

AFGHANISTAN

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

58,592 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED SINCE JANUARY 2017

In November 2017, UNHCR facilitated the return to Afghanistan of a total of 2,603 Afghan refugees, including 2,548 from Pakistan, 44 from Iran, 6 from Tajikistan and 5 from India. This figure is 38% lower than 4,188 refugees who returned in October. Normally return trends decrease from mid-October onward (during winter season).

UNHCR's facilitated return programme from Pakistan entered a winter break from 01 December, 2017 until 28 February, 2018 and will resume on 1st March 2018. Return from Iran and other countries will continue throughout the year.



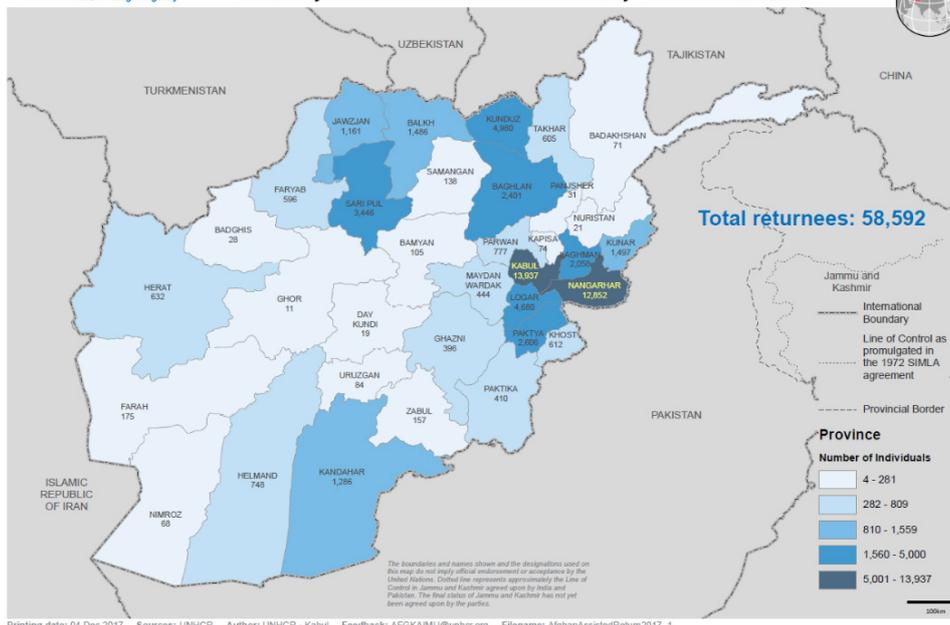
Refugee returnee children in the vaccination area
Kabul Encashment Center – May 2017
UNHCR/ M. Haroon

The 29th Tripartite Commission meeting (between the Governments of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Pakistan and UNHCR) and the fifth meeting of the Quadripartite Steering Committee (between Governments of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and UNHCR) was held in Istanbul, Turkey on 30 November and 01 December, 2017 respectively. Both meetings were hosted and chaired by the GoIRA and delegations from GoIRP, GoIRI along with representatives from UNHCR Offices in Pakistan, Iran

and Afghanistan attended the meetings. Parties reaffirmed their commitment to the principle of voluntary repatriation, in safety and with dignity; and urged enhanced joint efforts to create an environment conducive to voluntary and gradual return and sustainable reintegration inside Afghanistan, as well as to continue to support host communities in Iran and Pakistan, under the framework of Solutions Strategy for Afghan refugees beyond December 2017.



**Afghanistan: Assisted Voluntary Repatriation
Return by Province of Destination - 01 January - 30 November 2017**



Process of return

UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in the countries of asylum are processing refugees wanting to return to Afghanistan and issue a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) for each family. Two VRCs are located in Pakistan: Azakhel in Peshawar (KPK) and Baleli in Quetta (Baluchistan). Repatriation from Iran is facilitated through all UNHCR Offices, including the VRC in Soleimankhani.

Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted at four Encashment Centers (ECs) located in Kabul, Samarkhel (Nangarhar), Jamal Mayna (Kandahar) and Herat.

At the ECs all Afghan returnees with a valid VRF receive a grant of approximately USD 200 per person based on their area of origin to support returnees' immediate humanitarian needs.

Besides cash grants, a range of inter-agency services including basic health care and vaccinations (Ministry of Public Health supported by WHO and UNICEF), mine risk awareness (Danish Demining Group supported by UNMAS), back to school campaign (UNICEF/Ministry of Education), and a transit facility for overnight

accommodation (UNHCR/MoRR) are also provided for returning refugees.

