

AFGHANISTAN

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

1,139 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED IN 2021

During 01 January – 30 June 2021, **1,139** Afghan refugees have returned from Iran (**706**), Pakistan (**396**), and other countries (**37**) including India, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. In comparison to the previous year, these returns were **202%** higher than the **377** Afghans who returned during the same period in 2020 but **63%** lower than the **3,070** returnees who came back during the same period in 2019.

The decrease in return trends, compared to 2019 is due to the uncertain situation, in particular the intra-Afghan peace talks progress, as a result of which Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan started taking a “wait and see” approach. Furthermore, lack of access to basic services, in particular lack of livelihood opportunities remained an obstacle to return and reintegration.

The increase in the number of returnees compared to 2020 is mainly due to the resumption and continuation of UNHCR’s facilitated voluntary repatriation programme in 2021, while the process had to be suspended between March and August 2020 as a result of restrictions linked to COVID-19.

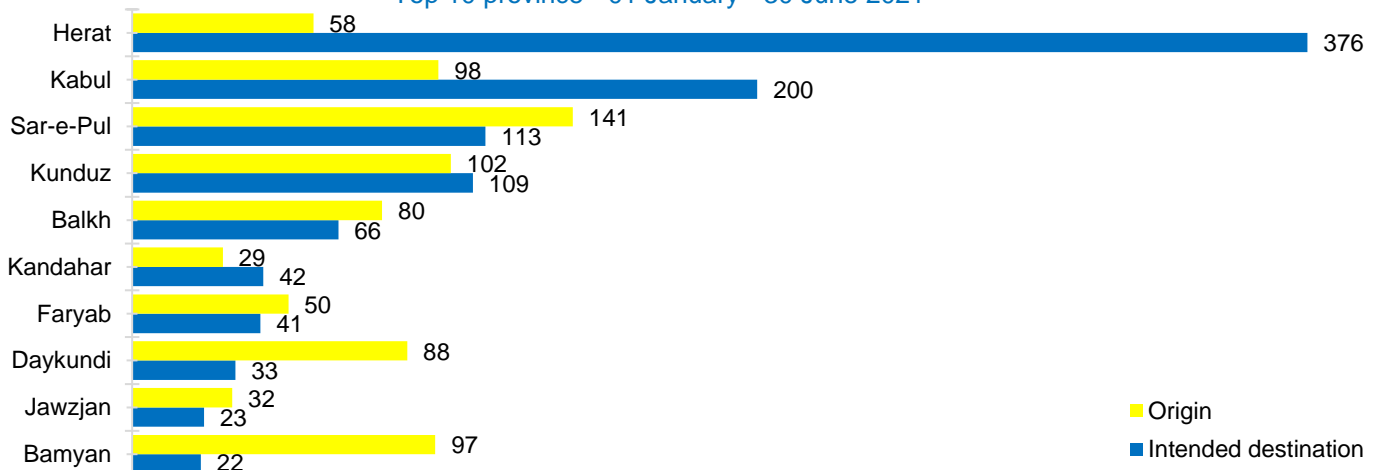
While Voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees through the Islam Qala and Spin Boldak crossing points continued, voluntary repatriation through the Torkham crossing point remains suspended as a result of restrictive customs formalities imposed by the authorities (Pakistan side) since November 2020. The UNHCR office in Pakistan is following this issue with the authorities.

UNHCR will continue to facilitate the return of refugees throughout 2021 with planning for 60,000 Afghan refugee returnees from Pakistan, Iran and other countries. In view of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, UNHCR will closely monitor the situation and maintain adequate coordination with UNHCR offices in the region to ensure to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees, who are intending to return to Afghanistan, in safety and dignity.

