In early 2002 it was estimated that nearly one-third of the Afghan population was either internally or externally displaced. According to Government figures there were approximately 3.3 million refugees in Pakistan, 2.3 million in Iran and more than 500,000 elsewhere. A further one million were classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Between March and November 2002, nearly 1.8 million Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran under the assisted repatriation programme organized by the UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) exceeding all return projections. This makes it the largest repatriation operation since 1972 and exceeds the 800,000 return estimate for 2002 by one million. In addition, during 2002, more than 200,000 IDPs received assistance to return home and a similar number went home on their own. Renewed displacements, however, occurred in some parts of the country.

The speed and volume of this mass movement presented a considerable challenge. Some 65 per cent of the refugees have returned to the Provinces of Kabul and Nangahar. These and other returns have seriously strained the already minimal provision of basic social services, especially health and education. Moreover, the flood is far from drying up – it is estimated that a further 1.2 million Afghans will return from abroad in 2003, while some 300,000 IDPs will also go home.

Progress so far…
The assistance to refugees returning from neighbouring countries and IDPs has been spearheaded by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation and supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with the assistance from the International Organization of Migration (IOM); United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); the World Food Programme (WFP); the World Health Organization (WHO) and a number of national and international NGOs. Some of the results of their work include:

- Signing of Tripartite repatriation agreements by the Afghan government and UNHCR with the governments of Iran, France and the UK, with an agreement in principle reached with Pakistan;
- Provision of over 48,000 tonnes of food aid, 310,000 return ‘packages’ and over US$35 million in travel grants to returning families through distribution and encashment centres;
- Completed construction of more than 40,000 shelters in areas of return by the end of 2002;
- 2,700 shallow and deep wells are under construction in areas of return;
- A variety of cash-for-work initiatives are under way, including restoration of roads, schools and irrigation systems, and production of quilts for vulnerable families during winter;
- Procurement and distribution of 84,000 sets of agricultural tools as well as the distribution of wheat seeds to 27,000 families;
- A new legal framework to protect the rights of returnees has been negotiated and is being implemented.
- Establishment of a monitoring network to ensure protection of returnee rights;
- A Return Commission, including representatives of local leaders, the Afghan government and UN bodies, has been established in northern Afghanistan to pursue solutions to continued forced internal displacement.
- Establishment of a referral network for returnees with special needs and of the Reintegration Unit at the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.
- Rehabilitation of some 210 schools in areas of high return; more than 160 schools provided with water and sanitation facilities; and 1,250 tents or temporary learning facilities made available for children in areas of high displacement;
Support to the Ministry of Education to provide catch up classes to 75,000 children who were away from the Afghan education system for several years and training courses for at least 5,000 teachers returning to Afghanistan;

National advocacy campaign to support the reintegration of displaced children and teachers.

Plans for 2003...

Afghan government departments and the UN worked closely on A National Return, Displacement and Reintegration Strategy for the Year 1382 (2003), based on the priorities established in the draft National Development Budget. Like 2002, the MoRR will lead the activities in this sector, which will focus on four major areas:

Return: The Afghan Administration and international agencies intend to facilitate the return of an estimated 1.2 million refugees and 300,000 IDPs. International legal frameworks governing refugee returns will be finalized with the Government of Pakistan, and renewed with the Governments of Iran and other countries of asylum. As in 2002, returnees will be provided with transport assistance, an initial food package and non-food items by UNHCR, IOM and WFP.

Reintegration: The Afghan Government with the assistance of various UN agencies will also spearhead intensive reintegration efforts; UNHCR will continue to support the Returnee Reintegration Unit at the Ministry Rural Rehabilitation Development (MRRD); WFP will develop food-for-work initiatives; UNICEF will work on safe water supply and education; FAO on crop production, and UNOPS (UN Office for Project Services) on road repairs. Shelter, water, education, health, community services and cash-for-work initiatives, although nationwide priorities, will feature prominently in reintegration assistance in regions with significant refugee/IDP returns. It is expected that shelter assistance will be provided for approximately 75,000 returnee families while 4,000 wells will be dug in communities with returnee populations. Specific attention also will be paid to vulnerable groups, including female heads-of-households, the elderly and the disabled.

Protection of Returnee Rights: Comprehensive monitoring of the return of displaced people and their initial reintegration will be conducted by the Government, with key support from UNHCR’s network of field offices. UNHCR will also work to develop mechanisms to enhance the capacity of government and other national institutions to reinforce the rule of law. The work of the Return Commission will continue to be supported.

Government Capacity: To meet the demands of the return and rehabilitation process, it will be imperative to continue to support the capacity development of the government in key areas of policy-making and operations management. Attention will focus on the three ministries dealing with refugee issues: MoRR, MRRD and MoUDH (Ministry of Urban Development and Housing). Activities will include training and mentoring in all phases of project management, gender analysis, and principles of refugee protection. By the end of 2003, it is expected that a substantial amount of policy and operational responsibility will have been transferred by international agencies to Afghan government departments.

At the same time, UNHCR and other agencies will continue to provide protection and assistance to Afghans inside and outside the country. Particular focus will be placed on the renewed displacements to and within the South of Afghanistan. Most of these IDPs have been displaced due to the ongoing drought while others have moved there from the north due to ethnic tensions. They will be provided, to the extent possible, with basic protection and assistance.

In Pakistan, refugees in camps created after 11th September 2001 will continue to receive assistance, including food, education and healthcare. Some refugees in urban areas and older camps will, however, have access to community-based services such as education and health - similar help will be provided in Iran. In both countries UNHCR will continue to work towards durable solutions for remaining refugees, addressing issues of long-term residence, work and access to local services, as well as resettlement. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan a basic level of assistance will be provided to remaining Afghan refugees.

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