

Afghanistan in short

Main Objectives

- Identify and address the needs of Afghan refugees returning from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan through systematic monitoring in their areas of return, ensuring that basic human rights are respected and that the process of repatriation adheres to international standards.
- Facilitate reintegration, preferably at their places of origin, by helping returnees meet their basic needs during the initial phase after return; implement multi-sectoral Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) jointly with local receiving communities to boost their absorption capacity and make return lasting.
- Work closely with other UN agencies and NGOs to ensure that reintegration projects continue after UNHCR withdraws, and that information on the returnees' circumstances is shared with all concerned, including the countries of asylum.



PLANNING FIGURES

Population	Jan. 2001	Dec. 2001 ¹
Returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran	1,455,000	1,555,000
Returnees from Pakistan	2,368,000	2,468,000
Total	3,823,000	4,023,000

¹ UNHCR estimates that 200,000 Afghan refugees will repatriate in 2001: 100,000 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 100,000 from Pakistan.

TOTAL REQUIREMENTS • USD 8,584,506

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Recent Developments

The ongoing conflict between the Taliban and the United Front has caused tens of thousands of civilians to flee their homes (and the country) over the past few months. It is estimated that some 60,000 people have been displaced from areas of Kunduz and Takhar provinces and forced to flee towards the border with Tajikistan and into Badakhshan, the last province still controlled in its entirety by the opposition. It is difficult for humanitarian agencies to gain access to many of the newly displaced persons in the north-eastern provinces. Their circumstances are reported to be extremely precarious, with win-

ter fast approaching. Afghanistan could be facing its worst humanitarian crisis in several years, mainly because of the effects of the drought which has exacerbated already severe food insecurity affecting large segments of the population, including the displaced.

With the former political headquarters of opposition leader Ahmad Shah Masood now in the hands of the Taliban, many of the newly displaced Afghans are camping out in the open and some could soon be making their way to one of the neighbouring Central Asian states. UNHCR has therefore asked the

Government of Tajikistan to keep its borders open for any Afghan refugees who might decide to cross. Tajikistan has expressed concern that the conflict may spill over into its territory and that armed elements may be mixed with fleeing civilians. More than 28,000 Afghans have recently crossed into Pakistan.

Refugees have continued to return to the more stable central and eastern provinces of Afghanistan, but UNHCR's reintegration programme has been hampered by a severe and persistent drought and the Taliban's restrictions on the employment of women by UN agencies. The main challenge is how to render return sustainable. Because of the drought, income-generating opportunities are at best limited for those returnees who own land, and almost non-existent for those not engaged in agriculture.

The situation in western Afghanistan – an area which recently received large numbers of returnees through the Joint Programme established by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and UNHCR – is relatively calm and the economy in the regional centre of Herat is comparatively dynamic. The Joint Programme has so far proved successful in assisting more than 116,000 Afghans to return to peaceful areas unaffected by the drought and will remain in place until the end of 2000.