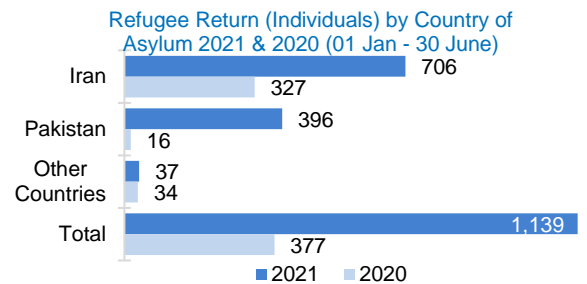
Return Trends

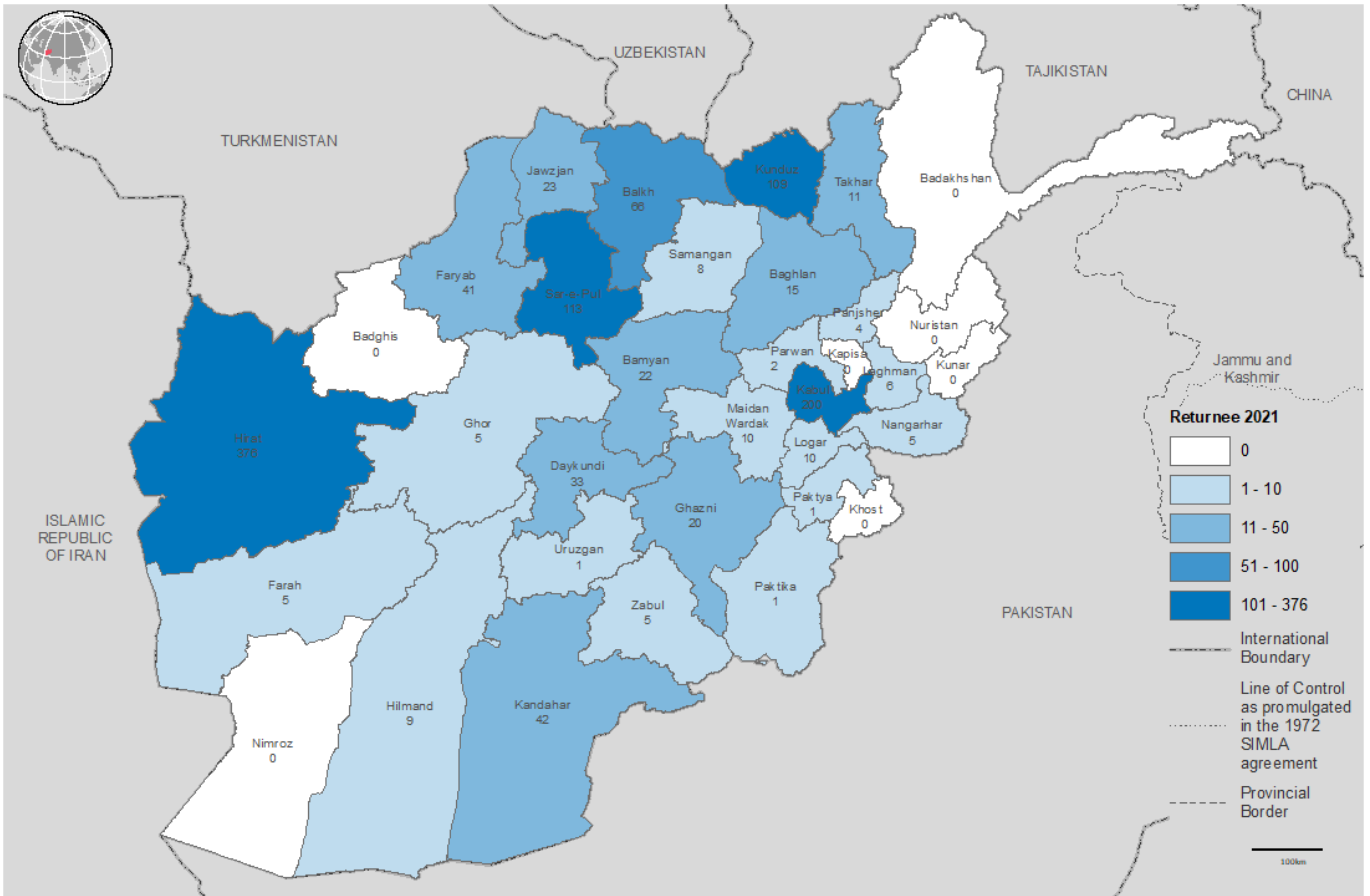
Some **76% (864)** of refugee returnees in 2021 have returned to Herat (33%), Kabul (17%), Sar-e-Pul (10%), Kunduz (10%), and Balkh (6%) provinces.

Comparison of recorded province of destination with province of origin
Top 10 province - 01 January - 30 June 2021

