



AFGHANISTAN

Protection Analysis Update

Update on protracted crisis and returnees-related risks trends
January – June 2025

October 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan remains gripped by one of the world's most severe humanitarian emergencies. The crisis has intensified significantly compared to 2024, driven by mass forced returns, and climate-related disasters that have now surpassed conflict as the primary displacement driver. Key deteriorations from 2024:

- Over 2.1 million Afghans were forcibly returned in 2025 from Pakistan and Iran following deportation campaigns
- 47% reduction in US humanitarian funding since late 2024, forcing suspension of critical mine clearance and closure of numerous service centres
- Climate disasters affected over 5 million people in early 2025 alone, no need to repeat
- August 2024 PVPV law further institutionalised restrictions on women and girls, expanding enforcement authority.

The humanitarian landscape is defined by interconnected crises: chronic poverty and food insecurity, recurring natural hazards (earthquakes, droughts, floods), systemic human rights violations particularly targeting women and girls, and severe restrictions on education, employment, and public participation. Vulnerable groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and IDPs, face escalating challenges. Bureaucratic impediments, underfunded response plans, and increasingly restrictive DFA regulations severely limit humanitarian scale-up. The massive returnee influx overwhelms Afghanistan's fragile infrastructure, straining host communities and escalating needs for shelter, food, protection, and livelihoods. Most returnees arrive in extremely vulnerable conditions without resources, documentation, or social networks.

The response requires urgent scaled-up funding to restore suspended programs and expand services for returnees. Additionally, we need enhanced protection mechanisms for women, girls, and vulnerable populations, along with climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction interventions. Partners should prioritize advocacy for eased operational restrictions while strengthening community-based support systems in returnee-receiving areas.

The protection risks requiring immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

1. **Gender-based violence**
2. **Child labour in dangerous or hazardous conditions and exposure to exploitation**
3. **Discrimination and stigmatisation, denial of resources, opportunities, services, and/or humanitarian access**
4. **Unlawful impediments and/or restrictions to freedom of movement, forced displacement, and threats of forced eviction**
5. **Presence of mines and other explosive ordnance**

URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

Amidst the continued multifaceted protracted crisis in Afghanistan, urgent actions are needed to reduce, prevent, and mitigate harmful coping strategies. It is of utmost importance to:

- Increase engagement with the DFA at the highest level to revoke all bans against women, considering that they hurt the economy as well as impact the lives of Afghan women and girls.
- Urgently mobilise resources for Mine Action operations.
- Prioritise the strengthening of protection pathways for the provision of life-saving protection services (including GBV and CP).
- Expand access to women and girls through enhanced deployment of female humanitarian staff on the ground and organisation of gender-segregated implementation sites and activities.

UPDATE ON PROTECTION RISKS SEVERITY | January-June 2025

SEVERITY VARIATIONS COMPARED TO 2024

INCREASE	54	districts increased from severity 3 in 2023 to severity 4 in 2024
STABLE	183	districts remained consistently high at severity 4
	72	districts remained consistently at severity 3
REDUCTION	92	districts moved from severity 4 last year in 2023 to severity 3 in 2024

CONTEXT

PEOPLE EXPOSED TO RISKS

35.5M

Source: [Afghanistan protection cluster](#)

RETURNED OR FORCED TO RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN FROM NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES THIS YEAR¹

Over 2 M

Source: [UNHCR](#)

HAZARDOUS AREAS

1,200 Km²

Source: [Afghanistan HNRP 2025](#)

Despite a reduction in active hostilities since the change in political leadership in August 2021, Afghanistan is marked by widespread human rights violations and ongoing protection risks, mainly affecting women and girls. Other vulnerable groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, returnees, persons with disabilities, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), face intensifying challenges.

Adding to these long-standing challenges is an ongoing surge in returns from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. In 2025 alone, more than 2.6 million Afghans returned (most involuntarily) after facing crackdowns, arrests, and forced deportation campaigns in those countries. The majority of returnees arrive in extremely vulnerable states, lacking resources, documentation, or social connections within Afghanistan. This mass influx of returnees is putting intense pressure on Afghanistan's already overstretched public services, straining host communities, and escalating needs for shelter, food, protection, and livelihoods. Many returnees find themselves at risk of renewed displacement, further compounding the challenges faced by the country's 6.5 million internally displaced people. Protection risks, particularly for women, children, and minorities, are mounting, and humanitarian organisations warn of rising social tensions and competition for scarce resources.

