

POLICY BRIEF

# Afghanistan: Response to Forced Returnees

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## **Background**

In the early fall of 2023, the tensions between the de facto authorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan reached a critical level. Pakistan's interim government threatened to expel all undocumented Afghan nationals who were inside Pakistan and articulated the possibility of extending this measure to other categories of Afghans inside the country as well. Despite efforts by the de facto authorities to negotiate a more measured approach with an extended timeline for the forced returns from Pakistan, the Pakistani authorities continued to insist on commencing forced returns on November 1, 2023.

In the weeks before this deadline, Afghanistan saw an influx of Afghan families returning from Pakistan with the belongings they were able to carry with them, crossing border points at Chaman/Spin Boldak in Kandahar and Torkham in Nangarhar province. Local officials in the provinces raised the alarm about this wave of forced returnees early on, noting that there were little to no services beyond those already provided by IOM and other entities at the border crossings and that a comprehensive and well-coordinated response of relevant de facto ministries was needed.

This policy brief will explore the response initiated by the de facto authorities from an institutional perspective, the meeting of the immediate and long-term needs, the caseload, and efforts to engage the private sector, as well as address challenges that have arisen related to the response so far. The policy brief concludes with recommendations and possible considerations for the international community when considering how to support the returnee caseload.

## **Institutional Response**

On October 26, 2023, Emir Haibatullah issued a decree establishing a High Commission authorized to respond to the anticipated forced return crisis from Pakistan and a continued high level of returns from other neighboring countries. The High Commission, under the leadership of the de facto Deputy Prime Minister of Administrative Affairs Hanafi, included representatives from all relevant de facto ministries and ordered the establishment of 12 sub-committees with tasks ranging from organizing transportation to provinces of origin and providing access to identification and mobile sim cards to dealing with land allocation issues and employment opportunities for the returnees. Within the first days of the returnee response, representatives of the relevant de facto ministries started their work at the border points, registering returning families to ensure adequate identification, registration of school-aged children and students as well as teachers and university instructors to arrange for education and employment, the provision of immediate cash assistance, as well as the standardized distribution of SIM cards to new arrivals (three SIM cards per family). Beyond this initial assistance, the de facto authorities also set up camps near the border posts to provide emergency shelter and organized cooked meals for the arriving returnees while onward transportation was being organized.

The de facto Ministry of Defense forces played a key role in the emergency response; they were tasked with setting up the emergency shelter camps, cooking tens of thousands of meals for the arriving returnees at the main border crossings, and organizing the transportation for the families seeking to travel to their provinces of origin or other locations selected. The de facto Minis-

try of Defense used its own trucks and vehicles to provide transportation to the provinces for the families free of charge. The de facto Ministry of Defense, in cooperation with the de facto Ministry of Public Health, also set up large field hospitals to deal with the returnees and provided medical checks, vaccinations, and care for pregnant returnees. Reportedly, the entire response by the de facto Ministry of Defense was financed from its contingency funding and by leveraging resources inherited from the Republic-era security forces.

## **Efforts to Mobilize Private Sector and Institutional Resources**

De facto authorities also immediately appealed to the Afghan business community inside and outside of Afghanistan and called for Afghan citizens and government employees to step up to assist with donations. Key Afghan businessmen announced in-kind and cash donations; de facto authorities hosted several events for the business community to solicit more donations and support. For example, there was an event in Kandahar where high-level de facto officials were also present. Private sector partners were also asked to help. The telecommunication sector, for instance, was asked to set up new antennas at the border point crossings and the vicinity to boost mobile network capacity and to donate SIM cards to the returnees.

Apart from the private sector, the business community, and charitable foundations, the de facto authorities also pushed for its officials and ministries to donate to the cause, with several de facto ministries announcing their donations. Additionally, the de facto authorities encouraged all de facto ministries and the private sector to identify vacant or newly created positions within their staff allocation that would be earmarked for returnees to be hired. For example, the de facto Ministry of Education, Afghanistan Central Bank, Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Ministry of Agriculture, and others noted that several thousand positions would be allocated to returnees. De facto security ministries reportedly also announced efforts to absorb some of the returnees into their ranks.

## **Sectoral and Subnational Responses**

After the initial meetings of the High Commission and all its sub-commissions and efforts to mobilize resources and get commitments of support, the various de facto ministries implemented their plans and reportedly also continued to coordinate interventions with other de facto authorities, private entities, international organizations, and NGOs/INGOs working on the caseload. Reportedly, de facto authorities were instructed to be cooperative with the latter two entities and to even consider reducing bureaucracy and restrictions for female staff working with the returnee caseload. Local authorities in the border areas, and later in the provinces where returnees were arriving for settlement, have been holding meetings with locally operating NGOs/INGOs to coordinate resources and provide a coherent response when it comes to providing services to this group.

