

Protection Trends Concerning Afghan Refugees January—February 2018

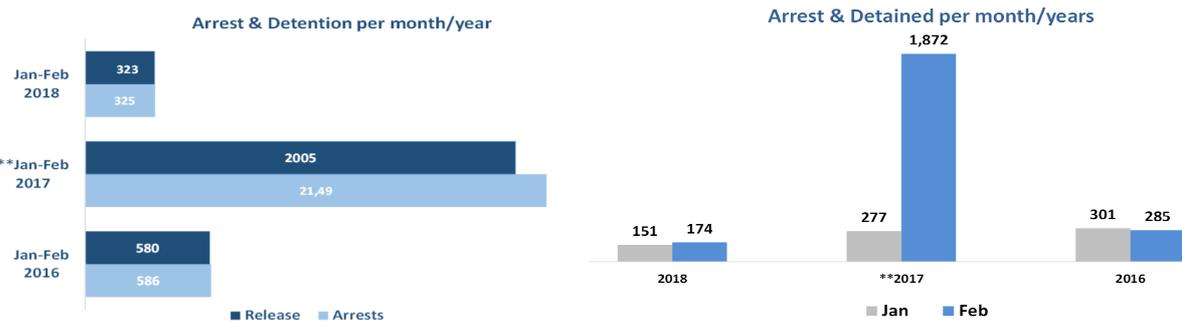
The Government of Pakistan (GoP) extended the validity of the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards from 31 January until 31 March 2018. In the past, the practice has been to extend the validity of PoR cards for at least six months. The short-term extension of PoR cards has caused anxiety among Afghan refugees who continue to face an uncertain future concerning their temporary stay in the country.

On 1 January, Ministry of States & Frontier Regions (SAFRON) issued a notification to the Ministry of Interior, the Chief and Home Secretaries and Inspector-Generals of Police to ensure that no harassment or adverse action is taken against registered Afghan refugees holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards issued by NADRA until the finalisation of the policy on Voluntary Repatriation and Management of Afghan Refugees beyond 2017.

The Federal Cabinet discussed the Afghan Management and Repatriation Policy (plan) on 20 February reportedly, the Cabinet has approved a further extension the stay of PoR cards, however an official communication is still awaited. The Afghan management and repatriation policy was reportedly partially approved, including the flexible visa regime.

Voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees was paused for the winter. The repatriation will recommence on 1 March 2018.

Arrests in the first two months of 2018 (325 individuals) are significantly lower compared to those in the same reporting period in 2017 (21,49 individuals).**



Summary of Events

1. Arrests & Detention

In February 2018, 174 PoR card holders were arrested compared to 151 in January 2018. There has been a slight increase in arrests and detentions mainly due to an increase in checks at security points in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K.P) province where 96 cases of arrests and detention were reported. UNHCR is monitoring the situation to establish if the increased number is attributed to the short-term extension of PoR cards. 77 percent of the arrested PoR cardholders were released without being formally charged through the UNHCR funded Advice and Legal Aid Centres (ALAC) interventions. Most individuals were released from detention within 24 hours.

In the wake of 3 February's attack on military, security has been beefed up on the check points in and around district of Swat in K.P. Most of the cases reported harassment on the check points in the districts of Malakand and Swat. UNHCR has taken up the issue with the Commissionerate of Afghan Refugees (CAR) who will take it up with Pakistan army for issuing instructions to officials to respect the notification on the validity of PoR cards and not to harass and/or arrest PoR card holders. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation. CAR K.P also wrote a letter to Commissioner of Malakand on 27 February asking for fair treatment of PoR card holders. In Karachi, UNHCR's legal partner held a coordination meeting with the Assistant Inspector General of Police Karachi, regarding the issue of prevention of harassment, arrest and detention of Afghan refugees. In Quetta, UNHCR'S legal partner organised a session for law enforcement agencies (LEA's) on the protection of Persons of Concern.

** In February 2017 18,72 Persons of Concern (PoCs) were arrested which was the highest for any month in last three years owing to the intensified security operation named "Radd-ul-Fasaad" initiated by GoP under National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism in the wake of series of security incidents.

2. Refoulement in Balochistan

The Frontier Corps (FC) in Quetta undertook security operations that resulted the apprehension Afghans including registered Afghan refugees – at various check points in Quetta and surrounding areas. These operations have already resulted in the deportation to Afghanistan of a group of PoR cardholders (unconfirmed number is 40 PoR cardholders) and undocumented Afghans from various parts of Quetta on 2 January. Both undocumented Afghans and PoR cardholders were taken by the FC from Gulistan area in Qilla Abdullah district to the Chaman border and deported without due process. UNHCR requested the Ministry of SAFRON to raise the matter of refugees' *refoulement* urgently with all relevant authorities and expressed its grave concern that the FC and law enforcement agencies are not distinguishing between Afghan refugees registered by the government of Pakistan and other Afghan nationals. The Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees in Balochistan has been closely engaged on this matter and continued to raise awareness among the relevant officials of the rights of refugees. UNHCR and ALAC partners reinforcing their awareness sessions for FC and other law enforcement officials in Balochistan.

3. Evictions/ Eviction Notices

Residents of Berari and Ichrian refugee villages of Mansehra district (K.P) were asked to vacate their refugee villages by 15 December 2017. Authorities have not taken any action against the residents after the expiry of the deadline. According to the information gathered by UNHCR, the majority of refugees in the village would prefer to relocate to urban areas or other refugee camps rather than repatriating to Afghanistan. On 30 – 31 January, UNHCR office in Peshawar, in close coordination with CAR and SHARP carried-out an intention survey and persons with specific needs identification mission to Berari and Ichrian refugee villages. UNHCR suggested the deadline was extended until 1 March 2018 which will give time for refugees to consider voluntary repatriation as an option after winter.

Some 50 families (half of them Afghan refugees) received a notice from the Pakhtunkhwa Highway Authority in Naguman to vacate their houses and shops as they fall on a proposed road route. On UNHCR's intervention, the authority has agreed to give further time to the families to relocate to other locations within the same refugee village.

The old landowner of Khurasan refugee village has sold the land and the new owner offered compensation to the Afghan refugees to relocate. There are some 30 families remaining who are seeking Commissionerate of Afghan Refugee's assurance of an appropriate alternate location. UNHCR is coordinating with CAR to identify an alternate location for these families.



UNHCR arranged a session with police officials in Peshawar. The session focused on the UNHCR mandate, operation and the status of refugees in Pakistan.



UNHCR conducted a one-day training session for police officers in the district of Bhakkar, Punjab with one of UNHCR's partners, the Society for Human Rights and Prisoners' Aid (SHARP).