

AFGHANISTAN

Cross-border return to internal displacement

SPOT
LIGHT

Continuous armed conflict, insecurity, human rights violations and recurrent disasters mean that flight and mobility have become a familiar coping strategy for many Afghans for almost four decades. Large numbers of people have experienced some form of displacement in their lives.

There are currently around 1.6 million IDPs in the country and their number continues to grow, primarily as a result of conflict. There are also millions of registered and undocumented Afghan refugees living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, and a significant number who have sought international protection elsewhere, mainly in Europe and Australia. Overall, Afghanistan continues to be the second largest source country for refugees, behind Syria.²⁴¹

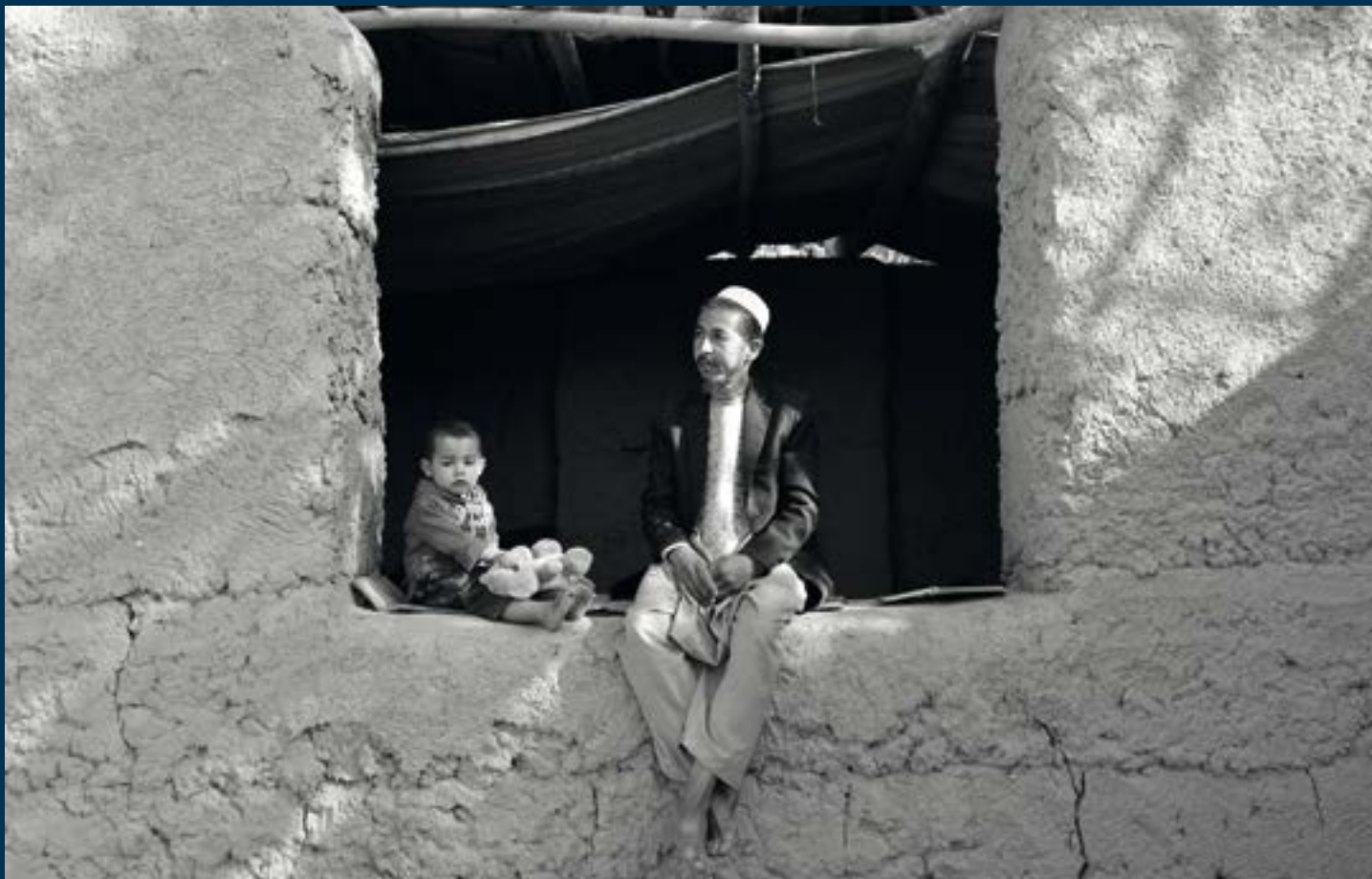
Many Afghans have been displaced more than once, whether within their own country or by

becoming refugees and then returning to find they are unable to resettle sustainably at home. The reasons for their plight are manifold, but those most commonly cited are the struggle to find a place to live, a lack of livelihood opportunities and pervasive insecurity.

Their inability to re-establish their lives in their places of origin has led many to undertake dangerous journeys further afield. More than half of those who entered Europe via Greece in the first three months of 2016 said they had initially been displaced internally, and another quarter were first or second generation refugees who had never lived in Afghanistan.²⁴²

More recently, however, Afghans' migration options have narrowed considerably. The adoption of restrictive border control measures and deterrence policies in 2016 means that Europe

An internally displaced man, having returned from Pakistan three years ago, works on full-day duty in a government school as a watchman and earns \$70 dollars per month. Photo: NRC/ Enayatullah Azad, October 2016



is no longer seen as a viable option for those seeking protection abroad. Asylum acceptance rates have also dropped sharply and an EU declaration signed in October 2016 has paved the way for at least 80,000 Afghans who have had their applications rejected to be returned.²⁴³

A major campaign has also been underway in Pakistan to push Afghan refugees back home. More than 600,000 registered and undocumented returnees arrived in eastern Afghanistan between July and December 2016. Asylum space in Pakistan and Iran has been shrinking for some time, and new refugee registration exercises have not been conducted in either country since 2007.²⁴⁴

These large-scale returns, whether forced, spontaneous or assisted, have prompted UN agencies and NGOs to warn that significant secondary displacement is likely, and the humanitarian country team for Afghanistan has said this will create considerable needs.²⁴⁵ Undocumented and involuntary returnees are at particular risk, because they tend not to be monitored or assisted, but rather fall off humanitarian agencies' radar soon after returning. As such they are far less likely to reintegrate into their communities.²⁴⁶

Afghanistan's national policy on IDPs is clear that returnees, including those coming back from outside the country, should be counted as internally displaced unless they are able to settle sustainably in their places of origin.²⁴⁷ So far, however, there has been no concerted effort to assess the impact of large scale returns on the number of IDPs in the country, nor has it been possible to record the true extent of secondary displacement more generally.

There has also been a sharp increase in the number of IDPs in Afghanistan in recent years. Every province currently either produces or is hosting IDPs, and the country is already struggling to respond to their protection and assistance needs.²⁴⁸ Addressing those of the huge influx of returning refugees in the east of the country and a predicted surge in 2017 in the number of refused asylum seekers coming back from Europe will be a major challenge.