Executive Summary

The research study on Afghan deportees from Iran is part of the ILO-UNHCR “Cooperation towards comprehensive solution for Afghan displacement” project launched in May 2004. The overall objective of this research is to generate hitherto unavailable information on the circumstances of the deportations of Afghans from Iran. The first priority is one of identification. The pattern of cross-border movements that indicates the ongoing and cyclical nature of migration has blurred the lines between “refugees” and “voluntary” migrants. This study provides empirical data to illustrate the transit, living and working conditions of two specific groups of Afghans deported from Iran: single adult males, referred to as “migrant workers” and family groups, referred to as “undocumented refugees”. The second level of this survey is policy-oriented as it provides empirical data on the irregular labour migration flow for policy makers to address the issue of irregular cross-border movements. The ultimate aim is to facilitate the efforts of the governments of Afghanistan and Iran to respond to irregular migration and to develop an effective and comprehensive management of population movements.

Methodology

The target sample covers two categories of deportees from Iran with a clear focus on migrant workers in irregular status who enter Iran (the vast majority clandestinely), to undertake unauthorized employment while their families remain in Afghanistan. According to UNHCR statistics, this group represents about 98% of deportations from Iran. The remaining 2% are undocumented refugees who lived in Iran irregularly either because they (1) failed to register upon arrival in Iran because they did not deem it necessary in the 1980s and 1990s, (2) defaulted by not taking part in the official registration exercises set up by the Government of Iran thus losing their legal status or (3) ignored a government directive which instructed Afghan families to move out of the Iranian province of Sistan Baluchistán and relocate to pre-assigned settlements.

Among the methodological tools used in this study are a quantitative survey of 784 individuals (single adult males and heads of households), 50 profiles of deportees, 20 case studies and 6 focus groups in the provinces of Herat, Farah, Nimroz and Kabul in March and April 2008.

This executive summary will outline the major conclusions of the study and the overall recommendations for a comprehensive migration management policy. Key findings on single adult males stemming from the empirical data collected in the survey are also provided at the end of this executive summary.
**Major conclusions of the study**

1. **The role of transnational social networks as a driving force of migration.** Single adult males settle in cities and neighborhoods where relatives and friends reside, depending on them for immediate assistance to pay the migration and smuggler costs, provide shelter and arrange for introduction in the informal labour market. The network of relatives and friends in Iran becomes a source of credit, solidarity, information, local expertise and labour market connections. These functions of the transnational social network guarantee the continuation of the irregular labour migration flow from Afghanistan and serve as a protection from exploitative networks. Single adult males keep strong ties to their communities in Afghanistan, as illustrated by the cyclical and temporary nature of their migration flow and the level of remittances sent home. They undertake regular family visits during the less labour-intensive seasons whereas families and undocumented refugees in Iran settle there permanently and show weak links with their country of origin. These elements create a strong transnational social network of Afghans based in both countries, with single adult males as the link between the two populations. This transnational network ensures a continuous flow of irregular migrants to Iran.

2. **Economic impact of migration: Remittances.** Single adult males migrate to Iran alone with the goal of earning higher salaries and sending remittances back to their families in Afghanistan. These remittances often constitute the sole source of income and a major livelihoods strategy for these families. The overall flow of remittances, calculated on the basis of an annual rate of USD 2,496 per person, is estimated at USD 500 million, representing approximately 6% of the national GDP of Afghanistan. This is equal to the economic share of the telecommunications market in Afghanistan. The profile of undocumented refugees in Iran shows the opposite tendency, with a marginal level of remittances and savings explained by the tenuous relationship with Afghanistan and the family cost obligations, including rent, transportation, education, medicine and so forth.

