

POPULATION MOVEMENT BULLETIN

The *Population Movement Bulletin*, published by the UN in Afghanistan, highlights issues of population movement as it relates to Afghanistan and is designed to consolidate the large amount of media coverage and many statistics into one place. The *Bulletin* includes trends in internal displacement, population movement to and from neighbouring countries and Europe, and policy developments and programme responses, drawing upon public sources as well as information gathered by the agencies, funds and programmes of the UN system, particularly those working on issues related to population movement – nationally and internationally – and the challenges faced by these groups of people.

Commentary: 2017 Ushers in Many Challenges...

We began 2017 looking ahead to many challenges for Afghans on the move – whether outside the region, in neighbouring countries, or their home country. January 2017 brought us sad stories from Europe, where extreme weather conditions threatened the lives of anyone without adequate shelter. Although there has been a pause in the returns to Afghanistan from Pakistan, this is expected to resume in several weeks' time. And after the last year saw record numbers of population internally displaced, we look ahead to 2017 hoping to see progress towards a peace that will enable Afghans to plan for the future with confidence.

As the Winter eases, it is expected that returns from Pakistan will begin again. Combining registered refugees and those without formal documentation, it is estimated that more than 620,000 people returned from there in 2016. Whilst it is difficult to forecast with certainty, it looks as if similar numbers may return from there to Afghanistan in 2017. Whatever that number turns out to be this year, and wherever they are returning from, it

is important that their returns are planned, and that support – whether financial, material or legal – is given to ensure that their re-integration is sustainable. If not, their return places another burden on their country and community of return, and may contribute to



Winter assistance distribution to IDPs. Photo by UNAMA

exacerbating the humanitarian challenges of displacement and/or informal settlement, without access to services or livelihoods.

Under the leadership of the Government,

(DiREC) – established late in 2016 – draws together the different elements of the Government of Afghanistan, including – crucially – those involved in the longer-term resettlement and re-integration of returning population, together with some of those involved in international support. We hope that DiREC will succeed in the task ahead of them; as noted above, unsuccessful returns will ultimately lead to greater challenges in a country that does not need more difficulties.

Although looking ahead to 2017, we would like to acknowledge one departure from Afghanistan. Ms Maya Ameratunga, country representative for UNHCR, completed her assignment here in mid-January. We would like to pay tribute to Maya's energetic work for those returning to Afghanistan, as well as those who have sought refuge here, to her collegial approach in working to address the situation of all those on the move or displaced, and her advocacy for the rights and needs of those who often don't have a voice. We wish her all the best in her next assignment, as she moves to Syria.

Latest News Headlines

Afghan migrant returns as a stranger to a deteriorating country

January 25 - An asylum seeker deported in December shares a glimpse of his life in Kabul, which has been marked by fear and desperation. As deportations continue, his story symbolizes the growing debate over German migration policy.

Read more: <http://bit.ly/2kvMd7h>

Why the European Union shouldn't deport Afghans

January 24 - This week, the German government deported to Kabul another 26 rejected Afghan asylum seekers – the second such wave of deportations in as many months. They come home to a city that is both divided and insecure.

Read more: <http://bit.ly/2kgjiAv>

Germany sends second batch of Afghan refugees to Kabul

January 24 - Germany deported a second batch of would-be Afghan refugees to Kabul Tuesday under a disputed Afghan-EU deal signed last October and aimed at curbing the influx of migrants.

Read more: <https://yhoo.it/2kvyNIm>

U.N.: 9.3 million people need aid in 2017 in Afghanistan

January 9 - The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance is on the rise in Afghanistan with 9.3 million – nearly third of the population - in need in 2017, the United

Nations said in a report.

Read more: <http://bit.ly/2jiMwh3>

Afghanistan Struggles to Absorb Wave of Returnees from Pakistan

January 4 - A breakdown in Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan has driven a flood of Afghans living there to return, severely straining their war-ravaged homeland's resources just as it is experiencing an escalation of violence.

Read more: <http://on.wsj.com/2ifdkmg>

Afghan Female Air Force Pilot Awaits Response to US Asylum Request

January 2 - Afghanistan's first female fixed wing pilot in the country's air force awaits a response to her asylum request to the United States, which she filed last month after receiving threats from Taliban insurgents.

More at VOA: <http://bit.ly/2j3fhPJ>

Afghan sets self alight at German supermarket warehouse

January 2 - German police say that a 19-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker has suffered serious burns after setting himself on fire at a supermarket warehouse in Bavaria.

Read more: <http://nyti.ms/2iiFkQQ>

Over Half a Million Afghans Flee Conflict in 2016: A look at the IDP statistics

December 28 - In 2016, more than half a million Afghans fled conflict to places of

safety inside Afghanistan's borders. Over a third of the yearly total fled in just one month – October.

Read more: <http://bit.ly/2j9tKvt>

Pakistani and Afghan refugees fear backlash after Berlin attack

December 20 - The Berlin terrorism attack has raised concerns about violence against Germany's asylum seekers. DW spoke to several refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan about their impression of the situation.

Read more: <http://bit.ly/2j9p8FH>

Over One Million Afghan Refugees Returned Home in 2016

December 19 - The Afghan government revealed Monday that more than one million refugees have “voluntarily” returned home from Pakistan and Iran in 2016, representing the highest number of returnees in 14 years.

Read more: <http://bit.ly/2jGm4Sr>

Pakistan repatriation push, rising hostility alarms Afghan refugees

December 19 - Almost 40 years after seeking sanctuary in Pakistan, Nusheen Bibi lives in fear of being expelled from the only country she has ever known. But growing animosity towards Afghan refugees combined with a push from the Pakistani government to repatriate thousands of Afghans has left the 40-year-old feeling vulnerable.

Read more: <http://reut.rs/2ja6Jcx>

2016 – A Retrospective

Looking back to mid-2016, the humanitarian community had predicted that more than a million newly displaced and newly returning Afghans would be on the move. By the year-end, the number was closer to 1.5 million, adding to the estimated million prolonged and protracted internally displaced people. Unfortunately, this trend of soaring displacement and returns in difficult conditions seems likely to continue in 2017. While Afghans in Europe continue to be in the global spotlight, it is critical to highlight that the largest and most vulnerable displaced and returning populations are right here in our midst – in Afghanistan and the sub-region – and they need our collective support now more than ever.