Bureaucratic constraints, underfunded response plans, and increasingly restrictive regulations by the DfA continue to limit the ability of aid actors to scale up assistance and protection services in line with growing needs. In addition to escalating returnee and displacement pressures, Afghanistan is witnessing the closure or severe curtailment of mine action and other essential services in 2025. As of May 2025, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan received only 16% of the required funding, leaving a \$2.04 billion shortfall (84% unfunded). The January 2025 suspension of US foreign aid, which accounted for 47% of the previous year's humanitarian funding, exacerbated an already dire situation. Widespread funding cuts and the overall decline in international humanitarian assistance have forced large-scale suspensions in crucial mine clearance operations and the shutdown of many service centres across the country. As a result, the capacity to clear landmines, provide risk education, and assist victims has diminished, leaving nearly 4.4 million people at continued risk from mines and unexploded ordnance.

In 2025, psychological and emotional abuse, manifesting as widespread trauma, chronic distress, and inflicted mental suffering, remains a pervasive and escalating risk throughout Afghanistan. Years of conflict, systematic exclusion from public life, mass displacement, loss of livelihoods, and the collapse of social support mechanisms have resulted in significant and lasting emotional harm. Vulnerable groups, including women, children, IDPs, returnees, and persons with disabilities, are disproportionately affected, often facing additional barriers to accessing psychosocial care and protection services ([UNICEF, WHO 2025](#)).

GOVERNANCE, LAWS, AND POLICIES

Throughout 2024 and into 2025, WHAT measures have been institutionalised through a growing body of formal legislation, increasing the social, economic, and civic exclusion of large segments of Afghan society. By mid-2025, the DfA's governance model is marked by greater centralisation and formal legislative processes, as reported by ACAPS and UNAMA. Decrees and edicts (previously disseminated via informal channels) are now more routinely codified and publicly gazetted. The supreme leader retains overarching authority, with any legislative proposals requiring a review board's approval before enactment.

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/afghanistan-emergency> Sep 2025

However, this has not corresponded with increased transparency or checks and balances, and policy reversals remain virtually absent.

The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV), with its network of provincial departments (DPVPVs), maintains a lead role in enforcing regulations, monitoring compliance, and adjudicating complaints under the DfA's version of Islamic law. Enforcement often varies at the provincial and district levels but remains vigorously applied in regions including **Kandahar, Nangarhar, Kabul, and Herat**. According to ACAPS, many decrees in 2024–2025 have increasingly targeted women's presence and participation in public life, as well as broader civil society activities.

Escalating Legal and Policy Restrictions (2024–2025)

- **Reinforced Gender-Based Exclusion:** Between July and December 2024 alone, over 15 significant new edicts and regulations were issued. Most aimed to further reduce the rights of women and girls, with heightened controls now systematically integrated into national legislation. The PVPV Law of August 2024 formalized many such restrictions, including specific dress and conduct codes, movement controls (such as the expanded mahram requirement), restrictive media policies, and expanded discretionary powers for the MPVPV to scrutinize all information and public behavior.
- **Total Ban on Participation:** By early 2025, enforcement has intensified. Women and girls remain banned from most employment, all forms of higher education, parks, sports, and civic engagement. Notably, a December 2024 decision to withdraw licenses from NGOs employing women has already prompted the closure or operational curtailment in dozens of organizations, with severe impacts on humanitarian access and gender-sensitive service delivery. The latest reports confirm that women are almost entirely absent from public and professional life.
- **No Policy Reversal:** As of August 2025, no previous restrictions affecting women's rights, right to education, or freedom of movement have been lifted. On the contrary, the trajectory has been one of further entrenchment and expansion.
- **Religious, Social, and Media Controls:** Additional decrees prohibit all religious debates between scholars and students, ban women and girls from attending private medical institutions or training, and restrict access to mobile phones in certain provinces.
- **Impacts on Humanitarian Space:** Regulatory interference, escalating restrictions, and punitive measures against NGOs (especially those employing female staff) have dramatically increased operational costs and reduced reach. Data from 2025 shows that 72% of surveyed NGOs now employ only male staff; 27% report female staff have left due to DfA decrees; and 22% say the new laws directly prevent women from accessing the workplace.

INCREASING EARTHQUAKES, FLOODS, DROUGHTS AND OTHER CLIMATE-RELATED SHOCKS

Afghanistan remains acutely vulnerable to climate change, consistently ranked among the countries at highest risk from increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters. Between January and June 2025, climate hazards have overtaken armed conflict as the leading cause of displacement and livelihood loss, exposing millions to further hardship. Afghanistan's capacity for climate adaptation remains extremely limited, with basic systems and communities left largely unprotected against worsening environmental shocks. The 2024/25 winter was marked by persistent La Niña conditions, resulting in freezing temperatures, record snowfall, and extended frost periods, particularly in the central highlands and northeastern provinces, including **Badakhshan, Bamyan, Ghazni, and Herat**. February and March saw heavy avalanches and landslides: at least 75 deaths and hundreds of injuries were reported, with thousands of homes cut off or destroyed. Major transport routes in Herat, Sar-e-Pul, and Badghis were closed, delaying critical aid and isolating already vulnerable populations.

