

**Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees  
to support  
Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration,  
and Assistance to Host Countries**



**Health, education, and livelihoods in the  
Islamic Republic of Iran**

September 2013



## Context

The Ministry of Interior's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs (BAFIA) is the responsible government department for refugee affairs in Iran. With a population of 840,158 registered Afghan refugees in the country, the Islamic Republic of Iran is second to Pakistan in hosting the largest refugee population in the world. The country is also host to the single largest urban refugee population in the world, with three per cent of Afghan refugees living in 11 settlements and the remaining 97 per cent living in urban and semi-urban areas.

In recent times, the current global financial crisis, socio-economic situation in the region, and the effects of sanctions on Iran have caused hyper-inflation and affected the service delivery of various sectors of the Government. Over the past three years, a number of government subsidies, including those of food, education, and medicine, have been gradually phased out. All of the above has resulted in a dramatic rise in the cost of living with almost daily hikes in the prices of food items and other basic needs. With regard to essential services, health treatment tariffs have seen a 30 per cent rise since 2012, school tuition fees increased by 45 per cent in the 2012-2013 school year from the previous year, and energy prices (gas and electricity) have witnessed a several fold increase in the past year. While the majority of the country's population has been affected by the difficult socio-economic situation, refugees have been particularly hard hit as they are often in a more vulnerable situation than the host population and cannot benefit from social protection measures available to nationals.

## Assisting populations of concern: The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees

While voluntary repatriation remains, in the view of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the preferred durable solution for Afghan refugees, within the overall framework of the Solutions Strategy, programmes are aimed at addressing the current gaps in the interlinking sectors of education, health and livelihoods.

The primary goal of the refugee programme in the Islamic Republic of Iran is to implement durable solutions for registered refugees by enhancing resettlement, facilitating voluntary repatriation, and ensuring sustainable reintegration in return areas by preparing refugees for return. This goal is being achieved by empowering refugees and building human capital through improved access to education and health care, and diversifying livelihood training and opportunities, which will in turn effectively contribute to their sustainable reintegration upon return to Afghanistan.

In Iran, the implementation of the Solutions Strategy focuses on the above-mentioned goal and has designed projects based on four out of the five regional outcomes of the Solutions Strategy: 1. Support to voluntary repatriation; 2. Improved access to shelter and essential social services for refugees, returnees and host communities; 3. Improved and diversified livelihood opportunities and enhanced food security and; 4. Enhanced social and environmental protection of refugees, returnees, and impacted communities improved and resettlement.

The Government of Iran established the National Steering Committee (NSC) in Dec 2012, to oversee the implementation of the SSAR. In May 2013, the NSC endorsed proposals from 22 participating agencies for the Solutions Strategy. The project proposals cover a wide range of services and were consolidated in a programme document: *Summary of Proposals*, which was endorsed by the NSC in late May 2013 - a significant step in the Solutions Strategy process as it allows for the operationalization of the Strategy in Iran. Furthermore, the inclusion in the *Summary of Proposals* of civil society, national and international NGOs, and other UN agencies, which have not traditionally worked on refugee issues, is a significant breakthrough in Iran.

As part of resource mobilization efforts, the National Steering Committee held a Donor Briefing in Tehran on 8 September 2013, where the *Summary of Proposals* was presented to the donor community in Tehran. The Briefing was very well attended and donor countries and other participants were briefed on the different activities of the Strategy in Iran. Resource mobilisation is the joint responsibility of all concerned parties and UNHCR is committed to playing its role in successfully mobilising the resources required for the implementation of Solutions Strategy activities in Iran.

## Protection

BAFIA undertakes the re-registration of refugees under the **Amayesh Scheme**, through which refugees are provided with Amayesh cards. Amayesh cards enable refugees to access basic services, and facilitate the issuance of work permits to refugees. BAFIA commenced the ninth Amayesh re-registration exercise in May 2013. BAFIA has continued to implement the re-registration exercise in a manner that ensures that vulnerable refugees are identified and exempted from all or part of the charges associated with the renewal of Amayesh.

For the Amayesh IX exercise, a list of 209,000 vulnerable refugees, identified through joint efforts of BAFIA and UNHCR, was presented to authorities for exemption from the various charges.

*Voluntary repatriation* to Afghanistan has been characterised by a downward trend in 2013. Between January and August 2013, 6,396 Afghan voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan with UNHCR assistance. At the same period of the year in 2012, the repatriation figure stood at 10,515.

