

AFGHANISTAN

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

2,147 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED IN 2020

During 2020, **2,147** Afghan refugees have returned from Pakistan (**1,092**), Iran (**939**), and other countries (**116**) including India, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and the Russian Federation.

After a temporary suspension of voluntary repatriation starting on 04 March due to COVID-19, UNHCR resumed its facilitated voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Iran as of 30 April and from Pakistan and other countries as of 10 August 2020.

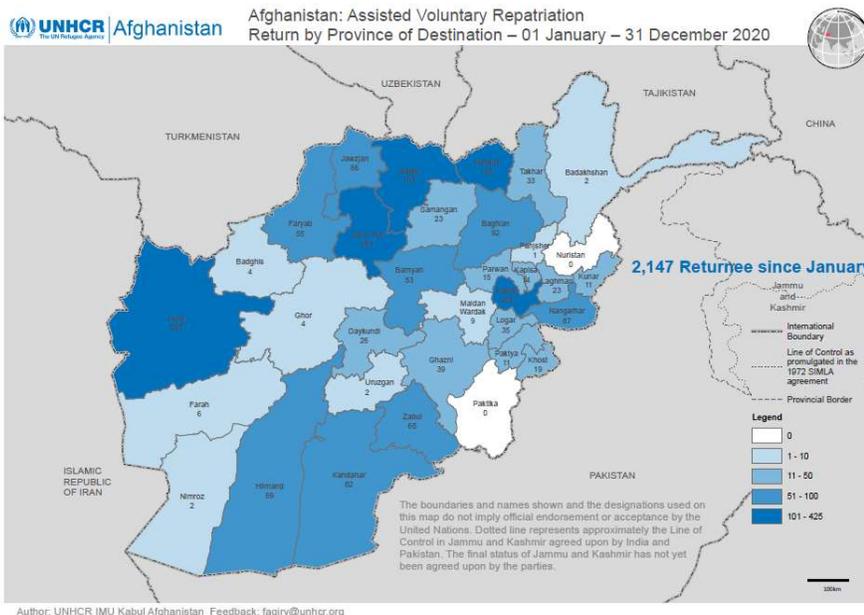
In view of increased transportation costs due to COVID-19, as of 01 July 2020, UNHCR has decided to increase the voluntary repatriation cash grant from USD 200 per person to USD 250 per person (on average USD 100 as a transportation grant and USD 150 as an initial integration grant). The additional funds intend to enable returning refugees to arrange adequate transportation to their destinations in Afghanistan.

UNHCR, in consultation with the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, agreed to continue the facilitated voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees during the winter season. This will enable Afghan refugees to return during the season, including those who were unable to do so in the previous months due to COVID-19 related restrictions. Voluntary repatriation from Iran and other countries has also continued throughout the year.



UNHCR partner staff providing information about COVID-19 for returnee women, Kabul Encashment Center, Kabul, September 2020, UNHCR/ F. Sattar

The 7th meeting of the Quadripartite Meeting, chaired by UNHCR, which was attended by the high-level representatives from the Governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, was virtually held on 01 October 2020. The meeting aimed to discuss progress, challenges and the way forward in relation to the implementation of SSAR to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries. During the meeting, all the parties reaffirmed their commitment to the principle of voluntary, safe and dignified returns.



Process of return

UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in Iran and Pakistan process refugees willing to return to Afghanistan and issue a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) for each family. 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 grant averaging USD 250 per person (based on their area of origin) to support their immediate humanitarian needs and transportation costs.

In addition to cash grants, a range of inter-agency services are provided for returning refugees, including basic health and malnutrition screening and vaccination (by the Ministry of Public Health 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.

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

Mine risk education 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 SOP in 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 mask for returnees and provision of PPEs for staff including partner staff working in the ECs.

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All returnees are provided with a multi-purpose cash grant (on average USD 250 per person) at four ECs. UNHCR's cash grants to refugee returnees are intended to prevent, reduce, and respond to immediate protection risks and vulnerabilities upon return to Afghanistan. Most of the interviewed returnees stated that they will spend the cash grant to pay transportation cost to their destination and buy food and other basic commodities.