3. **Labour impact of migration: wage differentials and transfer of skills.** The potential for single adult males to succeed financially is significantly higher in Iran than in Afghanistan: the monthly wage levels are 4 times higher in Iran than in Afghanistan and unemployment levels among migrants are nil in Iran as compared to 18.5% in Afghanistan. Upon their return, these men experience a sharp decrease in their wages levels and high unemployment rates. Beyond their fulfilled income generating potential in Iran, most single adult males benefited from their experience in Iran to learn a new skill or improve on their skills due to a more conducive economic environment and infrastructure. The industries which rank the highest in terms of skills learned by migrant workers are the construction industry, agriculture, manufacturing, professional and technical service activities and wholesale and retail trade. The transfer of skills is illustrated by a comparison of activity sectors before and after migration, showing a net increase in the number of people working in the construction sector after having lived in Iran. The main problem upon their return is their inability to use these acquired skills because of the scarcity of construction and manufacturing work to be done in Afghanistan. Labour policies and public works programme should target these sectors and marketable skills to benefit the population of deportees and their communities in Afghanistan.

4. **The informal labour market in Iran feeds an irregular labour migration flow.** The migration flow of Afghans to Iran is partly a response to the demand on the part of Iranian employers. The proportion of Afghan workers is low as they represent less than 2% of the overall labour force in Iran. Despite high levels of unemployment, the Iranian economy relies on migrant workers for whom working in the informal economy is a survival strategy. They therefore accept to work with low wages and are known to be hard and reliable workers. Iranian employers prefer hiring Afghan workers because they represent cheap, flexible and highly productive source of labour. There is no empirical evidence to support the claim that they displace Iranian labour but this does not prevent the perception of Iranian workers that their work is being taken away by foreign workers.
5. **A thriving smuggling network supports an irregular labour migration flow to Iran.** The years since 2001 have marked a shift in the methods of migration with the rise of an even better organized human smuggling network on both sides of the border. This network has thrived despite restrictive policies put in place by the government of Iran, showing not only the failure of dissuasive measures in responding to the irregular labour migration flow from Afghanistan to Iran, but the role played by restrictive border management policies in favoring the development of and reliance on a network of smugglers with consequences on security, law and the protection of migrations. The financial burden of obtaining a visa is also a considerable obstacle to legal migration. The average cost of using a smuggler’s services is USD 361 as opposed to the rate of a legal option for entry into Iran, estimated at USD 740. It is twice as expensive for a migrant to enter Iran legally as to do so illegally by relying on a smuggler. The cost benefit analysis clearly favors clandestine migration, with migrants not seeing the benefit of paying for a visa with a limited validity period and which does not provide them with a right to obtain employment. This is evidence supporting the need for the creation of temporary work permits that will prove financially competitive and which will affect the decision making process of potential migrants in favor of a legal entry into Iran.

6. **Irregular labour migration and loss of state revenues.** The increased reliance on clandestine solutions and networks is accompanied by a significant revenue loss for the governments of Iran and Afghanistan as migrants opt for irregular entry options. Based on the figures obtained in this study, the overall amount spent by migrants on smuggler fees in one year can be estimated at approximately USD 94 million, while the estimated revenue loss exceeds USD 221 million. This is a source of revenue which the governments could collect if migrants were provided with a viable solution to gain lawful employment in Iran. It has important policy implications both in terms of government resources and expenditures on migration management policies and further supports the claim in favor of revised visa options.

**Areas of opportunity**

The current migration flow between Afghanistan and Iran is predominantly a labour migration issue, not a refugee issue. After a long history of cross-border movements with Iran, migration has now become a highly organized and irregular flow with the existence of transnational networks, smuggling networks and a well established demand for migrant workers on the Iranian informal labour market. Beyond the lives of individuals and families, the significant flow of remittances plays a crucial role in the livelihoods strategies of communities in Afghanistan.

7. The immediate responsibility rests on the Government of Afghanistan to prevent irregular migration and to promote the long term re-integration of migrants at home. To support this domestic agenda, and to reflect the regional and national labour market trends, immigration laws should be revised on the basis of bilateral negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and Iran. Bilateral negotiations can provide a legal framework that will effectively curb irregular migration. However, progress towards negotiating such an accord will be slow until the Government of Afghanistan demonstrates it is making a concerted effort to discourage irregular movements. The domestic action plan and the legal framework therefore go hand in hand.

