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WHEN RETURN IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

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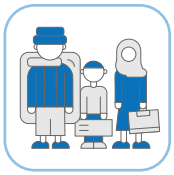
Why conditions of return, predictable financing and local absorption capacity determine whether return of refugees supports stability or fuels protection risks and renewed movement

Return is not the end of the journey

When refugees return, sustainability depends on safe, voluntary return, access to basic services, documentation, livelihoods and community support.

The risk lies in the interaction of these pressures

Resources spent on immediate needs such as food, transport and healthcare cannot be invested in housing, documentation or livelihoods. At the same time, concentration of returns in a few areas increase pressure on housing, services and job markets in communities with limited investment, while restrictions on the rights of women and girls further weaken prospects for sustainable reintegration and recovery.[1]



RETURN CONDITIONS
coerced returns; little preparation; lost assets
higher needs on arrival



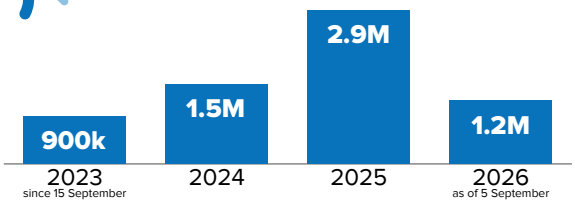
RESOURCE SHOCK
reduced or short-lived cash; funding gaps
spending on basic needs supersedes recovery



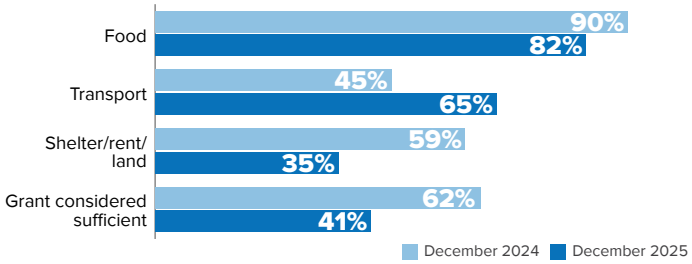
LOCAL CAPACITY
concentrated arrivals; human right violations, limited jobs, housing and services
secondary movements or re-displacement

Afghanistan is seeing one of the world's largest refugee return movements. This is a regional and global stability issue. Returns are happening under pressure, without preparation and into a country unable to cope with the shock.

6.5M Afghan returns since 15 September 2023



How returnees used cash assistance



Since September 2023, Afghanistan received an estimated 6.5 million returns. In 2025, UNHCR monitoring reported that 61% of returnees from Pakistan and 73% from Iran said their return was not voluntary.

The scale and coerced nature of these returns raise serious concerns about Afghanistan's capacity to absorb this population growth, about returnees' ability to reintegrate after years in exile, and what this means for stability and recovery in Afghanistan.

Further funding to Afghanistan is decreasing. UNHCR had to reduce its cash assistance in 2025, heightening returnee families vulnerability. The share able to meet basic needs fell from 62% to 41%. Funds shifted from long-term reintegration to immediate survival: spending on housing and land dropped from 59% to 35%, with more absorbed by transport from borders to areas of origin.

[1] Evidence base: UNHCR 2025 Afghan Returns One-Year Recap; UNHCR Post-Return Monitoring Survey Report (Dec. 2025); Afghanistan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment (May 2024); World Bank Afghanistan Development Update (May 2026).

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What happens when absorption capacity is exceeded?



17% of returnees in 2025 reported their intention to leave their current location or knowing of other returnees who already left Afghanistan again

Returns are highly concentrated, with 67% of returnees settling in just 10 provinces, severely straining local economies, key services, and opportunities. Another 29% relocated outside their province of origin due to shortages in housing, land, and jobs. Although returns drove 4.8% GDP growth in 2025, living standards declined as GDP per capita dropped by 5.6%. Infrastructure is under severe pressure: 52% of returnee households lack adequate living space, while healthcare and education facilities in nearly half of high-return districts were already at capacity in 2025 and now risk collapse.

How can weak reintegration lead to destabilization?



UNHCR 2026 protection monitoring found that 76% of families rely on informal work, and almost a third had children engaged in labour. Faced with destitution, some might resort to illicit activities. Eleven new armed opposition groups have been created in 2026 alone. Another likely outcome is renewed displacement.

Irregular arrivals from South and South-West Asia increased from 15% of arrivals via the Mediterranean in 2021 to 30% in 2025. These dangerous journeys expose people to smuggling, trafficking and exploitation, with preliminary reports indicating that an increasing number of returnees were killed while attempting to leave Afghanistan again to Pakistan and Iran since 2025.

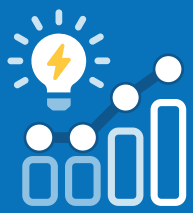
Persistent vulnerabilities and inadequate reintegration support has been shown to increase reliance on negative coping mechanisms, and lead to desperate, dangerous decisions.

What would a stabilizing investment package look like?



- Reintegration strategies that work on restoring access to rights and social protection, especially for those more vulnerable.
- Link immediate assistance to reintegration through civil documentation, housing, livelihoods and local services.
- Prioritize investments in high-pressure areas, supporting both returnees and host communities through flexible, multi-year funding.
- Continued advocacy for returns to be safe, voluntary, dignified and organized; and to ensure legal stay, rights and protection in host countries for those seeking asylum.

Why is data a core part of the response?



Afghanistan already has a strong evidence base across UN agencies, (I)NGOs, the World Bank, and research partners. The UNHCR Microdata Library alone contains 1,081 datasets globally, including 103 studies on Afghanistan. The priority is not more data, but better data sharing, common standards and joint analysis to track returns, protection risks, and reintegration outcomes.

Sustainable return depends on protection-sensitive policies, predictable financing and investment matched to local capacity. Without them, vulnerability, pressure on services and renewed displacement increase.

Prepared by **Data, Identity Management & Analysis Unit (DIMA)** UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific