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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject: The current migratory situation in Afghanistan
- Presidency paper

Following the takeover in 2021, the Taliban *de facto* authorities announced that they intend to govern through "a powerful Islamic government" based on their radically conservative interpretation of the Sharia religious law and of Islamic principles and tradition. In result, since 2021, the economic, humanitarian and human rights situation has steadily deteriorated, and there are many signs that Afghanistan is evolving into a theocratic police state. As of September 2024, no state has recognised the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or its *de facto* government, but some diplomatic missions remained or have re-established a presence in Kabul, and a number of countries have accredited Taliban-appointed ambassadors to Afghan embassies.

Economic difficulties

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was already a fragile country, facing a series of economic and humanitarian crises, but the situation has worsened since 2021. The lack of a vibrant private sector and the departure of international actors (including development actors), combined with weak economic governance and instability due to decades of armed conflict, are preventing the country's economy from developing. The lack of expertise and inability to attract investments by the non-recognised Taliban *de facto* authorities governing in Kabul have paralysed Afghanistan's already unstable and very fragile economy, leading to the collapse of the banking system and public services, including the health system which remains heavily subsidized by foreign donors. Livelihood opportunities of the Afghan population in both the countryside and urban areas have become limited. Following a number of very restrictive bans announced in 2022 and 2023, women and girls are being excluded from education beyond grade 6, their mobility has been largely curtailed as well as their access to public spaces and certain employment sectors (e.g., the UN and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)). Clearly all these restrictions on women and girls' empowerment further deepen the already severe economic situation.

The current situation of the population and humanitarian challenges

The UN estimates that in January 2022, around 24.4 million people were in need of humanitarian aid, rising to 28.3 million in 2023. Currently, more than 50% of the Afghan population is in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, 79% lack access to safe water and only 39% of the population has electricity. In contrast to the dramatic increase in the needs of the population, the delivery of aid has become increasingly difficult and complex following the Taliban takeover, leading to a reduction in the level of assistance. According to World Bank statistics for 2023, 48.3% of the Afghan population lived below the poverty threshold, while monetary poverty affected 70% of the population. Since 2021, the number of children under five years of age admitted to health facilities due to severe acute malnutrition has increased significantly. In this situation of deprivation, many are forced to reduce the quantity and quality of food or to beg, but it is not uncommon for families to resort to girls being early married, or to child labour, or in extreme cases, organ trafficking.

Although food security and nutrition statistics have improved compared to 2022 and 2023, it is unclear whether this is sustainable with the reduction in WFP food aid and the worsening of overall health indicators (due to difficulties in maintaining an adequate health system). Due to the funding crisis in general and the current political environment, the capacity of humanitarian actors to continue their commitment to meet humanitarian needs and stabilise public services (health, water, electricity, etc.) has been reduced.

Migration impact

For the reasons explained above, Afghan nationals represent one of the largest displaced populations worldwide. According to IOM 3.42 million Afghans have left the country since August 2021 whereas the returns have increased, with 2.81 million people returning to the country. Of those who migrated, 84% moved to neighbouring countries, predominantly Iran and Pakistan, and almost 250,000 heading to Europe and Türkiye. In the EU, Afghans are the second largest group of asylum seekers after Syrians. According to EUAA 114,000 Afghan nationals applied for international protection in the Member States in 2023, and nearly 60,000 by September 2024. According to Frontex, as of July 2024, 8 478 Afghans IBCs were recorded in the EU, a decrease by 5% compared to the same period last year. In the whole 2023, 19 942 Afghans IBCs were recorded (-44% compared to 2022).

The EU's response

After the Taliban's takeover, the EU reorientated its development cooperation to basic needs and livelihoods' assistance directed to the people of Afghanistan with a focus on women, girls and vulnerable groups such as IDPs and returnees. The implementation is done through international organisations (mainly the UN) and NGOs. Since August 2021, the EU has mobilised almost EUR 1,6 billion in support. In order to reduce the damage caused by the *de facto* authorities, the EU has stepped up its efforts and is coordinating its initiatives with the UN, neighbouring countries in the region and key international partners. Humanitarian and basic needs support is provided under strict conditions and carefully monitored guidelines ensuring that assistance is not provided through or benefiting the Taliban. The EU is also making sure that aid in Afghanistan is delivered in a principled way, in line with the „by women for women” agreed by the International Community in February 2023.

The EU is actively participating in and contributing to the UNHCR's Support Platform for a Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), where it aims to further strengthen the international community's response to Afghan refugees.

