Pakistan: Protection Trends July - September 2020



UNHCR organized a capacity building session for police offices to increase their knowledge of UNHCR

Summary of Key Events

The validity of the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards and the Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) expired on the 30 June 2020. The Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) submitted a recommendation to the Federal Cabinet for an extension which has yet to be agreed. The current long delay in extension of PoR Cards is unprecedented. Meanwhile, SAFRON issued a formal notification instructing relevant governmental departments, including law enforcement agencies, to refrain from any harassment or adverse action against PoR and ACC holders while the decision of the Federal Cabinet is pending. UNHCR has shared the formal notification with its partners for further dissemination.

The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) Support Platform is one of three Support Platforms launched in the context of the Global Refugee Forum at the end of 2019. The Support Platform seeks to deepen and broaden partnerships in large, complex and protracted refugee situations, including with development actors, international financial institutions (IFIs), private sector, civil society and non-traditional donors. A Core Group of the SSAR Support Platform has been established, which will play a leading role in mobilizing a diverse range of stakeholders, galvanizing the necessary political, financial, technical and strategic support for the implementation of the SSAR including heightening awareness and visibility of the Afghan refugee situation. Denmark, EU, Germany, Japan, Korea, Turkey, USA, Qatar, Switzerland, UNDP, WB and ADB have joined the Core Group. The inaugural meeting of the SSAR-SP Core Group took place on 7 October 2020.

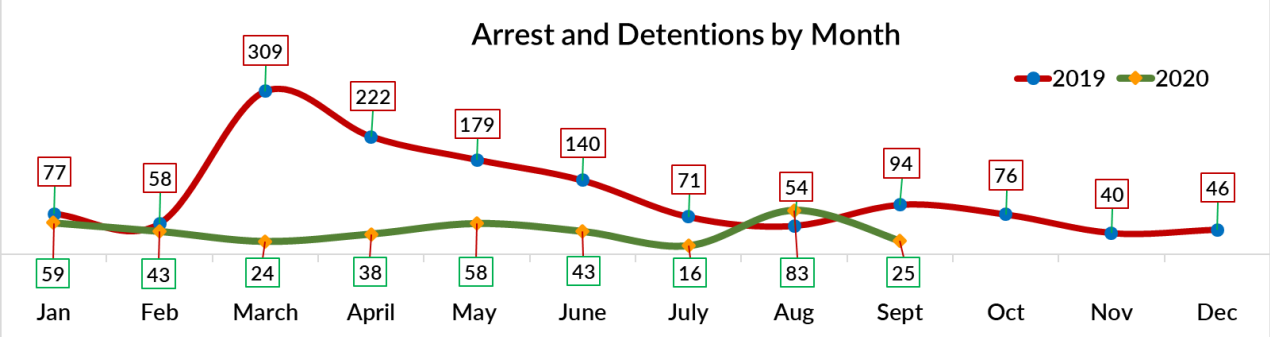
Despite the reported slow-down of COVID-19 in Pakistan, with smaller number of new cases and deaths reported, there is growing concern about a possible second wave of the pandemic. The phased re-openings of schools began across Pakistan. However new cases of COVID-19 have been reported in schools in some areas around the country. The Proof of Registration Cards Modification Centres (PCMs) resumed their operations to provide documentation services to Afghan refugees. UNHCR resumed the issuance of refugee certificates; and UNHCR and CAR also resumed refugee voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan on 10 August 2020.

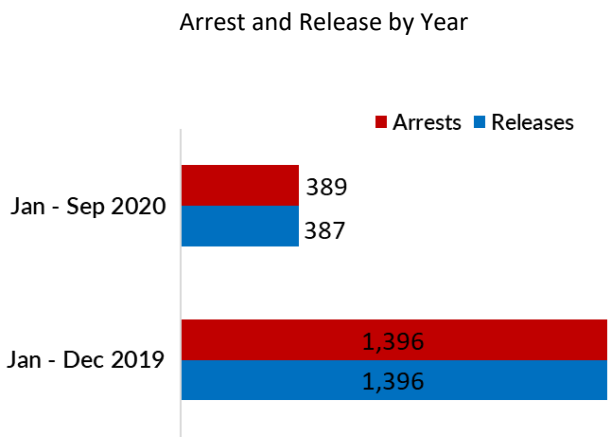
In partnership with SAFRON and Pakistan Post, UNHCR's emergency cash-based initiative (CBI) continued, with 53,500 refugee families having received vital humanitarian assistance as of 30th September. Phase 1 of the emergency assistance has been completed and Phase 2 has commenced. The program targets up to 70,000 most vulnerable households that are eligible to receive a one-time emergency cash assistance of 12,000 Pakistani rupees (approximately $77). Cash assistance is being distributed in 55 districts across Pakistan. The project has received generous funding from Japan, the United States of America and the European Union (DEVCO). The Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees and UNHCR teams continue to work closely with refugee community structures to identify the most-needy families for inclusion in the emergency program.

Together with the NDMA/PDMA and with the support of the sub-working groups for child protection, women and GBV, UNHCR is co-chairing the Protection Sector Working Group (PSWG) at the national and provincial levels. The national-level PSWG has convened sixteen times and has more than twenty-five members (incl. UN agencies and NGOs) that are focused on addressing the most urgent social protection needs of all vulnerable groups in Pakistan. The PSWG also supports the efforts of the Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Network. As of August 2020, protection awareness-raising and prevention messaging have reached to 424,314 individuals. Similarly, 302,735 individuals have been given individual protection assistance including emergency cash assistance. A total of 5,086 individuals have received psychosocial support and counselling. Child protection services including psychosocial support were provided to 15,892 children.