Constraints

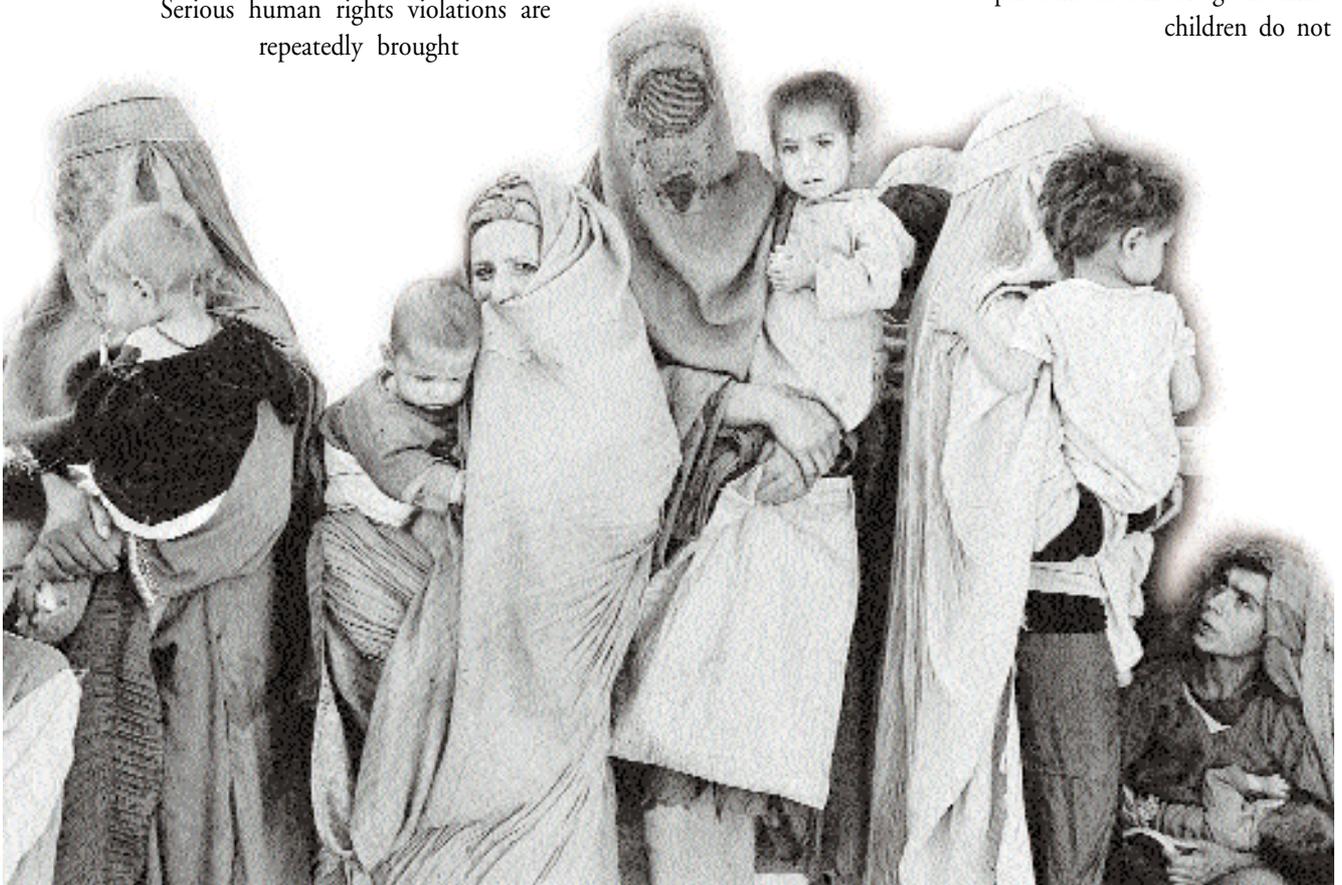
More than two decades of civil war have had an enormous impact on the living conditions of the Afghan people.

Serious human rights violations are repeatedly brought

to the attention of the international community. The prospects for returnees are dismal: widespread poverty and unemployment, limited food security, no significant rehabilitation or development projects, or private sector investment.

The Taliban's recent reorganisation of the public sector has exacerbated urban poverty. Several central ministries have been downsized, including the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education. Female teachers who are no longer allowed to work, but were for a time still receiving salaries, have now lost their income as well. This situation has been further compounded by the aforementioned drought which has affected most areas of Afghanistan. Rain-fed crops have failed almost everywhere and owners of livestock have experienced great losses. Criminality is on the increase, as is the illicit drug production that has helped finance the war for most of the past decade. Furthermore, the population has to contend with an almost complete lack of basic services. Health care and education are extremely limited or non-existent. Infrastructure (electricity, water, transport, communications) is unreliable or non-existent. In some relatively peaceful areas, normal life could resume, were it not for landmines and unexploded ordnance, destroyed houses, poorly maintained or ruined irrigation systems and limited economic opportunities.

Life expectancy in Afghanistan is 43 years; infant mortality 257 for every 1,000 live births. Access to health care is very limited, particularly for women. It is estimated that only one woman in eight has access to maternity health care. Eighty-two per cent of school-age returnee children do not



attend school, either for lack of schools or because children are required to work, to contribute to family income. In general, girls are forbidden to attend school (even informal home-based schools) beyond the age of 12. Women's freedom is severely curtailed, in particular by a prohibition on work or everyday tasks outside the home (unless accompanied by a male relative).

The Taliban movement is not recognised by the international community as a legitimate government. UN sanctions have been imposed on the Taliban due to terrorist-related charges. The ongoing civil war, especially the recent summer offensive, has severely hampered the repatriation and reintegration operation, as security restrictions for international UN staff have limited UNHCR's ability to provide assistance in some areas.

Staff in Afghanistan work under exceptionally stressful conditions. Humanitarian agencies have often been victims of armed robbery, particularly for telecommunications equipment. Furthermore, an almost complete segregation of the sexes prevents female staff (both international and national) from working and providing assistance to the returnees. UNHCR's activities for women are curtailed, especially the monitoring of returnee women.

