

Returning to uncertainty: The situation of Afghan returnees

Advocacy Brief

April 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan is facing one of the largest and most rapid mass return movements in recent decades. Since September 2023, more than **5 millions of Afghans**, many of whom had lived in Iran or Pakistan for years, if not decades, **have returned to a country already grappling with an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.**¹ A high proportion of returnees, potentially reaching 80% of total returns, have been deported or had no control over their return, often arriving after traumatic journeys and with very limited resources (see page 6). Their return takes place against a situation where, after decades of conflict and crisis, nearly half of Afghanistan's population relies on humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs, and where economic challenges, widespread poverty, and lack of services continue to erode coping capacities across the country.

Once back in Afghanistan, **returnees face a long and difficult road to safety and reintegration.** The initial reception at border points, often supported by humanitarian actors, provides only essential and short-term relief. Beyond these entry points, assistance is incredibly limited, leaving families to navigate extreme vulnerability on their own.

Humanitarian organisations working in Afghanistan, including INTERSOS, are doing what they can to respond. With support from key donors, INTERSOS provides health, nutrition, and protection services at some of the main entry points and in several areas hosting relevant numbers of returnees. However, **operational challenges and reduced humanitarian funding severely limit the scale and continuity of assistance.** Despite growing needs, **humanitarian appeals remain**

gravely underfunded, forcing organisations to scale back or suspend programmes and leaving critical gaps at a time when support is most urgently needed.

At the same time, it should be underlined that the situation facing Afghan returnees is not only an immediate humanitarian concern, it is also a **long-term development challenge.**² Without sustained investment in basic infrastructure, health systems, livelihoods, shelter, protection mechanisms, and community-based reintegration support, Afghanistan will continue to face great challenges to absorb large numbers of returnees and improve the living conditions of its population.

Overall, the aim of this advocacy brief is to shed light on the challenges that returnees face both throughout their journey and after settling back in Afghanistan, with the objective of elevating their needs and calling for concrete action. The analysis draws on direct testimonies from returnees and on insights gathered through discussions with INTERSOS staff in Kabul, Kandahar, Nimruz, and Herat.

This brief calls for renewed and principled engagement from the international community, including **increased humanitarian funding, targeted development assistance, and strengthened cross-border support.** It also urges all states, especially neighbouring countries and European governments, to recognise that **conditions in Afghanistan are not conducive for safe and dignified returns** and that protecting people on the move, and supporting their ability to rebuild their lives, is both a humanitarian imperative and a shared responsibility.

KEY POINTS

- Since September 2023, more than 5 million Afghans have returned to Afghanistan at a time when 21.9 million Afghans, nearly half of the population, depend on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.
- Returnees face severe challenges both upon arrival and during reintegration efforts, including lack of shelter, livelihoods, healthcare, protection, and social support, further straining already fragile communities and overstretched services.
- Assistance reaches only a fraction of those in need. Severe funding shortfalls prevents organisations from scaling up responses, leaving critical gaps in health, protection, nutrition, and reintegration support for returnees.
- Donors must significantly increase and sustain funding to enable humanitarian organisations to maintain and expand essential services, particularly in high-return areas and hard-to-reach locations. Flexible, multi-year funding is essential to move beyond short-term emergency responses and support dignified reintegration.
- Due to the scale of the situation and in order to make Afghanistan able to absorb returns in a sustainable and dignified manner, humanitarian assistance needs to be accompanied with targeted development assistance.
- Afghanistan is not currently conducive to safe, voluntary, and dignified returns. Ongoing humanitarian needs, widespread poverty, limited services, and protection risks mean that returns, especially forced returns, expose individuals to heightened vulnerability.

1. A CRISIS OF RETURN: AFGHANISTAN'S GROWING CHALLENGE

Historically, **more than 40 years of war, conflicts, and instability in Afghanistan have displaced millions.** Many found shelter in neighbouring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan, while many others were internally displaced.³

While Iran and Pakistan initially provided refuge to Afghans fleeing conflict and instability, the situation shifted significantly after 2021. Over the past few years, and particularly since 2023, both countries have increasingly moved toward **large-scale forced returns.** As a result, Afghanistan is now grappling with a growing returnee crisis: millions of people have been compelled to return, placing additional strain on already fragile local systems and scarce resources. The scale of these movements is massive, **in 2025 more than 2.9 million Afghans had returned from neighbouring countries** (Figure 1).⁴

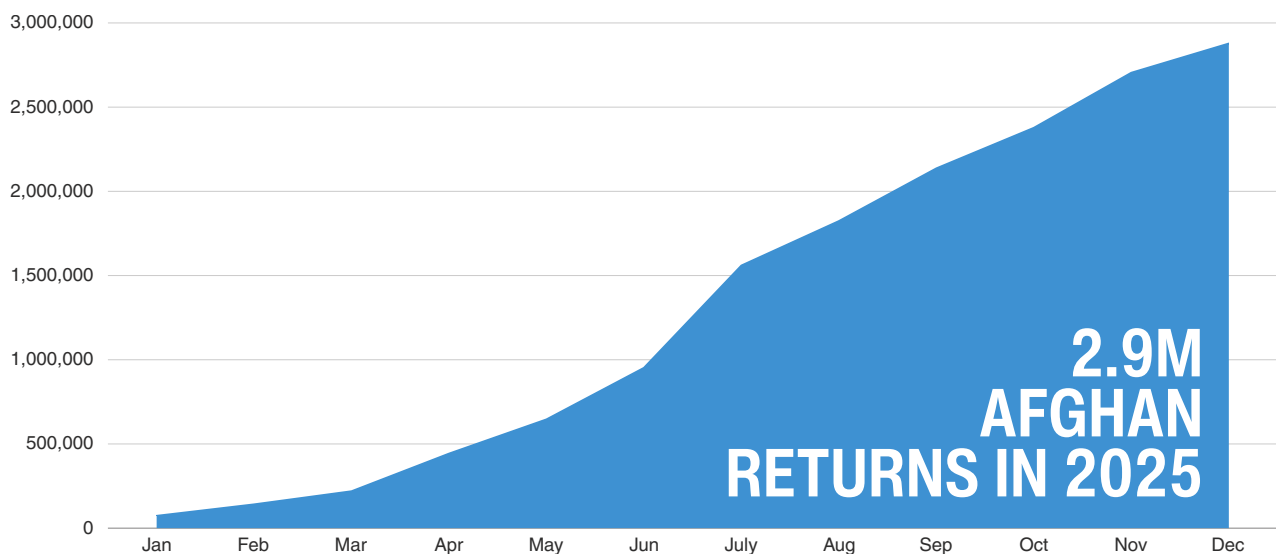
These arrivals add to those arrived in previous years. Between mid-September 2023 and the end of 2024, approximately 2.4 million Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan.⁵ The scale of these returns has acted as a demographic and economic shock occurring in a country already facing institutional fragility, economic contraction, and climate stress.