Coordination and response

To tackle these challenges, it is commendable that the Government of Afghanistan, with the direct engagement of the President and Chief Executive, after the Brussels Conference set up high level coordination mechanisms to enhance cooperation with the international community. The Displacement and Returnees Executive Committee (DiREC), with three working groups on policy, technical support and finance, has so far approved a policy framework and is finalizing a Return and Displacement Action Plan, taking full account of the Government's Comprehensive Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration Strategy and the National IDP Policy. Key issues include land allocation and eligibility for land, shelter needs, civil documentation and access to basic services, including the need to fast track children into the education system and recognize educational qualifications gained in asylum countries. In order to ensure sustainable reintegration, robust development initiatives are crucial to bolstering Afghanistan's absorption capacity and in order to minimize secondary displacement and onward movements out of the country. This is reflected in the mainstreaming of returnee and IDP issues in the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework, the Citizens' Charter and other National Priority Programmes.

IDPs

In a year which marked the greatest number of war-related security incidents and civilian casualties, 2016 also recorded the highest rate of conflict-induced internal displacement, with some 600,000 new IDPs. For 2017 the forecast is for 450,000 new IDPs, depending on how the conflict evolves.

IDPs are among the most vulnerable and least assisted of population groups. Accordingly, the humanitarian community is considering how to better assist IDPs in the emergency phase, how to track prolonged IDPs and respond to their assistance needs, and how to support solutions in the protracted phase. As voluntary return often becomes a less viable option in prolonged conflicts, local integration for protracted IDPs needs to be explored at an earlier stage. It is hoped that provincial governments willing to consider local integration – such as in Herat – can be better supported by the development community, as a tangible means of implementing key aspects of the National IDP Policy.

Returnees

In 2016, there were 372,577 refugee returnees, almost all of whom were from Pakistan, and 248,189 undocumented returnees and deportees from Pakistan. From Iran there were 443,968 undocumented returnees and deportees and 2290 refugee returnees. Similar trends are expected in 2017, with planning figures for return of registered refugees from Pakistan in the range of 600,000. This means that the total number of refugee returnees, undocumented returnees and deportees from Pakistan and Iran is again likely to be over one million.

In this edition of the Population Movements Bulletin, we examine returnees' perceptions of push and pull factors which led to their deci-

sions to return in difficult circumstances. Regional political dynamics have been the dominating factor in influencing increasingly politicized protection space for Afghans in Pakistan, both on the part of the authorities and decreased support from host communities who used to provide a protective buffer. The promotional campaign of the Afghan authorities in Pakistan, with offers of land and shelter, has also contributed as a pull factor. Therefore the Government, in collaboration with the international community, will need to move quickly to address these promises and the expectations that have been raised regarding reintegration prospects within Afghanistan.

When the facilitated repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan resumes on 1 March after the current winter pause, the lessons learned since mid-2016 make it all the more important that principles of voluntary repatriation are better upheld by all parties. The voluntary character of repatriation of refugees is binding on all states under customary international law, regardless of whether or not they are party to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Voluntariness of refugee repatriation is key to the sustainability of reintegration and therefore is in the interests of all, including asylum countries. For both registered refugees and undocumented Afghans, return should also be safe, dignified, orderly and gradual, so that Afghanistan's fragile absorption capacity is not overwhelmed. Because of the serious security and operational context and the need for reintegration to be expanded, UNHCR is not yet in the phase of 'promoting' or actively encouraging return to Afghanistan, but rather 'facilitating' assistance for refugees who have made an informed decision to return. The asylum countries in this region acted with great honour and generosity when they opened their doors to Afghans nearly four decades ago; it is hoped that the same sense of honour and hospitality will prevail at the current challenging time. This is an important contribution to regional stability. As the Chief Executive stated at a quadripartite meeting of countries in the region and UNHCR in October, "When refugees choose to leave longstanding host communities and come home, it is essential that they do so as friends."

A consultative process is underway in Kabul and Geneva to discuss moving towards harmonization of sustainable levels of repatriation assistance to different categories of returnees, currently focusing on registered refugee returnees and undocumented returnees from the region. For example, UNHCR has been providing a cash grant of USD 400 per refugee returnee to help families in the difficult process of re-establishing themselves upon arrival, while IOM and other agencies provide more basic transportation grants, non-food items and food assistance for vulnerable undocumented returnees, and other actors also assist undocumented returnees in the community. The starkest discrepancy however is the significantly higher level of return assistance packages provided by host governments in Europe and elsewhere to rejected asylum seekers and other non-refugee Afghans returning from non-neighbouring countries.

Asylum and migration in the sub-region

With approximately 2.3 million Afghan refugees – many of them second or third generation refugees – still in neighbouring countries, as well as possibly similar numbers of undocumented Afghans, protection or asylum space remains essential, both for the authorities as well as host communities. Stronger collective cross-border/regional advocacy is needed. Time frames such as validity of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards for refugees in Pakistan, which have become increasingly short-term since the end of 2015, cannot be regarded as 'deadlines' for return – these are incompatible

with voluntariness of repatriation. Policy proposals for residual populations who may wish remain in asylum countries, through immigration permits and alternative stay arrangements, should cater not only for Afghans who are regarded as making a substantial economic contribution, but also on humanitarian grounds the poor and vulnerable and should ensure that basic rights, such as the principle of family unity, are upheld. Migration management regimes need to be jointly agreed by the countries of this sub-region, to complement the need for improved refugee protection. This should include biometric registration and documentation of long-term resident undocumented Afghans, particularly those who arrived after completion of the initial PoR card issuance process in 2007.

Afghanistan deserves to be applauded for being a hospitable refugee hosting country for Pakistani refugees since 2014. To complement protection and assistance initiatives so far, solutions will be pursued in 2017. It is also hoped that the Government of Afghanistan will make progress on long pending draft legislation on refugees.

Afghans in Europe

In 2016, some 50,000 Afghans arrived in Europe by sea, a reduction from approximately 200,000 in 2015 due to increased border controls in Europe. They remain the second largest group of asylum seekers and migrants, while 51% of unaccompanied minors who are in the asylum process in Europe are Afghans. Mapping exercises in 2016 showed that 71% - 75% left Afghanistan because of the armed conflict, 43% stated they were internally displaced before they started the journey to Europe and 37% had resided in Iran prior to the journey but were not registered as Amayesh card holders and therefore gave as their main reason for departure the challenges affecting undocumented Afghans. And 75% said that they experienced discrimination, violence or abuse during the journey to Europe.

Asylum practices in Europe are not harmonized and rates of recognition of Afghans for refugee status vary greatly from a couple of percent in some countries to 100% in others. Overall refugee status recognition rates reduced from 72% in 2015 to 34% towards the end of 2016, despite the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. The reason for this decrease is believed to be the suspension or removal of complementary forms of protection and restrictive application of the 'internal flight alternative' (assessment of the relevance and reasonableness regarding whether an asylum seeker could/should have found safety elsewhere within Afghanistan). UNHCR's 2016 update of 'Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan' remains an essential tool for asylum states.

