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By John Curtis

Expulsion of Afghans from Pakistan and Iran

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Summary

Since the Taliban-takeover in August 2021, [Afghanistan has been experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis](#), and [a significant deterioration in human rights](#).

[Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have fled to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran in response](#), adding to the millions of Afghans who have arrived in both countries since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Situation in Pakistan and Iran

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), [Pakistan hosts an estimated 3 million Afghans](#), and Iran over 4.5 million.

The UNHCR states that since 15 September 2023, [over 400,000 individuals have crossed into Afghanistan through Pakistan's border crossing points](#).

On 3 October 2023, [Pakistan's caretaker government ordered all illegal immigrants to leave the country by 1 November or face deportation](#). It cited the alleged involvement of Afghans in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, as part of the reason for the move. Since 1 November, [Pakistan has been detaining large numbers of undocumented Afghans and then transporting them direct to the border, according to International Crisis Group](#).

Human Rights organisations [have expressed concerns over the treatment of Afghans by the Pakistani authorities](#). NGOs [have expressed concerns](#) that Pakistan's Government's policy of not allowing deportees to bring significant sums of money, or other property with them means that almost all have been plunged into poverty upon crossing the border; and that the Afghan authorities are not in a position to support them.

On 27 September [Iran also announced plans to deport Afghans who were living in the country "illegally"](#). Iranian authorities say [over 400,000 Afghans have been expelled](#) so far this year.

UK Government actions and response

Some Afghans applying for permission to come to the UK [travelled to Iran or Pakistan to attend a visa application centre or pending arrangements for their travel to the UK](#).

[Many have unexpectedly spent prolonged lengths of time in these countries](#). This is partly due to a policy introduced by the UK Government in November 2022 [not to bring eligible people to the UK if they don't have long term accommodation in place](#).

There were news reports that in Pakistan since 1 October deportation order, [Afghans who were found eligible to come the UK were arrested during immigration enforcement actions by the Pakistani authorities](#), but were later released after intervention by the UK High Commission in Islamabad.

The UK Government have now said that [the Pakistan Government have agreed not to arrest Afghans who are eligible for the UK immigration schemes](#).

In late October 2023 [UK Government ministers approved a change of policy](#), authorising Afghans to be brought to the UK from Pakistan and Iran as a matter of urgency regardless of whether long-term accommodation was in place.

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What is the situation in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is suffering from a severe humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations, its economy contracted by about 30% between 2020 and 2022, 24.4 million people in Afghanistan are in need of humanitarian assistance, and more than 9 in 10 are living in poverty.¹

¹ UN, [United Nations Strategic Framework for Afghanistan](#), 2 July 2023.

Afghanistan is heavily reliant on international aid, but need is far outstripping available funding. In August 2023 the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stated that “just 23% of required funds for this year’s humanitarian response plan have been received”.² In September 2023 the World Food Programme stated it had been forced to withdraw food assistance from over 10 million people in Afghanistan this year due to shortfalls in funding.³

In September 2023, Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the UN Human Rights Council that “human rights in Afghanistan are in a state of collapse”. He raised the issues of ongoing reports of extrajudicial killings, torture and ill-treatment and arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as serious violations against former Government officials, adding “compounding all of this is a deeply troubling lack of accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations”.⁴

The UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, states that there has been an improvement in overall security since August 2021 and “a marked reduction in civilian casualties, enabling humanitarian access to all provinces, including areas which had been inaccessible for decades”. However, it adds that “the humanitarian, economic, and human rights situation continues to deteriorate significantly, particularly for women and girls”.⁵

3 Why is Pakistan removing Afghans and what is the current situation?

Number of Afghans in Pakistan

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN refugee agency, estimates that currently Pakistan hosts over 3 million Afghans.⁶

Large numbers of Afghans first emigrated to Pakistan in 1979 following the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. Since the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 it is estimated that around 600,000 have arrived in Pakistan.⁷

² OCHA ReliefWeb, [Two years since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, almost 30 million people remain in dire need of assistance as funding shortfalls jeopardize the humanitarian response](#), 8 August 2023.

³ World Food Programme, [WFP in Afghanistan forced to drop 10 million people from lifesaving assistance, deepening despair and worry for Afghans](#), 5 September 2023.

⁴ UN, [Afghanistan: Human rights ‘in a state of collapse’, warns Türk](#), 12 September 2023.

⁵ UNHCR, [Iran: Refugee Response Plan 2023 \(RRP\)](#), accessed 28 November 2023.

⁶ UN OCHA, Relief Web: [REGIONAL REFUGEE RESPONSE PLAN FOR AFGHANISTAN SITUATION January-December 2023](#), 9 March 2023, p27.

⁷ As above.