*A returnee family receiving mine awareness
Kabul Encashment Centre, Kabul, Afghanistan.
August 2020. UNHCR/A.Moore*

IN BRIEF

Between 01 January and 31 December 2020, a total of 2,147 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan under UNHCR's facilitated voluntary repatriation program, with the majority returning from Pakistan (1,092) and Iran (939) followed by smaller numbers from India (58), Tajikistan (39), Kazakhstan (7), Azerbaijan (6), and the Russian Federation (6).

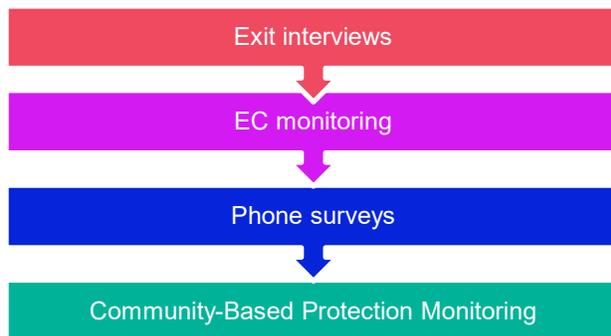
These returns were 73% lower than the 8,079 Afghans who returned during 2019 and 86% lower than the 15,699 returnees in 2018.

This decline in the number of returnees was largely due to the temporary suspension of UNHCR's facilitated voluntary repatriation linked to COVID-19, worsening security and economic situation across Afghanistan as well as improved protection situation in Pakistan and Iran.

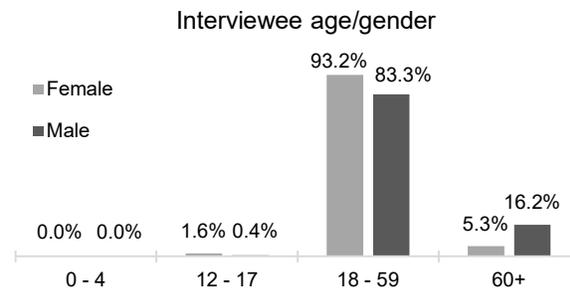
For 2021, UNHCR will continue to facilitate the return of refugees and planning for 60,000 Afghan refugee returnees from Pakistan, Iran and other countries.

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 those who plans to return at the VRCs in the country of asylum, monitors the return



conditions at the ECs in Afghanistan, and follows up on the returnee's situation one to six months later through phone surveys. UNHCR also monitors the protection environment of refugee returnees through its community-based protection monitoring, which collects gender and age disaggregated data based on population groups including refugee returnees.



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, the conditions and respect for basic rights in the country of asylum, and returnees' plans for the future. Monitoring identifies persons with specific needs and helps identifying harassment and other violations to be reported to responsible authorities for appropriate response.

Between 01 January and 31 December 2020, a total of 418 households were interviewed, including 228 male and 190 female respondents. Interviewees are selected randomly among returning families at the ECs, the first point of contact between returnees and UNHCR in Afghanistan.

Post-Return Monitoring

To monitor the post-return situation of returnees in Afghanistan, UNHCR conducts phone surveys with returnees within one to six months upon their return. In the longer-term period, UNHCR conducts community-based protection monitoring using focus-group discussions, and household-level and key informant interviews to assess the protection environment and the level of reintegration of returnees. In 2020, while

phone surveys were not conducted given the low number of returns and challenges due to COVID-19, UNHCR reached 1,899 returned refugees in 23 provinces through its community-based protection monitoring. The findings of the monitoring are available in UNHCR's data portal:

