

Over 70,000 Afghan refugees return this year

Islamabad, June 20 (UNHCR) – The number of refugees voluntarily returning home to Afghanistan in 2010 reached the 70,000 mark this week. With two and a half months of the peak repatriation period still to run, this year’s overall figure could reach over 130,000, more than double last year’s annual total.

“Despite security constraints and challenging socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan, the voluntary repatriation of 70,000 Afghans demonstrates that many refugees are confident that there are opportunities available to return sustainably to their homeland,” said Mr. Mengeshe Kebede UNHCR’s Representative in Pakistan.

The pace of returns has increased markedly in recent weeks averaging 806 individuals per day during June. Since the resumption of large scale repatriation operations in March 2002, repatriation trends have generally peaked during the period May to August.

Over the past few months, returning refugees have cited economic factors and the difficult security situation in Pakistan, and local improvements in security and employment opportunities in some provinces of Afghanistan as key reasons for deciding to return.

Speaking on the occasion of World Refugee Day in Kabul, Engineer Abdul Rahim, the Acting Minister for Refugees and Repatriation, said “It’s important to recall that there are still 2.7 million refugees registered with the authorities remaining in Iran and Pakistan. Continuing donor support for Afghanistan’s reconstruction and development programmes is needed to attract more refugees home in future.”

Returning Afghans have stated their destinations as the Eastern region (33%), mainly to the provinces of Nangarhar, Laghman, the Central region (32%), mainly to the provinces of Kabul, Logar and Parwan, the Northern and North-eastern regions (18%), mainly to the provinces of Kunduz, Jawzjan , Balkh and Baghlan, and the South-eastern region (7%) mainly to the provinces of Paktya and Khost. Afghans destined for the Southern, Western and Central Highland regions constitute 9% of the total returns to Afghanistan this year.

***For more information please contact:
Qaiser Khan Afridi on 03005018696***

...

The majority of the 2.7 million registered Afghans in Pakistan and Iran have lived in exile for over two and a half decades. More than half this population has been born in exile. As such, they face more complex reintegration challenges than their compatriots who left Afghanistan more recently and who repatriated in huge numbers between 2002-2006.

Since 2002 it is estimated that over 5 million Afghans have returned home, a figure that represents a 20% increase in Afghanistan's estimated population of 25 million. Commenting on the resulting reintegration challenges, Mr Ewen Macleod, UNHCR's Representative in Afghanistan, said "there are issues related to land, property, housing, and employment that emerge daily. But the determination of the returnees to overcome these obstacles is remarkable."

Each Afghan returning with UNHCR assistance receives a cash grant averaging about \$100, depending on the distance to their area of origin. The grant is given out to returning refugees at one of five UNHCR encashment centres in Afghanistan.

Now in its ninth year, UNHCR's voluntary return programme to Afghanistan is the largest return operation around the world. Since it began in 2002, more than 3.6 million Afghans have returned home from Pakistan and 865,000 from Iran with UNHCR's help.

The vast majority of Afghans who have repatriated this year were living in the Pakistan province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (almost 49,000), while just 10,000 were living in Balochistan. Around 2,600 were living in Sindh province and some 8,500 in the Punjab or Islamabad. Nearly 3,000 people, returned from various parts of Iran in 2010.

...