Providing protection solutions worldwide is a key element of the external dimension of the EU's refugee and migration policy, and the EU is a leading international donor in the field of forced displacement. In 2023, the European Commission allocated the majority of its EUR 1.7 billion humanitarian budget to projects addressing the needs of forcibly displaced persons and host communities. EU funding has been partially targeted at Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan. The projects aim to help displaced people access shelter, protection, food and basic services, including health care, nutritional support, safe water, sanitation and education.

The EU and 13 EU Member States, in cooperation with UNHCR and IOM, have established a regional Team Europe initiative (TEI) with an indicative financial envelope of slightly above EUR 1.8 billion, aimed at supporting Afghan IDPs and host communities through policy dialogue, protection (including social inclusion and sustainable reintegration), provision of basic services, job creation and access to the labour market. Further to the High-Level Forum on providing protection to Afghans at risk (October 2021), the European Commission provides financial support (under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund) to underpin Member States' resettlement and humanitarian admission efforts for Afghans at risk, as part of the contribution to the TEI. Providing legal pathways to protection for Afghans at risk remains a key priority for the current 2024-2025 ad-hoc EU resettlement and humanitarian admission scheme. Moreover, the EU Agency for Asylum Expert Platform on safe pathways for Afghans continues to provide a forum for coordination on efforts for legal and safe channels for vulnerable Afghans in need of international protection among Member States, international organisation and international partners.

After Pakistan's adoption of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) in September 2023, and a similar policy reportedly by Iran, over 1 million Afghan nationals returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran. The EU advocated with the Pakistani authorities to ensure the continued protection of vulnerable Afghans, in particular women and children, as well as human rights activists and journalists, and to refrain from repatriating Afghans who are on a resettlement list to a third country. After a period of pause, Pakistan announced in the Summer of 2024 to continue the implementation of the IFRP and according to UNHCR a total of 1.46 million Afghans are expected to return in 2024 from both Pakistan and Iran. In order to assist returnees, DG ECHO has so far mobilised EUR 61 million.

ICRC's main orientations and activities in 2024

In the course of 2023, the ICRC in Afghanistan has disengaged from its country-wide emergency assistance programs in the sectors of health, water and electricity. The disengagement strategy is accompanied by a protection dialogue and monitoring of impact of the IEA taking over these essential services. The ICRC continues to engage authorities and other stakeholders on a wide range of protection concerns for the civilian population.

- The ICRC facilitates access to **primary health services** (e.g. immunization, antenatal consultations, curative care for malnutrition and other common illnesses) in up to 47 health facilities across the country through the provision of medicines, medical and non-medical equipment, staff training, infrastructural repairs, and information sessions for healthcare workers.
- The ICRC continues to provide **first aid training** that prepares participants to immediately and safely treat injuries that occur where access to hospitals and clinics is not directly available (e.g. road traffic accidents, demonstrations, explosion).
- The ICRC reinforces **hospital emergency departments** to enable wounded and sick people to obtain life-saving care, including surgical services through deliveries of drugs, medical consumables and equipment to support emergency/mass casualty responses. In 4 provincial hospitals, the ICRC will strengthen the capacity of the health staff to provide training on ongoing trauma and on triage to their colleagues and to health staff in other nearby health facilities.

- To alleviate supply shortages and disruptions in service delivery, the ICRC provides various forms of **support to the national water and energy sectors** including:
 - Donations of consumables, spare parts and other supplies to the main energy provider
 - Building of spring catchments
 - Rehabilitation of irrigation canals as well as other small-scale water systems in rural areas.
 - Provision of essential supplies and capacity building support to water authorities in urban areas.
- The ICRC will help communities **mitigate the effects of violence and the current economic situation** on their ability to meet their daily needs and support themselves more independently in the long term. To this end, the following activities are carried out:
 - Provision of cash grants and training to smallholder farmers
 - Implementation of cash-for-work community projects and business startup cash grants
 - Support to PWDs with microloans and vocational training
 - Provision of cash transfers or other forms of financial assistance to the most vulnerable to ensure access to food and other essential items

Questions

1. How do Member States assess the situation in Afghanistan in the light of the past three years? Which of the current circumstances regarding managing the situation of the Afghan migrants, including on criminal cases, do you consider the most challenging and how could the identified challenges be improved?
2. For migration policy in the future, what do Member States see as the right way forward for Afghanistan and the neighbouring region?