While some returns of rejected asylum seekers are necessary, this must be only after undergoing fair and transparent asylum procedures and must avoid exacerbating the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. It is hoped that the EU/Afghan Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues will be implemented in this light. It is a wiser and more cost effective investment by the international community to address the causes of displacement in the country of origin rather than face the consequences of continued outflows of asylum seekers seeking hope beyond their country.

Finally, as this is a period when many colleagues in the international community are completing their assignments, I wish to express sincere appreciation for their dedication, collaboration and camaraderie in difficult circumstances. To those remaining and to new teams coming in, all the best for addressing the challenges of displacement, return and migration.

Maya Ameratunga,
outgoing UNHCR Representative

Population Movements: IDP Trends in 2016

In 2016, more people were internally displaced by conflict in Afghanistan than ever before in recorded history. By November, more than half a million Afghans had fled their homes due to conflict; by the end of the year, nearly 600,000 had been recorded as internally displaced persons (IDPs), on the move in their own country.

From 1 January to 12 December 2016, 592,324 individuals were internally displaced due to conflict in Afghanistan; on average around 1,600 per day, and approximately 25 per cent higher than previous year's record of approximately 470,000 IDPs. These figures confirm an alarming trend: Afghanistan is experiencing significant, year-on-year increases in the number of families driven from their homes. The numbers of IDPs in 2016 are three-fold that recorded in 2014, and nearly six-fold that recorded in 2012.

The escalation of internal displacement mirrors the steady deterioration of Afghanistan's security during the past two years. The conflict is measurably worse: 2016 saw the most reported security incidents, driven by a 23% increase in non-state armed groups (NSAG) initiated armed clashes in 2015.

The conflict is also more widespread. In 2016, 33 out of 34 provinces experienced increasingly intense confrontations between non-state armed groups (NSAG) and government forces, and correspondingly, a record 203 districts – more than half of the country – reported conflict-induced displacements.

The nature of the conflict exacts a heavy toll on civilians. Parties to the conflict continue to disregard their obligations under international law to protect civilians. Use of explosive weapons in populated areas, military use of civilian infrastructure, schools and medical facilities, forced recruitment, targeted killings, destruction of property, and hampered access to affected populations for humanitarians have been widely documented. The amount of civilian casualties in the first nine months of 2016 was the highest recorded since UNAMA started counting in 2009, with 8,397 civilian casualties. Out of the total killed and injured, almost 1 out of 3 victims was a child (2,461) an increase of 15% compared to the same period in 2015.

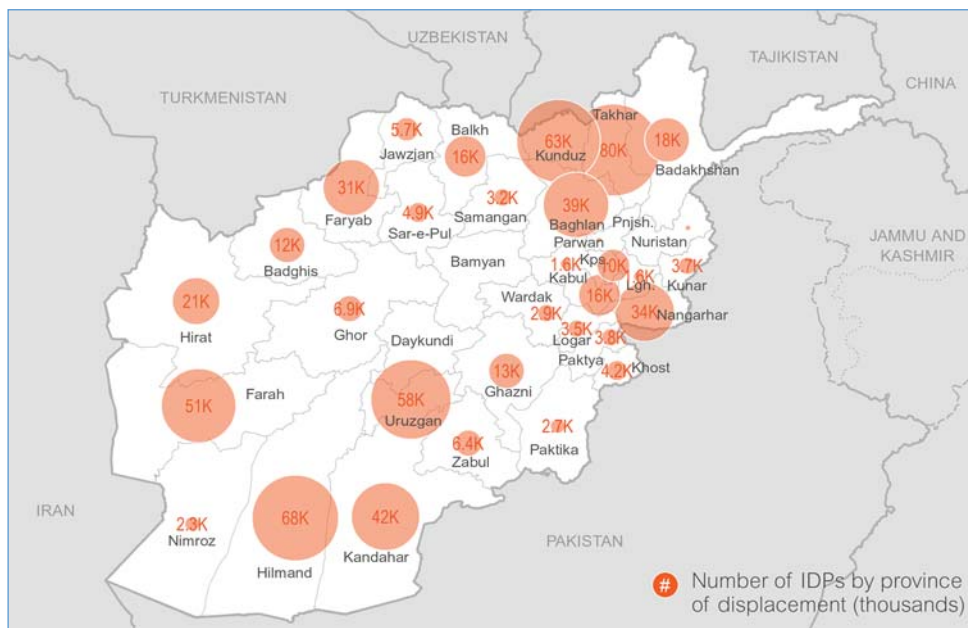
In 2016, NSAG also increasingly targeted district administrative centers (DACs) and provincial capitals. Months of ongoing attacks, skirmishes and clearing operations effectively resulted in besieged cities – and not just in traditional NSAG areas of influence.

Major capitals this year plagued by drawn out clashes and resulting displacement included those located in the south (Lashkar Gah and Tirin Kot), but also in the north/northeast (notably Kunduz city, but also Maimana), and in the west (Farah city). With fluid frontlines enveloping major population centers, more families than ever were thrown into chaos, becoming trapped or prevented from returning to their homes, and suffering as their access to basic services was regularly impeded and markets disrupted.

In the past two years, there have been no seasonal lulls in clashes offering any respite, as seen in the past. In 2015 and 2016, displacement continued to peak during the traditional summer fighting. But with the tempo-

floods, which, uprooted or affected tens of thousands more in 2016. More than 100,000 of the IDPs displaced this year (around 18%) are also considered extremely hard to reach; located in gradually expanding areas of non-government controlled territory – some of whom go to NSAG controlled areas by choice, seeking safer, more remote refuge, but in areas where there are few or no humanitarian actors. In large areas of the country, there is also an over-reliance on the Red Cross and Crescent Societies as the sole actors able to access some NSAG-controlled areas. Constrained humanitarian access hinders assessments, therefore preventing verification of the full extent of the displacement crisis and undermining provision of assistance and services.

However, even in areas where there is humanitarian access, the constant stream of displaced families means that a state of continual emergency has become the norm for Afghanistan. The bulk of the humanitarian response is being directed to provide immediate relief to displaced populations, to the detriment of fully addressing other areas of need. Combined with the fact that decades of conflict



rary seizure of Kunduz by Taliban fighters in October 2015, and again in 2016, in addition to fierce fighting around Farah and Lashkar Gah, steady streams of displacement continued even as temperatures cooled. Combined with new dynamics, such as small pockets of militant groups claiming affiliation with Islamic State, the fighting has continued to cause immense psychological distress and resulted in hundreds of thousands concluding that they are no longer safe in their homes.