The **resettlement** quota for 2013 stands at 2,422 individuals for processing, and the 2014 target is 2,500 individuals. The resettlement countries from Iran include Australia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, USA (through the Emergency Transit Centre), France, Netherlands and Iceland.

The **Alternative Stay Arrangement (ASA)**, introduced in October 2011, is an initiative by the Government of Iran for Afghan refugees who wish to relinquish their Amayesh card and opt, on a voluntary basis, for migrant status with the issuance of a residence permit to stay in Iran. BAFIA has asked UNHCR to participate in the process to confirm that refugees willingly agree to this change of status. The arrangement would accord additional rights and benefits to temporary resident status holders, particularly as regards mobility and employment. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), recognizes that alternative temporary stay arrangements initiatives for Afghan refugees may contribute to resolving the protracted refugee situation in Iran.

## Education

In line with the *UNHCR Global Education Strategy (2012-2016)*, UNHCR Iran is currently developing a country-level **Education Strategy** that sets out UNHCR's main objectives and activities related to the provision of education to refugees in Iran. In line with the Solutions Strategy, the education programme in Iran aims at ensuring the access of refugees to quality primary, secondary and tertiary education; providing safe learning spaces and environments for refugee children; and ensuring inclusive education for marginalised groups. The Strategy is anchored in a renewed focus on providing refugee education not as a peripheral stand-alone service but as a core component of UNHCR's protection and durable solutions mandate. UNHCR Iran works in close collaboration with BAFIA and the Ministry of Education (MoE) to reach this goal.



UNHCR's strategic approach in 2012 and 2013 has facilitated a strengthened partnership with MoE and has resulted in more favourable conditions for refugee children. In the 2012-2013 school year, 7,000 refugee children in the settlements were exempted from school fees. In total, 309,407 refugee students were enrolled in Iranian schools in 2012-2013 school year, of whom 53% boys and 47% girls; statistics show that the enrolment rate in schools among refugee children increased by 12% from the previous school year.

UNHCR Iran supports 184 university students in various fields of study including engineering, medicine, natural sciences, and business administration under the DAFI Scholarship Programme that aims to build the capacity of refugees to be able to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan upon completion of their studies and voluntary return.

## Health

The current difficult socio-economic situation has had a particularly damaging effect on the health sector; critically impacting the availability of medication and medical equipment, thus compromising the health of the population at large. The current unavailability of many drugs in Iran is exacerbated by the fact that the most advanced lifesaving drugs cannot be made in generic form. These include drugs for heart disease, lung problems, kidney disease and dialysis, multiple sclerosis, thalassemia, haemophilia and many forms of cancer. This has a direct impact on the ability of refugees, especially those who are vulnerable and persons with the five identified special diseases (Haemophilia, Thalassemia, Renal failure/dialysis cases, Multiple sclerosis and Cancer) to manage their conditions.

UNHCR Iran has enjoyed constructive collaborative ties with the Government of Iran, NGOs and national service providers in making **primary, secondary, tertiary health care services** available to all refugees residing in Iran. Through joint collaboration with the Ministry of Health, BAFIA, State Welfare Organization (SWO), Society to Protect Children Suffering from Cancer (MAHAK), Iraqi Refugee Council (IRAC), Association to Protect Refugee Women and Children (HAMI), Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV), Rebirth Society, and Society for Recovery Support (SRS) UNHCR has been able to address the most urgent and critical needs of refugees in the areas of services to persons of concern through the provision of harm reduction activities, training on SGBV prevention, medical referrals, among others.

Through joint collaboration with the Ministry of Interior (BAFIA) and a private insurance company, UNHCR provided complementary health insurance services to over 210,000 vulnerable refugees from July 2012 to July 2013, including up to 1,200 refugees who suffer from the five special diseases (haemophilia, thalassemia, renal failure, cancer and multiple sclerosis).



## Livelihood

The objective of the livelihood programme in Iran is to improve the livelihoods of persons of concern through: a) direct provision of services that enhance refugees' financial, human and social capital, and b) indirect support through influencing the environment – including policies, institutions and market systems where different types of livelihood assets are generated, accumulated and transformed – with the aim to foster a conducive environment for the most vulnerable members of the community to achieve greater self-reliance.

The Government continues to generously support the provision of **technical, vocational, and skills training** as well as revolving fund activities in order to enhance the livelihoods of Afghan refugees in the anticipation of a sustainable voluntary return to Afghanistan. The provision of skills training is vital to enhancing the

human capital of refugees and diversifying their livelihood opportunities to achieve greater livelihood outcomes. Evidence shows that refugees who can build and protect their livelihood assets are more likely to return to their home country when it is safe to do so.