Relevantly, still 3 million registered Afghan refugees, asylum-seekers or afghans in refugee-like situations currently reside between Iran, Pakistan, and other neighbouring countries.⁶ Returns are therefore expected to continue also in the next months if the overall political context remains unchanged.

The reception center of the Islam Qala border crossing between Afghanistan and Iran.



Figure 1 - Total number of returns to Afghanistan in 2025





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NEW POLICIES, INCREASED CHALLENGES

Across both Pakistan and Iran, **the space for Afghans to remain in host countries has shrunk significantly in the past three years**, placing millions in increasingly precarious situations. While both countries continue to host large Afghan refugee populations, policy shifts have tightened documentation requirements and accelerated large-scale returns. Relevantly, both Iran and Pakistan have progressively toughened their refugees-related policies. As a result, **many Afghan refugees have found themselves in an increasingly fragile and uncertain situation**, as their documentation, permits, or visas expire in both Pakistan and Iran, and authorities intensify crackdowns on those without valid legal status.

More specifically, for what concerns **Pakistan**, the Government resumed the “Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan” (IFRP) on 7 March 2025, first targeting Afghan Citizenship Card (ACC) holders who were instructed to leave voluntarily by 31 March or face deportation from 1 April. Originally introduced in September 2023, this plan aims to return all non-citizens without valid visas, effectively closing the protection space for Afghans in need of safety. In addition, on 31 July of the same year, the Government extended the plan to include Afghan refugees holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, granting only a one-month grace period until 31 August.⁷

Moreover, the **escalation of tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan** that started in the second half of 2025 has further complicated the situation, making the position of Afghans in Pakistan even more precarious. The closure of land border crossings between the two countries (while not applied to the flow of returnees) has also had significant economic repercussions as it has disrupted cross-border trade and restricted access to imported goods such as rice and medicines affecting incomes in sectors that depend on bilateral commerce, further increasing pressure on the Afghan population.⁸

In **Iran**, the expiry of the temporary “Headcount slip” documentation for roughly two million Afghans (initially set for 20 March 2025 and later extended to 6 July) triggered a large return scheme, under which most were expected to return to Afghanistan by the July deadline or face deportation.⁹ The current hostilities in the country and in the broader region may further complicate the situation.

As a result of these measures, **more than 1.8 million Afghans returned from Iran and almost 1 million from Pakistan in 2025**.¹⁰



Deportations

As per UN data, in 2025, deportations made up a large share of overall returns to Afghanistan. Out of 2.9 million total returns, **around 1.42 million people were officially deported**. The vast majority came from Iran (about 1.26 million), while roughly 155,000 were deported from Pakistan. At the same time, as analysed in the next pages, it is important to consider that those that were not officially deported did not necessarily re-enter Afghanistan completely voluntarily (see page 6).¹¹

From Iran, deportations increased steadily at the start of the year and surged sharply in June and July, following the 12-day conflict, before remaining high through the end of the year. From Pakistan, numbers rose significantly in November and December, in line with the implementation of the IFRP.

What is particularly concerning is that many of those deported held some form of documentation. In Iran, 42% were headcount slip holders. In Pakistan, 46% were PoR cardholders and 3% were asylum seekers.¹² This points to a shrinking protection space, even for Afghans who were previously considered documented.

THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

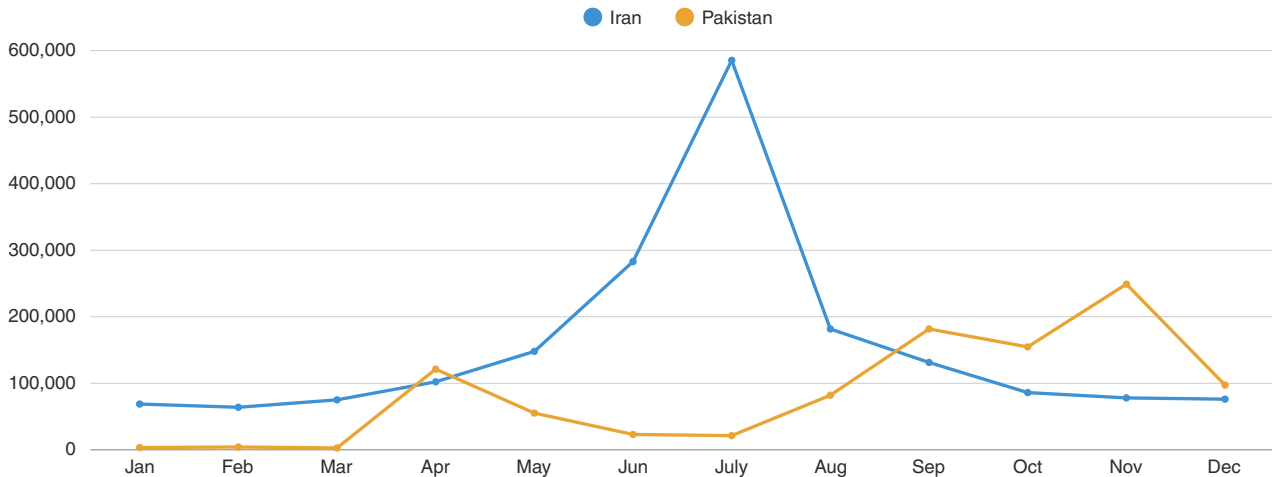
The millions of Afghans returning to Afghanistan are going back to a country already struggling under the weight of a profound and multi-layered crisis. More than four years after the end of active hostilities, Afghanistan remains one of the world's most acute humanitarian emergencies where nearly half of the population, **an estimated 21.9 million people in 2026, requires some form of humanitarian assistance simply to meet basic daily needs.**¹³

The crisis touches every sector: food security and nutrition, health, water and sanitation services, protection, education, and livelihoods. On top of these, returnees also face other **long-term challenges around protection, housing, re-integration, employment, and access to public services.** The latter, weakened by decades of conflict, have limited capacity to absorb additional pressure, and essential systems that were already stretched thin are now struggling under the demands of large-scale returns.

In this context, **the arrival of nearly three million returnees within a single year has accelerated the erosion of coping capacities.** Families returning with little or no assets find themselves in communities where resources are scarce and job opportunities are limited. Local authorities, facing substantial financial and structural constraints, struggle to provide even basic reintegration assistance. At the same time, funding for humanitarian assistance was dilapidated in the last few years, making things even worse. Relevantly, in 2025, Afghanistan's Humanitarian Response Plan was covered by only 41.7% of required funding – not enough to homogeneously provide assistance throughout the whole country. As a result, **returnees re-enter a situation marked by rising poverty, limited access to services, recurrent climatic shocks, and widespread economic hardship without the possibility of receiving almost any support.**



Figure 2 - Number of returns to Afghanistan in 2025 per host country



A truck full of furniture and other household items arrived from Pakistan is being unloaded at the Kandahar Transit Center (KTC). May 2025.