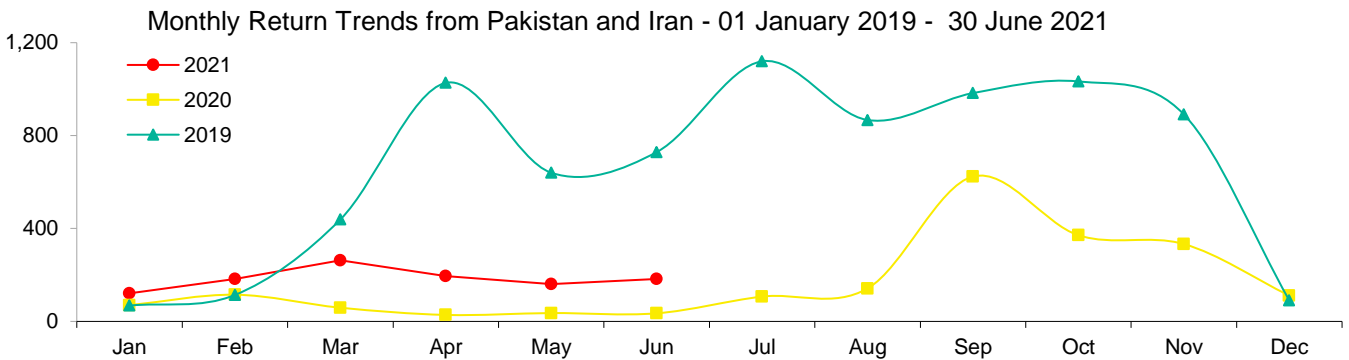


UNHCR partner staff during returnee monitoring interview with returnee youth from Pakistan, Kabul Encashment Center, Kabul, Afghanistan, May 2021



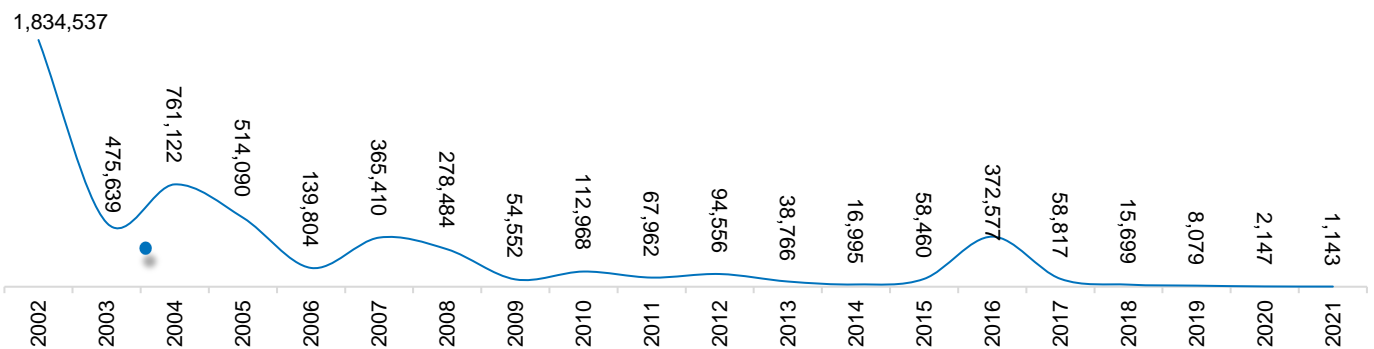


sources: UNHCR - Afghanistan Kabul Feedback: AFGKAIMU@unhcr.org file Name : returnee 2021



Since the beginning of large-scale repatriation in 2002 UNHCR has facilitated the return of nearly **5.3 million** Afghan refugees, mainly from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

Annual volrep trend from Pakistan, Iran and other countries to Afghanistan
03 Mar 2002 - 30 Jun 2021



Process of return

➤ UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in Iran and Pakistan process refugees willing to return to Afghanistan and issue them a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF). Two VRCs are located in Pakistan: one in Azakhel in Peshawar (KPK) and the other in Baleli in Quetta (Baluchistan). Repatriation from Iran is facilitated through all UNHCR Offices, including the VRC in Soleimankhani.

➤ Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted at four Encashment Centers (ECs) located in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar for returnees from Pakistan and other countries, and in Herat for those returning from Iran.

➤ At the ECs, all returnees with a valid VRF receive a one-off multisectoral assistance consisting of a cash grant amounting USD 250 per person (based on their area of origin) to prevent, reduce, and respond to immediate protection risks and vulnerabilities upon return to Afghanistan and to cover their transportation costs. Most of the interviewed returnees stated that they will spend the cash grant to pay transportation costs to their places of origin/intended destination and buy food and other basic commodities.

➤ In addition to cash grants, a range of inter-agency services are provided to returning refugees, including basic health and malnutrition screening and vaccination (by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) supported by WHO and UNICEF), mine risk awareness (by the Danish Demining Group supported by UNMAS), information on school enrolment (by the Ministry of Education supported by UNICEF), and overnight accommodation when needed.

Returnee Monitoring

Returnee monitoring is an inherent part of the **protection monitoring** carried out by UNHCR in Afghanistan. UNHCR monitors refugee returnees through the entire process of voluntary repatriation.

UNHCR interviews refugees willing to return at the VRCs in the country of asylum, monitors the return condition at the ECs in Afghanistan and follows up on the returnee's situation in the areas of return one to six months later through phone survey. UNHCR is planning to launch the phone monitoring exercise during the second quarter of 2021.



