

Afghanistan Operational Update

April 2007

UNHCR is in urgent need of additional funds for the 2007 assisted voluntary repatriation programme to Afghanistan. This year the repatriation grant has been increased to USD100 per person for Afghan returnees. At the request of the Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, UNHCR exceptionally assisted the return of some 206,000 unregistered Afghans by mid-April 2007. This humanitarian gesture has exhausted the budget foreseen for the regular assisted voluntary repatriation programme in 2007. The office estimates that it will require an additional US\$ 15 million to support the return and reintegration of additional returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

1. Background

Since 2002 over 5 million Afghans have returned home from Pakistan (3.2 million) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (1.8 million) respectively. In 2006 the assisted repatriation programme recorded the lowest level of 139,000 returnees since the start of the large-scale return operations. UNHCR believes that the primary factors behind the declining trend of returns are the decline in security, the economic and social conditions inside Afghanistan, and the long exile of the remaining 3 million Afghans, half of whom were born outside their countries.

Assisted voluntary repatriation takes place within the framework of Tripartite Agreements between UNHCR, the Government of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The agreement on voluntary repatriation with the Islamic Republic of Iran was renewed in February this year. The signing of a new agreement with Pakistan is expected soon. The number of Afghans who will choose to return voluntarily in the coming years is not known at this point. An important determinant will be the ability of the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to advance security, reconstruction, and development.

2. The census and registration of Afghans in Pakistan

The 2005 census carried out by the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR enumerated over 3

million Afghans. During 2005-6 approximately 580,000 Afghans repatriated. In a further joint exercise in the autumn of 2006, the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR registered 2,153,088 Afghans. The original planning figure for the registration was set at 2.4 million indicating that some 350,000 Afghans in Pakistan have not registered.

Registered Afghans received a 'Proof of Registration' card (POR) that gives them the right to a 'temporary stay' in Pakistan for a further three years until the end of 2009. The Government of Pakistan declared that those Afghans who did not register (participation was mandatory) would be subject to the national laws for foreigners. However, it offered a one-off opportunity - a grace period - for those who chose to return home before mid-April.



Peshawar/An Afghan family walking to the UNHCR Hayatabad Repatriation centre/B.Baloch/UNHCR/2007

3. The return of unregistered Afghans from Pakistan

In 2007 UNHCR's repatriation grant has been increased in order to encourage further returns and meet initial reintegration needs. This change in policy was agreed at the respective meetings of the Tripartite Commissions on voluntary repatriation between the Governments of Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and UNHCR in February, in consultation with donors. Following further consultations among the Governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan and UNHCR, it was decided that on an exceptional and time limited basis (until mid-April) unregistered Afghans opting to return should also receive the enhanced assistance. As from April 15th 2007 only registered Afghans in Pakistan are eligible for the repatriation grant.

During the grace period, some 206,000 unregistered Afghans returned under the enhanced repatriation assistance. Of these, some 162,700 have so far arrived in Afghanistan and about 133,000 had received the repatriation grant as of 18 April. The rest are still on their way to Afghanistan.



UNHCR had a capacity to process 12,000 persons per day/B.Baloch/UNHCR/2007.

The policy changes affecting the repatriation grant and the return of unregistered Afghans were introduced in February 2007 at the request of the concerned governments. They were not budgeted for in the 2007 Afghanistan Operation which had originally foreseen a regional repatriation figure of 250,000 within a total budget of US\$ 15 million at a cash grant of US\$ 60 per person.

Supporting the return of the approximately 206,000 unregistered Afghans with an enhanced

repatriation package has had a serious impact on UNHCR's budgeted resources. The return of over

200,000 persons represents expenditure of US\$ 20 million.

Additional funds are now urgently required for the regular voluntary repatriation programme which starts on 30 April 2007. The revised planning figures for the voluntary repatriation of registered Afghans from both Pakistan and Iran have been set at an initial figure of 100,000 persons. This will be reviewed periodically based on the actual rate of return.

4. Managing the return of the unregistered

In six weeks the UNHCR office in Pakistan processed well over 200,000 unregistered Afghans who had decided to return. At the peak of the return movement, the office managed up to 12,000 persons daily. To benefit from UNHCR's enhanced repatriation/reintegration assistance, unregistered Afghans had to show proof of residence in Pakistan during 2005-6 (utility bill, education certificates, medical bills), pass the iris eye scan verification, and undergo an interview. Overall, 30% of applicants were rejected.

Many of the rejected applicants were identified through the iris scan verification as 'recyclers' who had previously benefited from UNHCR assistance, others were unable to prove they were resident in Pakistan. Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) took electronic fingerprints of all those unregistered Afghans who benefited from the enhanced repatriation package during the 'grace period'.

The verification system provided sufficient safeguards to prevent unregistered Afghans in the future to claim UNHCR assistance. Of the 206,000 unregistered Afghans in Pakistan, at least 82% were living in the North West Frontier Province, 13% in Balochistan, 3% in Sindh, and 2% in Punjab. The majority (94%) lived in Pakistan's cities and towns. Only 5.4% were living in camps. The bulk of Afghans were returning to neighbouring provinces in eastern Afghanistan.