2. UNDERSTANDING THE RETURNEES' REALITY AND NEEDS

Returning to Afghanistan remains deeply challenging and potentially traumatising, especially for those who have spent many years abroad or who were born and raised in the host countries and are now entering Afghanistan for the first time. Many return with few resources, limited family or community networks, and in some cases leave members of their household behind due to differing legal statuses. Once back, they often confront a foreign new reality marked by widespread poverty and scarce opportunities.³ As a matter of fact, for many returnees, accessing even the most basic services such as healthcare, nutrition support, education can be practically impossible once they arrive in Afghanistan. By also drawing on INTERSOS' first-hand field experience and direct testimonies from returnees, the following sections outline their current situation and shed light on some of the key challenges returnees face upon arrival.

THE SITUATION IN HOST COUNTRIES

As outlined in the previous section, **the majority of Afghan returnees are forced or directly induced to return to Afghanistan by local authorities due to their increasingly precarious legal status**. This uncertainty largely stems from recent policy decisions in Iran and Pakistan regarding the validity and renewal of the temporary documents and permits that Afghan refugees had relied on during their stay in the host countries or a total lack of documentation.

However, even those who still hold some form of residence documentation are not exempt from pressure. A number of returnees' households told us how authorities in both Iran and Pakistan frequently instruct Afghan nationals to leave the host country before their permits expire. Those who remain after their documentation lapses are left without any legal status, effectively cut off from services, employment, and protection, and forced to live with the **constant fear of arrest, detention, or deportation**. In this regard, a recent IOM assessment highlights how the most common challenges for Afghans refugees in Iran and Pakistan include the risk of deportation, lack of documentation, and police harassment.¹⁴ This precarity shapes the daily reality of the majority of Afghans residing in both countries. In Iran and Pakistan, the situation is further compounded by the absence of efficient Afghan consular services,¹⁵ which makes it even more challenging for Afghans to obtain or renew official documents.

Despite all these challenges, many returnees described how life in host countries had, for years, offered relatively better economic opportunities compared to Afghanistan. Several interviewees reported having jobs and being able to support their families. However, this situation has progressively deteriorated as increasing restrictions, fear of arrest, and limited access to services have made daily life increasingly difficult, eventually forcing many to leave, often abruptly and without the possibility to prepare.



"I recently returned from the Gardi Jungle area of Pakistan, where my family and I spent almost 43 years. We did not want to leave, but we were forced to. We had to pack our belongings in a great hurry, leaving many of our possessions behind. Our livelihoods and businesses there have completely ended.

Male returnee from Pakistan,
Helmand Province



"My husband used to work as a daily labourer and I was working in a farm collecting fruits.

We had registered our family and got a headcount card for Iran, but later, they warned us and set a deadline for us to leave the country.

We came back to our country and here we have nothing, no home and no jobs."

Female returnee from Iran,
Nimroz Province

FORCED RETURNS

For many Afghans, return is not a choice but a sudden and distressing event. According to a 2025 assessment by the Mixed Migration Center, the vast majority of respondents, **80%, had no control over their return**: 39% were deported and 41% were expelled, while only 11% were able to return independently (Figure 3).¹⁶ This shows the critical situation Afghans encounter in neighbouring countries.

Importantly, **people often recount how they were forced to leave their homes within hours**, abandoning all their belongings accumulated over years or sometimes even decades of life in Pakistan or Iran. INTERSOS assessments in Herat and Nimroz show that nearly all deportees arrive in Afghanistan within a week of being removed, emphasising the speed and chaos of these movements. In this situation, accounts of violence, property confiscation, harassment, and abrupt evictions are incredibly common.

Understanding this situation is central. **Many returnees have spent their entire lives outside Afghanistan or left so long ago that they no longer know the social norms or how basic services function** in the country. Returning to an unfamiliar environment, already affected by a dire economic situation, widespread poverty, and limited services places extraordinary strain on families who must rebuild their lives from scratch. As analysed in the next section, their needs are immense and layered: on top of the challenges faced by the general population, returnees confront additional barriers related to documentation, shelter, livelihoods, protection, and access to essential services.

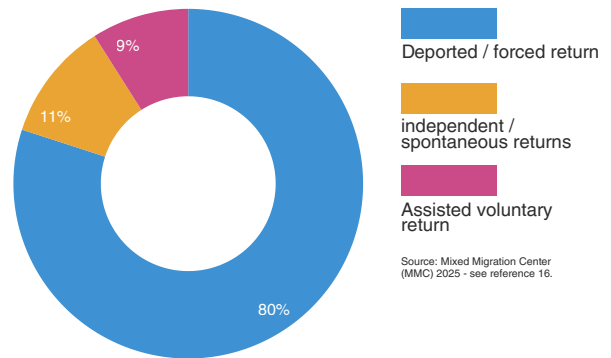


“I returned from Iran, where I had lived for five years. The authorities collected our headcount cards and told us that we were no longer allowed to stay. They said we either had to leave the country or we would be accused of being spies and imprisoned.

We returned under very difficult circumstances. Transportation costs were very high, and we had to spend all our money just to reach the border. Now we are living in a rented house without a job or any source of income.”

Female returnee from Iran,
Nimroz Province

Figure 3 - Nature of the returns



“I had been living in Mashhad, Iran, for 4 and a half years, and the government of Iran forced us to leave the country.

We had no formal residency there, so the Iranian police brought us to the camp near the border, deported us, sending us back to our country.

We had lots of problems on the way back.”

Female returnee from Iran,
Herat Province



I come from Karachi, Pakistan. We had been living there for two years. One night at midnight, the police came to our home and arrested my husband. The following night, they returned and arrested my children. They sent me to the border to be deported to Afghanistan, and months later, they sent my children as well. They did not allow us to sell or collect our belongings.

Female returnee from Pakistan,
Nimroz Province

The reception center of the Islam Qala border crossing between Afghanistan and Iran. In July 2025 more than 585,000 Afghans returned to Afghanistan.



RETURNING TO UNCERTAINTY: HEALTH, PROTECTION, AND BASIC NEEDS

Afghans reach the borders with Iran and Pakistan for a range of reasons such as expired documentation, forced deportation, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, or increasing pressures from host-country authorities.¹⁷ **Upon arrival at the border, exhausted families are confronted with overwhelming uncertainty.** During the peak of returns in the summer of 2025, those returning found themselves in crowded and chaotic conditions among thousands of other returnees, with limited information and, depending on the specific entry point, only limited assistance available. While the number of daily returns has since decreased, **the entrance into Afghanistan is still marked by disorientation.** Many have spent years, sometimes decades, abroad and are returning with only a few belongings and uncertainty of their future life inside Afghanistan.