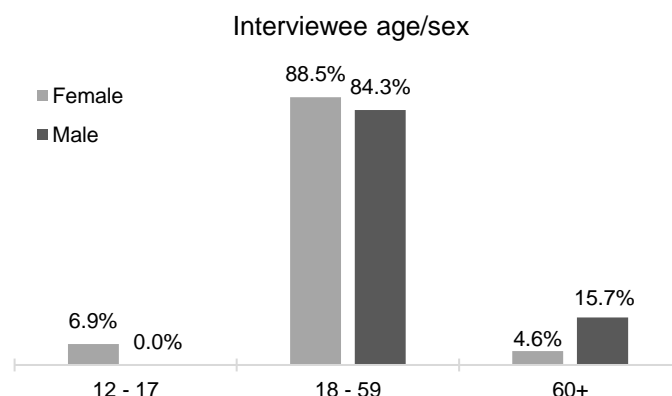
Refugee returnees from Iran receiving cash grant Herat Encashment Centre, Herat, Afghanistan

UNHCR and the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR) also conducts monitoring to identify persons with specific needs to be referred to specialized service providers for assessment and assistance.

For instance, mine risk awareness is important as a protection intervention to raise awareness of the threats associated with landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and unexploded ordnances to prevent injury and loss of life, particularly for children and those returning to rural areas.

In addition, UNHCR, in line with the measures recommended by MoPH and WHO, adopted a new operating procedure at all ECs, which is aimed to prevent the spread and transmission of COVID-19. This includes awareness-raising sessions for all returnees using materials provided by MoPH and WHO, health screening, referral of suspected cases to health facilities, additional handwashing facilities, distribution of face masks for returnees and provision of PPE for staff including partner staff working in the ECs.

UNHCR also monitors the situation of refugee returnees through its community-based protection monitoring, which allows UNHCR to assess the protection environment, identify human rights violations and potential protection concerns returnees may face after return in Afghanistan to inform timely interventions and advocacy by UNHCR and other stakeholders.



ENCASHMENT CENTRE (EC) MONITORING

Encashment Centre monitoring is conducted with refugee returnees upon their arrival in Afghanistan. It aims at identifying return trends through an assessment of the voluntariness of return, reasons for return, the level of information that returnees received in countries of asylum to allow them to make a well-informed decision to return, identifying persons with specific needs to be referred for appropriate response, the conditions of return and respect for basic rights, as well as human rights violations experienced during return to be reported for appropriate response, and returnees' plans for the future.

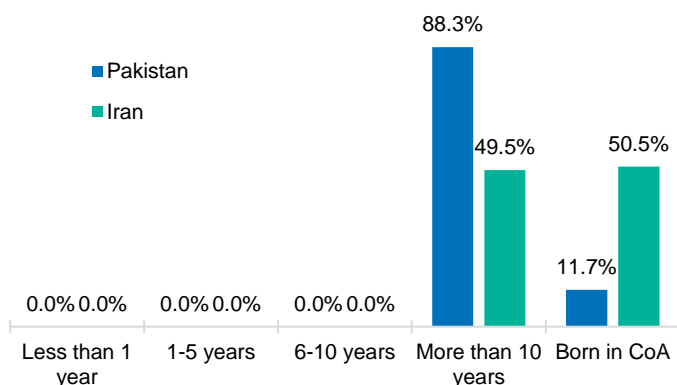
Between 01 January and 30 June 2021, a total of 176 refugee returnee households (representing 77% of total returnees) were interviewed, including 89 male and 87 female respondents. Interviewees are selected randomly among returning families at the ECs, which is the first point of contact between refugee returnees and UNHCR in Afghanistan.

Encashment Center Returnee Monitoring Findings

IN BRIEF

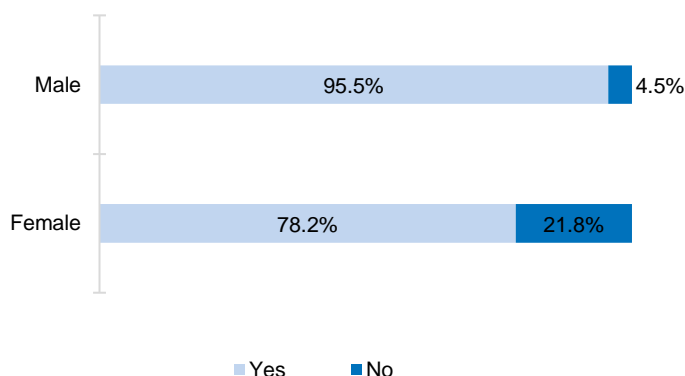
- 59% of Afghan refugee returnees interviewed at the ECs stated that they intend to return to their province of origin, while 41% stated that they would return to other provinces to reunify with their relatives, seek income opportunities, due to perceived insecurity and lack of basic services.
- 88% of interviewed returnees from Pakistan and 50% from Iran returned after spending more than 10 years as a refugee.
- 51% of returnees from Iran and 12% from Pakistan were born in the country of asylum.
- 81% of returnees stated they had information about the overall situation in Afghanistan, including the security situation in their place of origin, before leaving the country of asylum. Majority of the interviewed returnees (76%) stated that they received information from Afghan communities in the country of asylum (CoA).