In February 2022 Pakistan's Government, with UNHCR support, concluded a Document Renewal and Information Verification Exercise (DRIVE) to verify and update refugee data and to deliver new smartcards. The exercise "identified almost 1.3 million refugees with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, in addition to 129,703 unregistered members of registered families (UMRFs)". Pakistan also hosts "some 840,000 with Afghan Citizen Cards and some 775,000 undocumented Afghans", according to Pakistan's Government.⁸

Pakistan Government announcement on deportation and future plans

On 3 October 2023, Pakistan's caretaker government ordered all illegal immigrants to leave the country by 1 November or face deportation.^{9,10}

Announcing the move, interim Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti, said some 1.73 million Afghan nationals in Pakistan had no legal documents to stay, and made reference to Afghan nationals being involved in terror attacks in Pakistan, stating "There are no two opinions that we are attacked from within Afghanistan and Afghan nationals are involved in attacks on us", and "We have evidence".¹¹

The Minister also announced that from 1 November tighter restrictions on Afghans entering Pakistan would come into force, saying only visitors with visas and passports would be allowed in. Before this Afghans were able to cross into Pakistan at land borders using their national identity cards.¹²

The removal of Afghans who the Pakistan Government say are there illegally, is just the first phase of a three-phase plan according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), with action expected to be taken against other Afghans including possibly those with Proof of Registration Cards:

In Phase 1 of the plan, which took effect on 1 November, the state is targeting "illegal" Afghans, meaning those with no documentation, those with fake Pakistani papers and those who have overstayed their visas. The government has not announced a clear timeline for the plan, but it has indicated that in Phase 2 it could go after Afghan Citizen Card holders. In Phase 3, it may send back even those holding Proof of Registration cards. The Proof of Registration cards for this cohort expired in June, and it is unclear if Afghanistan, Pakistan

⁸ UN OCHA, Relief Web: [REGIONAL REFUGEE RESPONSE PLAN FOR AFGHANISTAN SITUATION January-December 2023](#), 9 March 2023, p27.

⁹ Under [Pakistan's constitution a caretaker government runs the country between the dissolution of parliament and general elections](#). The [parliament was dissolved on 9 August](#) and the [general election is scheduled for 8 February 2024](#).

¹⁰ "[Pakistan orders illegal immigrants, including 1.73 mln Afghans, to leave](#)", Reuters, 3 October 2023

¹¹ As above.

¹² "[Pakistan orders Afghan asylum seekers out of country by November](#)", BBC News, 4 October 2023.

and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will be able to reach an agreement on renewing the cardholders' status.¹³

The Pakistan authorities also announced, according to the ICG, that “they will be building large holding centres where they will detain foreigners pending deportation”. However, the organisation states that since 1 November “They have taken many detained Afghans straight to the main border crossings in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces and, in effect, pushed them through”.¹⁴

Issues with Afghans gaining Pakistan citizenship and documentation

Pakistan's nationality laws state that those born in the country after the adoption of its [1951 citizenship law](#) (PDF) should, with some exceptions, be granted Pakistani citizenship.¹⁵ But successive governments have said children born to Afghan immigrants in Pakistan should not be given citizenship. In 2022, the Islamabad High Court ruled that an Afghan citizen born in Pakistan, did have a right to Pakistani citizenship.¹⁶

Muhammad Abbas Khan, Commissioner for Afghan refugees in Pakistan Federal Government's States and Frontier Regions Ministry, who oversees all aspects of Afghan exiles in Pakistan, told Radio Free Europe (RFE) that Islamabad cannot grant citizenship to Afghans born in Pakistan. He argued that this would open the door to many among the more than 4.3 million Afghans who have already returned to their country from Pakistan during the past four decades.¹⁷

Mr Khan told the news organisation that “such [a] facility could be exploited and would open yet another floodgate for large numbers of individuals, claiming their birth in Pakistan on forged documents”, stating that this would lead to “a complex, uncontrollable, and unmanageable situation”.¹⁸

Mr Khan also cited the issue of the ethnic makeup of the Balochistan province, which borders Afghanistan and Iran, as another bar to changing policy, saying: “The majority of the new-born Afghans are of Pashtun ethnicity,

¹³ International Crisis Group, [Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability](#), 13 November 2023.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, [Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability](#), 13 November 2023.

¹⁵ See The Pakistan Citizenship Act, 1951, Section 4: Citizenship by birth; Ministry of Interior, Government of Pakistan: Directorate General of Immigration & Passports, [Learn about Immigration to Pakistan: Citizenship of Pakistan](#), accessed 28 November 2023; and “[Every child has birthright to citizenship: IHC](#)”, The Express Tribune, 23 October 2022;

¹⁶ “[Every child has birthright to citizenship: IHC](#)”, The Express Tribune, 23 October 2022.

¹⁷ “[The Lucky Few: Pakistani Citizenship Still Elusive For Most Afghan Refugees](#)”, RFE, 9 July 2023.

¹⁸ “[The Lucky Few: Pakistani Citizenship Still Elusive For Most Afghan Refugees](#)”, RFE, 9 July 2023.

which, if included in the Pakistani population, may change the delicate demographic balance in the sensitive province of Balochistan”.¹⁹

Considering these statements, it looks unlikely that the Pakistan Government will reverse its policy on giving citizenship to Afghans born in Pakistan at present, despite the High Court ruling.