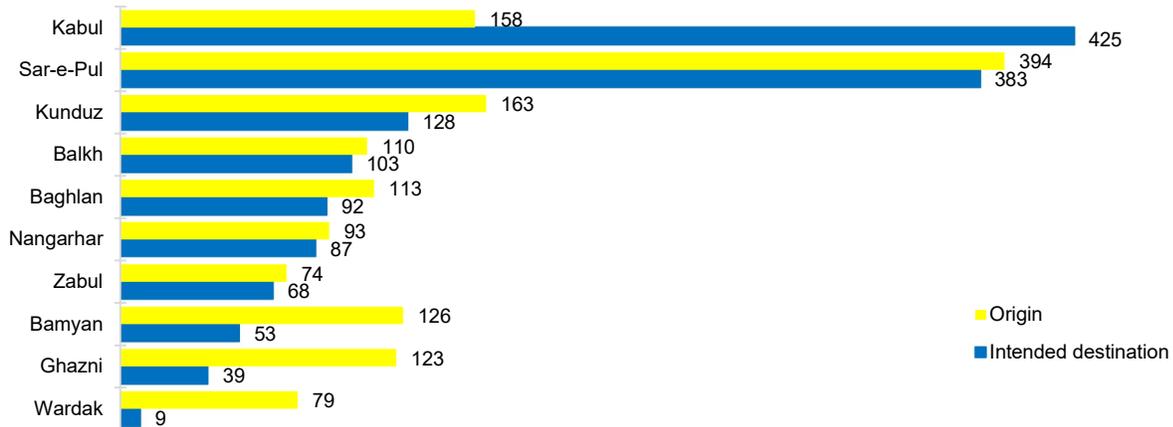
<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/afg>

Return Trends

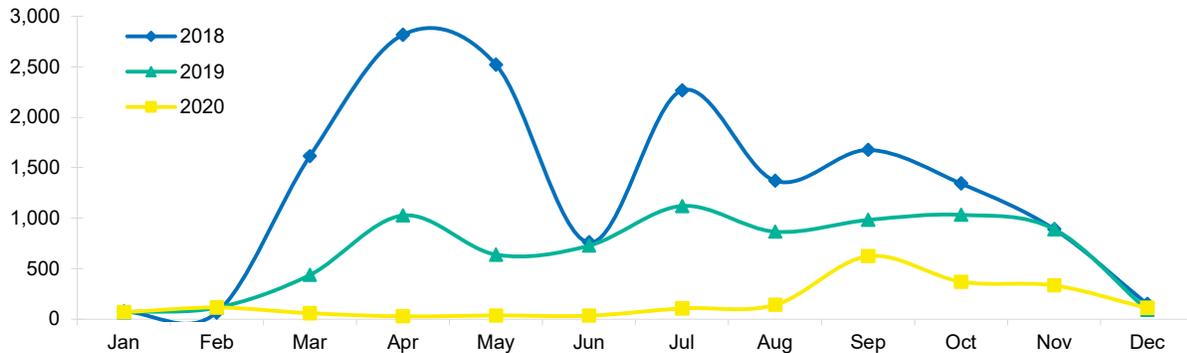
Since the beginning of large-scale repatriation in 2002 UNHCR has facilitated the return of nearly **5.3 million** Afghan refugees, mainly from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

Some **53% (1,131)** of refugee returnees in 2020 have returned to Kabul, Sar-e-Pul, Kunduz, Balkh, and Baghlan provinces. Kabul and Nangarhar are among the top five provinces of return since 2002.

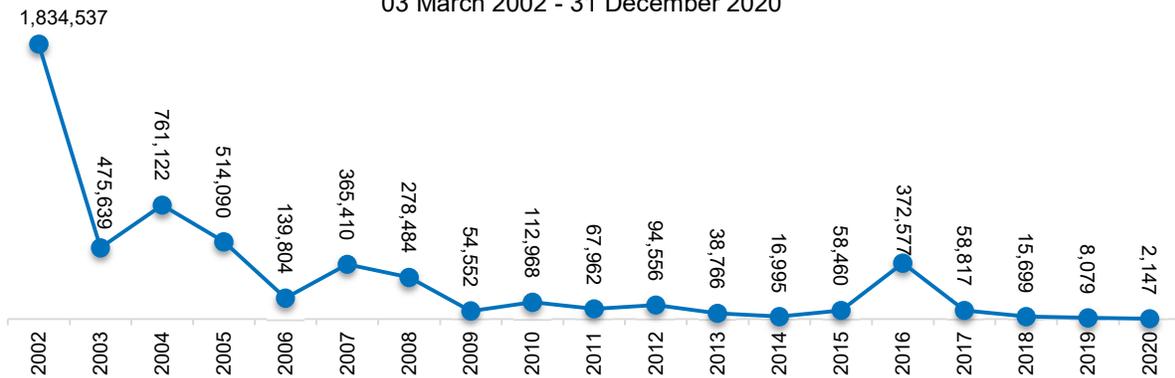
Comparison of recorded province of destination with province of origin
 Top 10 Provinces - 01 January - 31 December 2020