8. The areas of opportunity outlined below are to be seen as an overall package which, if met, will help to address and fight clandestine movements and diminish the vulnerabilities identified among this population. The order in which they are presented point to the need for the Government of Afghanistan to show its commitment to combating irregular migration and to show itself a viable partner in building a strong migration management strategy, alongside the Government of Iran.
9. **Domestic issues: prevention and long term re-integration package.** The Government of Afghanistan should remind its citizens of their responsibility to respect Iranian immigration laws and of the risks and consequences of irregular migration. These efforts should be supplemented by the development of specific programmes and training opportunities in provinces contributing to the labour migrant outflow. The Government of Afghanistan, along with the support of the international community, is advised to:

I. Build the knowledge among Afghans of the civic responsibilities and of migration laws,

II. Raise awareness of the risks involved in clandestine migration,

III. Use re-integration efforts as a means to prevent further irregular migration. Integration programs on the Afghan labour market can be used and expanded to target potential migrant workers,

IV. Develop public works programmes that discourage irregular movements in provinces and districts contributing significantly to the migration flow. Labour intensive public works programmes should be built to absorb the excess supply of labour in specific sectors of activity such as the construction sector,

V. Build the capacity of the police and judicial systems of the government of Afghanistan to more effectively regulate cross-border movements.

10. **Legal issues: creating opportunities for regular labour migration.** Coercive measures such as detention and deportation and the lack of viable legal options have so far failed to diminish the flow of irregular Afghan workers to Iran. This study has shown that there is a reported backlash to dissuasive measures and an increased reliance on clandestine solutions and networks. The states, especially Iran, incur costs and revenue loss stemming from the reliance of migrants on clandestine means.

VI. In this light, our recommendation is to expand the avenues for regular labour migration through bilateral negotiations between the governments of Iran and Afghanistan. The base problem today is the lack of a legal framework in which Afghans can live and work temporarily in Iran. The governments of Iran and Afghanistan will need to agree on a temporary visa policy that will be accessible and affordable for potential migrants and which will deter them from relying on clandestine migration to Iran. As an example, the creation of seasonal work permits at lower rates, matching that of smuggler fees around USD 300, and available for a longer period of 8 to 9 months corresponding to the seasonal labour demand, will fulfil the goals of temporary migrant workers.

VII. Such a reform has to be coupled with intensified measures at the Afghan border to detect and identify abusive migration practices. The relevant agencies of the government of Afghanistan, with the technical support of international organizations, can focus on providing border police with the proper training to ensure fair border practices aimed at diminishing incentives for bribes and corruption.

VIII. Following from the previous recommendation, it is advised that the Government of Afghanistan should enforce legislation and systems of sanctions against the thriving network of smugglers inside Afghanistan. This will allow to curb the clandestine movements from Afghanistan and to protect the safety of vulnerable groups of migrants.

11. **Human rights: relieving the pain.** The vulnerabilities inherent in the irregular status of migrants and in the arrest and deportation process can be alleviated without condoning the clandestine nature of the migration flow. Our recommendation is to endorse a rights based approach for all deportees, whether in regular or irregular status while in Iran.

IX. Every state has the sovereign right to deport undocumented and unauthorized populations within its territory. Without questioning the right to resort to deportation, our recommendation is to improve the process of detention and deportation to respect the rights of all individuals taken into custody.

X. We also bring attention to the immediate assistance which, if provided at the border in Afghanistan to all vulnerable deportees, whether families or single adult males, will help towards a decrease in vulnerabilities and a successful re-integration process. It is the policy
call of the Government of Afghanistan to decide whether to assist deported migrant workers with immediate needs. Such a policy should preferably be linked to public works programmes in migrants’ provinces of origin.

XI. Last but not least, the findings of this report highlight the necessity to strengthen the joint action plan with a particular focus on its re-integration phase. The aim is to develop the absorption capacity in areas of return and to promote the self reliance and equity of deportees. It will require agencies mandated to address migration and labour issues to promote policies favouring the re-integration of these deportees. Economic migration being first and foremost a labour issue, the International Labour Organization (ILO) should join efforts and provide its funding and expertise to an inter-agency action plan.

