

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1590
Land:	Afghanistan
Kilde:	ACAPS
Titel:	Afghanistan Spotlight on social impact (October 2023 to February 2024)
Udgivet:	25. april 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	24. maj 2024

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

The spotlight on social impact in Afghanistan report is released every four months and aims to shed light on emerging issues that have or are likely to have significant social impact on Afghans as well as consequences for the humanitarian response. When possible, the report considers groups with specific vulnerabilities and key themes.

This edition of the spotlight on social impact (October 2023 to February 2024) focuses on issues related to Afghan forced returnees following Pakistan's launch of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan in October 2023. The theme of this edition is the impact of forced return on the livelihoods of vulnerable returnee groups (i.e. elderly, people with disabilities, female-headed households, children, economically vulnerable, and those moving to informal settlements).

These issues and related arising needs must be considered in light of the further shrinking of humanitarian funding, which is expected to continue throughout 2024.

Methodology

The report is largely based on ACAPS's core methodology of secondary data review supported by interviews (KIIs).

Secondary data includes the review of assessments and response reports by humanitarian organisations, publicly available reports by the Interim Taliban Authorities (ITA), and national and international media.

In total, ACAPS conducted ten interviews: six with relevant experts from humanitarian organisations and clusters (e.g. CCCM Working Group) and one each with a male forced returnee, male member of the host community, an elderly person, and one returnee with disabilities.

Limitations

As the humanitarian response shifts focus from the borders to host areas, local assessments are starting to be undertaken. At the time of writing in March and early April 2024, only a few comprehensive assessments of the needs of returnees were available. The data and information used in this report is mostly limited to the time when returnees crossed the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and were assisted in transit camps.

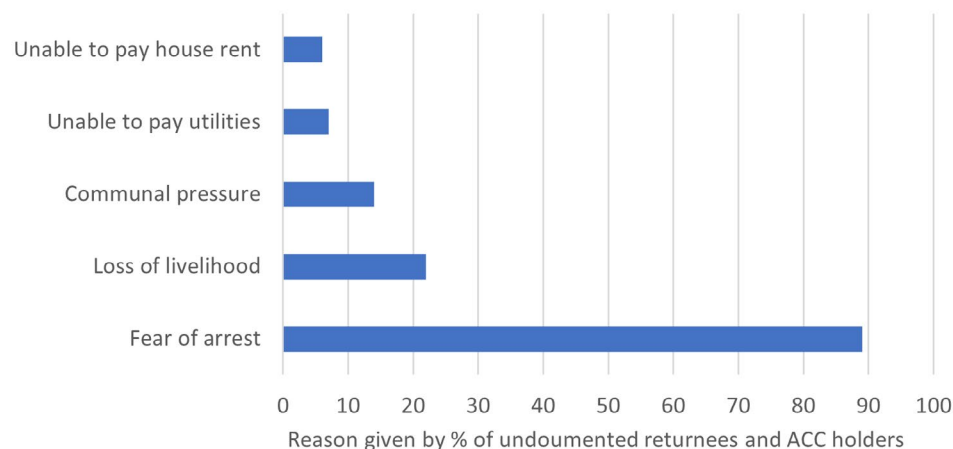
For interviews with returnees, as with many other contexts in Afghanistan, the collection and analysis of sex and age disaggregated data faced significant limitations as a result of cultural sensitivities, restricted access to certain regions, and logistical challenges, impeding the accurate representation of genders and age groups. The disaggregation of information on returnee groups is, therefore, limited.

Up-to-date data on the impact of assistance provided to forced returnees after they move from the border crossing is also limited. Humanitarian organisation assistance is limited to transit camps and border areas.

OVERVIEW

On 3 October 2023, Pakistani authorities announced the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, ordering all foreigners without valid documents to leave the country by 1 November or face arrest and deportation (ACAPS 07/12/2023). Afghans constitute the largest group of foreigners living in Pakistan, and nearly 546,800 have returned since October 2023 (UNHCR 05/04/2024). Of those who returned since October, 89% were undocumented and the remainder held a Pakistan proof of residency card (9%) or an Afghan citizen card (ACC) (2%) (UNHCR/IOM 05/04/2024). 'Undocumented' means having no form of valid visa or legal status in Pakistan, but many may have a passport or Tazkera, the Afghan national ID (EUAA 05/2022). When the repatriation plan was implemented, an estimated 1.7 million undocumented Afghanis were living in Pakistan (Reuters 01/11/2023). Among undocumented returnees and ACC holders, the reasons for their return to Afghanistan included fear of arrest in Pakistan (89%), loss of livelihoods (22%), and communal pressure (14%) (UNHCR/IOM 24/01/2024). In March 2024, Pakistan began preparations for a second phase of returns, aimed at the estimated 880,000 AAC holders in the country (Business Standard 25/03/2024).