Monthly Return Trends from Pakistan and Iran - 01 January 2018 - 31 December 2020



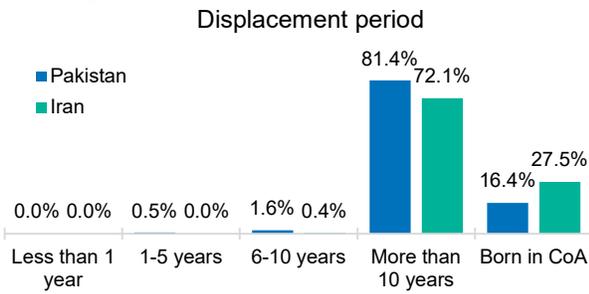
Annual volrep trends from Pakistan, Iran and Other Countries to Afghanistan
 03 March 2002 - 31 December 2020



Encashment Center Returnee Monitoring Findings

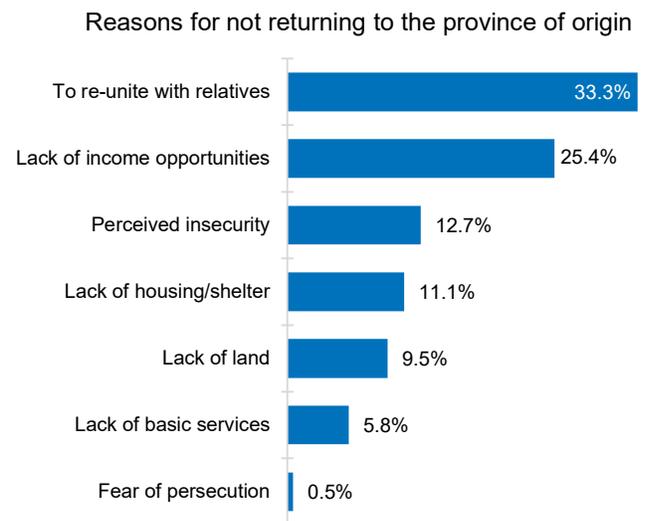
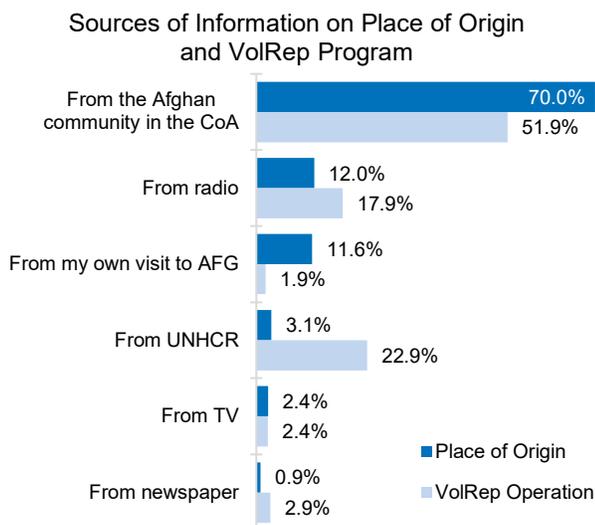
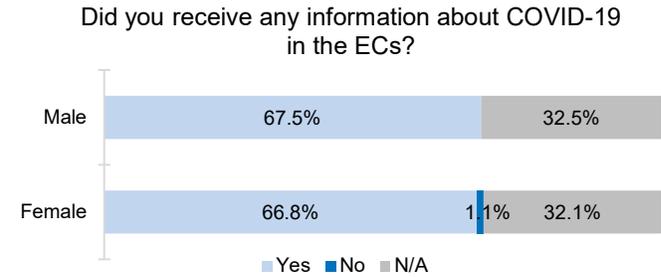
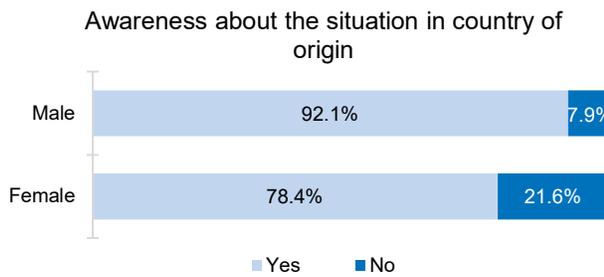
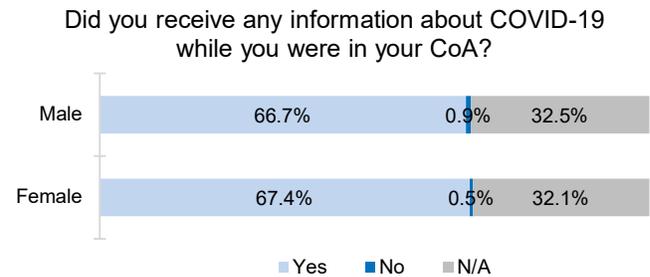
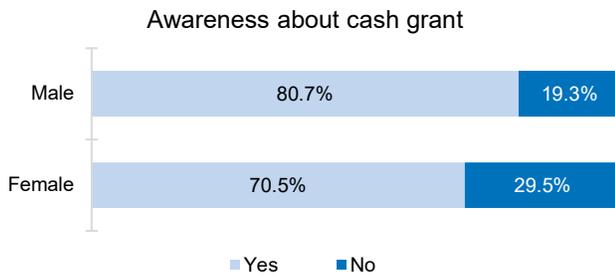
IN BRIEF

