

UNHCR welcomes Pakistan's decision to extend validity of registration cards for Afghan refugees

ISLAMABAD 26 March 2010 - The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Mr. António Guterres on Thursday welcomed the decision by Pakistan to extend the temporary stay of 1.7 million registered Afghans for three more years, alongside continued voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan.

Mr Guterres extended his thanks to Pakistan for its past, present and future commitment to the protection of Afghan refugees, who have been caught in one of the world's most protracted refugee situations. "This is clearly welcome. Pakistan remains host to the largest refugee population in the world and its continuing generosity in response to the uprooted is vital," the High Commissioner said.

The cabinet of the Pakistan government on Wednesday endorsed a new Strategy for the Management of Afghans in Pakistan, which includes the extension until the end of 2012 of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, which are issued to registered Afghan refugees. The existing PoR cards, which expired on December 31 last year, will be replaced with new cards with enhanced identification features.

More than 3.5 million Afghans have returned home from Pakistan with UNHCR's help since 2002. The voluntary repatriation operation resumed this week after the winter from UNHCR centres in the North West Frontier Province city of Peshawar and in Quetta, in the southern province of Balochistan.

"My office is committed to continuing our work with the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan to find lasting solutions for Afghan refugees," Guterres stressed on Thursday.

The new Strategy for the Management of Afghans in Pakistan also extends the Tripartite Commission Agreement between UNHCR, Pakistan and Afghanistan for another three years as the gradual repatriation of Afghans continues in safety and dignity and in line with the security situation and capacity of Afghanistan to absorb returning refugees. The strategy also calls for better reintegration and economic opportunities within Afghanistan to support sustainable return.

UNHCR has agreed to mobilize additional support for local communities in Pakistan that have hosted Afghan refugees. This will see problems like

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environmental degradation and the rehabilitation of infrastructure and social services addressed through the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas programme.

“I call upon the international community to strengthen its support to Pakistan for the hosting of Afghan refugees, taking into account too the needs of the refugee-impacted areas and their communities. Funding needs to be commensurate with the generosity shown by Pakistan over the past three decades,” said Guterres.

Pakistan’s new strategy also includes arrangements for some of the unregistered Afghans. A visa regime will manage the stay of business people, students and other categories. Families headed by women who have lost male breadwinners will be allowed to stay.

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