While the demographic profile of those displaced in 2016 remained consistent with previous years, it is still notable that 22% - approximately 130,000 - of the displaced are women, and 56% are children. This means that in 2016 more than 330,000 children under the age of 18, as IDPs, faced particular risk of abuse, and exploitation, as well as interrupted school attendance and increased incidence of being forced into harmful child labour. Multiple forms of GBV, particularly early and forced marriage, domestic, psychological and sexual abuse are reported in displaced communities, affecting IDPs and individuals in hosting communities alike.

Even with the record numbers, the figures alone do not provide the full picture of the crisis. The 600,000 does not include Afghans displaced by earthquakes, droughts and

has severely hampered development progress, maternal and child health remains dangerously overlooked. So too has there been less emphasis on coverage and quality of basic services, access to water and sanitation and functioning protection services.

Meanwhile, the concurrent exposure to violence continues to intensify humanitarian needs. With so many Afghan families in poverty, facing repetitive shocks or experiencing forced displacement over the past decades, informal community support mechanisms have lost potency. Displacement is becoming more protracted for more people. In December 2016, 48% of IDP households living in the Kabul Informal Settlement were found to be severely food insecure. The secondary displacement seen among both IDPs and returnees – including the more than 600,000 Afghans living in Pakistan that returned to Afghanistan this year - raises concerns around the country's capacity to absorb and reintegrate additional flows amid continued deterioration of the security situation and potentially negligible economic growth. With no obvious prospects for an improved state of affairs, 2017 is likely to see a continuation of the current displacement trends, including at least 450,000 new IDPs and potentially as many as a million more Afghan returns from Pakistan.

Population Movements: Return of Undocumented Afghans

There was a substantial increase in the return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan in 2016. A total of 248,189 undocumented Afghan spontaneously returned or were deported from Pakistan from 1 January – 31 December 2016, compared with 119,279 in 2015. The increase in returns resulted from diverse push factors including deteriorating protection space in Pakistan. IOM has been providing post-arrival humanitarian assistance to returning undocumented Afghans at Torkham and Spin Boldak border crossing points.

A total of 443,968 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned or were deported from Iran in 2016, an 18% decrease from the 544,016 returns from Iran in 2015. This is consistent with trends from previous years. IOM provides post-arrival humanitarian assistance at Islam Qala and Milak border crossing

points. On 18 December 2016, IOM and the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) held an event in recognition of International Migrants Day in Jalalabad. The event brought together government officials, civil society organizations, humanitarian actors, academics and the international community to discuss the risks, challenges and opportunities of migration. Over 72% of undocumented Afghan returnees from Pakistan have chosen to settle in Jalalabad and elsewhere in Nangarhar province.

IOM's Geneva-based Displacement Tracking Matrix unit published a report in November 2016 on Afghan migrants in the Calais "Jungle" pre-dismantlement. The report offers important insights into the driving factors behind migration from Afghanistan as well as profiles of Afghans who make the journey to

Europe, and can be downloaded at <http://bit.ly/2g978GW>.

IOM's Geneva-based Displacement Tracking Matrix unit further published a Flow Monitoring and Human Trafficking Survey in the Mediterranean and Beyond which found Afghans to be at significant risk of trafficking-related abuses, second to Syrians moving along the migratory route. The report can be downloaded at: <http://bit.ly/2hGI4Li>

There was also a substantial increase in voluntary returns from Europe compared to previous years (IOM provided assistance to more than 7000 cases in 2016- an all-time record high in 14 years of IOM Afghanistan operations); as well as December 2016 seeing the commencement of the charter (non-IOM voluntary returns) flights from Europe under the Joint Way Forward.

Weekly situation report: 25-31 December 2016



Boys from a returnee family wait outside the IOM Transit Center near Torkham border crossing. Photo by IOM

- 1,671 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned or were deported from Pakistan between 25-31 December 2016, a 30% decrease from the previous week.
- 7,732 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned or were deported from Iran between 25-31 December 2016, an 11% decrease from the previous week.
- In total, 248,189 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned or were deported from Pakistan and 443,968 spontaneously returned or were deported from Iran in 2016.

Returns from Pakistan

From 25-31 December 2016, a total of 1,671 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned or were deported from Pakistan through Torkham border (Nangarhar province) and Spin Boldak border (Kandahar province), according to the Border Monitoring Team of the Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR). This is a 30% total decrease from previous week, with deportations decreasing by 9%. Of the total, 1,493 were spontaneous returnees in family groups and 178 were deported individuals. This brings the total number of undocumented Afghan returnees from Pakistan to 248,189 in 2016.

During the reporting period, IOM assisted 1,415 (84%) undocumented Afghan returnees from Pakistan, including 101 single parent families. The support provided includes meals and accommodation at IOM's Transit Centers near the border, household supplies and other Non-Food Items (NFIs) for fami-

lies, special assistance to Persons with Specific Needs (PSNs), a one-month food ration from WFP, family and hygiene kits from UNICEF and dignity kits from UNFPA.

A recent IOM survey of returning families (covering 242 households through 14 December) at Torkham border indicates that the majority (60% of households interviewed) have at least some level of debt, usually between 10,000-20,000 Pakistani Rupees (USD \$96-191). This will create an additional challenge for families as they seek to reintegrate in Afghanistan. In addition, the survey highlights that most returnee heads of household (33%) plan to seek work as daily wage laborers, which may cause strains in already crowded local labor markets. For more information and analysis, visit [IOM Afghanistan's website](#) to download the survey. Updates to the survey are published on a regular basis.

Returns from Iran: A total of 7,732 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned

or were deported from Iran through Islam Qala (Herat) and Milak (Nimroz) border crossings from 18-24 December, according to the DoRR Border Monitoring Team. This is an 11% decrease in returns from Iran compared with previous week. Out of the total spontaneous returnees, 195 (5%) were in family groups and 4,096 (95%) were individuals. Similarly, out of the total deportees, 148 (4%) were in family groups whereas 3,293 (96%) were individuals. This brings the total number of undocumented returnees from Iran in 2016 to 443,968.

IOM provided post-arrival humanitarian assistance to 264 (3.4%) undocumented Afghans arriving from Iran at its Transit Centers in Herat and Nimroz provinces, including 86 unaccompanied migrant children and 18 individuals with special medical needs. A gap in assistance remains, as DoRR estimates that approximately 10% of undocumented Afghans returning from Iran are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Situation Overview

IOM is responding to a substantial increase in the return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan and Iran. In 2016, over 692,000 undocumented Afghans returned to Afghanistan, due to diverse push factors including deteriorating protection space in Pakistan.

While returns have declined recently in line with seasonal trends as winter sets in, previous surges in returns have been unpredictable and IOM remains prepared to respond to increased needs.

Many of those returning have lived outside of Afghanistan for decades, and will need support from the government and humanitari-

an actors both on arrival and as they seek to reintegrate into a country already struggling with widespread conflict and displacement. IOM is currently providing post-arrival humanitarian assistance to returnees at its Transit Centers near the major border crossing points of Torkham and Spin Boldak (Pakistan) as well as Islam Qala and Milak (Iran).

