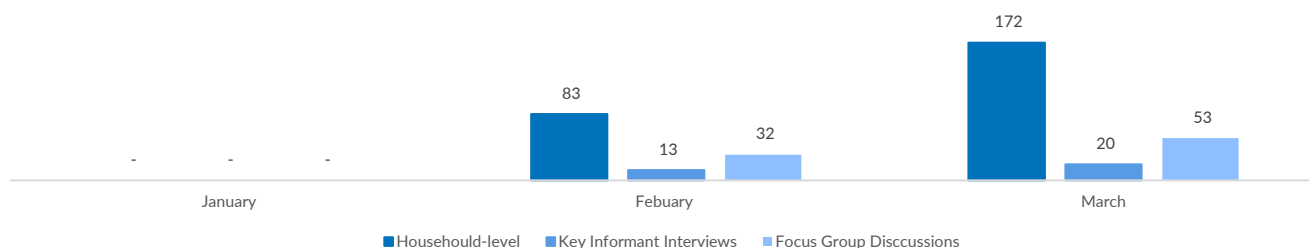
- **Women and girls** continue to face significant challenges in accessing basic services and assistance, reflecting systemic discrimination and movement restrictions. CBPM data also indicates widespread GBV risks.
- **Among the households surveyed, 71% have at least one family member lacking civil documentation.**
- **In addition, 59% of heads of household** reported experiencing one or more vulnerabilities, such as being a female head of household (17%), child spouse/parent (8%), older person at risk (4%), being unable to work-elderly person (4%), lactating women (4%), and persons with life-threatening health conditions (3%).
- **Food assistance** was the most crucial need highlighted by the households surveyed.



Many families reported having resorted to harmful coping mechanisms, such as borrowing money (29%), skipping meals regularly or reducing meal sizes (13%), relying on support from friends/family in Afghanistan (8%), or other harmful practices. These harmful coping mechanisms often arise from poverty and limited livelihood opportunities, forcing families to take desperate measures to meet their basic needs. This in turn triggers protection concerns, including increased risks of child labor, forced marriage, or child marriage. The findings highlight the strong linkages between socio-economic vulnerability, displacement status, and protection risks, requiring integrated programming responses across different sectors

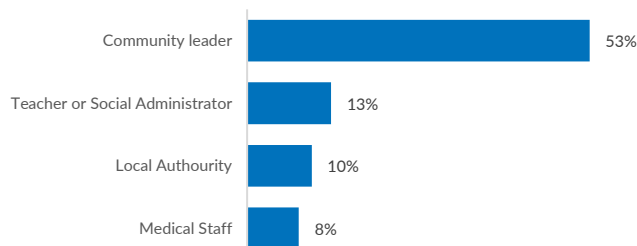
OVERVIEW OF THE DATA COLLECTED

Number of CBPM Assessments



- During the first quarter of 2026, a total of **255 household monitoring visits** were carried out across **15 provinces (27 districts)**, covering approximately **1,814 individuals**. A total of **85%** of interviews were conducted **in person**, and **15%** were conducted **by phone**. The use of remote modalities was necessary due to continued restrictions on the movement of women and girls, as well as on Afghan female humanitarian staff. **Female-headed households** made up **55%** of all household interviews. Among all heads of household, those aged **35–44 years** represented **29%**. Meanwhile, households headed by individuals aged **45–54 years** accounted for **33%**, and those headed by individuals aged **25–34 years** accounted for approximately **19%** of households surveyed.
- 89%** of households interviewed were **returnees**, reflecting UNHCR's concern for protection risks faced by this demographic group. Most respondents were women and children. Female-headed households represented **55%** of surveyed households. **UNHCR made strong efforts to ensure the participation of female staff** and capture the voices of women and girls despite severe restrictions.
- Rural areas** represented **48%** of all households surveyed, compared with **29%** in **urban locations**. This underscores UNHCR's sustained commitment to identifying protection risks and assistance gaps in remote and hard-to-reach locations, including in Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs).
- Assessments also included 33 key informant interviews (KIIs)** conducted across **15 provinces and 22 districts**. **37%** of key informants **were women**, mainly due to limited mobility and access constraints. **The largest share of key informants** came from **host communities (55%)**, followed by **returnees (23%)**.
- Most KIIs were conducted in urban areas, which comprised 43% of respondents, whereas 30% were from rural settings. Most key informants were aged 35–44 years (28%), followed closely by those aged 45–55 years (28%).