Figure 1. Undocumented Afghans and ACC holders' top five reasons for leaving Pakistan



Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR/IOM (24/01/2024)

The ITA has allocated AFN 2 billion (USD 27 million) from the national budget to assist forced returnees (IOM 04/01/2024). In October 2023, a high commission was established to support returnees, which included representatives from all relevant ministries on 12 sub-committees. These sub-committees assist by providing temporary shelter, food, and medical services (Heinrich Böll Foundation 05/04/2024). The Government also supports each household with AFN 10,000 (USD 135) in cash and SIM cards (IOM 04/01/2024; Pajhwok 20/11/2023). The authorities also organise free transportation from the temporary camps along the border to returnees' destination (Heinrich Böll Foundation 05/04/2024; KII 14/02/2024).

The ITA has announced some specific measures for returnees, which are addressed in this report when relevant, but the implementation and impact of such measures are yet to be assessed.

Returnee figures and areas of return

The estimated number of forced returns from October 2023 through February 2024, the period covered by this report, was close to 528,000. Of undocumented and ACC holder returnees to date, as at 31 49.7% were women and 50.3% were men, 20% of whom were children under five and nearly 60% under 18. 3% were elderly (60+) (UNHCR 05/04/2024).

As at 29 February, 84% of those forced to return chose to settle in the areas from which their family originated (IOM accessed 03/03/2024). The main provinces of returnee settlement include Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Kunduz, and Nangarhar.

Map 1. Main provinces of return



Source: ACAPS using data from IOM (accessed 24/03/2024)

Kandahar, Kunar, and Nangarhar provinces share a border with Pakistan, which facilitated Afghan refugees' ability and decision to leave in the first place. Many returnees are likely to be found in Jalalabad, the capital district of Nangarhar province, as the district hosts Afghanistan's most active border crossing point, Torkham (IOM 17/03/2024). Over the past two decades, Kunduz has experienced considerable insecurity, causing many to flee to Pakistan (KII 14/02/2024).

IMPACT OF FORCED RETURN ON DIFFERENT RETURNEE GROUPS

Female-headed returnee households

About 15% of returnees are female-headed households (IOM accessed 08/04/2024).

Obtaining documents can be a challenge, and lack of civil documentation leads to access problems

The Tazkera is the most important identification document for Afghan citizens, confirming Afghan citizenship, and is required to gain access to some public services (e.g. education), acquire or own property, and receive permits (Landinfo 22/05/2019; IOM 08/2023). As a consequence, not having this document is a barrier to accessing services, registering for humanitarian programmes, and receiving assistance, although some humanitarian organisations have relaxed the Tazkera requirement (UN Women 05/12/2023; KII 25/02/2024).

A significant number of returnees do not have a Tazkera. Nearly half (46%) of households in an IOM rapid returnee assessment in December 2023 reported that less than half of all household members held such documentation, and 14% of households were completely undocumented. In this assessment, nearly 75% of female respondents reported an urgent need to understand how to get legal documents, while only 57% of male respondents indicated such (IOM 28/12/2023). This difference could be indicative of women facing greater challenges obtaining a Tazkera.

In order to obtain a Tazkera, an applicant must have the endorsement of the elders in the district from which the applicant originates, confirmed by the local council (shura mahal), and documentation for a relative and two witnesses (Beporsed 22/10/2023). The high financial costs, lengthy processing times, and potential lack of connection to the community, in order to obtain witnesses, are among the challenges returnee women face in obtaining a Tazkera upon arrival in Afghanistan. The Mahram requirements, stipulating that a woman must be accompanied by a male guardian, continue to limit women's movement in Afghanistan; female heads of households are hence impaired in their ability to travel to obtain the elders' endorsement, unless a woman has a son of working age to be her Mahram (Khaama Press 24/10/2024; TOLONews 17/04/2023).