Repatriation of Registered Afghan Refugees

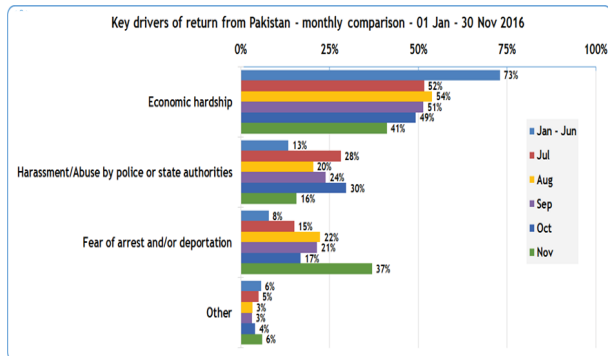
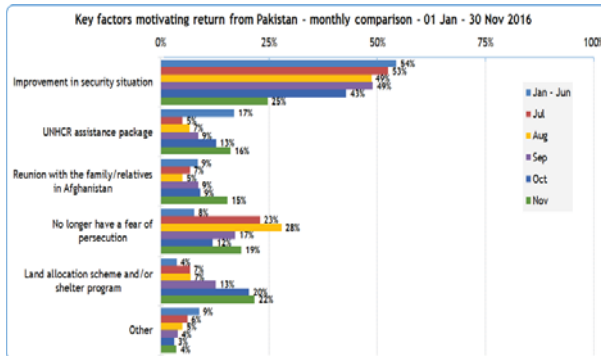
Return Monitoring: Key Findings

To better understand the key drivers of the enormous surge in return from Pakistan over the past several months, as well as the initial reintegration challenges faced by returning refugees as they attempt to re-establish their lives in Afghanistan after prolonged periods in neighboring countries of asylum, UNHCR undertook an intensified return monitoring exercise,

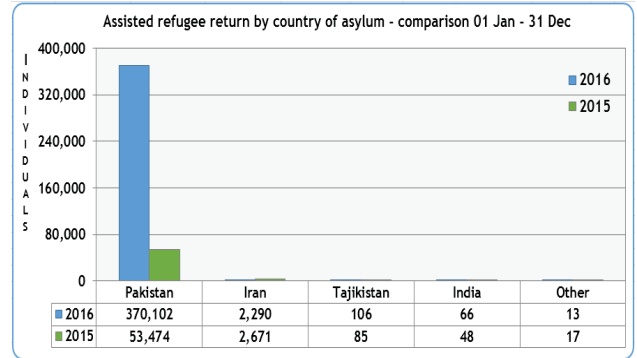
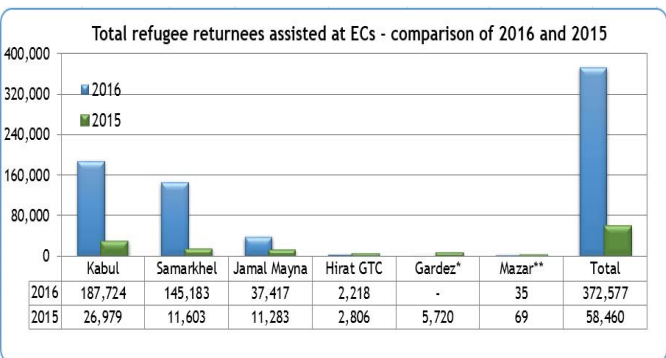
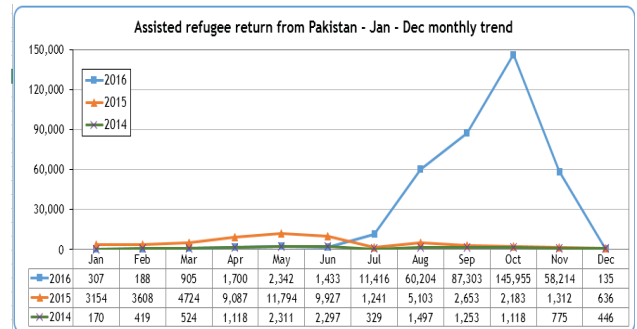
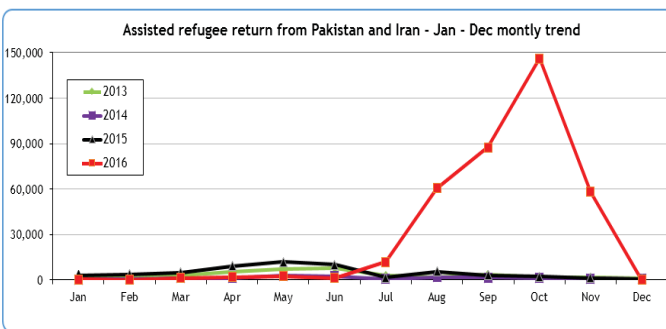
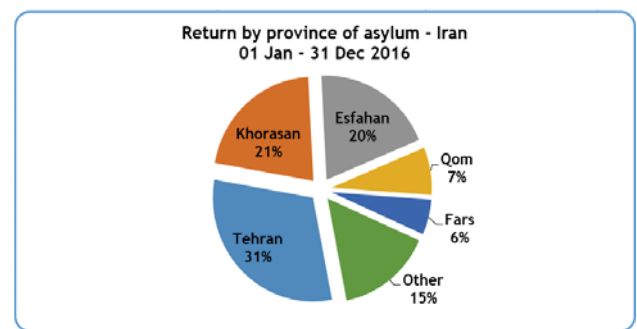
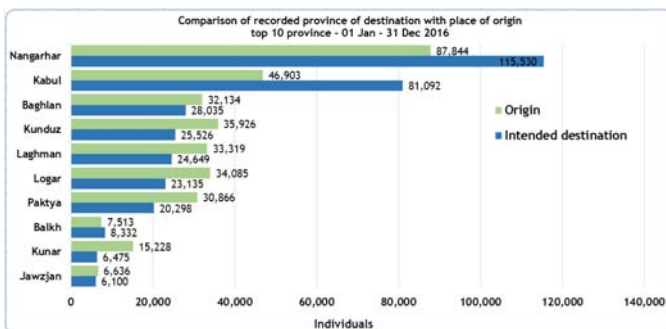
based on face-to-face interviews at the point of arrival and telephone interviews with returnees after a period of three months.

A total of 4,285 heads of household interviews (representing 7% of total returnee families) were conducted with returning refugees from Pakistan (4,129) and Iran (156) at the Encashment Centres managed by UNHCR and the Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation. Economic hardship in

Pakistan with access to economic opportunities and job markets often affected by the prevailing protection situation for Afghans, as well as harassment and intimidation, arbitrary arrest, night raids on homes, extortion and bribery were reported as the primary push factors influencing refugees' decision to return, with marked differences between the first and second halves of 2016.