Key Informant Type



Key informants were purposively selected based on their direct engagement with communities and their knowledge of local dynamics, services, and protection issues, ensuring the collection of relevant and context specific qualitative insights.

To complement the quantitative household and key informant data with qualitative information, UNHCR's partners conducted a total of **85 focus group discussions** in **15 provinces (25 districts)**, engaging

approximately **859 men, women, boys, and girls** of different age groups and vulnerabilities. **46%** of participants were **returnees**, followed by **host community members (23%)** and **IDPs (20%)**. Despite efforts to employ remote modalities, **female participation remained lower** than male participation, with men aged 18 and above accounting for an average of 38% of participants, compared to 23% for

women aged 18+. This disparity reflects access and participation constraints for women, including limitations on mobility, availability, and engagement in mixed or remote consultation modalities.

- To mitigate this imbalance, **UNHCR increased the proportion of women engaged through household surveys and key informant interviews.**

IDENTIFIED VULNERABILITIES



59% of HHs reported vulnerabilities (affecting **64% female HHs**)



35% of returnees and 29% of IDPs experienced stress affecting their day-to-day life



10% of heads of households reported disabilities

- According to the CBPM assessment conducted in the first quarter of 2026, **64% of female-headed households** were identified as having at least one vulnerability. **These vulnerability categories included lactating women, pregnant women, child spouses or child parents, single parents or primary caregivers, elderly persons unable to work, female child caregivers, and women, children, or older persons identified as being at heightened protection risk.**
- According to the CBPM survey conducted in the first quarter of 2026, **35% of returnees (documented/undocumented) and 29% of IDPs** indicated that they or their family members had experienced feelings of stress that affected their day-to-day life, pointing to a high prevalence of MHPSS issues among the surveyed population. **The main stressors identified were lack of livelihood opportunities, food insecurity, loss or lack of income, restrictions on employment, unavailability or lack of access to services, denied access to education and denial of services and opportunities.** The behavioral changes observed in the household include family members appearing **withdrawn, violent/aggressive loss of appetite, self-harm and suicidal tendencies.**
- **CBPM monitors observed that 72% of women, girls, children, persons with disabilities, or individuals with specific legal or protection needs were unable to access specific services** such as **legal, protection case management, MHPSS, and civil documentation.** In addition, **58% of households (both male and female)** reported that **they would not know where to access services** for women and girls in case someone in their community experienced violence, highlighting both the lack of available GBV services as well as the limited awareness among community members about where to seek support.

SAFETY & FREEDOM

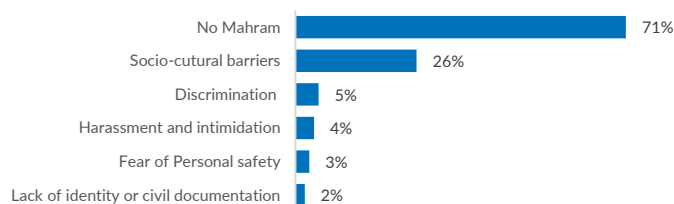


46% mention community areas off-limits for women and girls

- **46% of households surveyed mentioned that there are places in the community that women and girls cannot access, highlighting the significant challenges in movement and participation in public life.**

- The **main reasons for movement limitations** include mahram (male chaperon) requirements for females (71%), socio-cultural barriers (11%), discrimination (5%), harassment (4%), fear of personal safety 3%, and lack of identity and civil documents (2%) and safety concerns related to explosive hazards (2%).

