

28 April, 2003

UNHCR statement in response to first forcible returns of afghans by the UK Government.

UNHCR accepts that those who are not in need of international protection should return. UNHCR recognises that governments have the power to take a range of measures to effect returns, including forcible return, however UNHCR is not a party to this process.

There are groups of afghans who remain in need of international protection. In this particular instance, UNHCR has been assured that the people who are subject to removal have availed themselves of the asylum procedure and have been found not to be in need of international protection.

UNHCR believes that afghans should, wherever possible, return voluntarily on the basis of a fully informed decision on the situation that they are returning to. UNHCR has found that voluntary return is the best way to achieve long term and sustainable solutions to refugee situations.

As a partner in the UK voluntary repatriation scheme, UNHCR is facilitating return through the provision of independent information on the situation in Afghanistan, and the verification that those individuals who are returning as part of the Voluntary return programme have received all relevant information on which to base their decision.

Security is still a concern in Afghanistan. However last year more than 2 million people chose to return of their own accord, and UNHCR hopes that conditions will allow many, of the more than 3m afghans living outside the country mostly in Pakistan and Iran, to be able to return. UNHCR is calling for the afghan authorities, and the international community, to take measures to strengthen security in the country, particularly in rural areas, as this will be a precondition for widespread return.

We understand that at present the UK is returning people only to the Kabul region where the security situation is relatively stable.

In October 2002, the UK Government, Afghan authority and UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement on returns to Afghanistan. Under this agreement, voluntary return is preferred solution and UNHCR agreed to act as partner in facilitating this. Under this partnership UNHCR is undertaking a number of tasks including:

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- the provision of impartial information on the situation in Afghanistan, gathered by UNHCR staff in country, and disseminating this to afghans and afghan community groups in the UK;
- ensuring that any afghans in the UK who have protection needs have those needs recognised;
- providing special attention to the needs of children and other vulnerable cases;
- verifying that any afghans returning under the voluntary repatriation scheme have had full access to all relevant information and that their decision is genuinely informed and voluntary;
- assistance and monitoring of returnees to Afghanistan by local UNHCR staff.

ENDS

For more information, or interviews, please contact:

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