There are other legal hurdles for Afghan migrants trying to gain citizenship in Pakistan. According to the New York Times, “While foreign women who marry Pakistani men can become citizens under the law in Pakistan, there is no provision for foreign men who marry Pakistani women”.²⁰

However, in July 2023, RFE reported that four Afghans married to Pakistani women had managed to win a court case arguing they should be granted citizenship, though “would still be unable to get Pakistani passports”.²¹

Pakistan has also not acceded to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#) (nor the 1967 protocol which updated it) which provides the internationally recognized definition of a refugee and outlines the legal protection, rights and assistance a refugee is entitled to receive.²²

The legal limbo that Afghan immigrants and their children, some of whom were born over forty years ago, find themselves in means they are unable to gain legal documentation, so they can sometimes be barred from schooling and jobs.²³

Why is Pakistan deporting Afghans?

Pakistan government officials have cited security issues as a reason why they have chosen to pursue mass deportations of Afghans. Interim Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti is reported to have stated when announcing the deportation decision that out of the 24 suicide bombings in Pakistan this year, 14 were carried out by Afghan nationals.²⁴

¹⁹ As above.

²⁰ “[Families Ripped Apart as Pakistan Expels Tens of Thousands of Afghans](#)”, New York Times, 23 November 2023.

²¹ “[The Lucky Few: Pakistani Citizenship Still Elusive For Most Afghan Refugees](#)”, RFE, 9 July 2023.

²² UNHCR, [States parties, including reservations and declarations, to the 1951 Refugee Convention](#); and [States parties, including reservations and declarations, to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), both accessed 28 November 2023.

²³ “[Born and Raised in Pakistan, but Living in Legal Limbo](#)”, New York Times, 28 December 2021.

²⁴ “[What's behind Pakistan's mass deportation of Afghan refugees?](#)”, The New Arab, 14 November 2023. Mr Bugti is interim Interior Minister as part of the caretaker government that is in charge of the country until the elections scheduled for February 2024.

VOA News reports that “independent experts say Islamabad's intent might be to pressure the nascent Taliban administration in Kabul, given the latter's perceived inaction against Pakistani Taliban hideouts on Afghan soil”.²⁵

The Taliban-run Administration in Kabul is reported to have dismissed Pakistan's accusations against Afghan migrants.²⁶

Foreign Policy magazine also states that concerns over security and the Taliban regime's alleged support for terrorist groups in Pakistan are behind the recent announcement.²⁷ In an interview conducted by text with Sarfraz Bugti, the Interior Minister states that the deportations are a sign that Pakistan is “putting its house in order,” saying “Pakistan is the only country hosting four million refugees for the last 40 years and still hosting them”, and “Whoever wanted to stay in our country must stay legally”. He also told Foreign Policy of the 300,000 Afghans already ejected, stating none have faced any problems upon returning. As the Taliban are claiming that Afghanistan is now peaceful, he said, “they should help their countrymen to settle themselves”. Mr Bugti stated that “We are not a cruel state,” but added “Pakistanis are more important”.²⁸

Humanitarian and human rights concerns

The Pakistani authorities have tightened controls on entrants to the country. According to the International Crisis Group: in November 2023 “The interior ministry established a hotline, encouraging Pakistanis to report any “illegal foreigners” living in their midst. Police reportedly warned of fines for landlords who rent to and firms that employ Afghans lacking proper documents”.²⁹

At the end of November 2023, Human Rights Watch (HRW) claimed that “Pakistani authorities have committed widespread abuses against Afghans living in Pakistan to compel their return to Afghanistan”.³⁰ Specifically HRW stated that “Police and other officials have carried out mass detentions, seized property and livestock, and destroyed identity documents to expel thousands of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers”.³¹

In November 2023, the BBC reported that Pakistan is charging a US\$830 fee to undocumented refugees who want to leave the country and arrived without a

²⁵ [“US Advocates for Afghan Refugees Amid Pakistan's Threatened Expulsion”](#), VOA News, 17 October 2023.

²⁶ [“Why is Pakistan deporting over a million undocumented Afghan immigrants?”](#), Reuters, 2 November 2023.

²⁷ [“Why Pakistan Is Pushing Out Refugees Foreign Policy”](#), Foreign Policy, 13 November 2023.

²⁸ [Why Pakistan Is Pushing Out Refugees Foreign Policy](#), Foreign Policy, 13 November 2023.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, [Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability](#), 13 November 2023.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Pakistan: Widespread Abuses Force Afghans to Leave](#), 28 November 2023

³¹ As above.

visa.³² Those who have expired visas will also be charged, depending on how long they have overstayed. The exit fee will not be charged to those travelling back to Afghanistan.

However, this would apply to Afghans applying for asylum in other countries such as the UK and the US.³³

A spokesperson for the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in response to the BBC report: “Pakistani laws, like the immigration laws in other countries including the United Kingdom, have fines and punishments for individuals who overstay their visas or are in violation of immigration laws”, adding “Any fines that Pakistan has imposed or will impose are in conformity with our laws”.³⁴

The ICG have warned that Pakistan’s forced repatriation policy “risks precipitating a humanitarian catastrophe, with major ramifications for the region and beyond”, stating further:

With thousands crowded into the narrow mountain passes between the countries, returnees must wait for days on the Pakistani side before officials let them through. Having no accommodations on site, they end up living on the roadside in dire conditions. Once across the border, returnees must wait for days on the Afghan side for the overwhelmed local authorities to register them and transport them to the makeshift camps. Prices for moving goods across the border have more than doubled since the deportation policy took effect, as demand for transport outstripped supply and roads became choked with traffic.