At the ECs, UNHCR and Ministry/Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR/DoRRs) also conduct returnee monitoring (household level) and identify persons with specific needs to refer to service providers for assessment and potential assistance.

Mine risk education is important as a protection intervention for awareness of the threats associated with mines, improvised explosive devices (IED) and unexploded ordnance to prevent injury and loss of life, particularly for those returning to rural areas; UNAMA has reported a sharp increase in associated child casualties in the first quarter of 2017.

IN BRIEF

All returnees are provided with unconditional cash grant (an average of USD 200 per person) at 4 Encashment centers to help them address their immediate protection needs.

IN BRIEF

Between January and November 2017, a total of 58,592 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan under UNHCR's facilitated repatriation program, with the majority from Pakistan (57,286) followed by a smaller number from Iran (1,135) and other countries (171).

This is five times lower than 372,361 Afghans who returned during the same period in 2016. The rate of return substantially increased between July and November 2016 due to heightened pressure on the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan, which influenced their decision to return.

However, the lowered return figure so far in 2017 is largely due to improved protection situation in Pakistan and extension of the PoR cards validity until 31 December 2017.

Returnee Monitoring

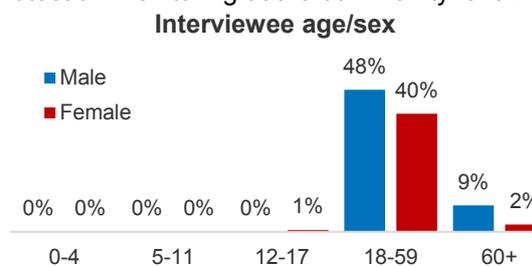


Returnee monitoring at Kabul EC with newly arrived returnee men. UNHCR/ M. Haroon, 2017

Returnee monitoring is an inherent part of the **protection monitoring** carried out by UNHCR in Afghanistan. UNHCR monitors refugee returnees through the entire process of voluntary repatriation: beginning with an interview at the Voluntary Repatriation Centre in the country of



asylum, continuing with the Encashment Centre Monitoring, conducted upon arrival to Afghanistan which is followed up 1-6 months later with a phone survey. Additionally, UNHCR includes refugee returnees as a population group into its protection monitoring at the community level.



ENCASHMENT CENTRE (EC) MONITORING

Encashment Centre monitoring is conducted with refugee returnees upon their arrival to Afghanistan. It aims at identifying return trends; an assessment of the voluntariness of return, reasons for the decision to return (in Pakistan/Iran to Afghanistan), the level of information that returnees received in countries of asylum to make a well-informed choice to return home, and conditions and respect for the basic rights in the country of asylum. It also assists to detect harassment and violations that should be brought to the attention of responsible authorities.

Between 1 January and 30 November 2017, a total of 2,680 households were interviewed including 57% male and 43% female respondents. Interviewees were selected randomly from the returning families at the ECs, being the first point of contact in Afghanistan.

Post-return monitoring

UNHCR uses mobile phone surveys to collect real-time data from returnee population one to six months after the returnees have settled in communities. It is supplemented with interviews with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and general Afghan population for comparison purposes. This provides UNHCR an unparalleled perspective on current population mobility trend and actionable data regarding assistance needs, protection risks and vulnerability, as well as