5. Prospects for voluntary repatriation of registered Afghans

After several years of exceptionally high returns during which over 5 million Afghans, (some 3.9 million with the direct assistance of UNHCR), returned home, there was a significant decline in repatriation from Pakistan and Iran in 2006. In Pakistan, some 133,000 persons repatriated voluntarily, the lowest number since 2002. From Iran, 5,000 persons returned assisted by UNHCR.

Majority of the returnees were in exile for less than five years. The profile of the remaining three million Afghans in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran is different. Most of the refugees have lived in exile for over 20 years. The data from the registration in Pakistan confirms that approximately half of registered Afghans were born in Pakistan. Many Afghans in both Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran face serious obstacles with respect to access to land or shelter. Poverty is also a significant issue with most families dependent on limited incomes from irregular daily wage labour opportunities.

The security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated markedly in 2006 in the southern, eastern and south-eastern regions. There is ongoing conflict in many districts of the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Pakitia and Khost, areas where many Afghans originate.

The overall figures and patterns of the 2007 voluntary repatriation programme will be influenced by government policies and practices. In Pakistan the Government's plan to close four camps (2 in Balochistan and 2 in NWFP) with a combined population of around 223,000 persons may result in substantial returns.

UNHCR has however underlined the need to identify alternative measures for those Afghans who can not yet return. The main option is relocation to viable sites within Pakistan. Depending on the number of those who opt for relocation, and the absorption capacity and conditions in the relocation areas, some additional support may also be required for site development.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, only registered Afghans holding the proof of registration cards are eligible for the UNHCR enhanced repatriation package.

6. Supporting returnee reintegration in Afghanistan

To date, no major difficulties or patterns of discrimination have been identified in returnee reintegration. By and large, returning Afghans face the same difficulties as those in the local communities. Reintegration challenges are likely to sharpen in future. Majority of the remaining Afghans have been in exile for more than two decades, while some were born outside Afghanistan.



UNHCR is processing unregistered Afghans at Hayatabad repatriation centre/B.Baloch/UNHCR/2007

In 2007 UNHCR will continue to support the immediate reintegration needs of returnees in Afghanistan intervening in the shelter and water sectors, maintaining monitoring functions, and promoting the inclusion of returnees in the Afghanistan Interim Development Strategy 2006-2010.

In view of the scale of overall needs, UNHCR's assistance is focused on the most vulnerable. It is planned that 10,000 shelters will be constructed bringing the five year total since 2002 to over 170,000 units. UNHCR will also work closely with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation to develop the government's land allocation scheme. This initiative has considerable potential and responds to a need that has been consistently identified by many Afghans. However, to scale it up and maintain quality will require improved management and technical capacity development.

A pilot programme with ILO will also be implemented to promote the access of returnees to micro-finance institutions. Studies have indicated that support for small enterprises; self employment and access to credit can be effective

responses to the employment challenge in Afghanistan.

UNHCR will provide support and assistance to Extremely Vulnerable Individuals and women at risk projects through a network of NGOs, charities and the provincial Department of Refugees and Repatriation.

The free and informed decision of Afghans to return has proved to be the single most important contributing factor to their successful reintegration in Afghanistan. Security remains of particular concern. Between March 2006 and February 2007, the number of districts to which UNHCR had direct access decreased. At the beginning of 2007 access to the north and central highlands remained good although this has declined in recent weeks. In all other regions access was below 50%.

UNHCR will maintain its returnee monitoring function both directly and indirectly through its partnership with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. It will appraise the voluntariness of return and keep cross border movements under review.

Ultimately, the key to continued and successful return and reintegration in Afghanistan remains in the improved security, and in raising living standards and employment opportunities through reconstruction and development programmes. UNHCR will therefore place particular emphasis on promoting the inclusion of the return and reintegration issue on the national development agenda. The office will also focus on locations, sectors and programmes that have the potential to encourage and sustain returning Afghans.



Afghan children at UNHCR repatriation centre in Jalozai refugee camp/B.Baloch/UNHCR/2007

7. Budget and Funding

With the enhanced repatriation grant, UNHCR therefore requires an additional USD 15 million for the Afghanistan Operation to support a revised overall total of 300,000 returnees expected to repatriate in 2007. The Government of Pakistan has already generously contributed USD 5 million towards this effort. The revised budget for the sub-region is as follows:

Afghanistan Operation Budget – 2007

Country Program	2007 Budget (Ops/admin)
Afghanistan	67,281,958*
Pakistan	19,053,562
Islamic Republic of Iran	12,747,430
Sub-Region Total Budget	99,082,950
Funds Available/ Earmarked for the South West Asia Operation	36,300,915
% of available funds	37 %

* This figure includes the additionally required USD 15 million.