Drought conditions remain persistent and widespread across southern, western, and parts of northern Afghanistan for a fourth consecutive year. By June 2025, large areas of **Kandahar, Helmand, Ghor, and Balkh** provinces saw another round of wells dry up, with over 80,000 people forced to leave their homes since January for lack of water. ACAPS and Save the Children report that the number of people displaced internally by climate hazards rose 28% versus the same period last year. This environmental pressure is further eroding already exhausted coping mechanisms, depleting groundwater at an alarming rate, and destroying agricultural livelihoods that the vast majority rely on for subsistence. At the same time, above-average spring and early summer rainfall triggered a series of deadly flash floods and landslides. UNOCHA records from April to May 2025 indicate that over 29,000 families (more than 206,000 people) have been affected by floods across 21 provinces, with the most significant losses in **Faryab, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Paktia**. Flooding destroyed or severely damaged over 22,000 homes, key roads, health centres, and schools, exacerbating displacement and loss of already limited assets. In Nangarhar's Omari camp, home to thousands of IDPs and recent returnees, more than 600 tents and facilities were wiped out, leaving women and children especially exposed to secondary risks of violence and exploitation. Environmental hazards have intensified existing gender and protection risks, particularly for women and girls, IDPs, returnees, and rural populations.

CROSS-BORDER RETURN MOVEMENTS FROM PAKISTAN AND IRAN

Since January 2025, the return of Afghans from Iran has escalated dramatically, creating a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions. By late July, at least 1.48 million Afghans had returned from Iran in just seven months, an overwhelming figure primarily driven by mass deportations and mounting pressures on all Afghan nationals, regardless of status or duration of stay. The pace of returns spiked even further following regional security incidents. It heightened anti-Afghan sentiment, with several days in early summer registering more than 40,000 people crossing the Iranian border in a single day. Both forced deportations and so-called “voluntary” returns have surged, blurring the line between choice and coercion: even Afghans who had lived in Iran for decades felt compelled to leave out of fear of arrest, arbitrary detention, or systemic harassment by authorities and civilians alike ([UNHCR 2025](#)). Of grave concern are individuals with continued international protection needs who are being forcibly returned to Afghanistan despite facing acute risk of torture, ill-treatment, and arrest at the hands of the DFA. Reports documented severe human rights violations against 49 Afghan nationals who were involuntarily returned to the country, revealing systematic patterns of persecution based on returnees' specific profiles and backgrounds (UNAMA, July 2025). From January to September 2025, UNHCR and its partners conducted nearly 78,600 protection monitoring interviews with returnees and deportees at key border crossings with Pakistan and Iran. Returnees from Pakistan cited threats such as harassment, arrests, extortion, and forced abandonment of assets due to police raids. Those from Iran reported violence, discrimination, anti-Afghan sentiment, and inhumane treatment during deportations. Vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, and unaccompanied minors were disproportionately affected.

Many of those returned had never set foot in Afghanistan or had left as children. Some families report sudden nighttime arrests, separation from their loved ones, and the confiscation or destruction of their travel and residency documents at the hands of Iranian officials. Additionally, returnees face systematic financial exploitation, including confiscation of cash and mobile phones by authorities in detention centres prior to deportation, wage theft by Iranian employers once Afghan migrants were forced to quit their jobs, and withholding of rental deposits by landlords who often promise to pay them back upon arrival in Afghanistan but then become unreachable ([IOM PM data, 2025](#)). Irrespective of legal status, whether registered refugees, slip holders, or entirely undocumented, all Afghans became subject to sweeping deportation measures and an increasingly hostile environment fuelled by racism, scapegoating, and the aftermath of recent geopolitical conflicts ([OHCHR 2025](#)). This extortion by landlords has deprived many Afghans of their savings, leaving them unable to bring any luggage, belongings, or cash, resulting in acute need for shelter and basic humanitarian support upon arrival. Additionally, between June and August 2025, UNHCR assessed 1,000 Afghan returnees and deportees with sensitive protection profiles. Many faced persecution due to past roles or perceived affiliations. They reported arrests, torture, and threats to family, prompting them to hide, destroy documents, and relocate. Failed attempts to leave due to deportations and visa barriers left all feeling unsafe.