At the main border crossings, **families can generally access some immediate services provided by humanitarian actors** and local authorities. When available, these can include basic health and nutrition support, cash assistance, distribution of kits, as well as protection services offered by NGOs and UN agencies. These interventions are critical in addressing the most urgent needs at the point of entry. However, they are far from sufficient to enable people to rebuild their lives.

Once inside Afghanistan, the challenges only intensify. **Widespread poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, and the absence of social networks mean that many returnees lack support to sustain themselves after the return therefore struggling to meet even their most basic needs.** Reintegration becomes an almost impossible task in a country whose fragile systems are unable to absorb the massive and continuous influx of people returning from abroad.

In the areas of returns, and in other centers dedicated to welcome returnees away from the border points, such as in the so-called Kandahar Transit Center, **services and facilities have been overstretched during peak times while the provision of assistance remains limited even today.** INTERSOS teams working both near border points and in the cities where returnees are sent after border procedures, such as Zaranj in Nimruz, and the KTC in Kandahar, report that people's needs go far beyond health, nutrition, and protection. As reported by those interviewed for this brief, returnees face a wide range of unmet needs, including the necessity for cash assistance, shelter, livelihoods, transportation to their intended destinations, and lack of documentation.

Many households, especially those who have been away from Afghanistan for years, are also particularly worried about the **harsh Afghan winters and the difficulty of adapting to a reality that has changed significantly during their absence.** The reality is that lacking the financial means to purchase fuel for heating and often living in substandard shelters, returnee families face harsh living conditions during the colder months, further compounding the stress of their reintegration.



“Our basic need is to have our own shelter. We have no money at home. If we are given some cash assistance, it would help us a lot. We have no food as well.”

Female returnee from Iran,
Herat Province



“We have lots of problems here; there is no work, there is no food, and we can not afford to eat. Most of the time, my children are sleeping without dinner.”

Female returnee from Iran,
Nimruz Province



“When someone has money, they can manage their needs. This year, we had no gas, no food, and no stove for winter. Everything depends on money. We also do not have a home or proper shelter.”

Male returnee from Iran,
Herat Province

Testimonies collected across different provinces reveal a common factor shared by nearly all interviewees: the lack of financial resources to cope with daily life. **Limited economic and employment opportunities leave many returnees living in extremely precarious conditions.** Without income, families struggle to access even the most basic services and to secure fundamental necessities such as shelter, food or even national documents that would grant them access to some basic services. **The absence of financial means often forces households to resort to negative coping mechanisms,** including borrowing money, which in turn increases their dependence on debt and further undermines their stability.

INTERSOS' response focuses primarily on providing essential health, nutrition, and protection services through its network of Basic Health Centres (BHCs), but we also provide cash assistance and distribution of different types of kits when possible (see page 12 for more). In terms of health assistance, our field teams report that the majority of returnees arriving at INTERSOS facilities are seeking support for a wide range of urgent and chronic needs such as access to medicines for long-term conditions, treatment for acute illnesses, maternal and child health consultations, child deliveries, and nutrition services for children facing moderate or severe acute malnutrition.



“Most returnees face serious challenges related to shelter, healthcare, food, sanitation, education, and protection. To improve their situation, it is important to ensure that adequate facilities and services are available to support them.

Many families are also unable to build or rent proper housing. The lack of nutritious food is another major problem, which often leads to children becoming sick. Addressing these basic needs would significantly improve the living conditions of returnee families.”

Hafeezullah Popal,
Mental Health Promoter,
Kandahar Transit Center

Generally, the demand for these services seems to reflect the reality for which **returnees often arrive with significant untreated health issues, exacerbated by limited access to healthcare in host countries and the sudden loss of resources upon return.**

On top of this, **protection needs among returnees remain extremely high,** driven by widespread poverty, the lack of economic opportunities, and the absence of social networks for those returning after years or even decades abroad. Many families arrive in Afghanistan with no resources, minimal support, and significant uncertainty about how to rebuild their lives. As a result, the needs for specialised protection services, such as legal assistance, are particularly overwhelming. Worryingly, **mental health needs have particularly risen** due to fear, stress, and anxiety around the returns and the hardship households have to face once back in the country. In addition, **access to education is another critical concern,** affecting not only returnee children, particularly girls, but also communities living outside major urban centers where schools and teachers are scarce.

Many of those interviewed told INTERSOS how families found themselves scattered between different countries. INTERSOS' recent needs assessments highlight **family separation** as the most common and severe protection risk, with many families split between Afghanistan and host countries. This fragmentation places enormous emotional and economic pressure on households already struggling with instability. On top of this, **lack of documentation and risks of forced eviction** appear consistently among the top protection concerns.

It must be said that certain groups face particular vulnerabilities, including women-headed households, unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities, families lacking documentation, and those experiencing separation from relatives. Women and children are disproportionately affected, facing higher risks of gender-based violence, lack of privacy, school dropout, and the inability to work or generate income. Practically, many women returnees find themselves as heads of household, responsible for dependents but without employment, legal papers, or the ability to access essential services making them unable to provide for their families. Other issues particularly affecting children include various forms of abuse or exploitation, child neglect, child labor, and children being out of school.

Worryingly, the **system seems to be failing to protect the dignity of returnees** as while some immediate humanitarian needs are partially addressed, there is a near-total absence of long-term assistance. As a consequence, returnees households, after having been abruptly displaced after many years outside Afghanistan, find themselves potentially enduring long-term instability facing the challenge of rebuilding their lives with almost no support.



“When families arrive at the Kandahar Transit Center, the first thing you see is exhaustion. Many have travelled for days in very difficult conditions, and the moment they step inside, their priorities are always the same: medical help, water, food, and a safe place to rest. We often receive people with respiratory infections, dehydration, diarrheal diseases, or injuries from the journey. Pregnant women tell us they haven’t seen a doctor in weeks, and many children arrive already showing signs of malnutrition. The first hours after arrival are marked by exhaustion, stress, and urgent requests for primary healthcare and essential items such as blankets, hygiene materials, and clothing.