Should the current rate of returns continue, with thousands of people crossing each day, Afghan authorities may soon be unable to cope with the returnees or provide them with essential services. Pakistan’s decision to not allow deportees to bring significant sums of money, cattle or other property with them means that almost all have been plunged into poverty upon crossing the border; returnees report having had to sell their immovable properties and livestock well below market value as they left in a hurry, some after having lived in Pakistan for decades. Thus deprived, and languishing in inadequate shelters, many will struggle to survive, especially if the winter proves harsh. Hamstrung by sanctions and banking restrictions, and battered by natural disasters, Afghanistan’s economy already cannot provide enough jobs for the 500,000 or so new entrants to the work force each year. It is hard to imagine how hundreds of thousands of returnees could find employment, especially when many of them have been away from Afghanistan for years, if not decades. Many of the returnees also worry about the Taliban’s restrictions on girls’ secondary and tertiary education. Those lacking familiarity with Afghanistan will surely struggle in other ways as well, lacking social networks once they cross the border.³⁵

³² “[Pakistan charging refugees \\$830 to leave](#)”, BBC News, 23 November 2023.

³³ “[Pakistan Firm on Exit Fee for Afghans Waiting for Asylum in West](#)”, VOA, 24 November 2023

³⁴ “[Pakistan charging refugees \\$830 to leave](#)”, BBC News, 23 November 2023.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, [Pakistan’s Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability](#), 13 November 2023.

In October 2023, Fawzia Koofi, Former Deputy Speaker at Afghan Parliament, giving evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, told them of the risks facing Afghans in Pakistan should they be deported to Afghanistan:

These are Afghans who are really at immediate risk. Some of the women who are in Pakistan, for instance, were the heads of departments of gender, judges, prosecutors or female police officers. They are at risk of being deported to Afghanistan.³⁶

Number of Afghans returning to Afghanistan

An [update published by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration](#) on 29 November 2023, states that since 15 September 2023, 413,745 individuals have entered Afghanistan through the Torkham, Chaman, Ghulam Khan and Badin border crossing points with Pakistan.³⁷

96% of the returnees were undocumented Afghans, 2% were Afghan Citizen Card holders and 2% Proof of Registration card holders.³⁸

The document states that 91% stated that fear of arrest was the reason for returning to Afghanistan.³⁹

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What is the situation in Iran?

Number of Afghans in Iran

Iran, like Pakistan, has hosted Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion, but a significant number have arrived since the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The UNHCR estimates there are around 4.5 million Afghans of various statuses currently living in Iran, and it has become the second largest refugee-hosting country in the world after Turkey.⁴⁰

In 2022 Iran held a headcount of undocumented Afghan nationals in the country. The exercise registered 2.6 million Afghans. Those taking part in the headcount exercise were issued a permit giving temporary protection against

³⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Follow-up on Afghanistan Inquiry](#) (PDF), 17 October 2023, HC 1888 2022-23, Q18.

³⁷ UNHCR Data, [UNHCR-IOM Pakistan Flash update 7 on Arrest and Detention/Flow Monitoring. 15 Sep to 25 Nov 2023](#), 29 November 2023.

³⁸ UNHCR Data, [UNHCR-IOM Pakistan Flash update 7 on Arrest and Detention/Flow Monitoring. 15 Sep to 25 Nov 2023](#), 29 November 2023.

³⁹ As above.

⁴⁰ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, [Iran: Overview of Iran Operation](#), accessed 7 November 2023.

deportation.⁴¹ The Iranian Government estimate over a million Afghans have applied for asylum since the Taliban took control.⁴²

In addition, there are, according to UNHCR, 750,000 registered refugees, 360,000 resident permit holders, 267,000 family passport holders and an estimated 500,000 undocumented Afghans in Iran.⁴³

Deportations of Afghans

Iran has been deporting Afghans in smaller numbers for some time. For example, it was reported in February 2023 that around 43,000 Afghans were deported by Iran back to Afghanistan, for lacking legal residence documents.⁴⁴

However, on 27 September Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said that all Afghans living in the country “illegally” would be deported and referenced implementing a plan by the authorities to do this.⁴⁵

On 19 October, Mr Vahidi once again said that Iran will deport all “illegal” migrants, stating “Everyone who lacks the legal means to remain in Iran will be sent back [to their country] under a specific framework”.⁴⁶

In its regional refugee response plan for Afghanistan, published in March 2023, UNHCR states that it’s not clear how long the temporary protections for those who participated in the headcount exercise will last:

Although the headcount exercise is likely to result in protection benefits for those who participated and were issued with temporary documentation (headcount slip), the duration of these protection safeguards and the subsequent legal status including rights and obligations, remains vague over the longer-term if they were to expire.⁴⁷

The agency also states that the “arrest, detention, and deportation of Afghans without documentation, especially of new arrivals, is expected to continue”.⁴⁸

In a television interview on 30 November, Mr Vahidi stated that Tehran has expelled approximately 400,000 “illegal” Afghan migrants this year.⁴⁹

⁴¹ As above.