Employment and income-generating opportunities are limited for women in Afghanistan, affecting livelihood options for female-headed returnee households

In 2023, the ITA severely restricted professional opportunities for women, and many lost their jobs or were forced to work from home as a result (IUFAP 29/05/2023). Those who still have jobs must be accompanied on their journey to work by a Mahram (UN 22/01/2024). Women's employment in the humanitarian sector has been banned since December 2022 and, although a workaround exists, humanitarian organisations are hesitant to hire more women (UN Women 13/01/2023; NRC 10/01/2023). The Mahram requirement also means limited freedom of movement when women enter public spaces, hindering their ability to find new employment or engage in income-generating activities. Female-headed households without a Mahram are, hence, less able to achieve financial independence. Women's shrinking employment options in Afghanistan likely also affect returnee women, particularly female heads of households (UN 18/01/2024). Many returnees had to leave all their belongings behind when exiting Pakistan; in some instances, Pakistani authorities took returnees' belongings before they left, further hampering livelihoods options or the potential to establish businesses in Afghanistan upon return (UN Women 05/12/2023).

Difficulties renting accommodation and accessing existing social networks affects where female-headed households choose to settle

Access to land and housing is a significant challenge for women in Afghanistan, as they are excluded from land and home ownership. Returning female-headed households with no option to go back to a family or home they own often face difficulties renting or finding accommodation, as does any woman without a male guardian (RFE/RL 31/01/2024). High rental prices compound the severity of the housing issues experienced by female-headed returnee households, as these women are more likely reliant on insecure livelihoods and low incomes from the informal sector, disrupted by restrictions on movement and access to public spaces, or are begging (Giha 23/10/2023). In such circumstances, rent is unaffordable and eviction risks are high.

Many women whose husbands and other family members were arrested in Pakistan, as a result of lack of documentation, had to return to Afghanistan on their own and were moving towards urban centres including Jalalabad, Kabul city, and Kandahar city (UN Women 05/12/2024). Among returnees, female-headed households are more likely to make decisions according to where they are better able to access assistance and services. A study by UN Women, the IOM, and UNAMA showed that safe access to education, health and other basic services, economic opportunities, and freedom of movement are what generally make a location most liveable for women (UN Women et. al 16/02/2024). When moving to urban areas, access to existing social networks also plays a role, indicating female-headed households' reliance on such networks (UN Women 05/12/2023). These networks play a crucial role in

accessing public services, resources, and aid, whether from the Government or humanitarian organisations. Strong connections within a community can give individuals and households an advantage accessing assistance. If a household has a strong network with community leaders, such as a malik, or connections with organisation staff, they can use such networks to more easily gain access to public resources or assistance (KII 14/02/2024).

Returnee children

Returnee children's access to education is likely as limited as in Pakistan, and girls beyond grade six no longer have access

In November 2023, the ITA Ministry of Education announced its readiness to provide educational facilities for students returning from Pakistan (TOLOnews 03/11/2023). At the beginning of April 2024, the new school year starts, but the number of returnee children registered is unknown. After 2021, the number of schools and rate of attendance in Afghanistan generally declined. This is attributed to several factors, including the ITA's de-prioritisation of education, non-payment of teacher salaries and maintenance costs for education infrastructure, withdrawal of qualified teachers as a result of security concerns, and the ITA's emphasis on religious centres over formal education, whereby priority is given to converting secular schools into religious schools (madrasas) (SIGAR 13/10/2023; Reuters 16/02/2023; UNESCO 17/09/2021; RFE/RL 25/06/2022).

In Pakistan, Afghans both officially registered as refugees and undocumented can register with government schools, so long as they provide a valid birth certificate (UNESCO 02/11/2018). Gaps in service provision at all levels of education is a major constraint to education access in Pakistan, with the country having the second highest number of children out of school in the world (UNICEF accessed 12/03/2024). As a result of poverty, limited access to sufficient livelihood opportunities, and obstacles finding work, many Afghan households in Pakistan, especially undocumented refugees, put their children to work instead of sending them to school. Sociocultural factors also play a role in the decision to withhold children from school, alongside the lack of access to education (ICMPD 16/08/2023).

Unlike in Afghanistan, where educating girls beyond grade six is banned, girls may attend school in Pakistan. In Afghanistan, restrictions on education prevent girls from continuing and pursuing higher education at the university level, severely hampering their opportunities for personal growth, empowerment, and prospects (NRC 14/12/2023). This exclusion also has far-reaching societal impacts, including effects on girls' mental health, increased risk of child marriage and gender-based violence, and exclusion from economic and societal development opportunities (Afghanistan Policy Lab 06/2023).