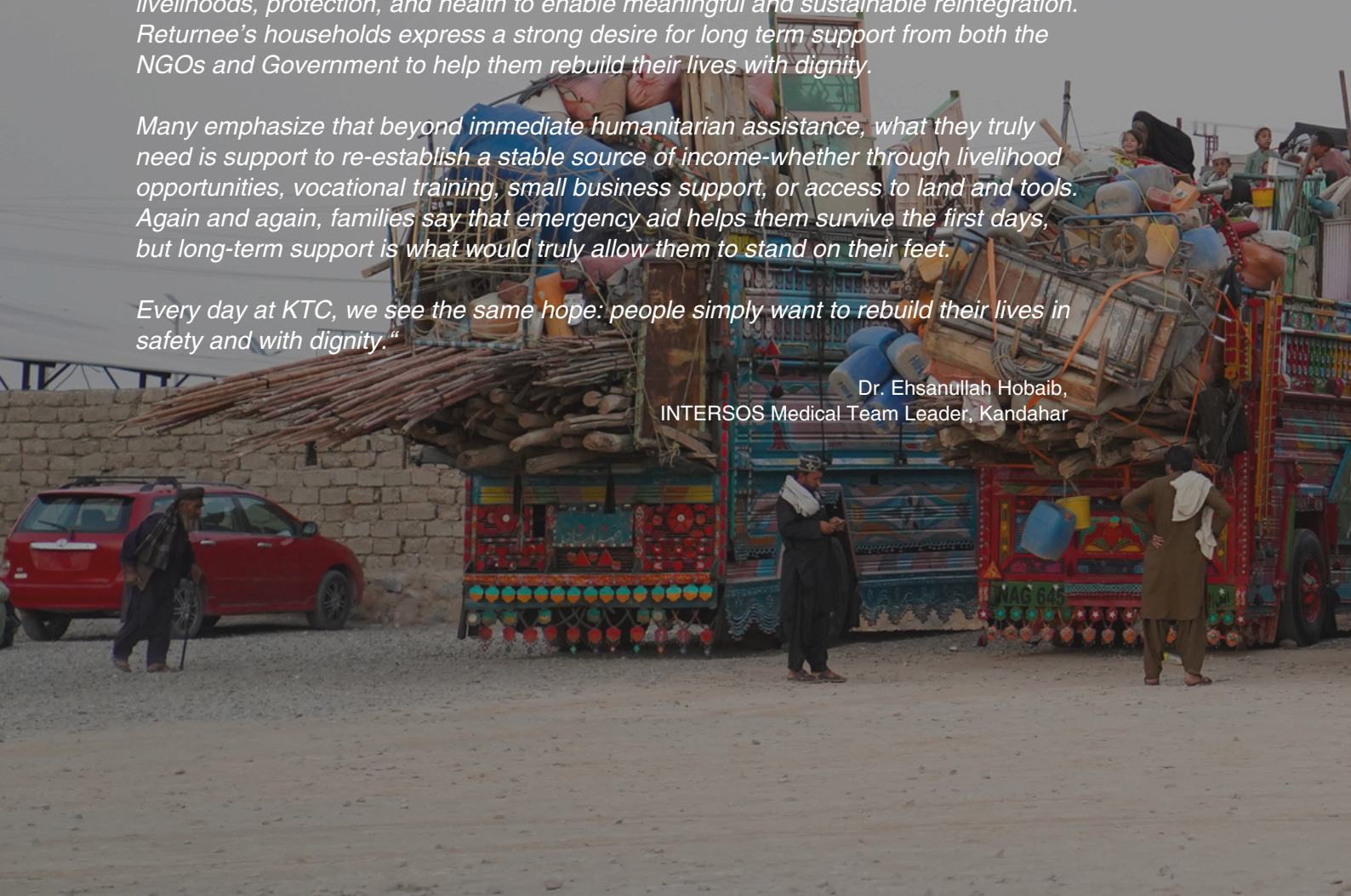
But once the immediate stress settles, another layer of concern always emerges. Families start asking what will happen after they leave the transit centre. Many tell us they have nowhere to go: no house, no land, no job, and no relatives who can support them. They worry about how they will feed their children, how they will afford medicines for chronic illnesses, and whether their sons and daughters will be able to go back to school. You can feel the anxiety in their voices.

Overall, returnees emphasize a strong desire for stability and dignity, generally summarizing their hopes as the need for a place to stay and a way to earn. This underscores the importance of multi-sectoral support spanning shelter, food security, livelihoods, protection, and health to enable meaningful and sustainable reintegration. Returnee’s households express a strong desire for long term support from both the NGOs and Government to help them rebuild their lives with dignity.

Many emphasize that beyond immediate humanitarian assistance, what they truly need is support to re-establish a stable source of income—whether through livelihood opportunities, vocational training, small business support, or access to land and tools. Again and again, families say that emergency aid helps them survive the first days, but long-term support is what would truly allow them to stand on their feet.

Every day at KTC, we see the same hope: people simply want to rebuild their lives in safety and with dignity.”

Dr. Ehsanullah Hobaib,
INTERSOS Medical Team Leader, Kandahar



THE STRUGGLE FOR REINTEGRATION AND DIGNITY

After the initial reception at the border, returnees are quickly confronted with a prolonged period of uncertainty. Families interviewed by INTERSOS consistently emphasise that while some support is generally available immediately upon crossing into Afghanistan, **any form of sustained assistance to help them reintegrate into Afghan society is almost entirely absent.**

Beyond the border points, essential services and support become scarce or inaccessible. Health care, protection services, education, shelter, and legal assistance are available only to a limited extent, and often not at all in remote areas. This gap in support critically undermines the ability of returnee households to rebuild their lives.

Relevantly, **protection concerns**, as highlighted in the previous pages, **significantly affect reintegration prospects, particularly for women and girls.** Family separation, lack of documentation, risks of eviction, and exposure to different forms of violence create an environment where safety and stability are extremely difficult to achieve.

At the same time, **the absence of family or community networks leaves returning households without the social support they need**, while social **stigma and potential tensions with host communities can further complicate their return**, especially in areas already struggling with scarce resources and widespread poverty.

As a matter of fact, **many of the challenges affecting returnees increasingly affect host communities**, whose already-strained resources, labour markets, and infrastructure must absorb large numbers of new arrivals. In this difficult situation it is key to deliver the needed assistance in order to improve community cohesion and mutual acceptance and nuance the challenges associated with the influx of returnees.

Overall, the immense difficulties in securing basic necessities and the challenges of reintegrating into Afghan society underscore just how hard it is for returnees to start again. The lack of services, the limited reach of humanitarian organisations, and the pervasive poverty across the country mean that **hundreds of thousands of Afghans returning from Iran, Pakistan, and other countries are forced to endure harsh living conditions in which dignity and stability are nearly impossible to achieve.**



"It's been one year since we returned and since then, my son has been jobless. It's just me doing some tailoring or sewing to earn some money."

Female returnee from Iran,
Nimroz Province



"I am living in a rented house, but I cannot afford the rent because I am unemployed. We hope to find a job here, because we cannot survive without work."

Male returnee from Iran,
Herat Province



"I want the government to create job opportunities for people like me - I know farming and poultry - or at least pay attention to the rent of the houses. Now it's very high, and we are jobless. We are already a lot in debt."

Male returnee from Pakistan,
Kandahar Province



"For most returnees, the most important issue is finding employment. Access to job opportunities would help solve many of their problems."

Nazir Ahmad,
INTEROS Mental Health Promoter in Nimroz

REACHING RETURNEES WHERE IT MATTERS THE MOST: THE ROLE OF INTERSOS



INTER SOS, through projects funded by DG ECHO, AICS, SV/DRA, and the Gates Foundation, **provides direct and indirect support to returnee communities both at key border crossings and in the areas where people resettle after their arrival.** Crucially, our teams also reach returnees indirectly in hard-to-access districts where families have settled in informal sites or remote villages, often far from public services.