⁴² “[Concerns Rise Over Growing Afghan Population In Iran](#)”, Iran International, 28 September 2023.

⁴³ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, [Iran: Overview of Iran Operation](#), accessed 7 November 2023.

⁴⁴ “[Taliban Says Over 40,000 Afghan Refugees Deported From Iran](#)”, Iran International, 8 March 2023.

⁴⁵ “[The Azadi Briefing: Iran And Pakistan Plan To Deport Millions Of Undocumented Afghan Migrants](#)”, Radio Free Europe, 29 September 2023.

⁴⁶ “[Iran Repeats Threat To Expel Undocumented Afghans](#)”, RFE, 20 October 2023.

⁴⁷ UNHCR, [REGIONAL REFUGEE RESPONSE PLAN FOR AFGHANISTAN SITUATION January-December 2023](#) (PDF), 9 March 2023, p27.

⁴⁸ As above.

⁴⁹ BBC Monitoring, [Iran deported 400,000 illegal Afghan migrants this year – minister](#) [via Ariana News TV, reported 30 November 2023], 1 December 2023.

Why is Iran deporting Afghans?

Iran is experiencing high inflation and unemployment, and according to Radio Free Europe (RFE) Iran has “often expressed alarm at the number of undocumented Afghans on its soil” and “officials have often blamed Afghans for insecurity and unemployment in Iran”.⁵⁰ RFE reported in October 2023 that some of the Afghan refugee community in Iran had experienced harassment and assault.⁵¹

This is not a new phenomenon. In 2013 Human Rights Watch (HRW) claimed that Iran was “subjecting many Afghans to a range of rights abuses including arbitrary arrests and detention”.⁵² HRW also reported in 2016 that thousands of undocumented Afghan migrants from Iran were being recruited by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps to fight in Syria, and some claimed they had been threatened with deportation if they didn’t.⁵³ In November 2021, RAND reported that thousands of Afghans in Iran were still being recruited to fight in paramilitary forces in Syria, saying Iran had “taken advantage” of them by offering them permanent residency in return.⁵⁴

The Asia-focused Diplomat magazine reports that “over the years, the Iranian regime has promoted a policy of accepting Afghan Shias to address the significant decline in [Iran’s] national population growth” (Iran is a Shia-majority state).⁵⁵

The Diplomat also states that Iranian policy on Afghan refugees has become one of the issues on which reformers and hardliners in the regime have divided, with reformists accusing hardliners of “undermining native Iranians and paving the way for mass migration of Iranians to other countries”.⁵⁶ This has led to a greater focus in Iranian media on current policies of “allowing Afghans to buy land, and access education and healthcare services”.⁵⁷

UNHCR stated that it required \$114.1 million to finance its operations to support Afghans in Iran in 2023, and as of October 2023 only 31% of those funds had been committed by donors. The agency reported that the UK had “softly earmarked” US\$3.7 million in funding for these programmes.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ [“I’m Afraid’: Afghan Migrants Complain Of Rising Harassment, Violence In Iran”](#), RFE, 18 October 2023.

⁵¹ As above.

⁵² Human Rights Watch, [Unwelcome Guests: Iran’s Violation of Afghan Refugee and Migrant Rights](#), 20 November 2013.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, [Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria](#), 29 January 2016.

⁵⁴ RAND, [Afghan Refugees Are Being Recruited to Join an Iranian Paramilitary](#), 23 November 2021.

⁵⁵ [“An Iranian Reversal on Afghan Refugees”](#), The Diplomat, 14 November 2023.

⁵⁶ As above. See also: [“Concerns Rise Over Growing Afghan Population in Iran”](#), Iran International, 28 September 2023.

⁵⁷ [“An Iranian Reversal on Afghan Refugees”](#), The Diplomat, 14 November 2023.

⁵⁸ UNHCR, [Islamic Republic of Iran funding 2023 as of 31 October 2023](#) (PDF), accessed 28 November 2023.

Reaction from the Taliban to deportation announcements by Iran

Afghanistan's Taliban-led administration has asked all countries hosting Afghan refugees to give them more time to prepare for repatriation.

In a social media post in October 2023, it said: "We call on them not to deport forcefully Afghans without preparation, rather give them enough time and countries should use tolerance". According to news-agency Reuters, it has also "assured Afghans who have left over political concerns that they could return and live peacefully in the country".⁵⁹

5

What aid is the UK providing to assist Afghanistan and Afghan refugees?

Afghanistan

The Government states one of its strategic aims for providing aid to Afghanistan is to "stem [...] refugee flows" from the country.⁶⁰

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) spent £286m in bilateral aid to Afghanistan in 2021/22 and £246m in 2022/23, making it the UK's largest bilateral aid programme in both years.⁶¹

In 2023-24 and 2024-25, the FCDO plans to spend £100 million and £151 million in bilateral aid to Afghanistan respectively. This would be a 47% reduction in aid from 2021/22 to 2024-25. These figures do not take account of spending by other government departments or UK contributions to multilateral organisations that may spend aid in these countries.

All UK aid is directed through the UN or international NGOs.