Displacement period

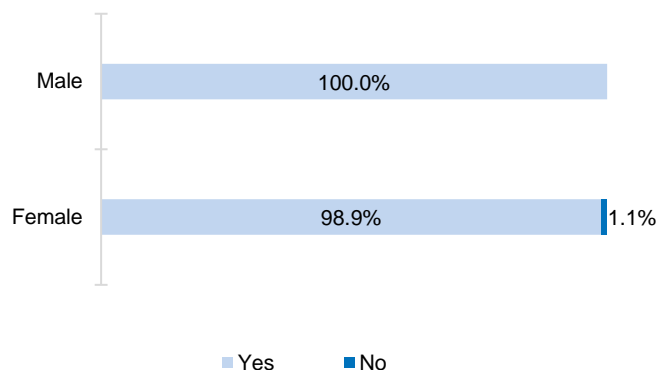


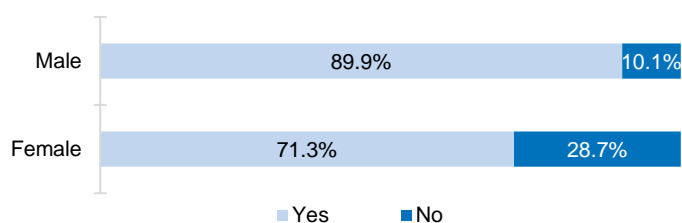
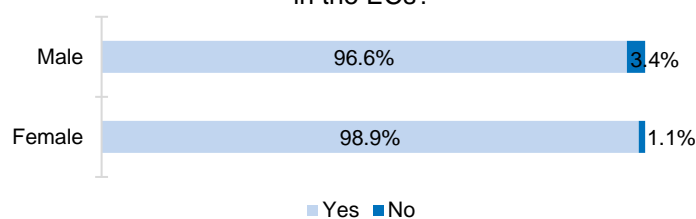
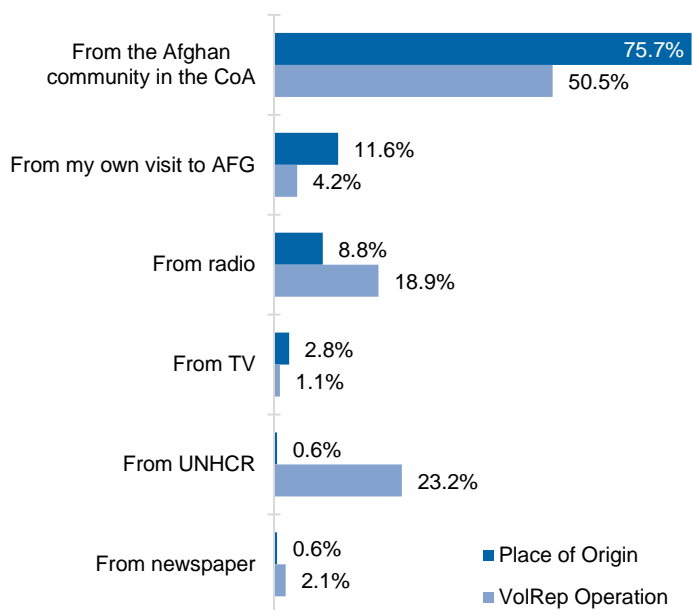
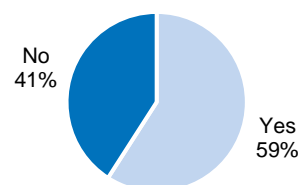
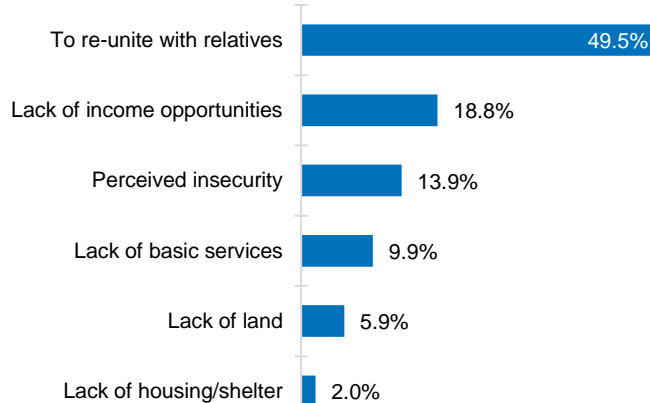
Refugee returnees from Pakistan receiving mine risk awareness
Kabul Encashment Centre

Awareness about cash grant



Did you receive any information about COVID-19 while you were in your CoA?