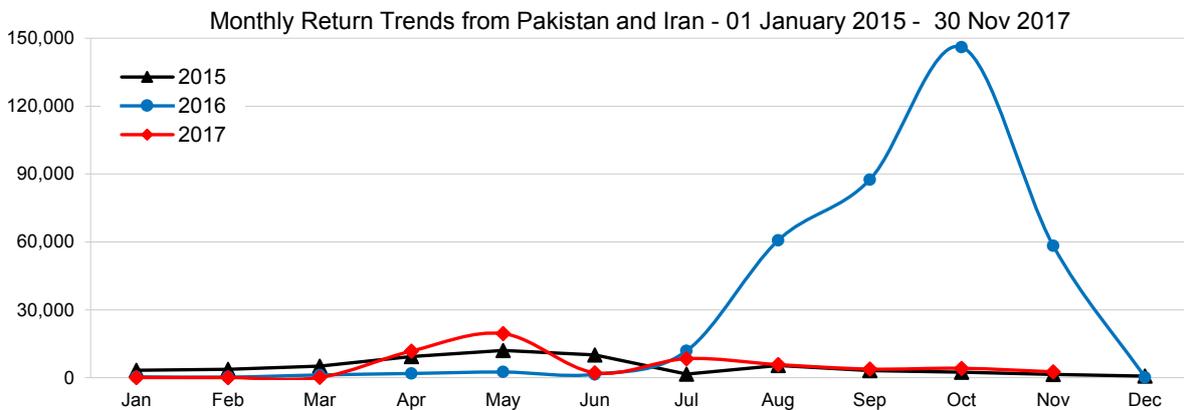
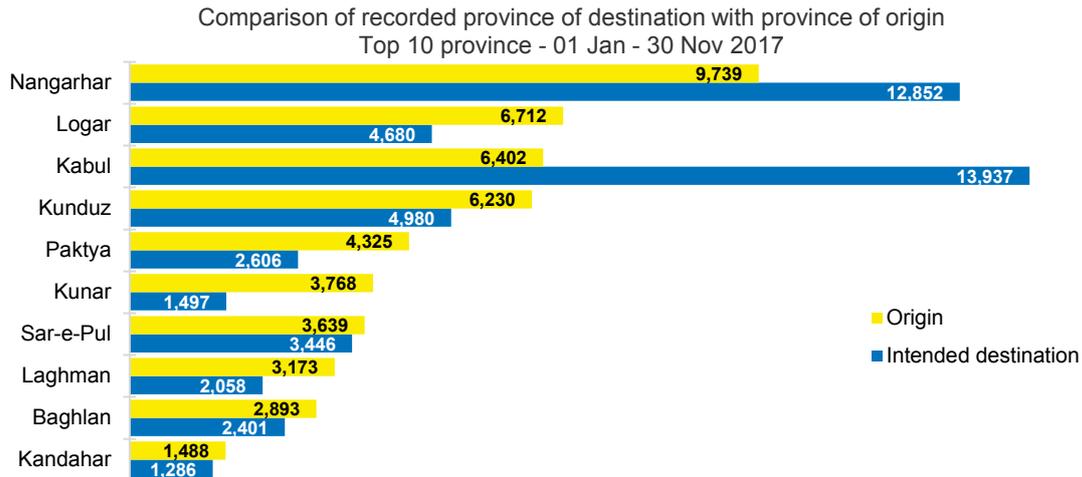
comparative information from a broader cross-section of the population.

UNHCR has piloted the first round of post-return monitoring interviews in-house in June 2017 (see results on page 9). It has informed the development of the continuous monitoring framework in partnership with Orange Door Research that currently conducts interviews on an ongoing basis.

Return Trends

68% (39,895) returned to Kabul, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Logar, and Sar-e-Pul provinces. Kabul, Nangarhar and Kunduz remain among the top five provinces of return since 2002.

Since 2002 UNHCR facilitated the return of over **5.2M** Afghan refugees mainly from neighboring host countries (Pakistan and Iran).



IN BRIEF

Only 60% of Afghan refugees return to their province of origin, while the remaining 40% do not.

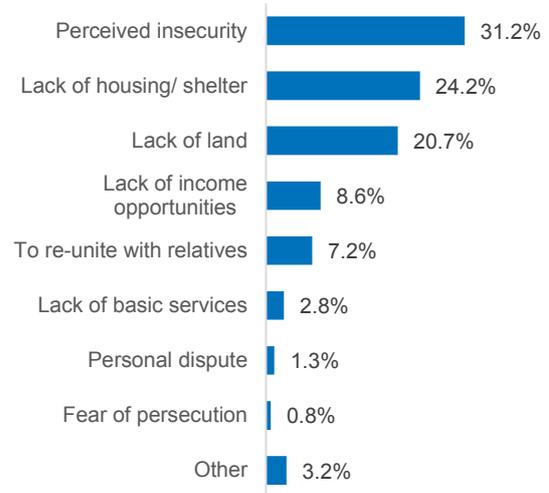
60% of refugees returned after spending over 3 decades in Pakistan.

21% of returned refugees from Pakistan and 31% from Iran were born in exile.