Despite setting up camps at the border crossings, the de facto authorities early on seemed to be focused on relocating returnees to provinces as soon as possible. For this part of the response, de facto authorities reported that they organized transport to and provided settlement support in nearly all provinces across Afghanistan. This support included handing over the responsibility for further response to provide for and settle the returnees to local authorities.

In a number of provinces, including Balkh, Kandahar, Kabul, and other cities, local response committees were set up to handle the task of providing further assistance. This locally coordinated response also meant that a number of provinces identified locations for local camps to be set up; in Uruzgan and Kabul, for example, land or buildings around airports were selected, while public lands were allocated in other provinces. The sub-committee for land allocation tried to provide guidelines and directives on how to distribute land for temporary and permanent settlement. Reportedly, local authorities were also instructed to focus on providing prioritized access to services, livelihood support, education, and employment for the returnees.

## **Response beyond the Caseload of Returnees from Pakistan**

In addition to the specific response to the forced returnee caseload from Pakistan, the de facto authorities in Kandahar and Kabul seem to have tried to use this sudden need for a more coherent approach to dealing with returnees to try to set up a more comprehensive system that can also serve the returnees from Iran, Turkey, and those repatriated from the Gulf States. This approach was referenced in the decree establishing the High Commission. The de facto authorities also reported on the establishment of a special legal commission tasked with looking into the rights of Afghan migrants and refugees abroad. While the main focus has been on the forced returnees from Pakistan, in the past two months, significant numbers of returnees from Iran and Turkey, at least 20,000 and 3,000, respectively, have been recorded. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in provinces like Herat, the returnees from Iran were integrated into the efforts meant to support returnees from Pakistan. That said, returnees from Iran do not seem to be eligible for the in-kind and cash assistance provided to those coming from Pakistan.

## **The Particularities of the Returnee Caseload from Pakistan**

The returnees from Iran and Turkey are mostly individuals who had been abroad for economic migration; in contrast, the returnee caseload from Pakistan is characterized by extended families who had been settled in Pakistan for decades or had otherwise settled there with their entire families. Thus, unlike migrants who have a household to return to inside Afghanistan, the majority of the caseload returning from Pakistan did not have any established home inside Afghanistan. Moreover, the returnees from Pakistan often had to leave

assets and businesses behind. While migrant returnees from other countries had been transferring remittances to Afghanistan, many of these returnee families had all their resources in Pakistan and faced limitations that prevented them from bringing all their assets immediately with them to Afghanistan.

The returnees from Pakistan reportedly also included thousands of Taliban-associated families as well as young Afghans studying in Pakistani madrassas. Other Afghans in Pakistan affected by the announced forced return are thousands of families who had fled to Pakistan after the fall of the Republic, including many former Republic government officials, former members of the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces, businessmen, as well as former national staff from foreign embassies, international organizations, international NGOs staff and collaborators, and people in other categories such as artists, human rights defenders, and journalists, many of them waiting to be relocated to third countries.

Possibly aware of the concerns of these groups, the de facto authorities have issued reassurances that all returnees could be treated equally and that protections under the General Amnesty would be extended to all returnees in need, as per the already established Return Commission under the de facto Political Commission. While, eventually, Pakistan has reportedly expressed support for those Afghans in Pakistan waiting for relocation to remain, a significant number of those who fled post-August 2021 and before have returned—so far, no confirmed cases of retaliation against individuals from this caseload have been documented as of the end of November 2023.

## **Overall Political and Economic Impact of the Returnee Crisis**

The forced returnee crisis has undoubtedly been used by the de facto authorities as a political instrument to emphasize unity among all Afghans and solidarity with the returnees, regardless of ethnic group and regardless of when and why they had been in Pakistan. The heterogeneous composition of the returnees and the fact that the returnees are settling in all of Afghanistan's provinces has created a situation in which the whole country has been equally affected, and the call for solidarity has resonated quite well. The de facto authorities also seem to have recognized that the magnitude of the returns means this will have an impact across all sectors and thus requires a comprehensive response.

Rather than just focusing on the returnees, it appears that the de facto authorities have used the impetus from addressing the needs of the returnees to try to broaden some of the initiatives for other groups. For example, cognizant of the impact of the returnees on the economy, the de facto authorities increased their outreach to the business community to both solicit its support and to work with returning businessmen and small business owners to integrate them into the Afghan economy. The de facto authorities also seem to have acknowledged that, in the short-term and possibly also in the long-term, the returnees will put additional pressure on the Afghan economy, with some potential impacts including

increasing rents in some cities, increased competition for employment opportunities, and a strain on already stretched resources in the service delivery sector, including health and education. In order to address these issues, the de facto authorities will, by default, need additional support to address humanitarian and basic needs. The de facto authorities had already been lobbying for increased assistance before the returnee crisis began.

