



Committee: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Committee Topic: Protecting refugees trying to flee Afghanistan

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MUN BACKGROUND PAPER – UNHCR AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

1. COMMITTEE BACKGROUND

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1950, during the aftermath of the Second World War, to help millions of Europeans who had fled or lost their homes.

In 1954, UNHCR won the Nobel Peace Prize for its groundbreaking work in Europe. During the 1960s, the decolonization of Africa produced the first of that continent's numerous refugee crises. The organization also helped uprooted people in Asia and Latin America over the following two decades. In 1981, UNHCR received a second Nobel Peace Prize for what had become worldwide assistance to refugees.

The start of the 21st century has seen UNHCR help with major refugee crises in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. UNHCR use their expertise to help many internally displaced by conflict and expanded our role in helping stateless people.

2. HISTORY OF THE TOPIC

After years of political turmoil, human rights abuses and violations, foreign invasion and civil war, Afghanistan is holding onto a last strand. Today, nearly 6 million Afghans have been driven out of their homes and their country by conflict, violence and poverty.

Afghanistan has been spotlighted since 1978, when conflict took place between Islamic Anti-Communist forces and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (financed by the Soviet Union). The conflict that would only see an end in 1992 with the overthrow of the communist government after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and satellite countries. Not long after, Afghanistan returned to the spotlight in 1999 when the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1267, creating the so-called Al Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee, which linked the two groups as terrorist entities and imposed sanctions on their funding, travel, and arms shipments (these two groups had been operating in Afghanistan since the 1980s). With tension rising in Afghanistan, the assassination of the anti-Taliban leader Ahmad Shah Massoud only worsened things, being seen as a potential curtain raiser for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

With the events of the 9/11 shocking the foundations of the global order, Afghanistan was targeted as a major threat for the United States of America and the rest of the world. President George W. Bush immediately took aggressive measures demanding the responsibility to be surrendered to the American government. On September 18, 2001, President Bush signed a resolution that would serve as legal rationale for its decision to take sweeping measures to combat terrorism, such as invading Afghanistan and initiating a long period of conflict in Afghan territory between American forces and the Taliban.

With unrelenting and abrupt ups and downs, such as the apparent political progress in the Afghan elections of 2005 that had accounted nearly half of the voting ballots as belonging to women voters contrasted by a bloody resurgence in 2006 composed of the immense increase in suicide attacks and remote bomb detonations, conflict in Afghanistan is not near an end.

3. PRESENT SITUATION

Recently, with Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American forces from Afghanistan after almost two decades of American occupation, and with the conquest of Afghanistan by the Taliban, the refugee crisis is perhaps experiencing its darkest hour. The current crisis comes on top of the 2.2 million Afghan refugees already in neighbouring countries and 3.5 million people forced to flee their homes within Afghanistan's borders.

During the evacuation, a military plane would depart Kabul every 39 minutes. In a hectic state, the Afghan population and U.S. military experienced days of chaos. But still after the last American soldier left Afghanistan, the crisis continued. Within the country, Taliban oppression is perpetuated. Women and girls suffer from constant discrimination and inhumane treatment. Journalists and anti-Taliban soldiers are being persecuted and murdered.

UNHCR and partners are assisting newly displaced Afghans with emergency shelter, food, health, water and sanitation support and cash assistance, despite challenges in accessing vulnerable groups.

4. CURRENT ISSUES

AFGHANISTAN: Prior to the September 11 events, Afghanistan already had up to one million internally displaced people due to civil war and drought. Since September 11, U.N. agencies and the majority of international NGOs have pulled out of the country due to security concerns, leaving local staff to distribute dwindling supplies to the Afghan people, millions of whom have no means of support. With the recently implanted Taliban government, the population suffers from utter oppression and has no escape. Displaced and starving, Afghans face what might be the worst era in Afghan history.