As of April 2026, **INTER SOS conducts activities in seven provinces across Afghanistan, several of which are severely affected by the influx of returnees.** In provinces such as Herat, Nimruz, Helmand, and Kandahar, we assist thousands of Afghans returning from Iran and Pakistan. Our response is delivered through a network of Basic Health Centres (BHCs) strategically positioned both near border points, such as Spin Boldak in Kandahar, Bahramcha in Helmand, and Zaranj in Nimruz, and inside large transit centres, like the Kandahar Transit Centre (KTC). We also work in resettlement areas, including informal ones such as in Herat, where INTER SOS runs two BHCs serving both host communities and concentrations of returnee households.

Across these facilities, **INTER SOS provides integrated services that include primary healthcare, immunisation, nutrition screening and support, maternal and child health, mental health and psychosocial assistance, and protection activities.** In addition, when possible we also distribute kits, such as winterisation kits, and deliver cash support. This combination of services allows INTER SOS to meet some of the urgent needs of the most vulnerable, especially women, children, and returnee families who often arrive with no resources, no documentation, and no social network to rely on.

INTER SOS PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

April 2026

INTER SOS health facilities according to donor:

- European Union (DG ECHO)
- Italian Cooperation (AICS)
- Dutch Relief Alliance / The Netherlands Refugee Foundation (SV)
- Gates Foundation
- Other countries



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The town of Bahramcha, located next to the border with Pakistan, seen from the window of a commercial flight.



INTERSOS' MOST REMOTE HEALTH FACILITY: BAHRAMCHA, HELMAND PROVINCE

Bahramcha can probably be defined as the most remote settlement in the whole of Afghanistan. Located in the South of Helmand province, at the border with Pakistan, Bahramcha is 10 hours away by car, most of which through the desert, from the province's capital, Lashkar Gah.

According to UNHCR data, in 2025, around 4% of all returns from Pakistan arrived through this remote border point, making it one of the least used, but also one with the highest needs. Services in this area of the country are almost completely absent for both returnees and the local community. In addition, for those returning to Afghanistan, the cost to reach Lashkar Gah is often prohibitive, making it difficult for them to leave this remote settlement.

Thanks to the support of the European Union, INTERSOS began operating in the area in November 2025. Since then, and as of the end of March 2026, INTERSOS' dedicated field staff has provided more than 3,252 outpatient consultations, of which 77% were for returnees or internally displaced people (IDPs). In addition to these consultations, INTERSOS has delivered health, nutrition, and protection services to both returnees and members of the local community in an area where basic services are largely absent and the nearest health facilities are several hours away through the desert.

DONOR FOCUS PAGE: EUROPEAN UNION (DG ECHO)

With the support of the EU's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), **INTERSOS is delivering essential health, nutrition, and protection services to thousands of Afghan returnees through a network of 19 primary healthcare facilities** located across the southern and western provinces of Afghanistan. These include key locations such as Kandahar, Helmand, Nimruz, and Herat – areas that have received some of the highest numbers of people returning from Iran and Pakistan. At the same time, DG ECHO's support also enables us to assist returnees in provinces less known for large-scale arrivals, such as Zabul and Uruzgan, where vulnerability for returnees and local communities remains extremely high but humanitarian presence is more limited.



Funded by
European Union
Humanitarian Aid

INTERSOS intervention is centred on primary healthcare, ensuring that returnee families, many exhausted after long journeys and years of hardship abroad, can immediately access critical services. INTERSOS facilities **provide comprehensive assistance**, including medical consultations, pharmacies, maternal and newborn care, nutrition screenings and treatment, vaccination support, mental health and psychosocial counselling, and referrals for specialised needs. This holistic approach is vital, as many returnees arrive with chronic illnesses, malnutrition, unaddressed trauma, and a complete lack of access to health services.

Importantly, one of the projects supported by DG ECHO is part of a wider **consortium** dedicated to the humanitarian response to the returnee crisis. Through joint programming with different humanitarian organisations, this consortium strengthens coordination and expands the reach of life-saving support across multiple provinces.

Thanks to this support, INTERSOS is present in some of the most strategic and fragile points along the return routes. In **Herat**, for instance, INTERSOS operates two health facilities in areas hosting hundreds of returnee households, providing immediate medical care and support to families who often arrive with nothing but the clothes they wear. In the south, among other locations, INTERSOS teams are active at the **Kandahar Transit Center**, one of the main reception sites for those forcibly returned from Pakistan, and at the **Spin Boldak** border crossing, where thousands of individuals pass through in need of urgent assistance each month. INTERSOS also runs a health facility in Bahramcha, **Helmand**, one of the most remote settlements in the entire country, located close to the Pakistan border and extremely difficult to access. Lastly, in **Nimruz** Province, three health facilities are located in the provincial capital, Zaranj, right at the border with Iran.

Reaching these communities requires extraordinary commitment. Every week, INTERSOS field staff travel for hours, often across challenging terrains and areas with limited infrastructure, to ensure that life-saving support reaches those who have nowhere else to turn. Their dedication allows INTERSOS to maintain essential services in locations where only few other actors are present, filling a critical gap in the humanitarian response.

DG ECHO's support is therefore not only strengthening immediate assistance for returnees, it is helping sustain essential health services in regions of Afghanistan where the needs are acute and the presence of humanitarian actors is scarce. This continued support is crucial to protecting the dignity and well-being of thousands of families rebuilding their lives after forced return.



INTER SOS multi-purpose cash distribution at the Kandahar Transit Center (KTC). May, 2025.

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A returnee and her daughter during a medical consultation at one of INTER SOS health facilities in Zaranj, Nimruz Province. October, 2025.

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DONOR FOCUS PAGE: ITALIAN AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (AICS)

Thanks to AICS funding, INTERSOS is able to provide essential health and nutrition services across five health facilities in Kabul province. Unlike other provinces where INTERSOS operates and directly supports returnees, Kabul does not border any neighboring country. Yet, our facilities in the province are consistently filled with returnees who struggle to access even the most basic services due to widespread poverty and the absence of support networks.

Because of Kabul's relative proximity to the border regions, **many of the people seeking care in our facilities have returned from Pakistan.** Testimonies from our staff and interviews conducted with returnee households reveal the extent of their vulnerability: most families arrive with almost nothing, often after leaving behind homes, possessions, and livelihoods in Pakistan or Iran. Many are returning to an Afghanistan that has changed significantly during their absence, sometimes after years, sometimes after decades, leaving them disoriented and without any social or economic foundation to rely on.

These accounts highlight not only the scale of humanitarian need but also the **urgency of strengthening protection and basic services for returnees even in areas that do not border host countries.**



The town of Babaqoshqar, in Kabul Province, where INTERSOS manages a health facility. The area is highly populated by households that have returned from Pakistan, but also from Iran.