On the positive side, the perceived improvement in the security situation in some parts of Afghanistan, a reduced fear of persecution, the Government land allocation scheme, UNHCR's assistance package, optimism regarding employment opportunities and the desire to reunite with families/relatives are reported as the main pull factors in determining the decision to return.



* Gardez EC ceased its activities at the end of 2015 due to budgetary constraints and refugees returning to the South-eastern Region will be referred to Kabul and Samarkhel ECs.

** There is no EC in Mazar, returnees from Tajikistan and other central Asian countries receive their repatriation assistance at UNHCR Office in Mazar or in Kunduz.

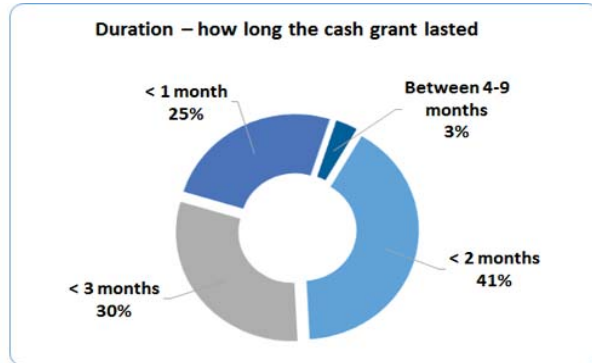
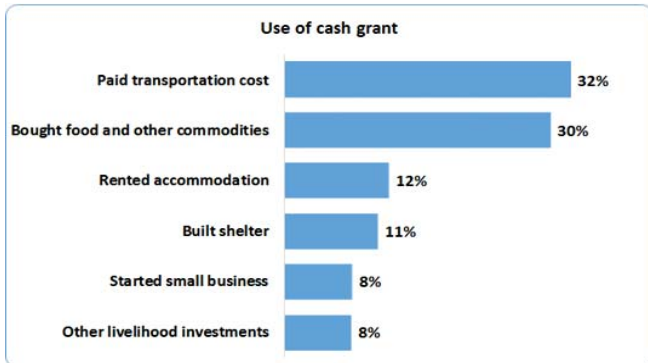
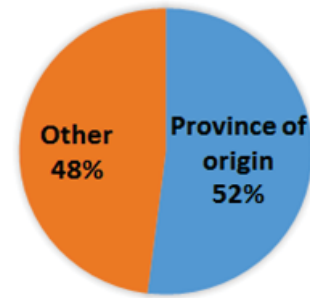
In December, UNHCR conducted nearly 1,300 telephone interviews with registered returnees after a period of at least three months in Afghanistan, in order to better understand how they fared in the initial processes of reintegration.

52% of the interviewed returnee families stated that they had returned to their areas of origin, while 48% stated that they decided to choose another province different from their areas of origin due to lack of shelter, land and livelihood opportunities as well as insecurity. A small proportion (8%) of interviewed families confirmed that a member of their family either left for another location within the country or moved back to the country of asylum, mainly due to lack of livelihood opportunities.

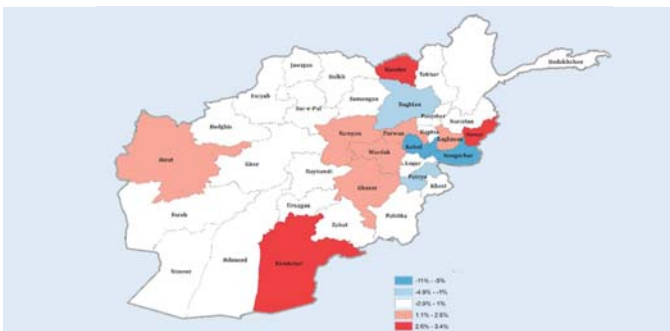
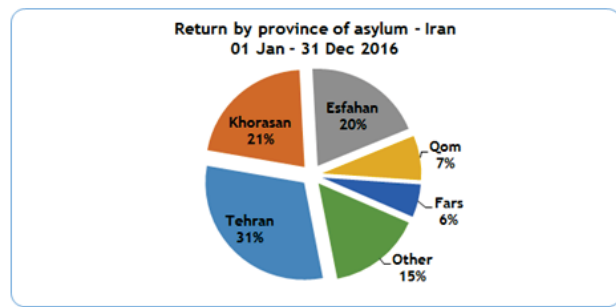
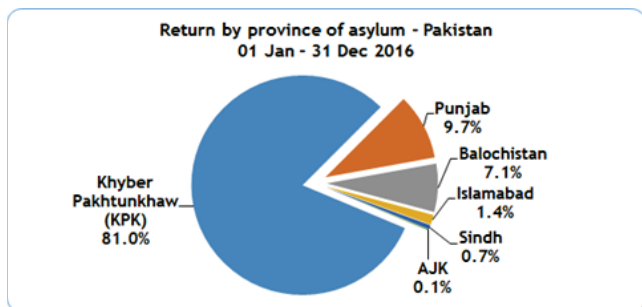
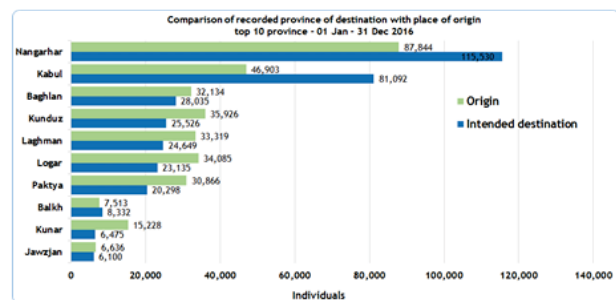
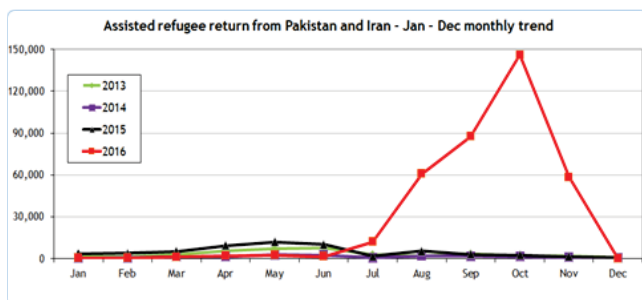
Overall, 93% of the respondents confirmed that they were warmly received by the host communities, while 7% stated that they had faced some problems with host communities. Reported problems included property/land disputes, security threats and other issues.

UNHCR was particularly interested in how returnees used the cash grant, which had been increased from an average of USD 200 to USD 400 per person, to further reintegration prospects and enhance sustainable household investments in housing and livelihoods. While there appeared to be a nominal increase in the ability of some households to make investments, the majority of respondents reported using the enhanced cash grant to meet immediate, humanitarian needs.

