



50,000 Afghan refugees voluntarily return to Afghanistan this year

Kabul, 28 August (UNHCR) –The number of Afghan refugees returning home, in the first eight months of 2012, from Pakistan, Iran and other countries has already surpassed 50,000 individuals.

An average of 213 refugees has returned to Afghanistan every day, representing a 12 per cent increase on the same period last year when the daily average was 190 individuals.

Forty thousand of these returnees have come from Pakistan, a 24 per cent increase compared with the same period last year, when some 32,000 Afghans returned home. The rate of return from Iran is broadly similar to last year, with slightly more than 10,000 returns so far this year.

Many returning refugees from Pakistan have attributed this increase to running the repatriation programme in Pakistan throughout the year, instead of stopping during the winter months as in previous years; but also to high cost of living, specifically food and fuel; increased competition with locals for employment opportunities; and as escalating security issues in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where most of the 1.7 million registered Afghan refugees, hosted by Pakistan, reside. The level of return from Iran, where 1 million Afghan refugees still live, remains stable which appears to be due to better living conditions there when compared to Afghanistan, notwithstanding the economic problems currently faced by Iran.

Initiated in 2002, this assisted voluntary repatriation programme has already supported more than 4.6 million to return home from Pakistan and Iran, out of some 5.7 million Afghan refugees. This represents nearly one quarter of the estimated entire population of Afghanistan and is the largest UNHCR voluntary repatriation and reintegration programme in the world.

Yet with 2.7 million registered Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan and Iran (half of whom have been born outside Afghanistan and do not own property there), Afghan refugees remain the largest protracted refugee caseload in the world.

Under the repatriation assistance programme, registered refugees coming back to Afghanistan receive an average of US\$150 per person to cover transportation as well as the initial cost of settling back home.

In 2012, the main provinces of return in Afghanistan are Kabul (21%), Nangarhar (12%), Kunduz (11%), Herat and Baghlan (6% each), Kunar (5%) Kandahar, Paktya, Balkh, Logar and Laghman, (4 percent each). Since 2002, most have returned to four main provinces: Kabul (26%); Nangarhar (20%), Kunduz (6%), and Baghlan (5%).

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Apart from supporting voluntary repatriation, the Government of Afghanistan, UNHCR and its partners are working in high return area to ensure sustainable reintegration by enhancing access to social services and creating livelihood opportunities.

The aim is to improve Afghanistan's present limited capacity to effectively absorb future return and is being carried out through a recently endorsed multi-year (2012-2014) solutions strategy for Afghan refugees which was developed by UNHCR and the governments of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

In Afghanistan, the strategy focuses on community-based interventions in provinces of high return, bridging the gap between humanitarian assistance and sustainable development. The implementation of the Solutions Strategy which is currently underway in Afghanistan certainly requires a coordinated engagement of key government ministries, with national and international humanitarian and development actors.

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