STRATEGY

Protection and Solutions

Despite the hardship facing the Afghan population in general and returnees in particular, voluntary repatriation remains the most realistic solution for the majority of the refugees in the asylum countries. It is therefore important that appropriate conditions for return are established, in terms of physical security, human rights, access to basic infrastructure and services and long-term economic development. This can only be achieved through increased dialogue and co-operation with the current authorities, both at central and local levels. Such co-operation must be predicated on a greater and more active presence, and thus a greater allocation of resources by donors.

UNHCR will continue to monitor returnee families to ensure that their basic rights are respected. This will take place through informal and confidential interviews and house visits. Interviews will focus on the respect shown by the authorities for the rights of returnees as enshrined in the amnesty declarations. These include: non-discrimination on account of religion, ethnic origin or gender; access to immovable property and land; and exemption from conscription for one year following return. Monitoring will also cover involuntary returns in order to guide appropriate intervention both in the countries of asylum and in Afghanistan. Data gathered from monitoring will be used to plan assistance and provide information to potential returnees, host governments, UN agencies and NGOs operating in Afghanistan and in the countries of asy-

lum. It will also inform dialogue with the Taliban authorities on returnees' problems and guide UNHCR's policy on future repatriation.

Information on the situation of returnee women is more difficult to assess since they tend to be discouraged, often by male family members or by policies imposed by the Taliban, from talking to outsiders, particularly men. Nevertheless, UNHCR hopes that, as a result of negotiations between the UN and the Taliban, women will soon be allowed to work and undertake returnee monitoring to address the needs of returnee women. UNHCR will also continue to press the authorities to facilitate the education of females.

There is a huge demand for primary education in many rural areas receiving large numbers of returnees. Many refugees in the asylum countries hesitate to return if their children's schooling cannot be guaranteed. To alleviate some of these problems, UNHCR and its partners have successfully established community and home-based schools for returnee children (boys and girls) in parts of eastern and central Afghanistan.

To broaden local officials' understanding of repatriation and reintegration as well as returnees' rights, UNHCR will organise training on international protection, with frequent and deliberate reference to the amnesty declaration. Regular consultations will take place with UNHCR's offices in asylum countries to report on protection issues in Afghanistan.

Assistance

UNHCR's programme is designed to meet the most pressing needs during the first critical months after return. Initial assistance will include repatriation packages and grants, which will be distributed to returnees from Pakistan upon arrival at four locations in eastern and southern Afghanistan. Returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran will receive half of their repatriation grants prior to departure and the other half upon arrival in Herat. WFP will provide a three month food supply for returnees. Transport assistance from border areas to final destinations will be organised for vulnerable returnees. Temporary transit facilities will also be maintained along the routes of return. UNHCR will distribute blankets and kitchen sets to returnee families, and tents to vulnerable groups.

Reintegration activities will be community-based, therefore returnee participation and ownership will be encouraged. Special plans will be prepared for each area to which groups of refugees return from Pakistan to address their needs. UNHCR will then contract a number of Afghan NGOs to carry out small-scale projects (QIPs), mainly the reconstruction of emergency shelter and improved access to potable water. UNHCR will also provide returnees with tools to construct their own shelters. Shallow wells will be repaired and handpumps



installed. Special attention will be paid to the location and accessibility of water sources in view of the fact that women and children (who constitute 80 per cent of returnees) are the main water collectors. UNHCR will work closely with specialised agencies to inform them of (and address) health care requirements in returnee areas. Where no other agency is present, UNHCR will continue to train traditional midwives.

Since women are not allowed to work, many women heads of household are unable to provide for their families. Despite social and cultural restrictions on the role of women in Afghan society, UNHCR plans to organise limited community-based activities, including literacy training and income-generating activities for the most vulnerable among them.

Educational facilities, teachers and teaching resources are almost non-existent. UNHCR will continue to fund the rehabilitation of primary schools and encourage access to education for both girls and boys, as in exile. Teacher training will be organised for both women and men, and textbooks and other teaching materials will be supplied to schools, including home or community-based schools. The teacher training materials and educational tools include education for peace. Skills-training or income-generating activities will be developed for adolescents, to reduce the likelihood that they will join the fighting forces.

A reforestation project will address some of the growing environmental concerns associated with the return of refugees. Seventeen tree nurseries will be established, aimed at assisting some 620 households. Local communities will be encouraged to use concrete beams instead of wooden beams for their houses. Returnees in Kabul will be introduced to the use of bio-gas

technology as a means of addressing growing problems with solid waste management.