Settled after return

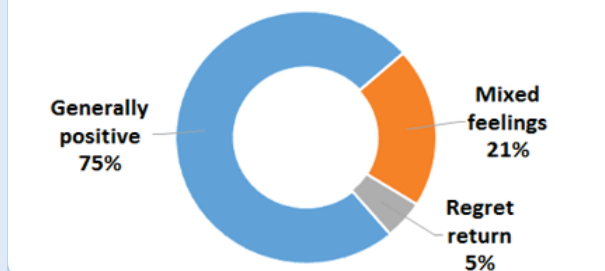


Assisted refugee return brief trend analysis



Note the difference between returnees' initially declared intended destinations and later confirmation of actual destinations. Red indicates fewer returnees actually in provinces than initially indicated at Encashment Centres, while blue indicates more returnees than originally forecast. Kabul and Nangarhar provinces seem to be over 10% over-reported.

Feelings after return



75% stated that they perceive their decision for return positive. 21% cited that they have mixed feelings while only 5% were regretful for the decision they made. 47% cited that they had faced with unexpected difficulties: Lack of job, difficulties to register children in schools, land/property disputes and lack of access to services.

Policy Development

The Untold Deportation Story to Afghanistan: Forced Returns from Iran: 2008 to 2016

By Nassim Majidi, PhD, Co-founder of [Samuel Hall](#), a research think tank based in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Forced returns are far too common in Afghanistan: from Iran, Pakistan, and Europe. In 2016, forced returns and deportations ranged between 750,000 Afghans (IOM) to one million Afghans (MoRR). In the eastern province, many are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance. In the west, greater numbers are being deported, but they are not spoken about. This article focuses on them – Afghan deportees from Iran. In 2016 alone, they were 443,968 forced returns from Iran (IOM).

A longitudinal analysis – comparing 2008 and 2016 data – is presented in a report on *Deportations of Afghans from Iran: a post-deportation protection assessment*, providing insights into a decade of deportations. Conducted by Samuel Hall, and commissioned by the Norwegian Refugee Council with funds from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this report shows worsening deportation trends at the western border:

A demographic evolution with 125 minors and 166 families interviewed

An overwhelming level of trauma leading 80% to want to stay home

Emergency needs among families of cash, food, water and clothing

Medical needs made up of injuries, chronic illnesses and mental health needs

The long term quests of being reunited with family, as 11% are separated along the way, and hopes of “making it” back home turning into further re-migration, within weeks, or after three to four months.

Who are the deportees from Iran?

It is no longer the ‘young fit adult male’ who experiences deportation: children are being deported, unaccompanied and separated minors, along with families who are threatened to and ultimately forcibly returned. Afghan migrants deported from Iran are not a homogenous group – there are three sub-groups:

Families: 32% in Nimroz and 9% in Herat were deported with their families. They are mainly undocumented refugee families in Iran, threatened, harassed or pushed to return to Afghanistan against their will. Undocumented Afghan families outnumber registered refugees in Iran. According to Iranian government estimates there are between 1.5-2 million undocumented Afghans in Iran, compared to 960,000 documented refugees.

Minors: 15% were minors at the time of their forced return: in other words close to one out of five deportees interviewed at the border was a minor. One out of ten was separated en route from their family, but the rest are unaccompanied minors who left Afghanistan on their own, and were deported on their own. The youngest respondent was 10 years old. The largest part is composed of youth, between 15 and 17 years of age. Their deportation story is one of autonomy and isolation – at a very young age – and of the need for assistance and care.

Single adult men: The majority are single adult males, who primarily left for work



Trucks pictured near a border crossing point in Afghanistan. Photo: UNAMA

and return in a state of shock, with emergency needs such as food, water, clothing and cash to be able to return home, and for the most part have no source of support immediately post-return.

What are their needs?

Emergency needs: Due to the harsh conditions of deportation (theft and harmful practices), deportees arriving at the border have pressing needs. 82% need cash as they arrive without their earnings, assets and empty-pocketed at the border. Food and water are basic needs expressed by 58% in Nimroz and 82% in Nimroz. Clothes are requested by 60% in Nimroz and 24% in Herat.

Health needs: 121 respondents in Herat (29%) need immediate medical assistance compared to 96 in Nimroz (24%). The numbers are constant and show the vast needs, and qualitative interviews with health workers confirm the recognition that health needs among deportees far exceed the provision of healthcare available.

The provision of services remains unequal and insufficient: in Herat, an ambulance at the border and a nurse trained in first aid care provision are available. In Nimroz, there are no such services at the border even though 42% of those requesting medical assistance in Nimroz define their condition as ‘heavy injury / illness’. Immediate help for such cases is essential.

Livelihood needs: Structurally, the economic situation to which deportees return to has worsened in eight years. Security was only a concern for 2.5% of the deportees interviewed in 2008, compared to 26% today. When the top five provinces of origin are Kunduz, Farah, Ghazni, Herat, and Takhar, declining security becomes an obstacle to return “home”. Interviews with men from Baghlan, who stayed in hotels in Herat city, highlight the inability to return to a hometown or village that has since their departure been taken over by anti-government groups. They remain separated

from their families.

Deportees not only leave because lack of jobs, but because monthly income in Afghanistan is so low. They earn 3-4 times more in Iran, when they are effectively paid. The lack of contract and irregular payment methods point to situations of exploitation in Iran.

Hope in the future remains dim. Those interviewed have no visibility on whether their situation would improve within a three-month timeframe. They are unable to protect themselves at home, and find themselves in a cycle of debt (for 65% of respondents) that forces them to leave again. Earning levels are too low to serve both for the survival of families and debt repayment. Debt fuels re-migration to Iran.

The lack of absorption capacity in their home areas, and their own lack of adaptation capacity, means that – although they would prefer to stay home with their families – they ultimately leave again.

What is the current response?

More organizations were present at the border points in 2008 compared to 2016: although protection needs have increased, as shown in this study, the response has decreased. The rare initiatives include interventions for women and minors, families and extremely vulnerable individuals. Nimroz’s Zaranj border point requires accrued attention to family-based protection responses. In both border points, resources for screening and protection capacity remain limited, processes inadequate and assessments far from systematized.

This research recommends the establishment of a post-deportation protection framework that addresses immediate and long-term needs, alongside coordination and collaboration. Protection assistance needs to be expanded to all of those who return without resources and having suffered from detention and deportation. Health needs include trauma care, drug rehabilitation, and care for injuries, all recognized by medical actors interviewed in this study.

Programmatic Responses

As temperatures drop across Afghanistan, humanitarian organizations launched winter programmes to help vulnerable families.