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DONOR FOCUS PAGE: NETHERLANDS REFUGEE FOUNDATION (SV) / DUTCH RELIEF ALLIANCE

Through the SV/DRA-funded project, **INTERSOS supports both returnees and host communities in Kandahar Province, including in areas close to the Spin Boldak border crossing**, one of the main entry points for Afghans returning from Pakistan. In these areas, INTERSOS, together with the local partner organisation BARAN, operates health facilities that provide essential health, nutrition, and protection services to local communities as well as to returnee families who have resettled nearby after crossing the border.

To further respond to the increasing number of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), **in 2025 INTERSOS also activated the project’s Crisis Modifier**, enabling a rapid and targeted response to households facing acute vulnerabilities. Following a structured vulnerability-based assessment, 314 households across Panjwai, Maiwand, Spin Boldak, and Takhtapol districts were selected to receive support.

Over a three-month period, these households received three rounds of cash-for-food assistance and winterization kits to help families meet immediate food needs and cope with harsh winter conditions.

DUTCH RELIEF ALLIANCE

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3. CONCLUSION

This advocacy brief has sought to reconstruct the situation and some of the difficulties that returnees face once they return to Afghanistan. Direct testimonies from returnees provided a powerful insight into the daily challenges they have been facing. **The reality of these returns is often complex and layered through different personal stories.** Those who are forced to go back to Afghanistan frequently have only a few days to leave the country in which they were residing, with no possibility of bringing their belongings with them. The journey and the crossing of the border can also prove dangerous experiences.

Finally, once back in Afghanistan, **many find themselves disoriented and without support networks, without family connections, and in a country affected by a severe humanitarian crisis.** The economic dimension of these returns cannot be underestimated: without livelihoods, savings, or access to services, families quickly fall into cycles of poverty and dependency. At the same time, the broader context remains extremely challenging. Humanitarian funding shows no sign of increasing, while Afghanistan remains trapped in a prolonged state of instability and crisis.

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF MASS RETURNS

The scale and speed of recent returns are occurring in an economic environment that lacks the capacity to absorb additional labour or sustain new household formation.

Afghanistan's economy has been under severe challenges and difficulties since 2021. The return of large numbers of working-age individuals is therefore taking place in a context where job opportunities remain extremely limited.

In Afghanistan, many households relied on cross-border migration as a livelihood strategy, supported by remittances that played a critical role in sustaining consumption, housing, healthcare, and education.¹⁸ The abrupt return of hundreds of thousands of Afghans is not only increasing the number of people seeking work inside Afghanistan but is simultaneously removing these external income streams, a dual-shock that is placing extraordinary strain on already fragile local economies.

In urban and peri-urban areas, this dynamic risks accelerating the expansion of informal settlements as families look for accommodation without access to stable income. In rural areas, it intensifies pressure on land, water resources, and agricultural systems that are already affected by climate variability and limited infrastructure. In this context, without targeted support, return may contribute to underemployment, rising household debt, and negative coping mechanisms rather than recovery.

The economic dimension of return is therefore not simply a question of livelihood support for individuals but of local economic stabilisation.

Districts receiving large numbers of returnees must accommodate sudden increases in demand for services, labour opportunities, and basic infrastructure without enough financial capacity to do so.

If unaddressed, **these pressures risk deepening poverty levels, increasing community tensions, and generating even more challenges for those returning.**

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Considering the challenging situation of Afghanistan, the scale of the returns is placing an additional burden on an already fragile system, pushing communities, services, and institutions beyond their limits. This situation has become difficult for all actors involved in the response, United Nations agencies, NGOs, and the de facto authorities alike. At the same time, despite the urgency of the crisis, **humanitarian funding remains far below what is required.** As a result, **organisations have been forced to scale back operations, restrict assistance to only the most life-saving activities, and in some areas suspend support altogether.** These gaps directly impact returnees, who often arrive in Afghanistan with nothing and find very limited assistance available to help them rebuild their lives.

Importantly, the chronic underfunding of humanitarian operations not only affects NGOs but ultimately leaves the Afghan population, especially the most vulnerable, without the essential support they need. **But it is also key to understand that the needs of returnees are long-term and go well beyond what emergency interventions alone can address. Without sustained investment in health, protection, shelter, and livelihoods, and without long-term strategies that also support host communities, Afghanistan will remain critically ill-equipped to manage the scale of returns now unfolding and the broader humanitarian situation.**

Afghanistan’s current return dynamics are not a temporary humanitarian episode but a structural issue unfolding across multiple regions of the country. The scale, pace, and concentration of returns are reshaping demographic dynamics and local economies in ways that require a stronger and more structured response.

Communities that are absorbing large numbers of returnees are themselves vulnerable, often lacking the infrastructure, employment opportunities, and institutional capacity needed to sustain this population influx.

A central challenge facing returnees is the **absence of long-term reintegration support**, largely a consequence of the international community’s retreat from development assistance in Afghanistan. Importantly, durable solutions require more than temporary aid, they demand **predictable funding and targeted development programming** that can restore basic services and create viable opportunities for families trying to rebuild their lives.

While humanitarian assistance remains essential to address immediate needs and protect the most vulnerable, it cannot by itself create the conditions necessary for sustainable reintegration and community stability. Without **complementary development support** that strengthen essential services, expand economic opportunities, and restore relevant infrastructure, **the pressures associated with mass return risk entrenching poverty and potentially increasing inter-communal tensions.**

t complementary development support that strengthen essential services, expand economic opportunities, and restore relevant infrastructure, **the pressures associated with mass return risk entrenching poverty and potentially increasing inter-communal tensions.**

Finally, it is essential to underline that **Afghanistan is not currently conducive to safe, dignified, or voluntary return.** This is consistently recognized across humanitarian assessments, NGO reporting, and UN analyses. Both Iran and Pakistan must acknowledge this reality when shaping their policies toward Afghan refugees and migrants. Equally, Western countries – including EU Member States – must refrain from pursuing forced returns and instead prioritise protection, legal pathways, and continued support until conditions for safe return genuinely exist.

Strengthening humanitarian assistance and re-engaging in principled, targeted development support is therefore crucial, not only to assist those who have already returned, but also to prevent further destabilisation of Afghanistan and the wider region.

People waiting for their turn for a doctor consultation at one of the two INTERSOS-managed health facilities in Zaranj, Nimruz. At this facility, INTERSOS teams assist dozens of returnees daily.



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4. RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERSOS teams working close to border points, in reception centers or in other facilities, constantly witness the dire situation Afghan returnees have been facing both during their arrival and when re-integrating into Afghan society. At INTERSOS, **we strongly believe that both donors and the international community can do more to support returnees households**. As the crisis in Afghanistan continues to impact its population, INTERSOS strongly advocates for the following recommendations.

