

High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Development Cooperation REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON THE AFGHANISTAN SITUATION 17 November 2022

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

Overview

Afghanistan is confronted with a serious humanitarian situation and compounding development challenges, with significant potential for impacting neighbouring countries and beyond. The country is facing a dire economic crisis, high levels of poverty, drought conditions, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; these collectively risk reversing decades of development gains. While life-saving humanitarian aid is urgently needed, humanitarian assistance alone is insufficient to address the situation faced by millions of Afghans.

At the same time, sustained development support to neighbouring countries which have generously hosted millions of Afghans for over four decades is becoming ever more important to maintain continued protection space in the region. Even prior to the events of August 2021, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan had been hosting 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees and 4 million other Afghans for decades—all while maintaining inclusive health and education policies. Presently there are some 7 million Afghans residing in Iran and Pakistan, including over 1 million recently arrived Afghans. Development assistance will be essential for neighbouring countries – especially the two principal host countries – to ensure continued inclusive access to services for all, to complement humanitarian assistance, and to respond to the realities of the protracted crises.

Regional Roundtable

In preparation for the 2022 High Commissioner's Dialogue to be held on 7-8 December 2022, UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific convened a Regional Roundtable on 17 November. The Roundtable explored what the role of development cooperation in Afghanistan and surrounding countries can and cannot mean given current circumstances and with regard to comprehensive approaches to solutions, including:

- (i) conditions for sustainable return for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs),
- (ii) local solutions,
- (iii) resettlement, and,
- (iv) complementary pathways.

The Regional Roundtable was thematically split, with the initial segment focusing on the situation inside Afghanistan, and the second segment on the situation in neighbouring refugee-hosting countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran.

The Roundtable was attended by a total of 21 participants:

- three representatives from host governments;
- five representatives from bilateral donors;
- four representatives of international financial institutions;
- three representatives from other United Nations entities;
- three representatives of non-governmental and refugee-led organisations; and
- three refugee/ returnee participants based respectively in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

Key reflections which emerged during the discussion are summarised on the following page.



Key Reflections¹

On the limitations of humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan

- While humanitarian aid is absolutely critical to assist the people of Afghanistan, humanitarian assistance alone is inadequate to respond to the significant challenges in the country, as evidenced by the fact that the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan has risen from 20 to 28 million over the past year. To address underlying root causes and long-term needs in a sustainable manner, the Afghan economy would need to be rebooted, employment opportunities created, and international investment attracted.

On the dilemma of donors vis-à-vis Afghanistan

- While the needs of the people of Afghanistan are well-known in the donor community and Member States have endorsed United Nations Security Council Resolution 2615, which provides the basis for the provision of humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan, the political situation makes it difficult for many donors to invest in long-term solutions in Afghanistan. Some policies of the *de facto* authorities and the overall human rights situation in the country prevent many donors from going beyond the provision of short-term humanitarian assistance. Many traditional donors nevertheless continue to engage in discussions with relevant stakeholders and regularly evaluate investment strategies.

On the cost of not doing enough for Afghanistan and neighbouring countries

- The humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan is deteriorating, and could, in the medium term, create conditions contributing to further destabilisation, including increased violence and renewed armed conflict, insecurity, and spread of terrorism, human trafficking, drug production and organ trade. The negative impacts could result in further displacement within Afghanistan, into neighbouring countries and refugee flows beyond the region.

On the possible future of assistance to Afghanistan

- There is a shared recognition that a focus on the needs of refugees, IDPs, and returnees provides a framework to grapple with the issues and dilemmas of working in Afghanistan. The most compelling argument in relation to investment in Afghanistan is to continue providing assistance to Afghans directly through a bottom-up, community-centric and area-based approach. Evidence indicates that this approach of providing assistance has a direct impact on communities and the lives of individual Afghans, mitigating the potential negative impact a continued destabilisation of Afghanistan could have far beyond the region. The success of this engagement will depend on the political climate, which is currently not very conducive to investments in development cooperation.

On the importance of evidence-based interventions

- A politically sensitive context such as Afghanistan exemplifies the importance of evidence-based programming in Afghanistan and the wider region.
- Bringing together the unique expertise and comparative advantages of the World Bank and UNHCR respectively, the two entities during the Regional Roundtable launched the joint UNHCR/World Bank Strategic Analysis Hub for the Afghanistan Situation to develop analysis on the challenges and opportunities presented by forced displacement in Afghanistan and the broader region, ultimately aiming to inform durable solutions to forced displacement in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

On the importance of burden sharing with neighbouring countries

- Given the challenging economic situation of the main host countries, the socio-economic shocks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the inclusive policies for refugees in education and health systems in Iran and Pakistan, support of the international community to refugee-hosting areas as a tangible expression of responsibility-sharing is more crucial than ever. Cross-border connectivity and border bazaars could be important areas to explore in this context.

¹ Key points are arranged thematically. While they aim to capture the overall spirit of the discussion, they may not always capture the views of all participants.