Movement limitation reasons



- **Households reported various protection risks within their communities, particularly affecting girls and women. For girls, the main protection concerns identified** were early and forced marriage (22%), family violence (13%), harmful practices (9%), violence against children (9%), community tensions and tensions within the household (9%), as well as harassment and intimidation (4%). In contrast, the **primary protection risks reported for women** included violence against women (25%), family violence (19%), harmful practices and community tensions (10%), and tension or friction within the household (7%). These findings indicate persistent protection risks within the community, with girls and women facing distinct but overlapping vulnerabilities related to violence, harmful practices, and social tensions. **They also point to widespread GBV risks** which often remain underreported due to stigma and widespread normalization (including legalization) of harmful practices, including economic, psychological and physical violence.

CIVIL DOCUMENTATION



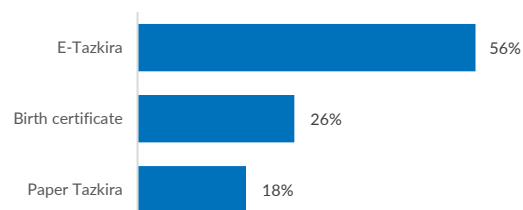
71% reported lack of **civil documentation**



63% reported barriers **accessing legal services**

- Around **71% of all households** surveyed have members who need civil documentation. **Refugee returnees (80%), undocumented returnees (61%), and IDPs (53%)** interviewed display significantly higher rates of members with missing documents, followed by IDP returnees at 50%.
- The **main documents missing** are the e-Tazkira, followed by birth certificate, and paper Tazkira. The **main reason that these documents were never obtained** include unaffordable fees, long and difficult procedures, socio-cultural barriers and the households interviewed lack knowledge about the procedures.
- In addition, the findings reveal that **63% of respondents reported being unable to access legal services**, including civil documentation and Housing, Land and Property (HLP). **Women and girls were disproportionately affected (23%, and 21%)** due to factors such as services not being available, high costs, no mahram, travel distance, discrimination, and inability to travel to their place of origin.
- **The lack of documentation has a significant impact**, with **38% of respondents reporting that it prevents them from accessing basic services**. It also poses barriers to receiving government or humanitarian assistance, access to education, and contributes to restrictions on movement.

Missing Documents



ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE AND PSEA



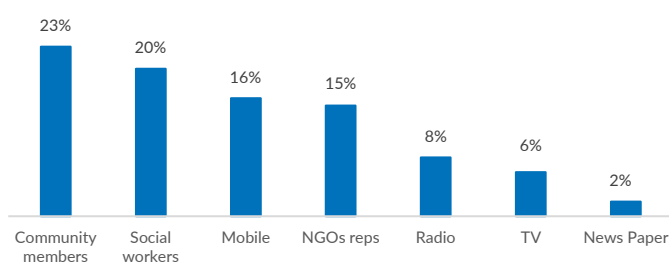
82% unaware of feedback mechanisms



56% reported no system to report misconduct, exploitation, or abuse by aid workers.

- According to CBPM findings, **82% of respondents were not aware of any feedback or reporting mechanism** to raise concerns or complaints related to humanitarian services or staff behavior. Among those who had received information about the basic services in their area, **23% mentioned community members** as the **main source of information**, followed by **social workers (20%)** and **mobile communication channels (16%)**.

Preferred source of Information



- Around **13% of households** reported **facing external interference** when accessing humanitarian assistance. This includes interference **by community leaders in beneficiary selection or distribution processes, discrimination by local authorities or community members, interference from DfA, and lack of female staff among aid service providers**, which particularly affected women and girls' access to services.

- Findings show that communities have **limited awareness about how aid workers are expected to behave and how to report concerns**.

Specifically, 59% of households said people do not know what conduct to expect from aid workers, while 56% indicated there is either no reporting system or they are unaware of one for misconduct, exploitation, or abuse, including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). This highlights a concerning lack of clear information on community rights, expected standards of aid worker behavior, and safe reporting. **The main reasons for not reporting exploitation and abuse** included lack of knowledge about where to report, the absence of a reporting system, lack of awareness, and fear of consequences. **Women and girls (20%, 16%, respectively) were reported to face more difficulties in reporting** due to cultural barriers and movement restrictions.