The Government has pledged that "at least 50% of people reached with UK aid in Afghanistan will be women and girls". International Development Minister Andrew Mitchell has stated that this commitment was met in 2021-22, and that they are "on track" to meet it in 2022-23.⁶²

In November 2023, the Government stated that they had "Since September [2023] [...] committed £16 million to the International Organisation for

⁵⁹ "[Why is Pakistan deporting over a million undocumented Afghan immigrants?](#)", Reuters, 2 November 2023.

⁶⁰ Independent Commission for Aid Impact, [Information note: UK aid to Afghanistan](#), 18 May 2023, box 2.

⁶¹ Commons Library, [UK aid: Spending reductions since 2020 and outlook from 2023](#), Table: FCDO bilateral aid for specific country programmes, 2021/22 to 2024/25, p37, 30 October 2023.

⁶² [HC Deb 17 July 2023 c45WS](#).

Migration in Afghanistan to support vulnerable undocumented people returning from Pakistan and Iran.⁶³

The UK has also used international aid funding to house and provide other support to Afghans refugees in the UK. For more see Library briefings:

- [Accommodation and integration support for resettled Afghans](#), 9 November 2023.
- [The UK aid budget and support for refugees in the UK in 2022/23](#), 30 October 2023.

Iran

In November 2022, in response to a Parliamentary Question on how much aid the UK had given to Iran to support Afghan refugees, the Government responded that it had:

[P]rovided £4.5 million to the UN Refugee Agency, £1 million to the World Food Programme, and £1 million to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, for life-saving assistance, including shelter, sanitation, protection, food security and health services, for vulnerable Afghan refugees in Iran.⁶⁴

Pakistan

In October 2022, in its response to [a Commons International Development Committee report on UK Aid to Pakistan](#) (PDF) that recommended “the FCDO should ensure that the Pakistani authorities receive the necessary assistance and resources to be able to support refugees from Afghanistan”, the Government stated: “Since late 2021, the UK has provided £7 million to WFP, UNICEF, UNHCR and IFRC to support preparedness and response for the arrival of new refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan in the wake of the Taliban’s takeover”.⁶⁵

The Government also noted that the UK is a member of ‘The Core Group’ of donors “which aims to provide sustained engagement and solidarity with the Afghan refugee situation and includes those who intend to make concrete commitments to support Pakistan’s Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)”.⁶⁶

⁶³ [UIN 343](#) [on Afghanistan: Refugees], 7 November 2023.

⁶⁴ [UIN 89839](#) [on Iran: Refugees], 17 November 2022.

⁶⁵ International Development Committee, [UK aid to Pakistan: Government Response to the Sixth Report of the Committee, Session 2021–22](#) (PDF), 1 November 2022, HC 829, 2022–23, pp XV–XVI.

⁶⁶ As above.

6 How is this affecting Afghans applying for UK migration schemes?

6.1 Current immigration schemes for Afghan nationals

There are two immigration routes provided by the UK government to specifically cater for people affected by the situation in Afghanistan: the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP).

ACRS⁶⁷

The ACRS was launched in January 2022 with the aim of resettling up to 20,000 people in the UK over the following few years. 9,839 people had been recorded under the scheme up to 30 September 2023.⁶⁸

Eligible cases are identified through one of three referral pathways. Each pathway has distinct eligibility criteria and processes:

- Pathway 1 is being used to grant long term immigration status to people who arrived under the [summer 2021 Operation Pitting evacuation exercise](#).
- Pathway 2 is for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries who are referred by the UN Refugee Agency.
- Pathway 3 is for certain at-risk groups currently in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries. For its first stage, eligibility has been restricted to Garda World and British Council contractors and Chevening alumni (and their family members).

ARAP⁶⁹

The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) launched in April 2021, is open to any current or former staff employed by HM Government in Afghanistan since 2001 who are assessed to be at serious risk of threat to life. Eligibility is regardless of employment status, rank or role, or length of time

⁶⁷ This section is taken from the summary of Commons Library, [UK immigration schemes for Afghan nationals](#), 9 November 2023.

⁶⁸ Home Office, Immigration statistics year ending September 2023, 23 November 2023, [table Asy_D02](#).

⁶⁹ This section, unless otherwise referenced, is taken from the summary of Commons Library, [UK immigration schemes for Afghan nationals](#), 9 November 2023.

served. The scheme is open-ended and there is no limit on the number of people eligible.

People approved for relocation (“principal applicants”) can bring their partner and minor dependent children with them, and eligible additional family members.⁷⁰

11,684 individuals had been relocated to the UK under the ARAP scheme by 30 September 2023.⁷¹ Slightly more than 2,000 other people have also been found to be eligible under ARAP and are waiting in Pakistan and other third countries for permission to come to the UK. The Ministry of Defence is still considering around 1,800 complex applications.

For more on these schemes, including the numbers of Afghans admitted under them, see Commons Library briefing: [UK immigration schemes for Afghan nationals](#).

6.2

Risks to Afghans in Pakistan and Iran waiting to move the UK

UK Government policy on Afghans applying to UK migration schemes⁷²

Some Afghans applying for permission to come to the UK have travelled to neighbouring countries such as Iran or Pakistan to attend a visa application centre or pending arrangements for their travel to the UK.