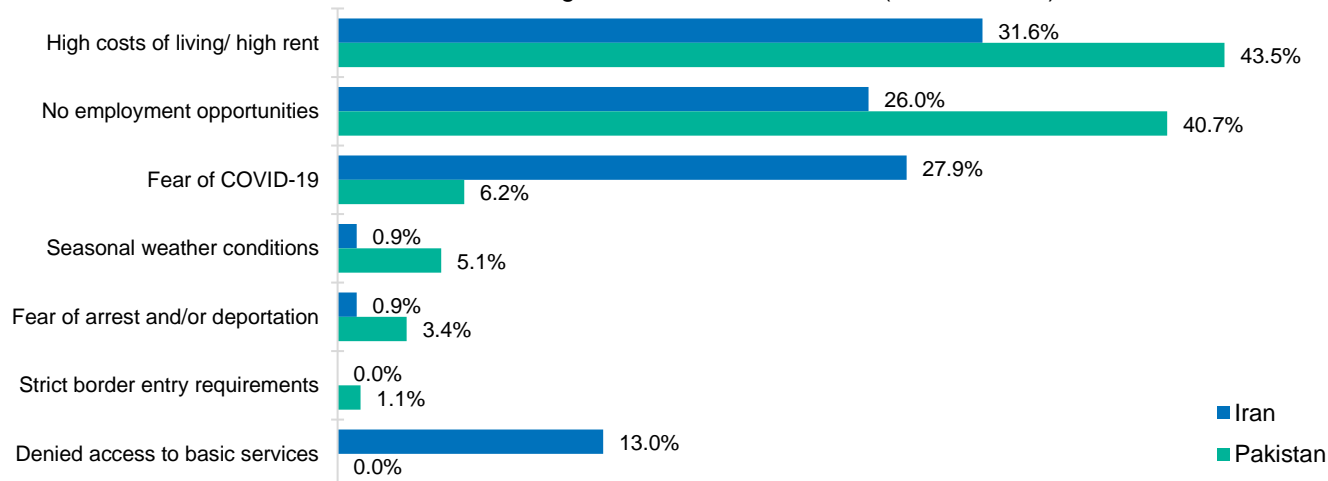


Awareness about the situation in country of origin

Did you receive any information about COVID-19 in the ECs?

Sources of Information on Place of Origin and VolRep Program

Do you intend to return to your province of origin?

Reasons for not returning to the province of origin


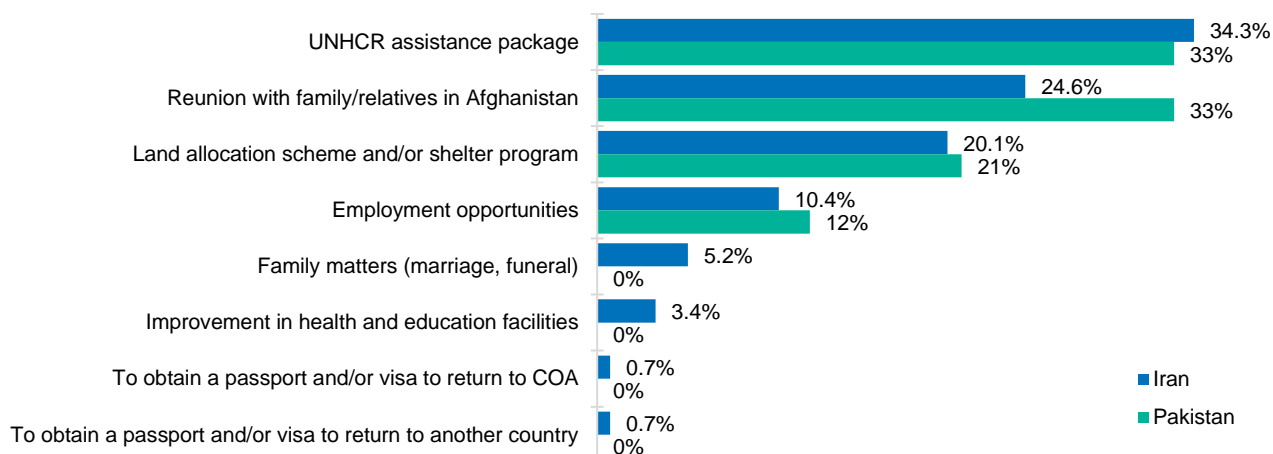
Reasons for Return (Push and Pull Factors)