- In terms of preferred reporting channels**, respondents mentioned **hotlines (28%)** as the most preferred way, followed by **community committees (22%), complaint boxes (19%), and help desks during aid distribution (16%)**.

ACCESS TO SERVICES AND ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

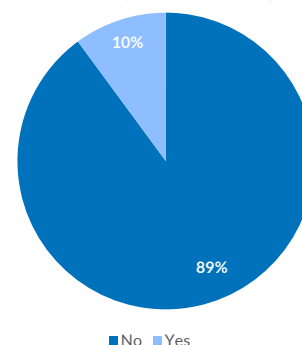


89% mention **food** as the most pressing need

- The CBPM findings show that **89% of all households reported needing food assistance in the past three months**. In addition, households identified several barriers to accessing food assistance, mainly lack of knowledge about eligibility criteria and procedures, interference by community leaders, and limited accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Among female respondents, 41% reported needing food assistance, highlighting the heightened economic vulnerability of women.

Beneficiaries Receiving Food Assistance (Past 3 Months)



- Respondents also face challenges** in accessing **MHPSS services** and **health services**, with **35%** of households indicating a need for each service.
- However, irrespective of the gender of the head of household, **all respondents** highlighted that among those facing access challenges, **women and girls are by far the most affected**, with limited access to **health, legal, education, civil documentation, food, and MHPSS**.
- The assessment findings indicate that **refugee returnees** and **undocumented households (39%)** are the groups most at **risk of eviction** within the next six months.
- Separately, **8% of households reported experiencing HLP-related challenges**, rent disagreements, harassment by landlords and ownership disputes over access and land use, and unlawful occupation of property. The majority of affected households (**74%**) continue to rely on **community elders to resolve HLP disputes**, while the remaining households seek support from **government offices (22%)**, and **faith leaders (4%)**. These findings highlight the need for increased access to legal assistance and formal dispute resolution mechanisms to address HLP issues and better protect vulnerable households.
- Overall, women and girls continue to face significant challenges in accessing the most basic services**, reflecting the systemic discrimination and movement restrictions.
- Other main barriers** to accessing services include high costs (including transportation), unavailability of services, lack of mahram, cultural norms, interference as well as lack of documents.