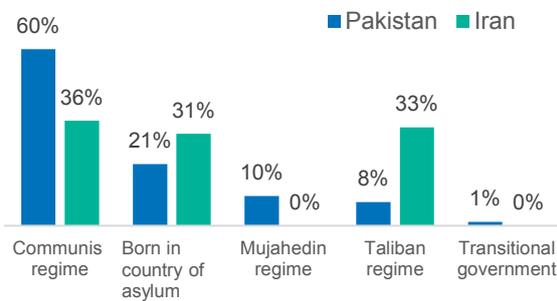
Over 90% of the interviewed returnees stated that they had sufficient information to make an informed decision prior to the return.

Information mainly obtained through Afghan communities and visits to Afghanistan.

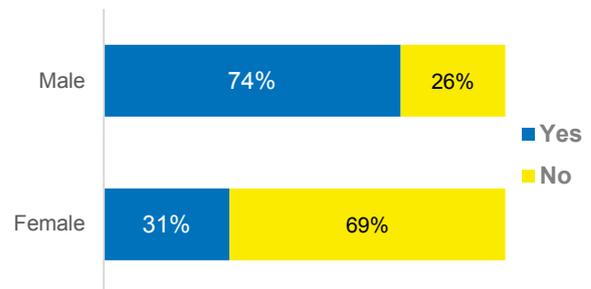
Reasons for not returning to the province of origin



