

Afghanistan (1)

**UNHCR**
The UN Refugee Agency**U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 2003 -
Afghanistan**

June 2003

At the end of 2002, over 3.5 million Afghans were living as refugees in other countries, mainly in Iran (2 million) and Pakistan (1.5 million). Some 30,000 continued to live in other countries in the region, mostly in India (13,000) and Tajikistan (3,500). Millions of Afghan refugees and displaced persons also returned to their country and communities in 2002. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as the year drew to a close more than 2 million Afghan refugees and displaced people had returned from neighboring states and camps inside Afghanistan in the largest and most rapid assisted return movement since 1972. More than 1.5 million returned from Pakistan, and about 300,000 from Iran.

Some 29,000 Afghans filed asylum applications in Europe, North America, and Oceania during the year: the largest numbers were in the United Kingdom (7,400), Austria (4,300), Germany (2,800), Hungary (2,200), and the Slovak Republic (1,800). The number of asylum applications in Europe by Afghans decreased by 45 percent over the previous year, moving Afghanistan from its 2001 position as the source of Europe's largest number of applicants to fifth place.

UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, and other agencies assisted some 250,000 internally displaced persons return to their homes during 2002. During the year, an additional 200,000 internally displaced returned home on their own, unassisted; however, in some areas in the north and west of the country, fighting, political repression, and ethnic violence caused some 45,000 Pashtun Afghans to flee their villages. About 700,000 Afghans remained internally displaced at year's end.

Political Developments

The U.S.-led military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, which started in early October 2001, led to the collapse of the regime in late November 2001. This paved the way for a momentous year in Afghanistan: for the first time in over 20 years, Afghans could aspire to a stable peace, increased development assistance, and respect for human rights norms. The year began auspiciously in January with a major donor conference in Tokyo pledging \$5 billion to reconstruct the country, including \$1.8 billion for 2002 alone. This was in effect a massive international vote of confidence in Hamid Karzai, the ethnic Pashtun leader of one of the largest tribes in southern Afghanistan. Karzai was sworn in on December 22, 2001 as chairman of a six-month interim government, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a small international peacekeeping force, was created to patrol Kabul.

In June, during the first working session of the Loya Jirga, Afghanistan's 1,550-member grand assembly, Karzai was elected as interim head of a new transitional government. Diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and most nations were restored, UN agencies reopened their doors, and international and developmental organizations were granted new access to help Afghanistan rebuild after years of war and poor governance.

In September, however, Karzai narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in the former Taliban stronghold of Kandahar that coincided with a car bomb attack in Kabul killing 26 persons. Other setbacks included the killing in February of the minister of civil aviation and tourism during a riot at the Kabul airport, and the July assassination of Vice President Haji Abdul Qadir, a former Mujahedin military commander from Jalalabad, by gunmen in Kabul.

Life in Afghanistan after the Taliban reverted to virtual warlord rule outside Kabul, highlighted by sporadic fighting, sabotage, the resumption of opium poppy cultivation, and heightened ethnic tensions, as numerous former commanders of the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s returned to power.

These were all unimpeded by the limited patrols of ISAF, whose writ never extended beyond Kabul. Karzai and many international observers repeatedly requested that the international community, and the U.S. administration in particular, extend the ISAF's mandate.

By the end of 2002, donors had just about come through on the delivery of the funding commitments they had made for the year at the Tokyo conference. Bilateral, multilateral, and international non-governmental aid agencies were able to start limited work on some rehabilitation projects during the year, but fundamental improvement remained elusive. The continuing security vacuum prolonged the vulnerability of an estimated 7 million people in Afghanistan to the risk of famine, and left more than 70 percent of the country's schools and roads still needing repairs. Life expectancy remained one of the lowest in the world (44 years) and the majority of the population lived in poverty worse than 1976 pre-war levels. Landmines and unexploded ordnance killed or maimed dozens of people, many of them children, on a monthly basis, constituting a major obstacle to sustainable refugee return, particularly to the rural areas.