SOURCE OF INCOME AND COPING STRATEGIES



76% engaged in **informal income-generating activities**

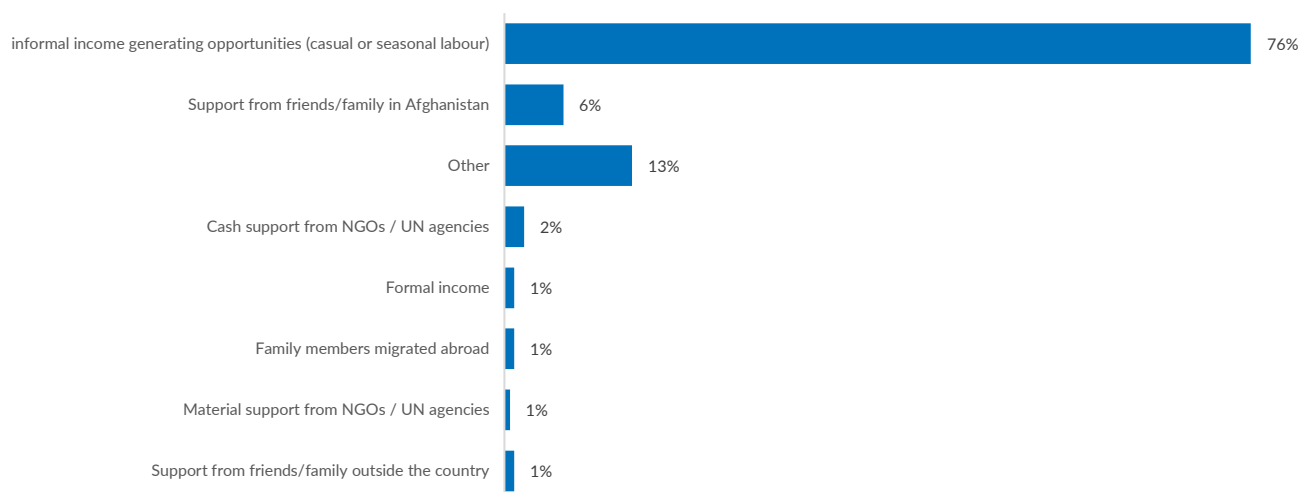


84% reported having **accrued debt**

- According to the findings, **76% of households** rely on **informal income-generating activities**, such as **casual or seasonal labor**, as their main source of livelihood, while **84%** reported having accrued debt to meet their basic needs.

- Due to financial constraints and high poverty, many families have resorted to **harmful coping mechanisms**, with severe implications that especially impact women and children. CBPM data indicate that most **households borrow money (29%)** to cope with their financial problems, the prevalence was even higher for refugees and forced returnees surveyed.
- **Child engagement in income-generating activities** remains a significant protection concern. **27% percent of households** reported that their children are involved in income-generating or labor-related tasks. Boys are primarily engaged in **fetching water and firewood, street vending, and garbage collection**, while girls are mostly involved in **domestic labor, fetching water, and cleaning and cooking**. Of particular concern, **17% of all households surveyed** indicated that children perform these activities during school hours, directly affecting their school attendance and limiting their access to education.

Sources of Income



- **Other coping mechanisms** identified were skipping meals or reducing meal sizes (13%), support from friends and family in Afghanistan (8%), and selling assets (4%) (including livestock, jewelry, furniture, etc.).
- The findings highlight the urgent need to support vulnerable families through integrated programming interventions, including child protection, livelihoods, and community engagement.

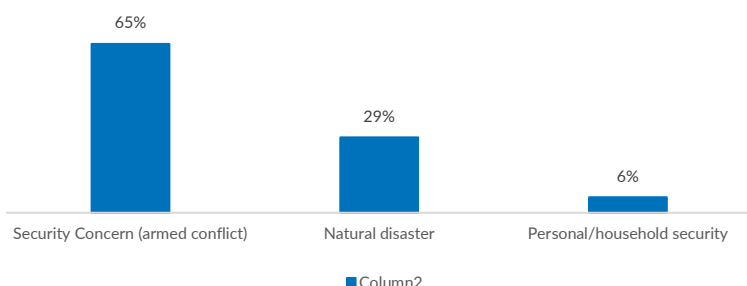
LEADING CAUSES OF DISPLACEMENT, AND INTENTIONS FOR RETURN AND REINTEGRATION



50% of all returnees reported having returned **within the last year**

- The findings show that, among individuals who returned to Afghanistan within the past year, the **main reasons for their initial departure from the country** were security concerns related to armed conflict (65%), followed by natural disasters (29%) and personal or household security reasons (6%).
- In addition, 67% of returnees expressed an intention **to return to asylum countries or move elsewhere within Afghanistan** due to economic hardship, while 33% cited natural disasters as the main reason for their intention to move.

Main reason for returnees Displacement



changes in local climate and weather patterns, including drought, heat waves, changes in rainfall patterns, and flooding.

- A large majority of respondents (94%) reported that no services are available in their community to support households affected by climate-related impacts. **Women and girls were identified** as the most affected, due to increased exposure to water shortages, livelihood pressures, and reduced mobility.

- The findings also indicate that **53% of IDPs displaced in the last three years expressed an intention to locally integrate**, while 6% expressed an intention to return or move onward. Meanwhile, 35% reported uncertainty about whether to return, integrate, or move onward, mainly due to economic hardship and natural disasters.

- CBPM findings also show that 33% of households reported noticeable



Figure 2: Afghans return via Islam Qala border in Herat amid a surge from Iran, many arriving with few belongings in difficult conditions. @UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production