

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION

UNHCR's mandate is to provide protection to refugees and to seek durable solutions for them. Among the durable solutions available, voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity remains the preferred solution, in that it is sought by the majority of refugees, including Afghans.

UNHCR's voluntary repatriation operation to Afghanistan is the largest such operation in the agency's history. Since 2002 more than three and a half million Afghan refugees have returned home, mainly from Pakistan and Iran, with the assistance of UNHCR and its partners. In 2005, more than half a million Afghans were assisted to return.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE REPATRIATION TO AFGHANISTAN

UNHCR is responsible for facilitating voluntary repatriation in safety and with dignity, to monitor that treatment is in accordance with international standards and to support reintegration, particularly during an initial phase after return.

The assisted voluntary repatriation from Iran and Pakistan is conducted under the framework of Tripartite Agreements between UNHCR and the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. These agreements outline the duties and responsibilities of each party. UNHCR also has a supervisory role in facilitating, co-ordinating and monitoring the voluntary repatriation and reintegration process.

Tripartite frameworks for return to Afghanistan are also in place with some non-neighbouring countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway.

While operating on the basis of the same principles and standards as the voluntary repatriation from neighbouring countries, these tripartite arrangements introduce safeguards and consultation mechanisms between the host country, Afghanistan and UNHCR for the return of persons considered not in need of international protection.



Arrival of returnees in Afghanistan

PROVIDING RETURN INFORMATION

The provision of information on the prevailing situation in Afghanistan is crucial to help Afghans abroad make an informed decision about whether or not to return. Up-to-date information on the voluntary repatriation programme and conditions in Afghanistan is disseminated through regionally co-ordinated initiatives of mass information. These include radio programmes broadcasted by the BBC Dari and Pashtu services as well as by local radio programmes in Pakistan. Mass information activities also include thematic leaflets which address the most frequently asked questions by refugees in the countries of asylum on relevant issues related to return, for example, access to medical care, to education, to shelter

assistance or to vocational training programmes.

The practice of “Go & See” and “Come & Talk” visits allows for the provision of more targeted information and direct inter-action between refugees and communities as well as authorities from their places of origin. In the first case, representatives of the refugee or IDP communities visit their areas of origin to obtain first hand information on the prevailing situation. During a “Come & Talk” visit on the other hand, representatives of the local community visits refugees or IDPs to provide information and discuss the main concerns of the refugees.



Afghan refugees in Pakistan at a “Come and Talk visit” discussing the situation in their area of origin with a Representative of their home community

TRANSPORT ASSISTANCE

In addition to their personal belongings, many returnees need to bring other valuables with them such as building materials, furniture and livestock.

Different transport arrangements were established for the return from Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian Republics and non-neighbouring asylum countries. Common to all of the models is that at least part of the journey is organised by the returnees themselves. For this purpose, they receive a transportation cash grant as they are the best placed to decide how to use the money. In Pakistan, groups of returnees usually rent a truck, bus or minivan which carries them first to the border and then to their final destination in Afghanistan. The travel assistance in Iran is organised in co-operation with the Iranian authorities who are responsible for the transport up to the border. UNHCR provides the funds for this

and, in partnership with the Afghan government, ensures that returnees reach Herat in Western Afghanistan. Further travel inside Afghanistan is organised by the returnees themselves. The transport grant which returnees from Pakistan and Iran receive varies from US\$ 4 to US\$ 37 per person, depending on the distance to their final destinations in Afghanistan.

Afghans who return from countries further away, such as India or Russia, and who depend on the assistance of UNHCR, are provided with an air ticket to Kabul and those who have onward travel inside Afghanistan receive a transportation cash grant to travel from Kabul to their final destinations.

MANAGING THE REPATRIATION

Afghans who wish to return with the assistance of UNHCR register and sign a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) at a Voluntary Repatriation Centre in Pakistan or Iran or, in other countries of asylum, at the UNHCR offices. Upon arrival in Afghanistan, they must approach the nearest Encashment Centre within seven days from their departure to receive, against one of the copies of the VRF, the transportation cash grant as well as an individual reintegration grant of US\$ 12 per person, allowing the returnees to purchase those items they need most urgently.

Some Encashment Centres are equipped with overnight stay facilities to allow returnees to rest before the final part of their journey home.

The Encashment- and Transit centers are managed by UNHCR, in co-operation with the respective Department of Refugees and Repatriation and the assistance of NGOs.

The system of Encashment Centres not only ensures a structured and orderly return, but also allows for a better protection monitoring and tracking of return movements.



Mine awareness training at the Encashment Centre

Apart from the cash grants, returnees receive a variety of services, ranging from mine awareness training to child vaccination and medical assistance for the most vulnerable.

UNHCR conducts interviews with the returnees to verify once again the voluntary nature of return, to analyse return trends and to assess the main problems returnees faced in the country of asylum and possible challenges regarding their reintegration in Afghanistan. These interviews also serve as the basis for referrals for further assistance.

As a precautionary measure against people benefiting more than once from the cash grants, UNHCR introduced the iris scan verification system for the return programme from Pakistan.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED

Assisted return to Afghanistan by region

Region	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
North	407,386	105,251	185,090	101,105	798,832
East	378,610	91,085	69,835	90,265	629,795
Central	864,206	194,070	314,771	157,323	1,530,370
S.East	3,227	11,477	20,826	104,957	140,487
South	92,856	26,439	68,473	26,342	214,110
West	78,573	46,076	101,439	32,976	259,064
Total	1,824,858	474,398	760,434	512,968	3,572,658

The transport and reintegration cash grant assistance provided by UNHCR constitute a large cash inflow into Afghanistan.

WHAT IS PLANNED FOR 2006

During 2006, an estimated 605,000 refugees are expected to return to their areas of origin.

UNHCR's overall goal in Afghanistan is to facilitate the voluntary, safe and gradual return of Afghans returning from Pakistan (300,000-400,000), from Iran (200,000-300,000) and other host countries (5,000) and assist their reintegration during an initial period of return.



Returnees from Iran

WHAT YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE

UNHCR plans to spend around US\$ 18 million on transport and reintegration cash grant assistance in 2006.

Assistance for returnees from Pakistan and Iran (in US\$)

Average grant per person	Number of returnees	Total cash grants
30	600,000	18,000,000

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

UNHCR maintains a database and daily updated statistics on assisted repatriation figures. The information is distributed periodically for both internal and external audience. Detailed statistical information on the assisted repatriation can be found on:

- www.unhcr.org
- www.aims.org/af