While Iran had registered over 5.5 million cases and more than 120,000 deaths in September, by the end of the month it was generally agreed that the country had overcome the fifth wave of the pandemic. As of the end of September, over half of Iran’s population had received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, of which some 500,000 were Afghan nationals (refugees and undocumented individuals). High school students became eligible to receive vaccines, with hopes for the reopening of schools. Working closely with the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant’s Affairs (BAFIA), UNHCR continued to provide emergency support to the Government of Iran’s COVID-19 response.

Refugees continued to have access to free COVID-19 testing in designated Ministry of Health affiliated centers. If refugees are enrolled in the Universal Public Health Insurance (UPHI), they also continue to have access to subsidized treatment and hospitalization and only pay the franchise fee of 10%. However, UNHCR continued to receive reports of uninsured refugees facing challenges in affording COVID-19 treatment costs. By mid-September 2021, 94,632 refugees had enrolled in the UPHI, out of which 83,672 (70% out of 120,000) were vulnerable and special disease cases for which UNHCR pays the fee (and thus enrolled in the scheme free of charge).

UNHCR strengthened its hotline capacity at the start of the pandemic so that refugees could continue to access protection services such as counselling, referrals or inclusion into relevant programmes. This capacity was further bolstered in late August 2021, in order to respond to the increase in approaches linked to new arrivals from Afghanistan. In September 2021, 3,715 refugees approached UNHCR, with assistance being one of the main topics of concerns of refugees.

In 2021, UNHCR is seeking USD 10.05 million for its COVID-19 response in Iran, which has been mainstreamed into its wider programmes. This is part of UNHCR’s global funding needs and feeds into the wider UN appeal.

Support for UNHCR’s regular activities, as part of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), further complements the emergency response to COVID-19, by strengthening inclusive national systems, notably for health, and mitigating the virus’ socio-economic impact.