PAKISTAN: currently host to more than two million Afghan refugees. Despite having officially closed its borders with Afghanistan, which are 1,560 miles long and difficult to control, relief agencies operating in Pakistan have reported that tens of thousands of Afghan refugees have entered Pakistan since September 11. Before the October 7 military strikes, approximately 15,000 refugees had reached the Chanam border crossing near Quetta in Balochistan province; attempts to prevent thousands more Afghans from crossing led to clashes between border guards and refugees. Amid growing concern over the

deteriorating humanitarian and security conditions of the refugees trapped at the Chanam border crossing, UNHCR sought to persuade the Pakistan authorities to allow the refugees to enter. The refugee agency reported on October 1, however, that thousands of the refugees had left the border area, apparently retreating back into Afghanistan in search of other routes into Pakistan. The Taliban are reported to have established checkpoints along routes to Pakistan to prevent those without passports and visas from leaving the country.

IRAN: since the September 11 attacks and the threat of U.S. and allied military action in Afghanistan, Iran has resolutely maintained that its 560 mile border with Afghanistan will remain closed to any influx of refugees. The government has indicated that it is willing to provide humanitarian assistance only inside Afghanistan with the consent of the Taliban. To this end, Iran has proposed establishing refugee camps inside Afghanistan immediately across the border from Iran. These camps will be designed to hold a maximum of 200,000 refugees between them. Iranian newspapers have reported that the Iranian interior ministry called upon national relief organisations to provide emergency aid, although prior to the October 7 military strikes, relief workers reported that few Afghan refugees had reached the Iranian

border. According to UNHCR, the Iranian Red Crescent moved tons of relief items to the border in preparation for possible new arrivals. So far, Iran has not responded to calls from UNHCR or international NGOs to officially reopen its borders, although reportedly small numbers of refugees are managing to cross.

TAJIKISTAN: its frontier with Afghanistan has been closed since September 2000. The Tajikistan government, unable to adequately defend the border itself has been relying on thousands of Russian Federal border guards to patrol the frontier. There are currently over 10,000 internally displaced Afghans on small islands in the Pyanj River, which divides the two countries, waiting for an opportunity to cross into Tajikistan. Some of these receive assistance from aid agencies. UNHCR has estimated that as many as 120,000 Afghans in neighbouring provinces close to the border may also leave their homes should the current crisis escalate.

CHINA, TURKMENISTAN, AND UZBEKISTAN: all three countries have closed their borders with Afghanistan. China's relatively narrow border with Afghanistan is the least accessible route out of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's government reinforced its frontier, citing concerns about Islamic militancy. Turkmenistan's foreign minister has said he is willing to cooperate with UNHCR, but it is

not clear whether Turkmenistan would reopen its border if faced with an influx of refugees.

UNITED KINGDOM: the UK has said it will take in 5,000 Afghans in 2021 as part of a scheme to resettle 20,000 over the next few years, focusing on those at greatest risk from the Taliban. However, racist attacks against Afghans and other Muslims living in the U.K. have increased dramatically since September 11. Such attacks have included damage to property and bomb threats against mosques, physical and verbal abuse of Muslim women wearing headscarves, and gang assaults targeting Arab and South Asian men. Hence, social conflict in the country is very intense.

TURKEY: the Turkish government has urged European countries to take responsibility for any new migrant crisis, saying Turkey would not be "Europe's migrant storage unit". The country has stepped up construction of a border wall with Iran to thwart those entering illegally.

5. UN ACTION

In 2022, the UN launched a more than \$5 billion funding appeal for Afghanistan, in the hope of shoring up collapsing basic services there, which have left 22 million in need of assistance inside the country, and 5.7 million people requiring help beyond its borders.

Speaking in Geneva, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said that \$4.4 billion was needed for the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan alone, “to pay direct” to health workers and others, not the de facto authorities.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi called for \$623 million, to support refugees and host communities in five neighbouring countries, for the Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan.

6. ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How will refugees be allocated in other countries, since a return to their home country is impractical at this stage of the crisis?
- What should be done in relation to the current oppression of social minorities by the Taliban within Afghan territory?
- How to provide aid to those still in the country without risking their safety and without putting UN officials and volunteers in danger?
- What will be done to ensure the safety of persecuted ex-Afghan Military soldiers, journalists and any resistor whose information has been leaked to the Taliban?

7.RESOURCES:

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