As part of coordinated efforts to help the most vulnerable displaced families across the country, humanitarian agencies, together with the Afghan authorities, launched their winter aid programmes in December to provide winter assistance. Using a vulnerability-based approach to winterization support, this initiative is targeting areas hosting large numbers of internally displaced people and returnees, as well as vulnerable host communities.

Last month, the UNHCR launched its winter aid programme, which was designed to complement the overall humanitarian response in Afghanistan, to assist a total of 25,000 vulnerable Afghan families, number-

ing some 175,000 individuals. UNHCR is focusing its assistance on some of the coldest



Photo: UNHCR

areas of the country, including the northern, north-eastern and central regions, while also

contributing elsewhere around the country.

With humanitarian access remaining limited in certain parts of the country, the provision of assistance and services, including in rural areas where the needs are greatest, has been hindered. To ensure a balanced and harmonized approach across humanitarian agencies, UNHCR provides cash transfers of USD 200 per household to enable vulnerable families to purchase heating fuel. As in previous years, UNHCR will continue to contribute non-food items, including tents if required, as part of the ongoing relief efforts in other parts of the country, particularly the eastern and southern regions, which have been affected by high levels of return and conflict-induced internal displacement respectively.

Protection of civilians remains critical as internal displacement marks another record

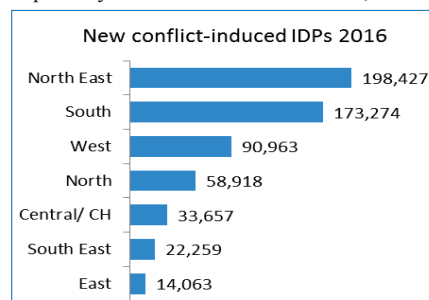
For the second consecutive year, the escalation of conflict in Afghanistan has led to an unprecedented level of internal displacement, forcing over 592,000 people from their homes in 2016 alone¹. Of grave concern is the fact that 56% of the new population of IDPs are children. Populations were displaced from 31 out of 34 Afghan provinces, while all provinces in Afghanistan now host conflict-induced IDPs. The surge in the return of refugees and undocumented Afghans from Pakistan in the latter half of 2016 has added to the complexity of the situation, with a sizable number thought to have been secondarily displaced due to conflict in areas of origin. Displacement and return patterns have proved difficult to predict, with some people returning quickly while others remain displaced for several years.

At home or on the move, civilians in Afghanistan often face life-threatening situations as a result of deteriorating security and ongoing conflict. In the course of 2016, while monitoring the protection situation, the Afghanistan Protection Cluster (APC) partners found evidence of numerous violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by parties to the conflict, resulting in increasing numbers of casualties among civilians, which has been confirmed by the UNAMA Human Rights Report on *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*².

In response to the deteriorating situation, the APC reactivated the Protection of Civilians Working Group (PoC WG)³ to focus expert attention on identified situations of concern and develop advocacy messages for the attention of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). In a practical attempt to bring protection to the centre of the discourse of the HCT and to facilitate the advocacy of the Humanitarian Coordinator with all parties to the conflict, during the last quarter of 2016 the PoC WG issued and presented to

the HCT a series of advocacy papers focused on critical situations in selected provinces of Afghanistan.

Members of the PoC WG examined the situation in Faryab and Jawzjan provinces in the Northern region, Kunduz and Baghlan in the North Eastern region, Helmand and Uruzgan in the Southern, regions. These were provinces where the situation of the civilian populations has been repeatedly at risk, including due to alleged IHL violations and high levels of conflict-induced displacement; active ground and aerial engagements with use of highly explosive weapons in densely populated urban and semi-urban areas; occupation or damage of education and health facilities by parties to the conflict, affecting access to essential services especially for women and children; move-



ment restrictions; the use of ERW and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including pressure-plate IEDs and other illegal methods of warfare.

In calling the attention of the HC/HCT on these situations, the PoC WG recommended that all parties to the conflict be urged to respect the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in the conduct of hostilities and particularly to exercise restraint when highly explosive weapons are used in populated areas to spare the civilian population and civilian objects; to continue the practice of issuing advanced warnings to

the civilian population as a precautionary measure; and to refrain from using civilian domiciles as fighting positions. The PoC WG also recommended the HC/HCT to stress with all parties to the conflict their IHL obligation to respect the right to access to healthcare by the civilian population in accordance with the protected status of medical personnel, medical facilities, medical transport and equipment; to respect the right to access to education, by refraining from partially damaging or destroying education facilities or by using them for military purposes; and to ensure prompt voluntary return in safety and dignity when hostilities end. When conflict dynamics prevented civilians from fleeing conflict zones, as was the case in Kunduz, Lashkar Gah and in Uruzgan, the PoC WG stressed the obligations of all parties to facilitate rapid and unimpeded access of relief assistance to the civilian population, including delivery of supplies to medical facilities; to allow civilians to escape active conflict zones in safety; and to allow civilians who opt to remain to temporarily access basic services, food, water and medicine.

The PoC WG also reiterated specific recommendations that HCT members, donors and other stakeholders should advocate with the Government of Afghanistan to finalize the national policy on civilian casualty mitigation and the related action plan; to refrain from resorting to armed groups, militias and other movements in support to military operations; and to honour the "Safe School Declaration" endorsed by the Ministry of Education by immediately vacating the schools currently occupied by military forces under the control of the Government.

These initiatives by the APC reinforced the centrality, and critical importance, of protection in a conflict that is exacting an increasing toll on civilian populations and forcing record numbers into displacement.

1. Conflict Induced Displacements Dashboard (as of 02 January 2017), OCHA. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2eUJXZ95> (accessed on 02 January 2017)

2. Children are among the most affected; in the first nine months of 2016, UNAMA documented 2,461 child casualties, a 15 per cent increase comparing to the same period in 2015. Ground engagements have reportedly caused more than half of all child casualties. With ground fighting intensifying, the number of civilian casualties due to unexploded ordnance or explosive remnants of war (ERW) has also risen. When compared to the first nine months of 2015, the proportion of civilian casualties grew by 67 per cent in 2016. Approximately 84 per cent of civilian casualties caused by ERW were children. See more: Press release: UNAMA releases civilian casualty data for the third quarter of 2016. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2jzLnSN> (accessed on 02 January 2017).

3. Since 2011, the Protection of Civilians Working Group under the umbrella of the Afghanistan Protection Cluster is led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNAMA Human Rights (UNAMA-HR). The WG holds ad hoc meetings in response to specific situations of concern to develop key advocacy messages for the attention of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and Humanitarian Coordinator (HC).

Relief Web provides the latest humanitarian and development information on Afghanistan.
<http://reliefweb.int/country/afg>