

Afghanistan is experiencing one of the largest human migrations in its modern history. In the past year, over a million Afghans have returned to their homeland, often not by choice but out of necessity. These aren't just statistics; behind every person crossing the border are broken dreams, children pulled from school, and families struggling to rebuild in a country already burdened by conflict, poverty, and international isolation.

For many, the journey home has led to deep uncertainty. Families often arrive with little more than the clothes on their backs, having sold everything they owned just to pay for transport. One father who recently returned to Nangarhar after a decade in Pakistan described his family as "starting life from zero again," facing a lack of jobs, schools, and assistance. His story is a common one, echoed by thousands who find themselves in debt within weeks of arrival, simply trying to secure food and shelter.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 1.4 million Afghans returned from neighboring countries in 2024, most from Pakistan. Humanitarian groups warn that Afghanistan's already fragile systems are ill-equipped to handle such a sudden influx. Nearly two-thirds of returnees face food insecurity, and many live in makeshift shelters or unfinished homes without access to clean water, healthcare, or stable livelihoods.

Women and children face the harshest realities. UNICEF reports that thousands of children have dropped out of school since the returns began, while access to healthcare and work for women remains severely limited due to current restrictions. Female-headed households are among the most vulnerable, often excluded from aid programs and left with no income.

One mother who crossed the dusty Torkham border last spring called the experience "a leap into the unknown." Her children had never even seen Afghanistan. After years of living in rented homes and working informal jobs in Pakistan, their legal documents expired, forcing them to leave. What awaited them wasn't a homecoming but a fight for survival, with no guarantee of shelter, schooling, or safety.

The numbers continue to grow. In 2025 alone, UNHCR recorded over 2.1 million Afghans returning from Pakistan and Iran. More than 640,000 came from Iran after a government-imposed deadline, while new restrictions in Pakistan pushed many undocumented and even previously registered individuals to leave. These mass

returns have left tens of thousands living in transit camps or with relatives, straining already scarce resources.

### ***Policy Shifts and Pressures in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa***

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), which shares a long border with Afghanistan, the politics of repatriation remain tense. Early in 2025, Pakistan's federal government announced deadlines for Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders and undocumented Afghans to leave voluntarily, with warnings of deportation afterward.



### ***Families crossing the Torkham border with their belongings — a journey marked by uncertainty and hope***

KP's Chief Minister publicly opposed forced deportations, citing the cultural and historical ties between Pashtun communities on both sides of the border. He promised that those who wanted to return voluntarily would receive support. Despite these assurances, thousands have crossed back through KP. By May, over 530,000 Afghans had been repatriated from the province since late 2023, including undocumented families and those with expired ACCs.

As the summer deadline passed, local authorities were directed to prepare for

operations targeting Afghans who remained without valid documents. Security committees have been tasked with detaining and removing them starting in September. These developments highlight the growing tension between humanitarian obligations and national security, leaving many Afghans fearful and uncertain about their future.

### ***Global Reactions and Responsibilities***

This crisis is testing international norms, including the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning people to situations where they may face harm. In Europe, several countries have resumed deportations of Afghan nationals, sparking criticism from human rights advocates.

Humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR, the IFRC, IOM, and Save the Children, have warned that mass returns without proper support risk creating new crises, such as internal displacement within Afghanistan, public health emergencies, and worsening poverty. The IFRC notes that many returnees arrive malnourished and in poor health, with no access to clean water or medical care.

Global actors are being urged to shift from short-term relief to long-term reintegration, which includes restoring legal identity, providing education and livelihood opportunities, and ensuring that returns are safe, voluntary, and dignified.

### ***Stories of Survival and Resilience***

In Peshawar, a former ACC cardholder now runs a small sweets stall after returning to Afghanistan. Her income is barely enough to cover food, let alone school fees for her children, but she says keeping a daily routine helps her stay hopeful.

In southern KP, a father prepares a meager meal over a shared fire. His family sleeps under a makeshift roof, his daughter has missed nearly a year of school, and he feels like a stranger in the land where he was born. "I left as a child, and I return as a stranger," he said quietly, his words capturing the sense of displacement many returnees feel.

### ***What Must Be Done***

The Afghan returnee crisis demands urgent, coordinated action. In Pakistan and KP, the focus must shift from deadlines to dignity. This means ensuring returns are

voluntary, documentation processes are transparent, and vulnerable groups receive special protection.

International donors must fill funding gaps to support education, health, housing, and livelihoods inside Afghanistan. Cross-border cooperation between Pakistan, Iran, and international partners is crucial to prevent a humanitarian spillover that could destabilize the entire region.

Above all, this crisis must be seen for what it is—not a policy challenge, but a human one. The people crossing these borders carry memories, losses, and hopes. Counting them isn't enough. Their dignity must be restored, their rights protected, and their futures rebuilt.