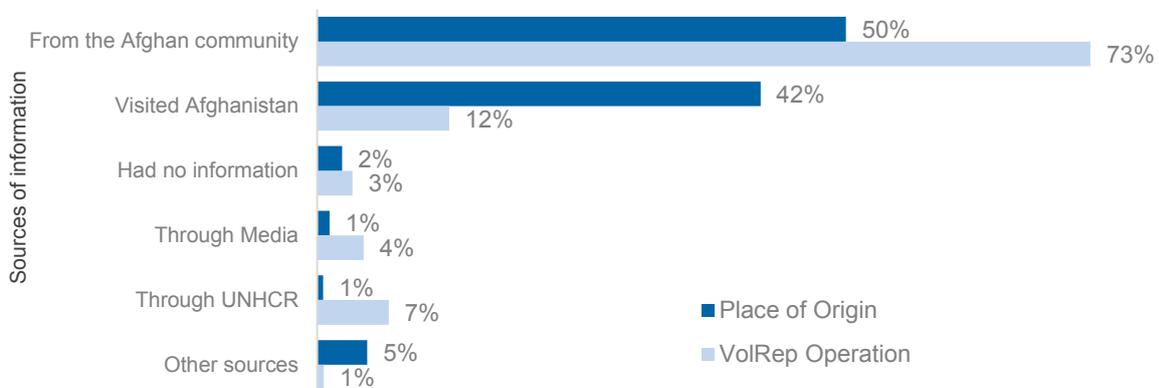
Years spent in Exile



Awareness about cash grant



Sources of Information on Place of Origin and VolRep Program



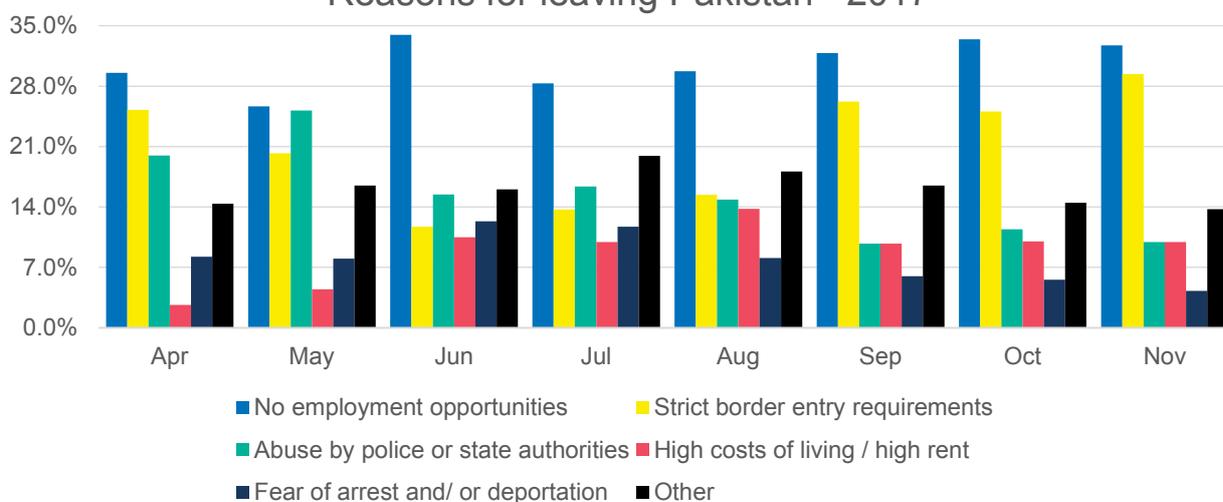
Reasons for Return

IN BRIEF

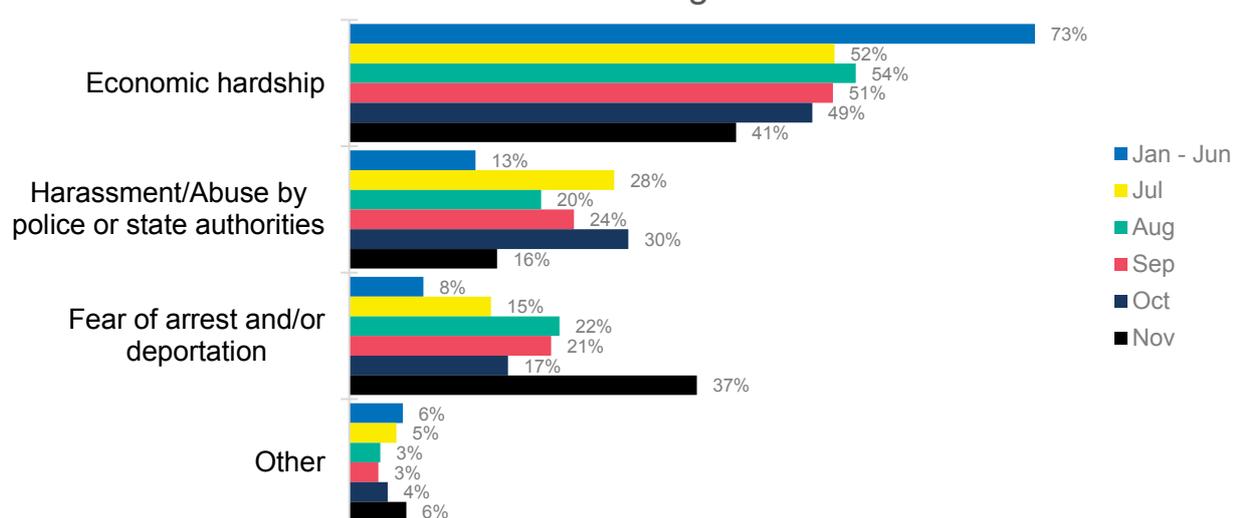
Over 2,600 new returnees from Pakistan were interviewed during monitoring. The main reasons for leaving Pakistan include: a lack of employment; stricter border controls resulting in separation of families; harassment by the police and other State authorities; fear of arrest/deportation; high cost of living and uncertainty related to the PoR cards extension.

8% of interviewed returnees reported that they or their relatives were arrested in Pakistan within the last year.

Reasons for leaving Pakistan - 2017



Reasons for leaving Pakistan - 2016



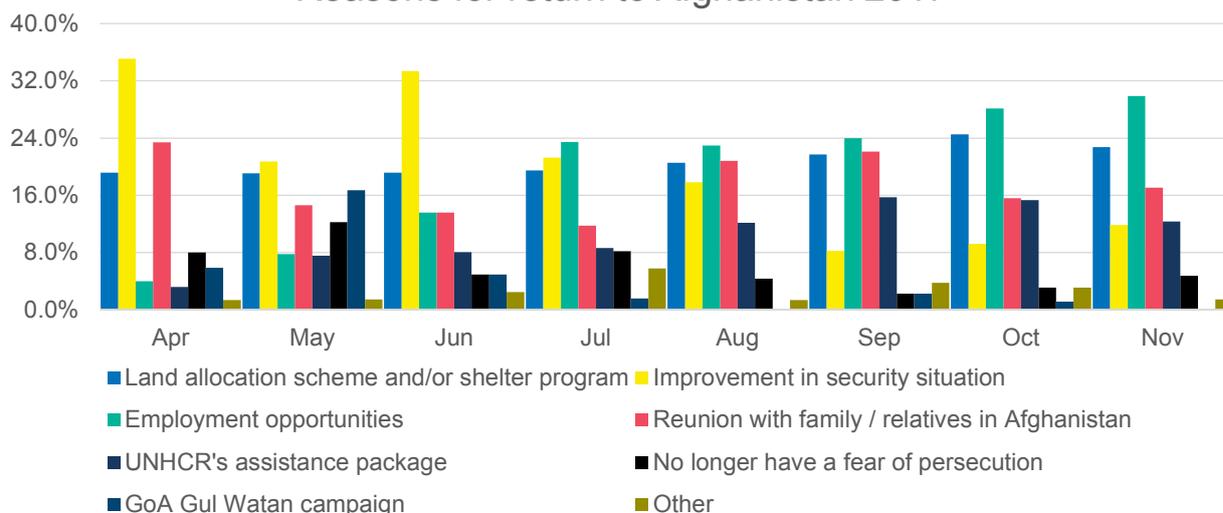
During 2016 refugees witnessed increased pressure in Pakistan. Economic hardship linked to loss of access to job markets, shrinking asylum space in particular lower acceptance rate by the host communities were regularly cited as the first factor that influenced decision for return to Afghanistan.