Returnee children without identity documents accepted in Afghanistan cannot register for school, and the cost associated with obtaining such documents likely prevents many poorer families from getting such IDs. Children who did go to school in Pakistan often lack the documents to prove their attendance and achievements, are frequently unable to transfer their educational records, and face difficulties adjusting to a different curriculum (Pajhwok 10/11/2023). Most returnee children who attended school in Pakistan studied in Urdu or English, posing a linguistic barrier when they integrate into Pashto/Dari schools (UKFIET 24/02/2024). These language skills may, however, be useful for future employment or setting up businesses.

Amid Afghanistan's health crisis, the risk to returnee children's health is similar to that of other children in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's health system is weak, with limited facilities, medicine shortages, and unpaid medical staff; resources and access to healthcare in Afghanistan has been a major concern for many years (Hamdana et al. 21/09/2023). Maternal and infant health also face challenges, as examinations are restricted to female workers only. Around 25% of women in Afghanistan also do not have a Takzera, which is required to access healthcare (USAID 22/12/2023). Food insecurity is a major driver of malnutrition among children and pregnant and lactating women in Afghanistan. The 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview projects that 2.9 million children under the age of five will suffer from acute malnutrition in 2024, including 857,000 children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) who will require emergency nutrition assistance to avoid preventable morbidity and mortality, as did 2.9 million women in 2023 (OCHA 23/12/2023 and 03/2023). In a previous edition of the this report, ACAPS showed that Afghanistan's healthcare system does not have sufficient resources to prevent and address high SAM and moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) rates (ACAPS 09/01/2023). According to IOM figures, over 1,400 children crossing the Pakistan-Afghanistan border were admitted for MAM treatment in December 2023 and January 2024 alone, and over 540 children under five were diagnosed with SAM (IOM 21/12/2023, 27/12/2023, 04/01/2024, 18/01/2024, and 05/02/2024). These cases likely also face a lack of access to adequate nutrition services.

Children's forced return and uncertain future can lead to feelings of despair and hopelessness, resulting in emotional distress and mental illness, making it more difficult for children to settle in their new location (Medium 14/02/2024). This situation requires mental health support that is likely unavailable, as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2022–23 showed for children suffering from anxiety and depression (MICS 05/2023).

Economically vulnerable returnees face unemployment and economic hardship amid limited economic opportunities and require longer-term assistance and support

Afghanistan's economy appeared to stabilise in 2023, with inflation on the decline and the currency appreciating. Still, the underlying context was a very weak economy, unable to generate the jobs and livelihoods needed to accommodate the growing population, alongside high unemployment and underemployment (WB 10/2023). As most returnees from Pakistan were undocumented, they could not open bank accounts, run businesses, or work in the formal sector. The Afghan Displacement Solutions Platform reported in 2018, however, that thousands of Afghans owned or were engaged in small, medium, and large-scale businesses in Pakistan, such as selling fruit, vegetables, gemstones, transport, and money exchange. The majority of these businesses were either unregistered or under proxy ownership by Pakistani friends and relatives (ADSP 30/12/2018). According to the IOM, 78% of forced returnees were unskilled labourers in Pakistan (IOM accessed 08/04/2024). In many cases, Afghans experienced underemployment and steadily declining living conditions in Pakistan (Pakistan Forward 02/06/2023).

According to a December 2023 rapid assessment, 90% of returnee households had no source of income (IOM 28/12/2023). IOM figures also show that financial support has been the highest priority need throughout the returnee influx, and according to March 2024 data was a priority need for 82.2% (IOM accessed 08/04/2024). Most forced returnees arriving in Afghanistan require livelihood assistance beyond that received at the border as, even when they had income, possessions, and savings in Pakistan, they were not allowed to take more than PKR 50,000 (USD 173) in cash when leaving the country (UNHCR 17/11/2023). This issue is especially significant for returnees who had been in Pakistan for decades, built businesses, and are now unable to transfer cash and property out of the country (Reuters 14/11/2023). Any money forced returnees are able to bring back, however, is often confiscated by security forces upon arrival in Afghanistan, especially if family members have been arrested during the process or at checkpoints (DRC 14/12/2023).

Returnees in informal settlements are at risk of eviction

In 2022, Norwegian Refugee Council camp management teams estimated that 2 million of the 6.6 million IDPs in Afghanistan were living in over 1,000 slum-like informal settlements across nearly 30 provinces. These informal settlements were established by the Government prior to 2021, mainly in urban areas, on public land, as people fleeing war had no other option (NRC 15/12/2022).