We urge donors to:

- Provide predictable, multi-year and flexible funding that enable partners to respond rapidly to shocks, including large-scale returns, while reducing delays linked to lengthy approval processes.
- Support the scale up of protection services for the increasing number of returnees by ensuring they are integrated across sectors and grounded in community-based approaches.
- Increase sustained funding to local protection actors to enable frontline support for returnees and promote community-led solutions.
- Support activities that bridge short-term humanitarian assistance and more long-term development support. Relevantly, while humanitarian actors are active at borders, long-term reintegration falls between mandates. There is the need for integrated funding that bridges humanitarian and development responses.
- Allow humanitarian programmes to integrate elements of durable, community-based components (such as system strengthening and service continuity), and re-engage development actors to prevent aid dependency.
- In addition to emergency relief, fund community-led WASH, agriculture, livelihood, and climate adaptation projects that reduce long-term dependency on assistance and help communities, particularly returnees, absorb shocks from climate-driven disasters and peak in returns.
- Channel funds to cross-border initiatives that support both returnees and those forcibly returned from Pakistan and Iran, in order to ease the pressure on Afghanistan's already overstretched services.

We urge the EU Member States to:

- Prioritise principled and realistic engagement with the authorities in Afghanistan, focusing on ways to support durable solutions and (targeted) development initiatives to support Afghans in re-integrating into their country in order to avoid falling into deep poverty, and not using this engagement to facilitate deportations from EU Member States.
- Refrain from conducting forced returns of Afghan nationals residing in the EU. Organisations witness increasing pressures in the Global North to repatriate Afghans from their host countries, despite clear evidence that the situation in Afghanistan is not conducive to durable solutions. Any return at this stage would expose individuals to heightened risks of violence, persecution, poverty, and rights violations. EU countries should instead prioritize protection, humanitarian support, and pathways for legal stay until conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified return are genuinely in place. To summarise, we urge EU Member States to recognise the reality that the current conditions in Afghanistan are neither safe nor conducive for dignified and voluntary reintegration, and halt any forced returns of Afghans from Europe and other parts of the world.

We urge the UN leadership to:

- Intensify diplomatic engagement with the Governments of Iran and Pakistan to advocate for the protection of Afghan refugees.
- Continue to raise international attention on the scale and consequences of returns to Afghanistan, including through regular public reporting, advocacy, and engagement with donors and Member States.

We urge other humanitarian organisations and NGOs to:

- Prioritise support to Afghans returning from neighbouring countries, not only at border points and reception centers, but also in areas of resettlement.
- Prioritise advocacy initiatives and communication activities focusing on the challenges faced by returnees. This should be done not only to raise the voices of those that we assist, but also to inform relevant policy makers about the challenges returnees and the broader Afghan population face in Afghanistan, a country that is not currently conducive to safe, dignified, or voluntary return.
- Advocate in support of unhindered access for humanitarian assistance, including in border areas and for non-interference in humanitarian activities.
- Develop analysis and research on the situation of returnees in order to better understand their needs, especially in resettlement areas, and better inform decision-making.

We urge the De Facto Authorities to:

- Do anything possible to support Afghan returning from abroad, with a great focus on assistance to find shelter, access to essential services, such as healthcare and education, as well as re-integration support.
- Ensure that female staff can fully participate in service delivery. This is the only way to provide returnees women with the assistance and support they need after their return.
- Ensure and support humanitarian organisations in accessing areas to deliver assistance to all those in need, including returnees. This requires clear, predictable, and consistently respected access arrangements that allow aid actors to deliver assistance safely and independently both at border points and in resettlement areas.
- Provide land, shelter, and livelihood opportunities for returnees and displaced people, and coordinate with humanitarian partners to prevent overcrowding and resource depletion in host communities.

We urge all States to:

- Reaffirm obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and customary international law, particularly the principles of non-refoulement, by halting deportations to Afghanistan and ensuring the feasible and legal pathways to fair asylum procedures and regularisation are in place.

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INTEROS response in Afghanistan

INTEROS has been present in Afghanistan since 2001, delivering life-saving assistance to communities affected by protracted crisis, poverty, and limited access to basic services. INTEROS intervention in Afghanistan focuses primarily on delivering health, nutrition, and protection assistance through a network of primary health facilities generally located in remote and underserved areas. As of April 2026, INTEROS operates in seven provinces through a network of 42 health facilities, including support to the maternity ward and the Therapeutic Feeding Unit (TFU) at Qalat Provincial Hospital in Zabul. Through support to these health facilities INTEROS works to ensure that women, children, returnees, and vulnerable families can access essential services in areas where there are none. In 2025, INTEROS in Afghanistan assisted more than 479,000 people in need.

Methodology

This advocacy brief was created using both primary data collected by INTEROS staff through 31 interviews with returnees in Kabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Nimruz, and Herat and informal discussions with INTEROS staff, as well as secondary data from different sources and organisations. Figures on returnees and other data present in the paper have been sourced from OCHA, UNHCR, IOM, and others between October 2025 and March 2026.

Limitations

This advocacy brief is not meant to fully and comprehensively represent the overall situation regarding returnees in Afghanistan. The dynamics of return are complex, fast-evolving, and vary significantly across regions, population groups, and time. Nevertheless, the brief draws directly on the experiences shared by returnees themselves, as well as on field insights collected by INTEROS teams and findings documented by other humanitarian organisations and the United Nations. While not comprehensive, it seeks to highlight the most pressing challenges returnees encounter, both throughout their journey home and after settling in Afghanistan. The intention is to contribute to a clearer understanding of their situation, support informed discussion, and strengthen ongoing advocacy efforts aimed at improving their conditions.

Ethical considerations

The analysis presented in this paper, in addition to drawing on both internal and external written sources, is primarily based on testimonies from returnees and, to a lesser extent, from INTEROS staff members.

During the collection of these testimonies, interviewers took specific measures to safeguard the mental well-being and dignity of participants in line with a “do no harm” approach. All interviews were conducted within INTEROS-managed health facilities, which provided a safe environment with medical and psychosocial staff available in case of need. For returnees, participation was entirely voluntary and in no way linked to the provision of services. As for the latter, interviewees were explicitly informed that their decision to participate or not would have no impact on their access to assistance. Before proceeding with the interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview modalities, and their rights, including their right to decline or withdraw at any time. Only after confirming their willingness to participate did interviewers proceed. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form.

Interviews were conducted in a language understood by participants, either Dari or Pashto.

Importantly, all data collected were stored on an internal organisational drive accessible only to staff directly involved in conducting the interviews and producing the report, including the Communications and Advocacy team and the MEAL department.

Lastly, to protect confidentiality, the names of interviewees have been removed, with the exception of INTEROS staff members.



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Established in 1992, INTERSOS is an international humanitarian organisation dedicated to delivering aid to the most vulnerable populations in the world's most challenging crises. INTERSOS currently provides humanitarian assistance in 21 countries worldwide, primarily focusing on protection, health, and nutrition, as well as water & sanitation, shelter, non-food items, and education.

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