Repatriation

Despite the fragile infrastructure and persistent security problems in parts of Afghanistan, more than 1.8 million refugees returned home in 2002, assisted by UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation. Some 150,000 others returned from Pakistan by their own means. Thousands of refugees also returned from Europe and the United States. At the beginning of the year, Afghanistan still had one of the largest displaced populations in the world with over 3.5 million refugees living mostly in Pakistan and Iran and some 700,000 internally displaced within Afghanistan.

In March and April 2002, UNHCR launched and coordinated parallel campaigns for the voluntary repatriation of 1.2 million Afghans from Pakistan and Iran, respectively. By the time the 87-year-old former Afghan king, Muhammad Zahir Shah, returned home in mid-April after 29 years of exile in Rome, some 300,000 refugees had already preceded him. By mid-May UNHCR had no choice but to revise upwards its original planning figure of 1.2 million returnees by an ambitious 850,000, to 2 million.

UNHCR's regional budget for the Afghan repatriation and refugee assistance programs during the 15 months ending in December 2002 was \$271 million. Refugees requesting repatriation assistance under the UNHCR-facilitated return program were verified at Voluntary Repatriation Centers established throughout Pakistan and Iran. UNHCR and the cooperating authorities made efforts to screen out Afghans who had previously repatriated, or who appeared intent on recycling back to an asylum country after receiving the small travel grant. Iris recognition technology was introduced in Pakistan in September 2002 to complement existing screening measures, and early experience suggested that the technology was effective.

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, UNHCR provided returnees transportation allowances ranging between \$5 and \$30 per person, depending on how far they had to travel to reach their homes. Returning families also received an aid package containing plastic tarpaulins, soap, and hygiene cloth, as well as 50 kg of wheat flour from the UN World Food Program. At the request of the Afghan government, which oversaw the repatriation effort, UNHCR targeted its assistance in rural areas in an effort to reduce the trend towards urbanization.

UNHCR and the Afghan government agreed early on that the provision of drinking water and shelter was the crucial first step toward helping families restart their lives in desolate,

war-ravaged, and drought-stricken villages. Together with partner agencies, UNHCR helped rebuild 3,000 wells in return communities in 2002. In addition, more than 2,200 baths and 5,300 latrines were constructed throughout the country. Returning Afghans were employed to repair canals and minor waterways.

Sustaining the Return

Despite these achievements, at the close of 2002 UNHCR expressed its concern about "the capacity of the war-torn country to absorb the sudden influx of millions of people" and noted that "substantive reconstruction aid for infrastructure repair and employment is still urgently needed if returns are to be sustainable." "Security and living conditions in Afghanistan," UNHCR concluded, "are not yet sufficient to encourage all refugees to return at this time."

Refugees returned in 2002 to a country ravaged by decades of civil war and conflict, destruction from the U.S. bombing, insecurity in parts of the country, and the continuation of devastating drought in the south. Basic infrastructure and services were essentially non-existent outside urban areas. The homes and property of many refugees and displaced persons were destroyed, and many returnees had absolutely no resources with which to resume rural life.

In recognition of this, by the year's end UNHCR had called on host governments to recognize that while for many Afghans the reasons for their exodus may have ceased to exist, there are still others who need continued international protection" and asked them "to provide support and ensure that returns are phased and coupled with development and reintegration support to increase the capacity in the communities of return."

According to UNHCR, more than a million more Afghans may return from abroad and internal displacement in 2003.

Forced Return?

Human rights groups were concerned that the Iranian and Pakistani governments may have forced Afghan refugees to return. According to Human Rights Watch, "there were credible reports from Iran and Pakistan of forced returns and deportations as well as push factors such as police harassment and restrictions on employment rights and health and education services." In Iran, a government-imposed deadline for undocumented Afghans living in Iran to report to the Office of the Bureau for Foreign Immigrants and Alien Affairs for exit documents reportedly pressured an increasing number of refugees to go home. Similar factors were reported in Pakistan. The independent Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit suggested that instead of catering to the interests of refugees, the decision to facilitate the mass repatriation had been driven by Afghanistan's neighbors, donor interests, and political pressure from the United States and other coalition force members in the international community to legitimize the new government.