- 76% of Afghan refugee returnees interviewed at the ECs stated that they intend to return to their province of origin, while 24% stated that they would return to other provinces to reunify with their relatives, seek income opportunities and due to perceived insecurity.
- 81% of interviewed returnees from Pakistan and 72% from Iran returned after spending more than 10 years as a refugee.
- 16% of returnees from Pakistan and 28% from Iran were born in the country of asylum.
- 86% 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 (70%) stated that they received information from the Afghan communities in the country of asylum (CoA).



Following the resumption of return in August, UNHCR added two additional questions in its returnee monitoring tool aimed to map the level of returnees' awareness about COVID-19 in Pakistan and Iran as well as upon their arrival in the ECs in Afghanistan.

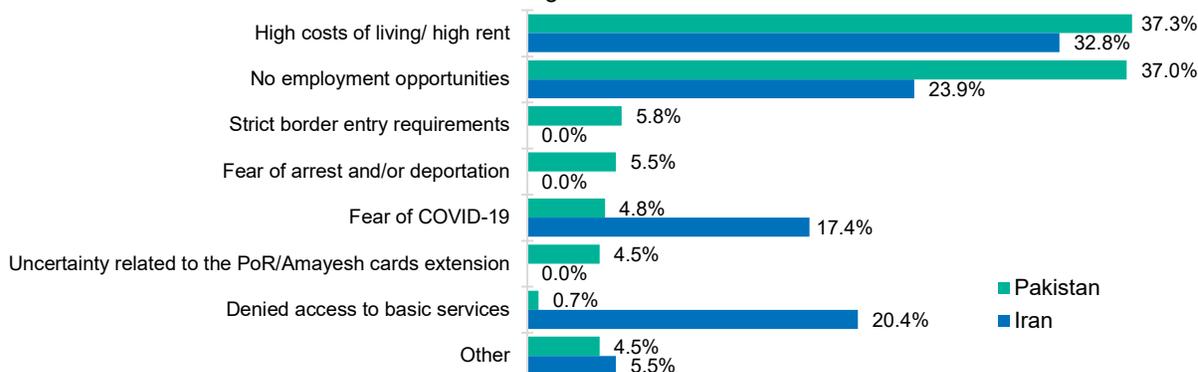
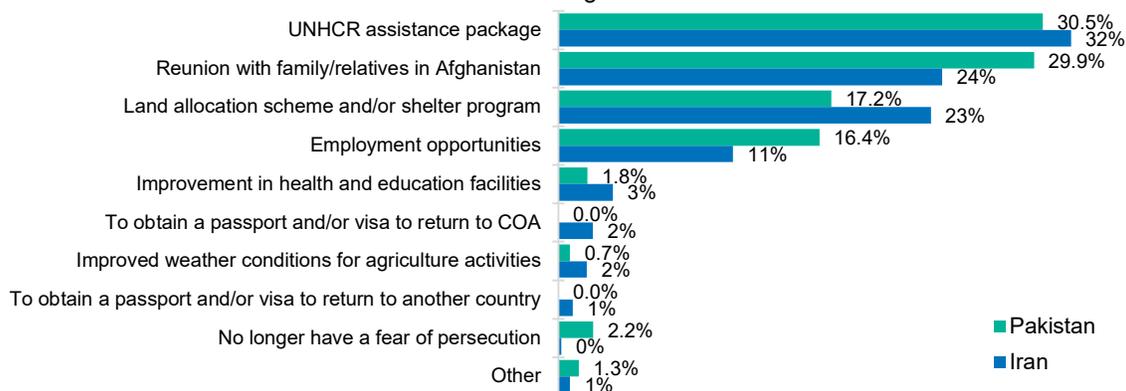
Note: N/A refers to returnees who returned before the COVID-19 outbreak.