Many have unexpectedly spent prolonged lengths of time in third countries. This is partly due to a policy introduced by the Government in November 2022 not to bring eligible people to the UK if they don't have long term accommodation in place. Often their immigration status in the host country has expired and they are typically unable to access work or education.⁷³ Some Afghans in Pakistan and Iran have sought to challenge the delay bringing them to the UK through judicial review.⁷⁴

Afghans confirmed as eligible under ARAP or ACRS pathway 3 may be provided with hotel accommodation and other support paid for by the UK

⁷⁰ Immigration rules, [Appendix ARAP](#), para ARAP 8.1 – 17.2

⁷¹ Home Office, Immigration statistics year ending September 2023, 23 November 2023, [table Asy_D02](#)

⁷² This section is taken from the summary of Commons Library, [UK immigration schemes for Afghan nationals](#), 9 November 2023.

⁷³ B Amunwa, ‘[Update: What’s happening with the Afghan relocation legal challenges?](#)’ Law Mostly, 24 October 2023.

⁷⁴ Deighton Peirce Glynn, [Afghans awaiting transfer to the UK – judicial review](#), 17 October 2023; Leigh Day, [ARAP scheme housing requirement leaves Afghan families stranded in third countries](#), 14 July 2023.

Government, if they cannot otherwise support themselves.⁷⁵ As of 18 October 2023, around 3,250 Afghans eligible under the ACRS or ARAP were in UK funded hotel accommodation in Pakistan.⁷⁶

Applicants at risk of removal from Pakistan and Iran

In October 2023, BBC News reported that hundreds of Afghans in Pakistan who had applied for the ARAP and ACRS schemes were now “stuck” in the country, and that some of them were “living in fear” of being deported back to Afghanistan.⁷⁷

The Independent newspaper reported in early November that some Afghans who had been approved for UK immigration schemes had been waiting so long to be brought to the UK that their visas to Pakistan had expired, putting them at greater risk of deportation. The Independent reported that the FCDO had contacted them advising that “You will be aware the GoP (government of Pakistan) are arresting, detaining and deporting those with no legal status in Pakistan, please do not take unnecessary risks by leaving your hotel”.⁷⁸

Earlier at the end of September, the Independent reported that a hotel housing UK-eligible Afghans had been raided by the Pakistan authorities, and seven of these who did not have in-date visas were arrested. The individuals were later freed following lobbying from the UK High Commission in Islamabad.⁷⁹

Shadow defence secretary John Healey MP said it was “unacceptable” that these Afghans had been waiting so long they now risked arrest by the Pakistan authorities.⁸⁰

In response the UK Government was reported to have provided “assurance letters” to eligible Afghans to show to the Pakistan authorities in case of arrest.⁸¹

On 17 October, Minister for the Middle East Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, appearing in front of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, told them that James Cleverly as Foreign Secretary, had a few weeks before met with the

⁷⁵ Ministry of Defence, [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy: third country support policy](#) (undated; accessed 7 November 2023).

⁷⁶ [PQ 203405](#) [Afghanistan: Refugees], answered on 24 October 2023. Though since this response, the Government have said in answering another PQ, that “There is no publicly available data on the number of individuals currently awaiting resettlement from Afghanistan and third countries such as Pakistan, including those awaiting a decision on eligibility”, See [UIN HI 218](#) [Refugees: Afghanistan], answered 27 November 2023.

⁷⁷ “[Afghans in UK visa limbo as Pakistan vows to expel migrants](#)”, BBC News, 13 October 2023.

⁷⁸ “[UK warns Afghans stuck in Pakistan hotels to hide indoors amid refugee crackdown](#)”, The Independent, 2 November 2023.

⁷⁹ “[UK shame as Pakistani police storm hotel and arrest Afghans promised sanctuary in Britain](#)”, The Independent, 29 September 2023.

⁸⁰ As above.

⁸¹ As above.

interim Prime Minister of Pakistan Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, and had discussed ensuring Afghans eligible for UK immigration schemes would not be deported.⁸²

Lord Ahmad said the Pakistan Government now accepted “the principle that those who already have qualified passage to the UK and are awaiting their departure from Pakistan, be they on the ARAP scheme or the ACRS, will be protected”.⁸³

Andrew McCoubrey, the FCDO’s Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told the Committee that for those eligible Afghans waiting in Pakistan, they had been “given private assurances that eligible persons will not be returned to Afghanistan”, by their Pakistani counterparts and that “Obviously, we are following up very closely to make sure that those private assurances are followed through”.⁸⁴

Addressing those Afghans without documentation, Lord Ahmad said:

The Pakistanis are working up a scheme for people who have some form of letter that demonstrably shows their association with the United Kingdom through the Government or a role they fulfilled. The detail of that is still being worked up so that they can be protected and normalised in terms of their status, and we hope that they would then have a safe passage to the UK.⁸⁵

UK Government changes policy

In late October 2023 UK Government ministers approved a change of policy, authorising Afghans to be brought to the UK from Pakistan and Iran as a matter of urgency regardless of whether long-term accommodation was in place.⁸⁶ The change of approach followed updated advice from officials about Afghans’ security overseas.