The order by the de facto authorities to prioritize the response to the returnee caseload also seems to mean that fewer resources would be allocated for development projects and other initiatives; resources that would have been allocated to these projects are being re-allocated to the returnee caseload instead. Thus, this is likely to create shortages and gaps in other areas that cannot be addressed through humanitarian or basic needs assistance funding channels, such as the construction of dams or reconstruction of infrastructure such as roads. Despite the announced decrease in funding and overall shortages related to humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and the earthquake in Herat, the forced returnee crisis has generated additional calls for humanitarian assistance. In particular, the forced returnee crisis, which would require additional resources across Afghanistan, might indeed help fill some of the funding gaps in humanitarian assistance that existed before the returnee crisis began, but still might not be able to meet the current increased needs and that of the new arrivals who are also less likely to have access other local coping mechanisms. On the positive side, humanitarian agencies and many implementing partners are already active at the border points and in most provinces; thus, additional needs for service delivery could easily be met using the already existing setup with just increased resources to scale up and adjust the humanitarian assistance.

## **The Returnee Crisis and its Impact on Migration Trends**

Despite the efforts by the de facto authorities to find a comprehensive approach to address the integration of this large caseload, there are genuine concerns that the forced returnee crisis will lead to a further increase in the outmigration crisis of Afghans towards Europe and beyond. With internal displacement due to water shortages and lack of livelihood and employment opportunities, returnees are just adding to already overstretched resources. Given that the economy is already impacted by sanctions, banking restrictions, and a lack of domestic and foreign investment due to political de-risking resulting from the fact that the de facto authorities are an unrecognized government, it is unlikely that the private sector will be able to grow at a pace sufficient for it to accommodate the returnees, despite support announced by the de facto authorities.

At the provincial level, returnees from Pakistan often join internally displaced populations and thus often face yet another challenging situation that is likely to act as a push factor towards at least some household members considering migration to neighboring countries or Europe to at least be able to contribute to the newly resettled families via remittances from abroad.

## **Challenges Related to the Returnee Crisis**

While the de facto authorities have been attempting to mount a responsive and comprehensive response to the returnee crisis, it constitutes a possible source of conflict and discontent among the population. After August 2021, humanitarian needs and unemployment already experienced a significant increase, along with competition over shrinking and often unequally distributed resources. Many constituencies inside Afghanistan have been lobbying the de facto authorities for the past two years for more employment opportunities, better service delivery, and more support to secure basic needs. These constituencies are now witnessing the support they've been asking for to be provided to returnees and are perceiving the response to be preferential treatment.

Although the de facto authorities have been trying to leverage the crisis into additional overall sectorial support that would eventually benefit all communities, in reality, constituencies have been antagonized by this perceived differential treatment. Shifting the responsibility for the support for the returnee caseload to the provincial level authorities is also likely to intensify local competition for already scarce resources and services as well as other conflicts over land, water, and farmland and pastures.

While the de facto authorities have tried to use the crisis to enhance unity, solidarity, and social cohesion, if there are not enough resources for returnees and the host communities at the local and national levels, this could turn into a source of conflict and unrest in the long run.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

- The de facto authorities have been able to launch a swift and comprehensive response to the forced returnee crisis, initiating a full-government response drawing on all available internal resources alongside the mobilization of additional humanitarian funds.
- The de facto authorities have been working well in cooperation with international organizations to provide a response and have been willing to provide their own resources to address aspects not otherwise funded and put in place a comprehensive response to meet immediate as well as long-term needs, such as employment and land allocation.
- The de facto authorities' leadership was ordered to prioritize the returnee response for all de facto ministries; however, given the limited resources of the de facto authorities, this is likely to mean that resources from other programs will have to be redirected or reduced. This might also mean that other services to communities will be reduced, thereby increasing humanitarian needs and development aid for other caseloads. The international community might, therefore, have to mobilize additional humanitarian assistance funding to cover unanticipated humanitarian needs previously expected to be financed by the de facto authorities.



- Technical assistance managing the settlement of a large number of returnees will be important to shift the response from short-term immediate assistance to long-term, sustainable integration of the returnees. While the de facto authorities have been trying to avoid an approach focusing on camps to accommodate the returnees, given the need for an immediate response, camps have been established not only along the border posts but also in the provinces of origin, mostly due to a perceived lack of immediate alternatives.
- A sustainable and comprehensive long-term response to the returnee caseload from Pakistan, as well as Iran, Turkey, and other countries, is necessary to prevent an outflow of migrants trying to reach Western Europe and further abroad. This is likely to happen if the de facto authorities are not able to integrate the returnees.
- A comprehensive, functioning, and sustainable refugee returnee approach by the de facto authorities that also focuses on long-term prospects for education for girls and the representation of and responsiveness to the population's needs would also open up prospects for the repatriation of Afghan refugees and migrants currently abroad in the long run.
- As such, support to the de facto authorities through various forms of assistance will ensure favorable and conducive conditions to limited outmigration and reduce migration flows in the future. Short-term humanitarian assistance with a gradual shift towards addressing basic needs and, eventually, development assistance (once the political realities are more conducive to that aim) would ensure that those who would otherwise seek outmigration would have better prospects inside Afghanistan.

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