Reasons for Return

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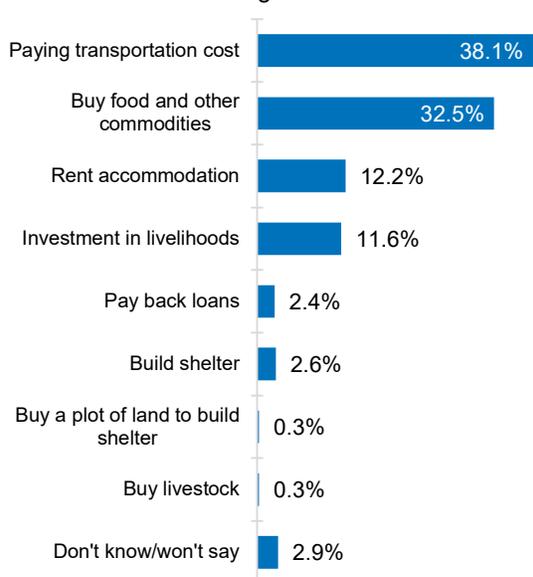
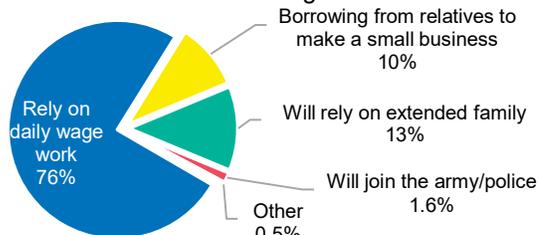
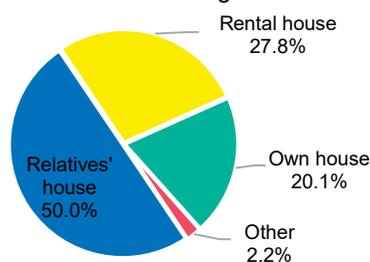
- Some **229** newly arrived refugee returnees from Iran, 183 from Pakistan and six from other countries were interviewed upon arrival at the four encashment centers as part of UNHCR's returnee monitoring in 2020.
- The main reasons for leaving Pakistan and Iran stated by interviewed returnees were high cost of living and lack of employment opportunities. Only four interviewed returnees reported that they or their relatives were arrested in Iran (3) and Pakistan (1) in 2020.