Key findings on Single Adult Males: data collected from the survey

12. The migration of Afghans to Iran is today a temporary and cyclical labour phenomenon for adult males traveling without their families. They spend on average 3.5 years in Iran overall, with the majority of respondents having spent 6 months or less in Iran on their last trip. Their intention to stay in Iran is of 5 years or less with the aim to earn and save enough money to support their families in Afghanistan. The data collected shows that 59.7% have entered Iran more than once and 23.0% have been deported more than once. The goal is therefore not to settle down in Iran. These men take the risk of going back and forth between the two countries, one which is home to their family and the other which provides them with the revenue needed to support their family.

13. Their migration is motivated by economic and labour considerations and is unlikely to end as it is a key livelihoods strategy for populations in Afghanistan. 89.2% decided to migrate to Iran based on economic reasons motivated mainly by the fact that: 92.5% perceive better employment opportunities and 56.0% more advantageous wage differentials in Iran than in Afghanistan. 49.2% of them are the sole breadwinners of their families and 52.4% are the heads of their households.

14. The monthly wage levels are 4 times higher in Iran (mean of USD 323) than in Afghanistan (mean under USD 80). Overall, 73.3% have benefited from their professional experience in Iran to learn a new skill. Migration has an impact on the skill set of the labour force, benefiting the construction sector. In the period before migration, 44.3% of the men interviewed worked in agriculture and 33.9% in construction. Upon their return to Afghanistan, 70.5% found employment in the construction sector, mirroring the activity rate in this sector during the migration period in Iran (74.8%).

15. Irregular migration is the preferred method of entry into Iran for 91.1% of respondents, of which 79.1% enter Iran clandestinely with the help of a smuggler. The average cost of a smuggler is of USD 361 which is equivalent to a month’s wage in Iran. Migrants borrow this money from their relatives. It is cheaper than relying on obtaining visas that are too costly, take too long to be delivered and expire after only 3 months. A visa costs altogether USD 640 per person, twice the cost of the smuggler fee, with the following breakdown: visa fees of USD 60, passport fee of USD 180, round trip ticket to Iran worth USD 500 from Kabul to Tehran.

16. The support network of friends and relatives living in Iran is a key factor in the decision making process of the men interviewed. 65.3% choose their city of residence based on the existence of this network and 49.0% rely on it to find their first employment upon arrival in Iran. They are themselves in turn a support network for their families in Afghanistan as they send back 67.0% of their monthly wage in the form of remittances.
17. **Deportees report having been subject to difficult conditions during their arrest, detention and deportation.** Instances of human rights abuses have been allegedly noted. The majority of single adult males were detained from 4 to 10 days before being deported. Then followed a period of transit, between 2 to 5 days in most cases, before arrival on Afghan soil. 69.2% had a difficult deportation experience with 75.9% receiving bad or very bad treatment from the Iranian authorities. The interviewees complained specifically of verbal abuse, physical abuse and health problems.

18. **Deportation represents an economic loss and personal loss** with 51.6% of respondents claiming that they had been forced to leave behind wages, money or material assets in Iran of an average estimated value of USD 1,503. Family separation was also recorded as a problem for 17.7% of respondents.

19. **The majority of single adult males did not receive assistance upon arrival at the border thus indicating that their condition did not qualify them as extremely vulnerable individuals (EVIs) according to current UNHCR criteria.** Vulnerability screening and needs are two separate issues. 84.8% of single adult males expressed the need for immediate assistance (water, food, shelter and transportation).

20. **The precarious nature of the socio-economic situation of these deportees highlights a vulnerability to be taken into account in support programs:** 47.7% live in a guesthouse or hotel, 19.6% do not have any accommodation waiting for them, and 43.7% consider their living situation to have gotten worse than before their migration. **Deportation also worsens the financial situation of Afghan men:** 53.7% say they have lost assets and money due to their sudden arrest and deportation and 52.2% have incurred debts resulting in a significant financial loss.

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