

Afghanistan: Child refugees at risk

Briefing from Save the Children ahead of the High-Level Meeting on the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) on 6 July 2020

Introduction

The escalating conflict in Afghanistan is taking a devastating toll on children, with almost all aspects of their lives impacted by the senseless violence around them. This is not least true for the millions of children who have been forced to flee their homes or have returned – whether forcibly or voluntarily - to Afghanistan since 2001. The following briefing from Save the Children highlights critical issues facing children on the move, in particular child returnees, and displaced children who have been affected by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Save the Children has worked in Afghanistan since 1976. We currently implement programmes in 16 of 34 provinces, either directly or through partners. In 2019, we reached more than four million individuals in Afghanistan, including over 900,000 children, through programmes in education, health, nutrition, food security, child rights and child protection.

Child returnees

Despite the conflict taking a rising and devastating toll on civilians - with 2019 representing the sixth consecutive year of more than 10,000 civilian casualties - the level of returns to Afghanistan (from mainly EU countries, Iran and Pakistan) have reached unprecedented levels in recent years.

In 2018, some 820,000 Afghans returned to the country from Pakistan and Iran, including both registered refugees and undocumented returnees, adding to some 610,000 who had returned the year before. In 2016, the Afghan Deputy Minister of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) estimated that one million Afghans had returned from neighboring Iran, Pakistan, and from Europe. The majority of returnees were children under the age of 18. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has further triggered large-scale returns of undocumented Afghans - since 1 January 2020, these include 337,871 individuals from Iran (247,082 spontaneous returnees and 90,789 deportees) and 1,871 from Pakistan (1,805 spontaneous returnees and 66 deportees).¹

Forcible returns of Afghans from EU countries have significantly risen in recent years as attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers have hardened. Just between 2015 and 2016, the number of returnees tripled from 3,290 to 9,460.²

The exact number of children returned from Europe to Afghanistan is unknown. In 2018, Save the Children published research based on interviews with 57 children who had been returned from EU

¹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/77302>

² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/afghanistan-refugees-forty-years/>

countries to Afghanistan.³ The results were disturbing and pointed to serious gaps in protection and reintegration of returning children:

- Nearly three-quarters of the children interviewed did not feel safe during the returns process.
- More than half reported instances of violence and coercion and nearly half arrived in Afghanistan alone or were escorted by police.
- On arrival, the children received little or no support, and only three had a specific reintegration plan.
- While 45 children had attended school in Europe, only 16 were attending school in Afghanistan.
- Ten children said attempts had been made to recruit them to commit violent acts, while many others spoke of discrimination, insecurity and sadness.

The research points to wider challenges facing returning children. While the decades-long conflict has impacted all children in Afghanistan, the struggles facing returnees are often compounded by the challenges of reintegrating and the serious psychological trauma of having been uprooted from their homes.

UNHCR is among key actors supporting returnees in Afghanistan, along with IOM and the Ministries of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) and Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). As far as Save the Children is aware, there is still an urgent need for the Government of Afghanistan to better adopt structures to support child returnees, and to strengthen support to returning children, which currently is fragmented and inconsistent.

Related to this, recent research by Save the Children has highlighted the hardships facing unaccompanied and separated migrant children in trying to reach Europe, the majority of whom come from Afghanistan.⁴ Refugee and migrant children are often forced to rely on “informal practices”, i.e. survival strategies that go beyond the domain of formalized relations. These are non-institutional, every-day actions needed in order to protect themselves from hazards and potential abuse and to meet their needs, organize border-crossing, find accommodation, transport, food, and relevant information.

Recommendations

- UNHCR and donor governments should work with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure that returnee children are included in all domestic policies addressing child protection. While separate policy frameworks for IDPs and returnees exist these fail to address specific concerns of children.

³ From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of child returnees, Save the Children, October 2018, available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route>

⁴ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16944/pdf/struggling_to_survive_uasc_travelling_the_western_balkans_route_0.pdf

- Support the strengthening of child protection at community-level. Community and family support are essential in reintegration processes in Afghanistan. Returned children may be stigmatised or perceived to have failed as they have not brought a 'return on investment' for those who paid to send them abroad.
- Coordinate with CSOs around existing activities to support returning children to ensure they can be integrated into existing support mechanisms as soon as possible.
- All countries receiving Afghan refugee and migrants must uphold the international legal principle of *non-refoulement*, an absolute ban on returning people to regions where they are at risk of persecution or other serious human rights violations.
- Children identified for return to Afghanistan must be accompanied by dedicated child protection professionals throughout the process.

Covid-19 and children on the move

Afghanistan is poorly prepared to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in large part due to the ongoing conflict, the weakness of its health system and a worsening economy exacerbating poverty. The country has only 0.3 doctors and 0.5 hospital beds per 1,000 people, and maternal mortality rates are amongst the highest in the world.⁵ The virus is already having a catastrophic impact on millions of vulnerable families. Preliminary World Bank estimates show that the pandemic and related containment measures are leading to massive disruptions to imports including vital household items, which in turn is leading to rapid inflation. Border closures have also meant a drastic reduction in exports and a sharp decline in remittances. The financial effects of the pandemic are also likely to mean that millions of children will face food shortages as costs of basic goods have risen alarmingly in recent months.⁶

While not directly affected by the health risks of the pandemic, children are extremely vulnerable to many of the secondary effects of COVID-19. Vulnerable children - including refugees and the internally displaced - are at particular risk from the effects of the virus. Some 8.12 million children – or 4 in 10 – will need some form of emergency assistance in 2020.⁷

The crisis is also heightening protection concerns for children, with increased risk of domestic violence as families become isolated while financial pressures increase. The financial effects on displaced families usually dependent on daily labor, coupled with internal movement restrictions, are likely to be significant. Evidence from past emergencies in Afghanistan show that families are likely to turn to negative coping mechanisms, including rises in child marriage as daughters are married off early to cover debts, or increase in child labour.⁸

⁵ https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ADSP_Covid_Note_Final.pdf

⁶ <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-more-seven-million-children-afghanistan-risk-hunger-food-prices-soar-due-lockdown>

⁷ <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-additional-three-million-children-afghanistan-need-help-survive-2020-warns-save>

⁸ https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ADSP_Covid_Note_Final.pdf

Education has been affected on an unprecedented scale during the pandemic, and 10 million children in Afghanistan alone have been affected by school closures. Even before the pandemic, and estimated 3.7 million children - 60% of whom are girls - were out of school even before the virus in Afghanistan. The school closures - couple with the negative coping mechanisms mentioned above - raise the prospect of children, in particular girls, not returning to school after the pandemic.

Recommendations

- The Government should take immediate steps to extend child-sensitive social welfare support and protection schemes to refugee, internally displaced and migrant children, targeting at risk households facing temporary loss of income. The Government should also ensure that adequate referral mechanisms to specialist child protection actors are in place.
- National education authorities must work together to ensure that measures are in place to mitigate the impact of school closures on migrant, refugee and displaced populations and ensure continuity of education using innovative new methods and technologies where possible
- Refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people – in particular children and youth - should be included in all government-led responses to ensure the continuity of education during the pandemic. This should recognise that refugee and host communities may have limited access to technology, and connectivity can be prohibitively expensive.
- The Government, donor countries and aid actors must take into account the dramatic economic effects of the crisis on many refugees and migrants. They should provide financial support, for instance through cash-based-interventions, to compensate for the loss of livelihood.

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