“YOU HAVE NEVER LIVED IN EXILE AND THUS YOU DON’T FEEL ITS DIFFICULTIES. EVEN IF I BUILD A HOUSE IN PAKISTAN, IT IS NOT MY HOMETOWN AND IT WILL NOT BE THERE FOREVER”. MOHMMAD RAHIM, WHO RETURNED AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE LIVING IN PAKISTAN.

UNHCR is mandated to provide international protection to refugees and to seek long-term or durable solutions to their displacement. Among the solutions available, voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity remains the agency's preferred option and presented the one sought by the majority of Afghan refugees.

The Afghanistan voluntary repatriation operation, which is the largest in UNHCR's history, began in March 2002 and has until 2009 facilitated the return of more than 4.3 million refugees returning mainly from Pakistan and Iran.

In 2008, UNHCR assisted 278,484 Afghans who voluntarily returned. UNHCR estimates that approximately 220,000 more refugees might choose to repatriate in 2009.

END OF MASS RETURN

Despite the Afghanistan repatriation operation still being the largest in the world, it is clear that the era of voluntary mass return, as seen in 2002 to 2005 has ended. Large scale returns generated by camp closure, other push factors or even deportation of unregistered Afghans create considerable hardship for those affected and often lead to reverse flows to the country of asylum. Low returns were influenced by the deteriorating security situation, the lack of absorption capacity, and the fact that most of the remaining Afghan populations now in Pakistan (less than 2 million registered) and Iran (some 950,000 registered) have been in exile for more than twenty years, and many were born in the country of asylum.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR REPATRIATION

To guide UNHCR and the relevant host governments as they ensure the integrity of the repatriation process, a tripartite agreement is in place between UNHCR and the Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The agreement outlines the duties and responsibilities of each party, with UNHCR taking a supervisory role in the repatriation and reintegration processes. Discussions with Iran are ongoing regarding renewal of the tripartite agreement.

UNHCR’s role in support of voluntary repatriation is to facilitate safe, dignified returns. This includes monitoring at encashment centres to assess the voluntary nature of return, as well as problems returnees may face in the journey back to Afghanistan. UNHCR further supports initial reintegration once individuals have arrived at their final destinations.

There are also a number of Tripartite Agreements with non-neighbouring countries, including United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, France and Sweden. Similar to the Agreement with Pakistan, these accords confirm that safeguards and consultation mechanisms are available to Afghans interested in voluntary return to Afghanistan.

MASS INFORMATION FOR REFUGEES

UNHCR provides refugees, returnees and IDPs with information on the current situation in Afghanistan through mass information projects that assist Afghans in making an informed decision on voluntary return. Mass information efforts include timely, topical radio programmes in the region produced by BBC Afghan Education Project and broadcasted in Dari and Pashto. Furthermore, UNHCR circulates a series of thematic leaflets which address refugees’ “Frequently Asked Questions” on issues ranging from repatriation procedures and education to the provision of shelter assistance and the land allocation scheme.
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION

TRANSPORT AND REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

UNHCR provides an average of US$ 100, for transportation and initial reintegration assistance, to all returnees who have come back home under the Voluntary Repatriation Programme. The transportation grant provided to returnees from Pakistan and Iran ranges from US$ 12 to US$ 23 per person depending on the distance to the province of origin in Afghanistan. Those returning from countries further away, and who depend on the assistance of UNHCR, are provided a plane ticket to Kabul in addition to the cash grant. Along with the transportation entitlement, all returnees receive an initial reintegration grant of $83 per person. This assistance allows people to procure for immediate needs when reaching their final destinations.

MANAGING REPATRIATION

An Afghan refugee wishing to return to Afghanistan with the assistance of UNHCR must approach UNHCR in the country of asylum to register for return and sign a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF). VRFs are available at Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRC) in Pakistan and Iran and at UNHCR offices in other countries of asylum.

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, returnees must visit a UNHCR Encashment Centre (EC) to receive the transportation and reintegration cash assistance. At the ECs, returnees also have access to a variety of services including mine-awareness training, polio and measles vaccinations for children, basic medical assistance, legal aid, mosquito nets in malaria prone areas and transit centres for overnight staying. There are five ECs (Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Gardez and Kandahar); all of them are managed by UNHCR in cooperation with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR).

ACHIEVEMENTS

For the average Afghan, the transportation and reintegration grants provided by UNHCR are a timely, short-term aid. Measured in terms of the total cash injected into the Afghan economy the value of the grant is substantial.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>From Pakistan</th>
<th>From Iran</th>
<th>From Other Countries</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1,565,066</td>
<td>259,792</td>
<td>9,679</td>
<td>1,834,537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>332,183</td>
<td>142,280</td>
<td>1,176</td>
<td>475,639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>383,321</td>
<td>377,151</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>761,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>449,391</td>
<td>63,559</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td>514,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>133,338</td>
<td>5,264</td>
<td>1,202</td>
<td>139,804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>357,365</td>
<td>7,054</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>365,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>274,200</td>
<td>3,656</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>278,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,495,134</td>
<td>858,756</td>
<td>15,196</td>
<td>4,369,086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above illustrates the number of refugees who have returned to Afghanistan since 2002 from neighbouring and non-neighbouring countries through the voluntary repatriation programme. In total, 4,369,086 Afghan refugees returned from 2002 to 2009 with the support of UNHCR.

2009 EXPECTATIONS

UNHCR expects returns will continue to be substantial in 2009. Pressures to return on Afghans in both Pakistan and Iran remain steady, and on the rise in some areas. In Pakistan, the increasing cost of goods and services and the ongoing conflict in the border regions are compelling push factors. At the same time, the economic and security situation within Afghanistan has not brought favourable conditions for return. It is possible that in 2009, a significant number of Afghans will choose return over the difficulties they are encountering, only to arrive with limited access to land and jobs and in need of continued assistance. Return of refugees from Iran is expected to be similar to recent years’ modest voluntary repatriation levels.

UNHCR maintains a database of regularly updated statistics on assisted repatriation. This information is distributed periodically and posted on the following websites: www.unhcr.org and www.aims.org.af.

1 In spring 2007 UNHCR introduced a six-week long grace period, when non-registered Afghans in Pakistan (commonly referred internally as Non-POR holders, POR: Proof of Registration) were allowed to avail themselves for assisted repatriation. Some 206,125 did so.