

Pakistan Must End Campaign Targeting Afghan Refugees

Millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are at risk under a Pakistan government decree for Afghan nationals to repatriate to Afghanistan. Vulnerable Afghans face an unthinkable choice— stay in Pakistan with dwindling opportunities in an increasingly hostile environment, or return to Afghanistan, where they face persecution and other harm under the Taliban’s repressive rule.

This snapshot report covers the situation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the government of Pakistan’s policies of repatriation and deportation, and cross-border migration in recent weeks. It concludes with recommendations for Pakistan on protecting Afghans in its territory and for the United States on pathways to resettlement for Afghans.

Background: Afghan refugees in Pakistan

Through cycles of violence and instability in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979, [Afghans have sought refuge in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan](#)— with some [3.7 million Afghans](#) now residing in the country. Roughly 600,000 Afghans arrived in Pakistan from August 2021 to early 2023, according to [Pakistan government estimates shared with the UN Refugee Agency \(UNHCR\)](#).

[About 1.3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan](#) have [Proof of Registration](#) (PoR) cards to lawfully remain in Pakistan. Some undocumented Afghans have separately been issued Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs). “All other Afghans without PoR cards or an ACC have no status and, therefore, no legal protection from refoulement,” according to [Refugees International](#). Many of those who have arrived since the Taliban takeover in August 2021 have not held a formal status with the Pakistan government, meaning they have lived with mounting fears of deportation and dwindling savings and other resources.

Many newly arrived Afghans in Pakistan face likely persecution upon returning to Afghanistan due to their work in civil society or on behalf of the U.S. government, U.S. military, or international coalition during the war in Afghanistan that ended in 2021. Experts view those fears as well-founded given [the Taliban’s extensive patterns of retribution, abuse, and violence](#) toward members of the former Afghan central government and its armed forces.

Pakistan’s crackdown through the “Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan”

On September 26, 2023, Pakistan’s Ministry of Interior [internally issued](#) a plan for the “repatriation” of Afghan nationals beginning with the identification and deportation of unregistered Afghans. Pakistan then formally announced its “Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan” on October 3, 2023. The decree set a November 1, 2023, deadline for the “voluntary return” of all undocumented Afghans in Pakistan to their country of origin.

After [pressure from United Nations \(UN\) agencies](#) for Pakistan to continue protecting vulnerable Afghans, Pakistan [later announced](#) that Afghan refugees with documentation can only be repatriated voluntarily.

However, the decree immediately set off [fear and panic](#) among the millions of Afghans residing in Pakistan. Undocumented Afghans have lost jobs as employers demand documents— while schools teaching Afghan children have [reportedly](#) begun to close. Facing deportations and an increasingly hostile environment, Afghans have felt compelled to leave their homes and lives behind in Pakistan to make the trek to Afghanistan—many of them for the first time.

A 'chaotic and desperate' situation on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has [reported](#) a “significant increase” of Afghans moving through the Spin Boldak and Torkham border crossings between Pakistan and Afghanistan since September 15, 2023. In 2022 and most of 2023, these crossings saw a daily average of about 260 undocumented Afghans returning to Afghanistan.

In the lead up and aftermath to the November 1, 2023, deadline, however, these arrival rates have spiked well into the thousands. The Norwegian Refugee Council, the Danish Refugee Council, and the International Rescue Committee [reported](#) a new daily average of 9,000 to 10,000 Afghans returning to Afghanistan through these areas. Both undocumented Afghans and those with documents such as Afghan Citizen Cards or Proof of Registration cards are among the returnees.

In “chaotic and desperate scenes” at the border crossings, Afghan returnees are traveling for days to reach the border with few possessions and uncertain prospects in Afghanistan. The aid operations to serve them at the border are also stretched thin. “The recent surge of Afghans returning from Pakistan has overwhelmed our resources and the fragile infrastructure in Afghanistan,” said Norwegian Refugee Council’s Afghanistan country director in a [joint humanitarian statement](#).

Recommendations

As UN agencies [urged after the initial decree](#), Pakistan must continue its protection of all vulnerable Afghans who have sought refuge in the country and would be imminently at risk if they returned to Afghanistan.

In line with the principal of non-refoulement, Pakistan must halt repatriations and deportations of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan under its “Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan.” Pakistan’s broader [campaign of harassment and intimidation](#) must also come to an end.

Afghans in Pakistan need accessible, sustained pathways for third-country resettlement, including to the United States. The U.S. government must work with its partners in Islamabad to explore opportunities to increase processing of at-risk Afghans out of Pakistan, including the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program or the Special Immigrant Visa program for Afghans.

[Protection pathways for Afghans](#) to the United States have been insufficient for the protection needs and risks of Afghans in Pakistan. The crisis stemming from Pakistan's decree underscores the urgency of protection pathways to the United States and other countries.

Conclusion

In August 2021, UNHCR issued a [non-return advisory](#) to Afghanistan—calling on states to suspend forced returns of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan. “A moratorium on forced returns to Afghanistan would need to stay in place until the situation in the country has stabilized, pending an assessment of when the changed situation in the country would permit return in safety and dignity,” according to UNHCR.

Fundamentally, the situation has not stabilized and safe returns to Afghanistan remain not possible. [Country conditions](#) indeed remain dire within Afghanistan, including lingering armed conflict; widespread repression of women, girls, and minority populations; vast humanitarian needs; and high rates of food insecurity and internal displacement.

The Afghan refugee crisis remains one of the largest globally— one that is comparable to the vast Syrian, Ukrainian, and Venezuelan regional crises. Given Afghanistan's ongoing challenges, neighboring countries such as Pakistan and resettlement countries such as the United States must strive to meet this crisis with protections and compassion, not punishments and cruelty.