In contrast, during 2017, no employment opportunities, strict border control resulting in separation of families and alleged incidents of police harassment were reported as the major factors of return from Pakistan. No employment opportunities are primarily related to competition in the job market with the host population. Most of the refugees are unskilled labourers who provide services at a cheaper price as compared to host population.

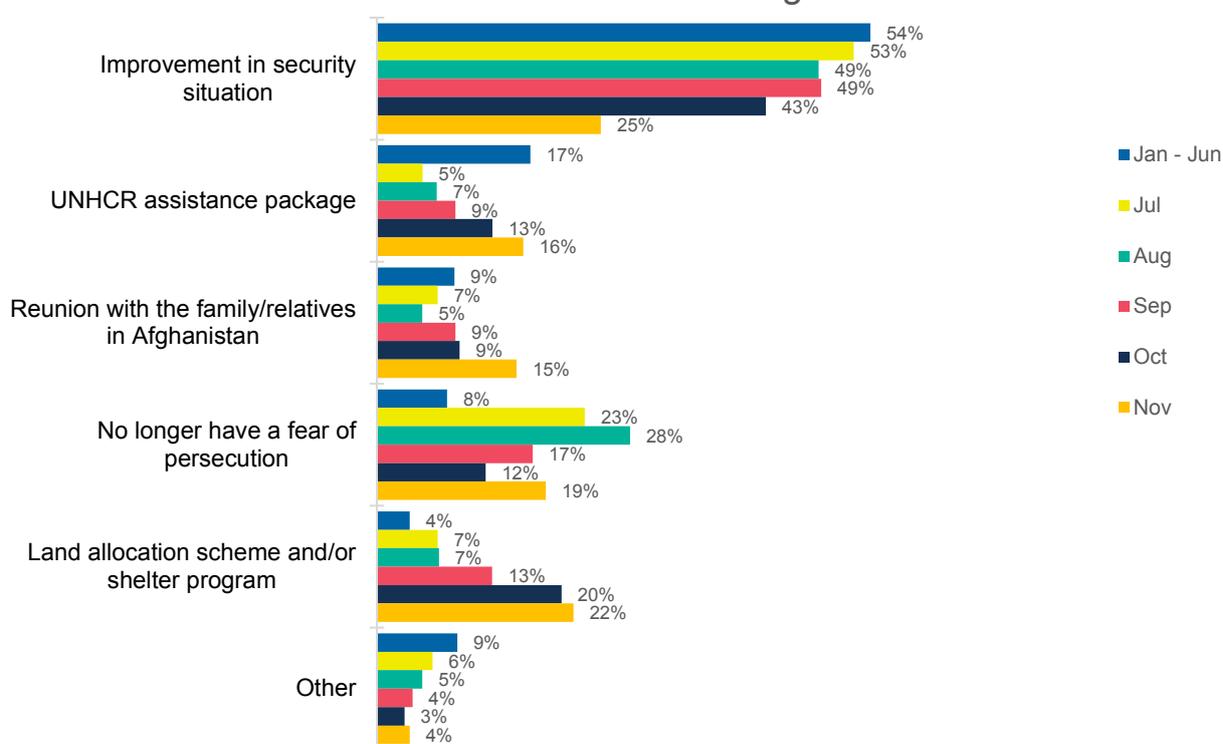
IN BRIEF

Incentives for returning to Afghanistan include offers of land allocation, including government assurances of house/land through the Gul Watan campaign¹; a perceived improvement in the security situation and reduced fear of persecution (compared to the period of their initial flight); a perception of increased employment opportunities; reunification with family members; and UNHCR assistance.