Desired Impact

Although conditions for return are less than ideal, UNHCR believes that refugees who make an informed decision to return to Afghanistan should be helped to do so. The socio-economic and political situation for refugees in the countries of asylum is worsening and after 20 years of hospitality, host governments are calling for a resolution to the refugee situation in their country. By helping refugees return and designing reintegration projects aimed at addressing the most pressing needs in return communities, UNHCR helps to alleviate the burden on neighbouring countries while at the same time providing a viable solution for the refugees.

It is expected that improved access to basic necessities (such as potable water, shelter and sanitation) will enable returnees to re-establish themselves at their places of origin in Afghanistan. Transport assistance is expected to improve the security of returnee women and children.

Through increased dialogue with the authorities, UNHCR hopes that agreement can be reached on the implementation of a range of activities which have become increasingly problematic. That means access for women to employment and health services, and access for girls to education. Similarly, support of small-scale businesses (through micro-credits for both men and women) is expected to alleviate poverty and stimulate local markets.

However, without lasting peace and security, and more meaningful investments in medium to longer-term development in Afghanistan, these objectives may be compromised as Afghans are again uprooted from their homes and forced to flee to other parts of the country or abroad. UNHCR will therefore closely monitor military and political developments in the region and remain on high alert for any new refugee movements.

ORGANISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Management

The Chief of Mission for Afghanistan, based in Islamabad, Pakistan, is responsible for UNHCR's activities in Afghanistan, liaison with the authorities, donor embassies, other UN agencies and NGOs. Five international and nine national staff run this office. Recently, UNHCR has felt the need to strengthen its international presence in Afghanistan as a means of achieving some of its reintegration objectives. The agency is therefore considering the possible transfer of this office to Kabul. UNHCR is also planning to reinforce its protection capacity through the creation of additional protection posts in all field-based offices. A total of 13 international and 47 national staff will be working in five offices in Afghanistan. Three United Nations Volunteers will reinforce the country operation.

OFFICES

Islamabad (Pakistan)	Kabul
Herat	Jalalabad
Kandahar	Mazar-i-Sharif

Co-ordination

UNHCR will work closely with the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan (the Senior Human Rights Advisor) to establish standards for a human rights framework in the country. Five key areas of assistance (refugee return, alleviation of human suffering, protection and human rights, the delivery of basic services, and empowerment of both men and women) have been identified in order to achieve more coherent and cost-effective planning. UNHCR chairs the thematic group on refugee return. The Afghan Programming Body based in Islamabad oversees, in an advisory capacity, delivery of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. UNHCR is a member of this Body, which comprises 14 other UN agencies, 17 NGOs and 16 donor governments. Regional co-ordination bodies are in place in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad to enhance collaboration between partners and foster active participation and transparency at all levels. WFP will remain a key partner, providing food to returnees as well as support for 'food for work' projects in Afghanistan.

BUDGET (USD)

Activities and Services	Annual Programme
Protection, Monitoring and Co-ordination	1,415,993
Community Services	40,000
Domestic Needs/Household Support	325,000
Education	420,000
Health/Nutrition	185,000
Income Generation	430,000
Legal Assistance	675,800
Operational Support (to Agencies)	265,000
Shelter/Other Infrastructure	1,050,000
Transport/Logistics	1,590,000
Water (non-agricultural)	730,400
Total Operations	7,127,193
Programme Support	1,457,313
Total	8,584,506

The Greater Azro initiative in Paktia, Logar, Nangarhar, Khost and Kabul brings together the expertise of six UN agencies and about a dozen international and local NGOs. UNHCR will continue to mobilise the support of these agencies to cover needs that UNHCR cannot meet (because of limited resources). Joint planning discussions will be arranged with UNICEF (on immunisation of returnee children), OCHA (on gender issues and demining), FAO (on crops and food security), WHO (on health and sanitation) and UNOPS (on water and community facilities). UNHCR will also persistently draw the attention of other UN agencies and NGOs to the needs of the most vulnerable returnees.

PARTNERS

Government Agencies

Ministry of Martyrs and Repatriation

NGOs

Afghan-German Basic Education

Afghan Planning Agency

Afghan Street Working Children

Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan

Bakhtar Development Agency

Care International

Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees

Focus Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian Assistance Network and Development

International Assistance Mission

International Rescue Committee

Islamic Relief Agency

PAAMIR Development Authority

Save the Children Fund

Voluntary Association for Rehabilitation of Afghanistan

Welfare and Relief Organisation for Rehabilitation

Other

International Organisation for Migration

United Nations Volunteers