

PUBLIC

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21 December 2000

Further information on UA 350/00 (ASA 33/16/00, 14 November 2000) - Forcible return of refugees

PAKISTAN/TAJIKISTAN/IRAN Refugees from Afghanistan

Increasing numbers of displaced Afghans fleeing the fighting in northern Afghanistan are being prevented from seeking safety in Tajikistan and Pakistan. Afghan refugees in Iran are facing an uncertain future.

The UNHCR have asked the Tajik government to allow Afghan refugees to formally enter the country, but have received no response. Some 10,000 Afghans are now living along the Panj River which marks the border with Tajikistan, and more are joining them every day. They are reported to lack adequate shelter, food, and drinking water. Some have been wounded by sporadic shelling during the fighting between Taleban and anti-Taleban forces along one stretch of the river. Aid workers have only limited access to the area, because it is so dangerous.

Some governments outside the region have offered limited funds to pay for aid to the Afghans on the border. According to the UNHCR, additional supplies and assistance will be needed urgently in Tajikistan, if the displaced Afghans are allowed to enter the country. The international community is obliged to aid states hosting large numbers of refugees, as well as international agencies such as the UNHCR.

The Pakistani border remains closed to refugees who have not previously registered as refugees in Pakistan. Afghans who have been granted refugee status in Pakistan often travel back and forth across the border. Afghans who can provide documentation of their previous refugee status or authorization from the Taleban authorities seem to be able to enter Pakistan as "new arrivals." Since September, more than 47,000 Afghans have been allowed to cross into Pakistan, and the UNHCR has settled many of these new arrivals in the New Shamshatoo refugee site and other camps in North West Frontier Province. However, some refugees, particularly those from non-Pashton ethnic communities, have been refused entry by Pakistani border guards. Thousands of Afghans have reportedly begun a vigil on the border, pleading with Pakistan to open its gates.

Since April 2000 the UNHCR and the Iranian government have been running a joint programme under which refugees return voluntarily to Afghanistan. More than 130,000 refugees have so far returned under the programme, which screens refugees to ensure that they are returning voluntarily, and assists them to appeal for legal permits to stay in Iran if they feel they cannot return in safety. The joint programme is scheduled to end on 31 December, after which the refugees may no longer enjoy this protection.

Repatriation convoys have recently been suspended, as UNHCR international staff have been withdrawn from Afghanistan in anticipation of possible new Security Council sanctions. However, refugees are still returning to Afghanistan independently of the joint UNHCR programme. Over 44,000 are reported to have returned in this way since April, including over 2,900 from 10 to 16 December alone. *Médicins Sans Frontières*, which has been providing medical services for the returnees, withdrew from the programme earlier this month, saying there was not sufficient monitoring and protection of refugees returning to Afghanistan.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/ airmail letters in English or your own language:

- urging the governments of Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan to uphold their responsibilities under international law not to turn back or forcibly return refugees to Afghanistan, where they would be at risk of serious human rights abuses;
- urging these governments not to close their borders to Afghan refugees, whom they are obliged to admit under international law.

APPEALS TO:

A. SATTAR

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Constitution Avenue

Islamabad

PAKISTAN

Telegram: **Foreign Minister, Islamabad, Pakistan****Fax:** + 92 51 9207217 (This number may be difficult to reach, and may take several attempts)**Salutation:** **Dear Minister**

Imamali Sharipovich RAKHMONOV

President of the Republic of Tajikistan

Respublika Tajikistan

g. Dushanbe

pr. Rudaki 80

Apparat Prezidenta Respubliki Tajikistan

Prezidentu RAKHMONOVU I.Sh.

TAJIKISTAN

Fax: + 992 372 21 25 20 (This number may be difficult to reach, and may take several attempts)**Salutation:** **Dear President Rakhmonov**

Col. Gen. Konstantin TOTSKIY

Director of the Federal Border Guard Service of the Russian Federation

Rossiyskaya Federatsiya

101000 g. Moskva

ul. Lubianka, 3

Federalnaya pogrannichnaya sluzhaba Rossiyskoy Federatsii

Direktoru TOTSKOMU K.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Salutation: **Dear Colonel General**

His Excellency

Hojjatoleslam Abdolvahed Musavi-Lari

Minister of the Interior

Ministry of the Interior

Dr. Fatemi Avenue

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Telegrams: **Interior Minister, Tehran, Iran****Salutation:** **Dear Minister****COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of Pakistan, Tajikistan and Iran accredited to your country.**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 January 2001.