

22 April 2010

More than 22,000 Afghans return home in first month of voluntary repatriation

More than 22,000 Afghan refugees have returned home in the first month of UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme from Pakistan this year, marking a quicker start to this year's return season compared to recent years.

The UN refugee agency resumed its voluntary repatriation programme for registered Afghans on 22 March after the winter recess, through its two voluntary repatriation centres in Chamkani, Peshawar, and Belali, Balochistan.

Over the past month, returning refugees cited rising living costs, fewer jobs and the difficult security situation in Pakistan as key reasons for deciding to return to Afghanistan. Some Afghans also say they are encouraged by improved opportunities at home.

"Whatever their specific reasons, the 22,000 people who opted to return in the past month -- marshalling their families through our repatriation centres and loading their worldly possessions onto huge trucks -- will need all the resilience they've shown as refugees to rebuild their lives at home," said UNHCR Pakistan Representative Mr Mengesha Kebede.

"Afghanistan has absorbed a 5th of its population in returning refugees over the past nine years and many still face shortages of housing, jobs, schools, and clinics as well as security problems."

"To make return sustainable, the returning refugees will need the support of their government and international donors to provide reintegration opportunities. I wish these returning refugees all the best as they take this step to help rebuild their country," said Kebede.

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 four UNHCR encashment centres in Afghanistan.

About 71 percent of Afghans to return in the last month were residing in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province), while 15 percent lived in Balochistan. Smaller numbers were living in Sindh, Punjab and Islamabad.

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 3.5 million Afghans have returned home from Pakistan and 865,000 from Iran with UNHCR's help.

**For more information please contact: Rabia Ali 0300-8593588 or
Kaiser Khan Afridi on 03005018696**