Since 2021, evictions from informal settlements have increased and will likely also affect returnees settling in such areas. The actual number of returnees who live in informal settlements is unknown, but some of the 6% who said they did not yet know where to go to upon return presumably moved to informal settlement areas (IOM accessed 08/04/2024). Evictions from informal settlements are driven by returns to area and community of origin being the ITA's preferred durable displacement solution in response to the growing numbers of IDPs, as the ITA believes that, now that the war is over, IDPs can return to their places of origin and informal settlement areas can be used for different purposes (NRC 11/07/2023). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated in 2022, prior to the influx of returnees, that eviction from informal settlements could result in homelessness for 500,000 families (IDMC 15/08/2022). Humanitarian organisations have advocated for the need to respect that returns be voluntary alongside the provision of sufficient services to ensure durable solutions, often not given in areas of origin to which authorities expect IDPs to return (IIED 13/02/2024). Evictions from informal settlements have occurred in locations such as Chamtala in Nangarhar province, where the authorities distributed land to forced returnees over the past 20 years (KII 26/02/2024). Areas once designated to returnees are no longer providing stable conditions for recent returnees; instead, new arrivals have increased the number of people at risk of forced evictions (KII 26/02/2024).

Without alternative affordable housing options, the risk of eviction from informal settlement areas increases (ACAPS 27/02/2023). The ITA has pledged to provide permanent shelter for forced returnees from Pakistan, including the distribution of land to those who do not currently own any (TOLOnews 04/11/2023). The country's weak economy and need to commit finances and support to other humanitarian emergencies – notably natural hazards such as the Herat earthquake, which resulted in a need for 8,000 housing units for the affected population – means that this proposal may face implementation challenges (TOLOnews 06/11/2023).

Elderly returnees likely experience financial hardship and lack of social protections at their destination

Among returnees, an estimated 3% are elderly (60+) (UNHCR 05/04/2024). The arduous journey to Afghanistan raises concerns about the health and safety of such returnees (IFRC 29/11/2023). In the returnee influx since October 2023, the lack of winterisation added to the challenges the elderly faced, especially in temporary shelters, causing an increase in acute respiratory infections (Health Cluster 21/12/2023). A rapid needs assessment in Torkham in November 2023 captured protection concerns for the elderly, expressed by 31% of respondents (Islamic Relief 19/11/2023).

There are approximately 1.5 million older people in Afghanistan, who often lack dedicated support in social protection, care, health, and manageable forms of transportation. Lack of financial resources or pensions to meet basic needs and maintain a decent standard of living is one of the major challenges faced by older people in Afghanistan. Retired government employees are the only elderly people who receive a pension in Afghanistan (Kabul Now 23/03/2023). Since 2021, however, the ITA has not paid any pensions, yielding protests by the retired (TOLONews 06/02/2024). Returnees include many former government officials and members of the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces, who fled after the fall of the republic (Heinrich Böll Foundation 05/04/2024). Whether such returnees have access to their pension entitlements is unknown. A significant number of elderly returnees who have settled in their places of origin in Afghanistan likely have not received any assistance specifically addressing social protection, health, and elderly care needs (KII 20/02/2024). Families' ability to provide support to elderly likely depends on their own employment and income situations.

Forced returnees with disabilities likely lack access to adequate assistance in their new locations

By 31 March 2024, close to 1,900 people with disabilities were among the undocumented and ACC returnee population (UNHCR 05/04/2024). They joined the over 2 million people in Afghanistan living with disabilities; disabilities often stemming from accidents, unexploded mines, or explosive ordinances that led to severe injuries, vision or hearing problems, and post-traumatic stress disorder (EU Delegation to Afghanistan 15/06/2023). Between 60–80% of people with disabilities live in rural and informal urban settlements (WHO accessed 12/03/2024). Access to dedicated services is limited in these areas.

In the time of the Afghan Republic (2004–2021), a distinction was drawn between people with disabilities as a result of war injuries and those born with or who developed disabilities unrelated to war. Those with war-related disabilities were entitled to social assistance, while those with non-war-related disabilities often faced marginalisation. Since 2021, the ITA has changed such financial support, favouring Taliban over non-Taliban people with disabilities (USIP 29/02/2024). Disability payments have been halted since September 2022, allegedly resulting from a lack of funds (Zan Times 11/12/2022). A study found that people with disabilities in Afghanistan are more likely to be in need of assistance, as there is a lack of dedicated services and support, but accessing such assistance is difficult, with reports of corruption, physical distance from aid sites, and the lack of aid cited as major barriers to access (GTS 26/02/2024). It is likely that returnees with disabilities will experience similar challenges, although it is also likely that family networks and communities, within their limited means, will provide support to newly arrived people with disabilities.

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