Reasons for return to Afghanistan 2017



Reasons for return to Afghanistan 2016



¹ *Khpal Watan, Gul Watan ("My country, my beautiful country") is the Government of Afghanistan's Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation's campaign launched in July 2016 in Pakistan to encourage Afghans to return home.*

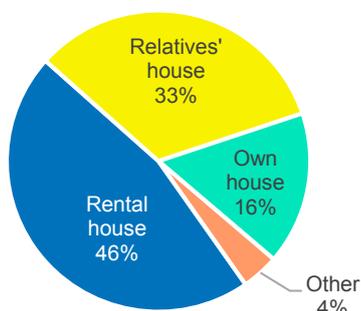
Intentions after leaving the Encashment Centre

The below findings are based on the interviews carried out at the Encashment Centers. These findings give an indication of returnees' intentions upon return which could change after a while when returnees settle in the communities. These findings can also help to compare dynamics among returnees during return and reintegration phases.

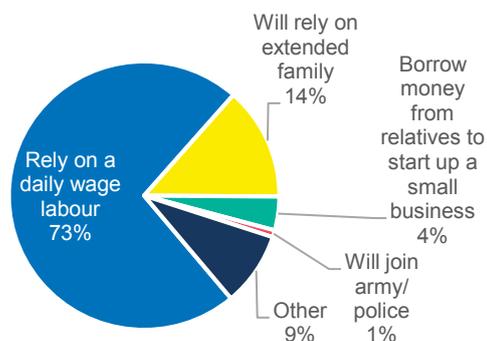


Returnee monitoring at Kabul EC with newly arrived returnee. UNHCR/ M. Haroon, 2017

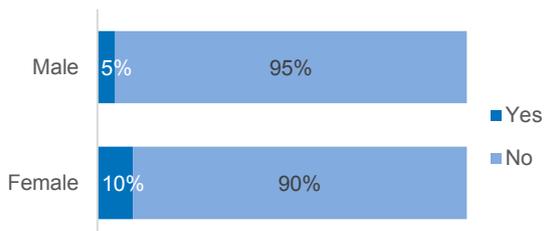
Stay arrangement after return
- 01 Jan - 30 Nov 2017



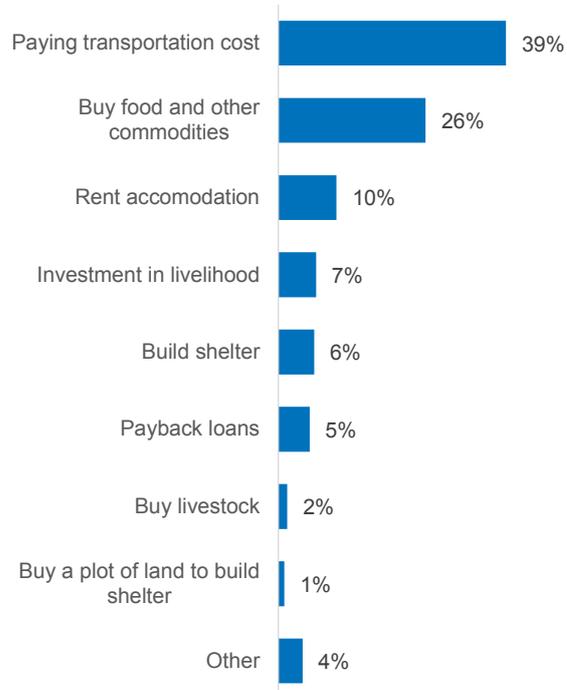
After you spend your cash grant, how will you support your family?
Returnees from Pakistan - 03 Apr - 30 Nov 2017



Did you, your family members or your relatives consider moving to Europe?
Returnees from Pakistan - 03 Apr - 30 Nov 2017



Upon return, how did you plan to spend the cash grant?
Returnees from Pakistan - 03 Apr - 30 Nov 2017
multiple response



Post-return phone survey – June 2017

UNHCR conducted a phone survey of refugee returnees that have already returned to their communities in Afghanistan in June 2017. In July 2017, UNHCR contracted Orange Door Research and Viamo (formerly VOTO Mobile) to conduct phone surveys with returnees and conflict-induced IDPs, supplemented by surveys with the general population. The exercise is part of UNHCR's protection monitoring in Afghanistan to identify protection risks for populations of concern, for the purpose of informing effective responses and advocacy.