1. Advice and Legal Aid Centres (ALAC)

From 1 July until 24 September, 124 PoR cardholders were detained by the security authorities, as compared to 219 during the same period in 2019. This figure represents a 43% decrease and, in part, may be attributed to the lockdowns enforced by GoP in different parts of the country in the wake of the COVID-19. Eighty percent of the refugees detained were released without being formally charged, five per cent were charged and detained under the Foreigners Act (FA), while fifteen per cent of the refugees detained were charged under Preventive Laws (allowing detention of persons violating administrative orders issued for maintaining law and order, preventing vagrancy and for furnishing security for good behavior). PoR Cardholders are exempt from the operation of the FA however; instances exist when PoR Cardholders are charged under the FA, at times, because of not carrying original PoR Cards during identity checks by LEAs. Delay in the extension of the validity of the PoR Cards is also a contributing factor in refugees being charged under the FA.





All but one of the detained refugees were released with ALAC interventions. UNHCR continues to work proactively against any harassment of persons of concern, through continued visits and interventions of the ALAC teams to police checkpoints and stations in the refugee-hosting areas. Most instances of arrest or detention took place in KP (65%), followed by Punjab, the Islamabad Capital Territory, Pakistan Administered Kashmir, and Sindh (29%).

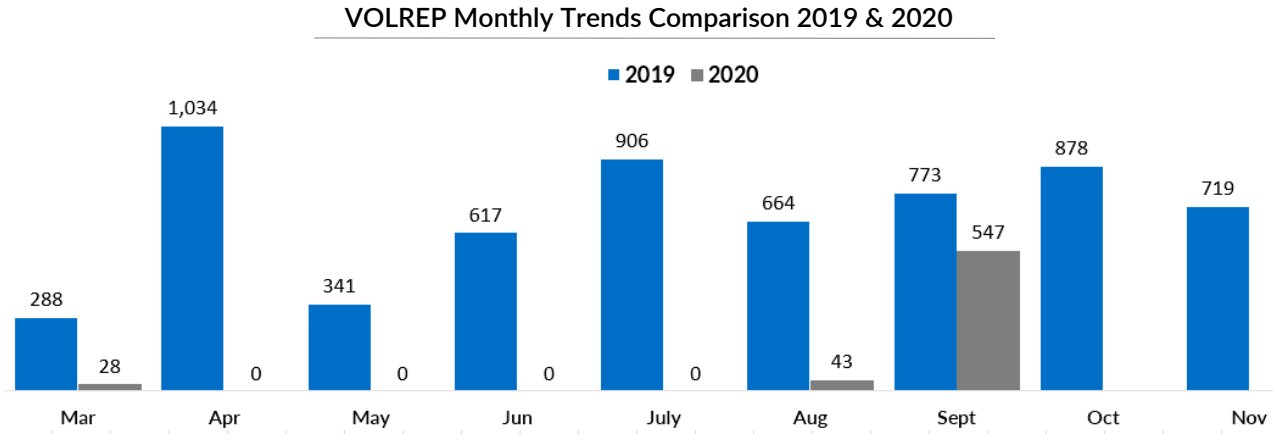
2. Evictions/ Eviction Notices

The Mansehra District Administration have not yet initiated further action for the eviction of refugees from the refugee villages (RVs) in Ichrian and Berari. This is partly attributed to the ongoing court case against the eviction order in the district courts. The court has issued a temporary stay order against the eviction until the hearing of the case and notices have also been served on relevant parties to the case including the district administration. Both UNHCR and the KP Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees are closely monitoring the situation and engaging with district authorities and refugees for an amicable resolution. A contingency plan has been prepared in the eventuality of enforcement of the relocation orders. Meanwhile, a total of 200 families have already self-relocated to different locations. Similarly, no development was observed in 16 other eviction issues across KP, which are dormant at the moment but the majority of them have been assessed as potentially critical by UNHCR in that enforcement could commence at any moment-given that formal notifications for evictions have long been communicated to refugees, which could potentially result in POCs having no place to live. Some of the issues are in the form of private land disputes.

3. Voluntary Repatriation (VOLREP)

Chaman and Torkham border crossings were closed by GoP on the 2nd and 16th of March respectively to curb the spread of the COVID-19. UNHCR's facilitated Voluntary Repatriation Operation then resumed on 10 August 2020 following consultations with the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. A total of 547 returnees were facilitated for Voluntary Repatriation by UNHCR between the period of 2 March to 30 September. The main Afghan provinces of return were Saripul (41 %), Jawzjan (10.4%) and Kunduz (9.5 %).

However, repatriation through the Torkham border crossing was again suspended in September following departure restrictions purportedly related to COVID-19 and custom duties levied on returnees, contrary to the Tripartite Agreements governing Voluntary Repatriation. UNHCR has raised this issue with CCAR who are in contact with the Ministry of Interior to resolve the issue.



4. UNHCR's Interventions and Capacity Building Activities

Advice and Legal Assistance Centre (ALAC) teams continued to visit police stations and courts across the country in order to represent refugees in legal cases and update law enforcement agencies on the GoP's extension of PoR card validity and other refugee related matters.

UNHCR and ALAC teams organized six legal camps and shura meetings reaching out to 27 individuals in RVs in April. Further legal camps and shura meetings could not be conducted due to COVID-19 restrictions. Similarly, capacity building activities also remained suspended during the reporting period.