Reasons for Leaving Pakistan and Iran - 2020

Reasons for return to Afghanistan - 2020


Note: except the fear of COVID-19, the main reasons of return to Afghanistan (push and pull factors) in both 2020 and 2019 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

Accommodation arrangement after return


Satisfaction Survey and Skills/Education Mapping

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. It is 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 will provide information on skills/qualifications and education level of returnees' HoHs that will enable ECs/field offices to immediately provide 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: 546 (302 M and 244 F)

Education

- **33%** of the interviewed returnees stated that they have no education (**43% F and 24% M**)
- **17%** stated that they have minimal education (up to grade 6);
- **5%** up to grade 9;
- **6%** up to grade 12;
- **9%** went to madrasa; and
- **31%** went to university.

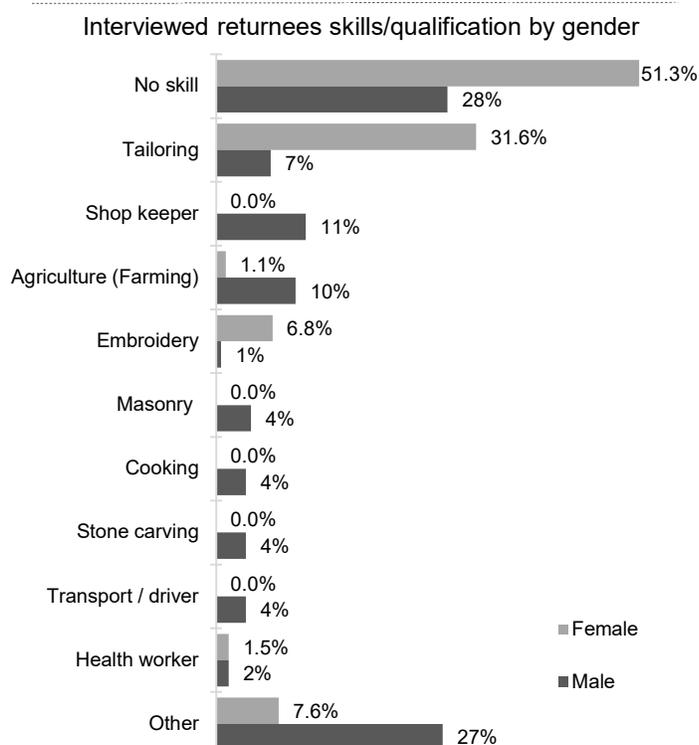
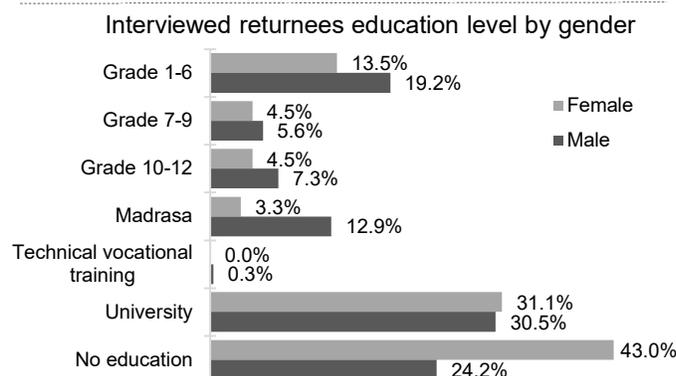
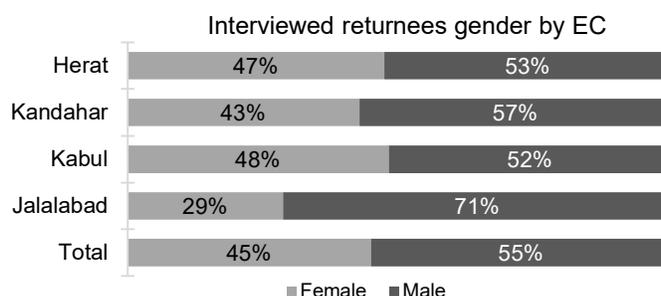
Skills

- **38%** stated that they have no skills (**51% F and 28% M**)
- Tailoring: 18%;
- Shopkeeper: 6%;
- Agriculture (farming): 6%;
- Embroidery: 3%;
- Masonry: 2%;
- Cooking: 2%;
- Stone carving: 2%;
- Transport/driver 2%;
- Health worker: 2%;
- Other skill: 13%;

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 from the services provided by UNHCR and other partners at all encashment centers.



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