Phone survey of returnees is conducted 1-6 months after the returnees have arrived in Afghanistan, and have found a place to stay (be it their place of origin or not). At this stage, UNHCR is monitoring movement patterns, perceptions upon arrival, use and impact of the cash grant, level of access to basic services, key protection risks and needs upon arrival. In the period between 18 June and 6 July 2017 UNHCR has completed 1,296 household level interviews (representing 21% of the overall number of returnees that returned for the period April-May 2017). Overall confidence interval is 2.42 with the confidence level 95%.

Population movement:

Returnees' movement directionality is dynamic and a significant number of returnees opt to return to destinations other than areas of origin. When asked where are you currently living, the majority (78% of the respondents) confirmed that they are settling in five provinces including Kabul (34%), Nangarhar (29%), Kunduz (7%), Logar (5%) and Paktya (4%), which corresponds to the top 5 provinces of intended destination recorded upon arrival to Afghanistan.

When asked whether it is your province of origin or not, 62% confirmed that they are currently living in their areas of origin (compared to 52% in 2016), while 38% said they settled in alternate destinations due to insecurity, lack of land, shelter, access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. Only 2% (31 respondents) of families interviewed cited that a member of their family either moved back to the country of asylum, or left for another location within the country, mainly due to lack of livelihood opportunities.

Change in the family composition is low (only 2% of families reported a member of their family moved back to the country of asylum). 95% respondents have expressed their intent to stay in

their current location in the future (remaining 4% are planning to move to another province and less than 1% expressed intent to return back to the country of asylum or go to Europe).

Living conditions. Lack of access to services and economic opportunities, landlessness and lack of shelter is a key obstacle to the enjoyment of social and economic rights, and the attainment of durable solutions by returnees. In this sense, the situation of returnees during the past years has not been significantly different to that of host communities, thereby compromising the sustainability of reintegration. In other words, it can be said that there is little difference in terms of access to social and economic rights between returnees and the general population.

Security of land tenure, lack of land and shelter, and livelihoods has been continuously reported as a major challenge after return. When asked about housing arrangements after return, 61% of the respondents mentioned that they are living in a rented house (compared to 63% among prolonged IDPs and an average of 23% among host communities); 22% said they are living in temporary shelters, others; 8% said they are living with their families, 8% said they are living in their own house.

80% of the returnees that have returned to their place of origin are renting a house or live in temporary shelter; as returnees are arriving with expanded families i.e. one family with five members left Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion 3 decades ago, is now returning with 3-5 families.

11% report that their living conditions have worsened compared to the country of asylum, while 74% claim they have improved.

Employment

IN BRIEF

8% of the interviewed returnees reported that their children under 14 years are contributing to the family income by working, mostly as street vendors, daily wagers and at the brick kiln factories.

Inadequate income continues to be the primary cause of protection risks including illegal migration, drug addiction, and possibility of joining anti-government elements. 34% of the respondents stated - they are unemployed, 43% said they were daily wage/subsistence labourers compared to 59% among prolonged IDPs and 30% among host communities.

Further, some 29% respondents (interviewed at Encashment Centers) have been engaged in daily wage labour in the country of asylum and 23% said they have some sort of livelihoods prospects in the formal sector or in informal markets such as shop owners, transportation, farming, etc.

Use of the cash grant

The provision of cash grants to returning refugees from the main hosting countries of Pakistan and Iran is a prioritised activity of UNHCR's operation in Afghanistan. The cash grant is a protection tool that provides the means to basic needs in the first phase upon return and the freedom of choice to determine a family's priorities. Furthermore, it gives direction to future re-integration prospects.

When returnees were asked what they spent the money on and how long it lasted, majority said that they spent the money primarily for transportation, food and other commodities, and renting accommodation. 20% said they used the money to build shelter, pay off debts and invest in livelihoods.

The cash grant was spent quickly: **97% spent the money between one-two months** and 3% spent the money over three months. These findings are almost similar to what was indicated by returnees during the phone interviews conducted in 2016.

Respondents appreciated the overall verification process before and after cash grant distribution in the encashment centers. 99.8%² of the respondents did not report any misconduct by UNHCR and partner staff before and during the cash grant distribution at the ECs.

In conclusion, the findings show that the cash grant does not contribute significantly to sustainable reintegration as the money is spent very quickly, nor does it contribute to sustainability, which is provided by stable employment and development of longer term integration networks.

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² One respondent complained about local authorities counselling method which was followed up