IN BRIEF

- Some **97** newly arrived refugee returnees from Iran, **77** from Pakistan and **2** from other countries were interviewed upon arrival at the four encashment centers as part of UNHCR's returnee monitoring in 2021. This sample size represents 77% of the total returnees in 2021.
- The main reasons for leaving Pakistan and Iran (push factors) stated by interviewed returnees were high cost of living, lack of employment opportunities and fear of COVID-19. While UNHCR's assistance package, reunifications with family/relatives, land allocation by the government of Afghanistan and perceived employment opportunities were mentioned as the reasons for return (pull factors) to Afghanistan.

Reasons for Leaving Pakistan and Iran - 2021 (Push Factors)


Reasons for return to Afghanistan - 2021 (Pull Factors)

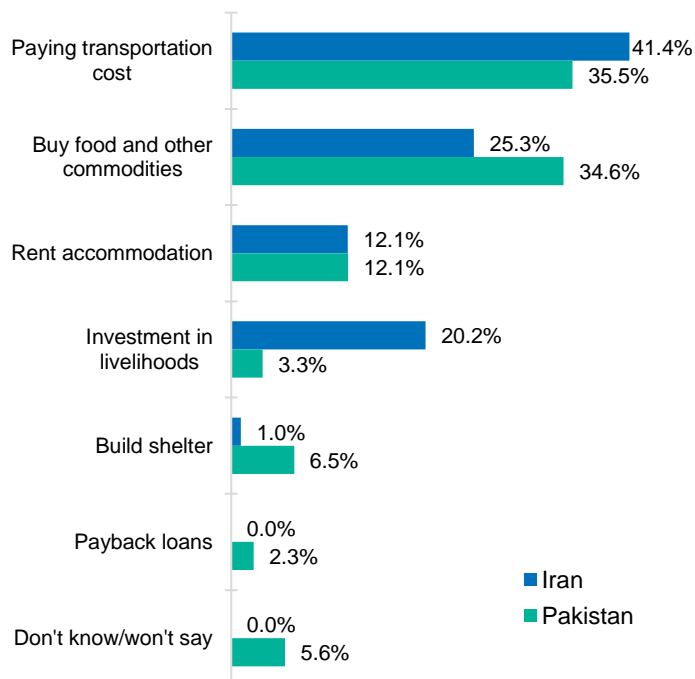


Note: except the fear of COVID-19, the main reasons of return to Afghanistan (push and pull factors) in both 2021 and 2020 for returnees from Pakistan and Iran are similar.

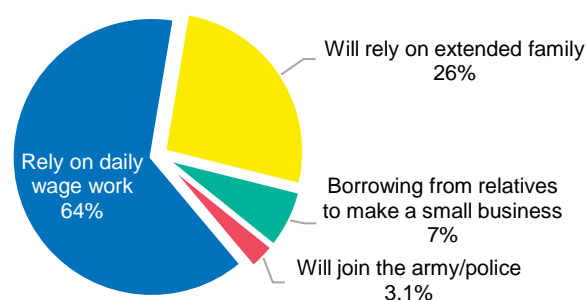
Intentions after leaving the Encashment Centre

These findings give an indication of returnees' intentions upon return, which may change after returnees settle in their communities. These findings also help compare dynamics among returnees during the return and reintegration phases.

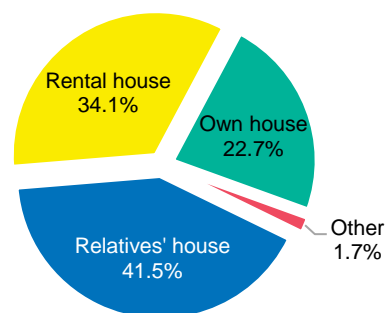
Upon return, how do you plan to spend the cash grant?



Potential coping mechanisms after spending the cash grant



Stay arrangement after return



Skills/Education Mapping and Satisfaction Survey

To ensure a smooth VolRep procedure in the ECs, on 10 August 2020, UNHCR established a new online tool using Kobo. It is a short (5 min) survey conducted with all refugee returnees' Head of Households (HoHs) at ECs, aimed to assess returning refugees' satisfaction of the services provided at the ECs including the mitigating measures linked to COVID-19. In addition, this survey provides information on skills/qualifications and education level of returnees HoHs that enable ECs/field offices to provide possible information/referrals related to potential employment opportunities or ongoing training programs, as well as to collect data at the village level for the purpose of designing future livelihoods programmes in priority areas of return and reintegration.

