The recent history of Afghanistan clearly illustrates the link between improved conditions and resources in regions of origin and the number of asylum seekers who come to Europe and other industrialized countries. During the 1990s, the number of Afghan asylum seekers spreading outside the immediate region climbed dramatically, until they became the largest group arriving in Europe – and industrialized countries in general – in 2001. As conditions in Afghanistan spiralled downwards, the millions of refugees in neighbouring countries lost hope of ever being able to return home. At the same time they felt increasingly insecure in their first countries of asylum. In all, during 2001, Afghans applied for asylum in at least 77 countries across the world, including countries as diverse as Iceland, Chile, and Singapore. Europe, in particular, saw a dramatic increase in numbers with the arrival rate more than doubling between 1999 and 2001.

As a result of the momentous changes in Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001, around 3.5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran have returned home (more than 3 million of them with assistance from UNHCR). The number of Afghan asylum seekers arriving in industrialized countries has simultaneously plummeted by more than 80 percent in the past three years, from 54,000 in 2001 to under 9,000 in 2004. Nevertheless, despite the colossal return movement – the biggest in UNHCR’s history – well over 2 million Afghan refugees remain abroad. The vast majority of them are in Iran and Pakistan. Even though more than half of all Afghan refugees have now gone home, they remain the largest refugee group in the world, with the exception of the Palestinians.

Since 1994, when the Taliban first emerged, some 238,000 Afghans have sought asylum in industrialized countries outside the region. Germany, has received 50,000 since 1994. The next largest recipient is the Netherlands, which has received 36,000 in the same period, followed by the U.K. with 31,500, Hungary with 13,500, and Denmark with 11,500. These numbers are, however, dwarfed by the number of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, which first rose to more than a million in each country in 1981. By the end of the 1980s, they were each hosting 3 million Afghan refugees. Their current totals – just under a million in each country – are their lowest in 24 years. Germany hosts the largest number of recognized refugees outside the region with 47,000, followed by (according to UNHCR estimates) the Netherlands with 36,000, and the U.K. with 24,000. Canada has 15,000 Afghan refugees, mostly cases they have resettled from the region.