Johnny Mercer, Cabinet Office Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, confirmed the change of policy in answer to an urgent question on 8 November (in respect of Afghans in Pakistan).⁸⁷ He is coordinating plans across government to bring approved ARAP and ACRS applicants in Pakistan to the UK.

According to reports, the UK has chartered 12 flights from Pakistan over the next two months, and the first flight left Pakistan on 26 October.⁸⁸ The Minister

⁸² Foreign Affairs Committee, [Follow-up on Afghanistan Inquiry](#) (PDF), 17 October 2023, HC 1888 2022-23, Q36

⁸³ As above.

⁸⁴ As above.

⁸⁵ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Follow-up on Afghanistan Inquiry](#) (PDF), 17 October 2023, HC 1888 2022-23, Q36.

⁸⁶ “[Sunak forced to bring thousands of Afghans granted sanctuary in Britain to UK from Pakistan amid safety fears](#)”, The Independent, 20 October 2023.

⁸⁷ [HC Deb 8 November 2023 c114-124](#).

⁸⁸ “[First flight bringing Afghan refugees from Pakistan lands in UK](#)”, BBC News, 27 October 2023

said he has received verbal assurances from the Pakistani authorities that Afghans eligible to come to the UK will not be deported.⁸⁹

On 8 November, Baroness Kennedy asked the Government:

[H]ow are decisions made on, and what is the process for, resettling more Afghans from Pakistan who are facing expulsion in addition to the 3,000 already accepted under the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme; and what steps they are taking in that regard, including on prioritising the 20 female Afghan judges who are in Pakistan.⁹⁰

The Government responded 22 November:

Resettlement of eligible Afghans remains a top priority for this government. As of June 2023, around 24,600 vulnerable people affected by the events in Afghanistan have been brought to safety. This includes British Nationals and their families, Afghans who loyally served the UK and others identified as particularly at-risk, such as campaigners for women's rights, human rights defenders, Chevening scholars, journalists, judges and members of the LGBT+ community.

[...] Visas continue to be issued to individuals eligible for the ACRS and ARAP schemes and flights are continuing to bring eligible Afghans to the UK.

The ACRS is not open to applications. Instead, eligible individuals are prioritised and referred for resettlement to the UK through the existing pathways under this scheme. We are not certain which female Afghan judges the question refers to; however our Afghan schemes have been designed to be fair and equitable in identifying those in need of resettlement or relocation to the UK. As has been the practice under successive governments, the Home Office does not routinely comment on individual cases.

We recognise there are many vulnerable individuals who remain in Afghanistan and the region. Whilst the UK maintains a generous resettlement offer, we must recognise that the capacity of the UK to resettle people is not unlimited, and difficult decisions have to be made on who will be prioritised for resettlement.⁹¹

⁸⁹ [HC Deb 8 November 2023 c122](#).

⁹⁰ [UIN HL113](#) [Refugees: Afghanistan], answered on 22 November 2023.

⁹¹ [UIN HL113](#) [Refugees: Afghanistan], answered on 22 November 2023.

7 Further reading

7.1 Press and other commentary

Press articles

- [“Pakistan orders illegal immigrants, including 1.73 mln Afghans, to leave”](#), Reuters, 3 October 2023.
- [“‘Why am I being sent back?’ Hurt, anger for Afghans pushed out by Pakistan”](#), Al Jazeera, 3 November 2023
- [“Pakistan starts mass deportation of undocumented Afghans”](#), The Guardian, 1 November 2023
- [An Iranian Reversal on Afghan Refugees](#), The Diplomat, 14 November 2023
- [“‘I’m Afraid’: Afghan Migrants Complain Of Rising Harassment, Violence In Iran”](#), Radio Free Europe, 18 October 2023.

Human rights and NGO commentary

- Human Rights Watch, [Pakistan: Afghans Detained, Face Deportation](#), 31 October 2023.
- Refugees International, [“They Left Us Without Any Support”: Afghans in Pakistan Waiting for Solutions](#), 6 July 2023.
- International Crisis Group, [Pakistan’s Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability](#), 13 November 2023.
- UNHCR, [Regional Refugee Response Plan For Afghanistan Situation January-December 2023](#) (PDF), 9 March 2023.

7.2 Parliamentary resources

Select Committee and other reports

- Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: Follow-up on Afghanistan Inquiry](#) (PDF), HC 1888, 17 October 2023.
- Independent Commission on Aid Impact, [UK aid to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover](#), 18 May 2023.

- International Development Committee, [UK aid to Pakistan](#) (PDF), HC 102, 29 April 2022.
- International Development Committee, [UK aid to Pakistan: Government Response to the Sixth Report of the Committee, Session 2021–22](#) (PDF), HC 829, 4 November 2022.

Commons Library resources

- Commons Library, [UK immigration schemes for Afghan nationals](#), 9 November 2023.
- Commons Library, [Accommodation and integration support for resettled Afghans](#), 9 November 2023.
- Commons Library, [The UK aid budget and support for refugees in the UK in 2022/23](#), 30 October 2023.
- Commons Library, [Politics in Pakistan 2022-23 and upcoming elections](#), 3 November 2023.
- Commons Library, [Afghanistan: One year under a Taliban government](#), 10 October 2022.
- Commons Library, [Aid to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan](#), 1 April 2022.

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