Total Interviews: 651 (343 M and 308 F)

Education

- **14%** of the interviewed returnees stated that they have no education (**17% F and 12% M**)
- **8 %** stated that they have minimal education (up to grade 6);
- **3%** up to grade 9;
- **6%** up to grade 12;
- **2%** went to madrasa; and
- **68%** went to university. This figure is high because over **70%** of the total refugee returnees from Iran are students who returned to Afghanistan.

Skills

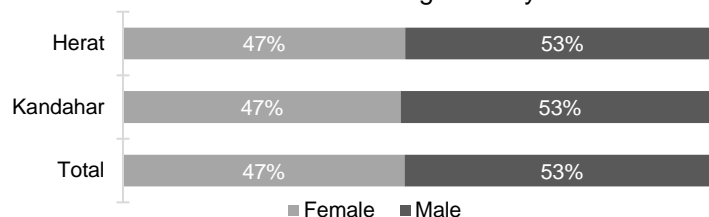
- **43%** stated that they have no skills
- Tailoring: 19%;
- Shopkeeper: 5%;
- Agriculture (farming): 4%;
- Teaching: 3%;
- Electrician: 2%;
- Stone carving: 2%;
- Embroidery: 2%;
- Health worker: 1%;
- Computer repair: 1%;
- Carpet weaving: 1%;
- Other skill: 18%;

Note: The list of skills, which consist of 37 skills, is also used by other partners including the government. UNHCR has collected data on returnees' skills and qualification at the village level.

Satisfaction from the services in the ECs

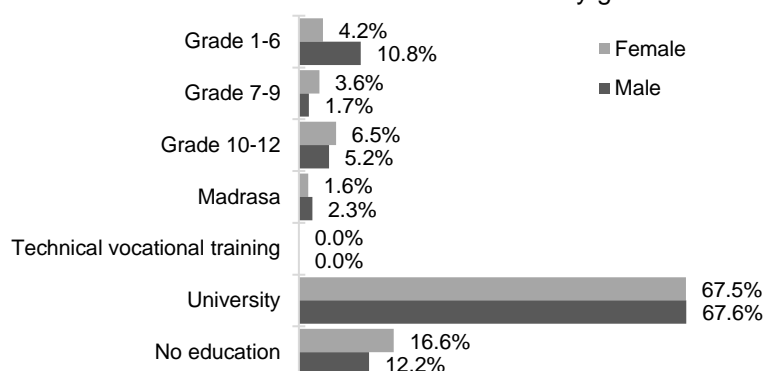
- All interviewed returnees expressed their satisfaction with the services provided by UNHCR and other partners at all encashment centers.

Interviewed returnees gender by EC

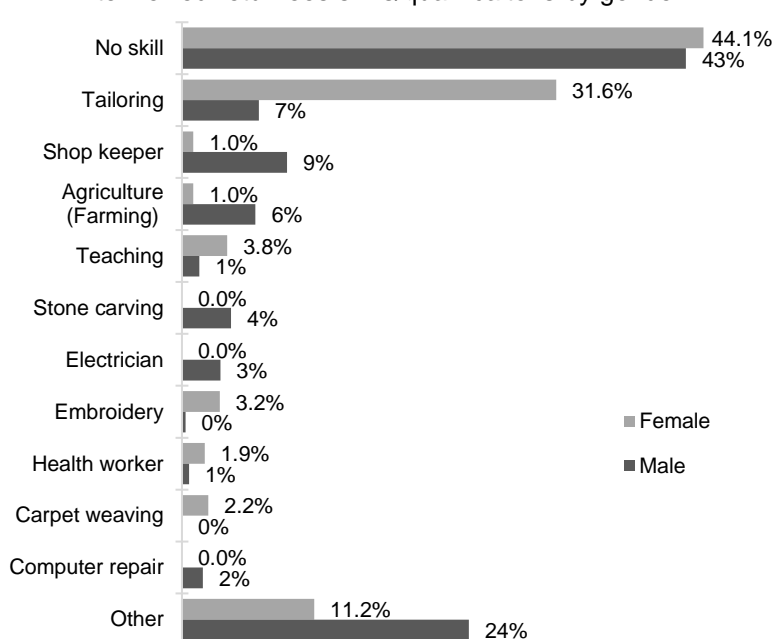


Note: No refugee returns through Jalalabad and Kabul ECs due to customs formalities imposed, since November 2020, by the authorities (Pakistan side) in Torkham.

Interviewed returnees education level by gender



Interviewed returnees skills/qualifications by gender



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