The return journey itself is distressing and dangerous. Many recount arriving at the border hungry, exhausted, and with barely any belongings. Families are broken up in the chaos of detention and transport. Deportees describe being left at border crossings overnight in extreme weather, with no shelter, food, or medical assistance, having had to pay out of pocket for their own transportation or left looking for missing family members. There are also individual reports of sexual abuse of women, girls, young boys, and men throughout the return journey (UNHCR Expert, 2025). Compounding these challenges, police have begun intercepting even “voluntary returnees” during their journey and deporting them at the border, with this practice occurring primarily among returnees from Pakistan. However, DRC has documented cases where even returnees with proper civil documentation are being deported from Iran. According to the APC monthly updates, most arrive with no civil documentation, making it impossible to claim assistance or resume life in Afghanistan with access to basic services or legal protections ([NRC 2025](#)). Upon return, these Afghans face immediate hardship: a collapse of public services, mass unemployment, and rampant insecurity greet them at the border. Women, children, and female-headed households are at the highest risk for violence, with little recourse for protection and frequently denied humanitarian aid if not accompanied by a male guardian. The situation has created acute mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs, with returnees expressing profound hopelessness and lack of perspective given the dire situation in their country of return. This psychological distress particularly impacts girls, who face great uncertainty about their future and a complete lack of access to education under current restrictions. They join hundreds of thousands already displaced by conflict and disaster, straining the capacity of local communities and humanitarian agencies, who are themselves overwhelmed and under-resourced to provide even the most critical assistance. The returnees’ stories are marked by loss of home, community, and hope, now compounded by renewed uncertainty and fear in a country still locked in crisis ([OHCHR, 2025](#)).

In addition to newly arriving returnees, Afghanistan hosts a long-term population of approximately 21,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from Pakistan. Most reside in Khost and Paktika provinces, with smaller urban caseloads in Kabul and Herat. Despite their prolonged presence, these individuals continue to face protection challenges, including limited legal documentation, restricted access to services, and acute food and livelihood vulnerabilities. The influx of returnees has compounded pressures on humanitarian assistance and social services, affecting both recent arrivals and long-term refugee populations, particularly those dependent on UNHCR cash programs in urban areas.

UNHCR's phone-based post-return monitoring interviews with nearly 7,100 returnee households conducted in areas where returnees from Pakistan returned post-IFRP I and II reveal a severe protection crisis. Fragile local conditions obstruct safe reintegration, with critical gaps in shelter, healthcare, education, civil documentation, and food security. Women, girls, and other at-risk groups face increased exclusion and discrimination. Growing psychosocial distress, fuelled by rights violations and economic strain, heightens vulnerability and harmful coping strategies. Urgent, gender-responsive protection support is essential to enable safe and sustainable reintegration.

PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1 Gender-Based Violence

GBV has reached catastrophic levels in Afghanistan during the first half of 2025, with 14.2 million people requiring GBV-related support as per the 2025 HRP, an increase of nearly one million from 2024 ([OCHA](#) 2025). GBV is most severe across the northern region (Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan, Sar-e-Pul, Kunduz, Baghlan), with these provinces accounting for the vast majority of Phase 5 districts. The most prominent threats driving this crisis include the systemic erosion of legal protections through the breakdown of formal justice and law enforcement mechanisms that previously provided some protection for survivors.

The period January-June 2025 marked a devastating tipping point with the convergence of multiple drivers. With over 2.1 million Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan in the first half of 2025, women comprising 59 percent of returnees ([UNHCR](#) 2025). These returnee women face acute GBV risks due to economic desperation, lack of documentation, and the absence of shelters or safe houses for protection. UNHCR's return monitoring from January-June 2025 documented heightened protection concerns among female-headed households comprising the majority of returnee families ([UNHCR Data](#), [OCHA](#) 2025). Border response mechanisms have proven inadequate to address these escalating risks, with humanitarian organisations reporting significant gaps in protection services designed explicitly for border areas and transit populations ([UN Women](#) 2025).

Natural disasters affected 5 million people in early 2025 alone, with flash floods in 32 out of 34 provinces during the first quarter, displacing thousands of families ([OCHA](#) 2025). Ground Truth Solutions research reveals that climate shocks disproportionately drive GBV through multiple pathways, as displacement forces families to adopt harmful coping mechanisms, including early marriage ([GTS](#) 2025). The converging crises have produced devastating consequences for women, girls, and families. Immediate safety risks have escalated dramatically, with increased domestic violence, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and forced marriage becoming widespread.

The socioeconomic impacts are profound, as displacement forces families to adopt harmful coping mechanisms, including early marriage, further eroding women's economic autonomy and opportunities. The data reveals that the proportion of Afghan women in the formal labor market has dropped from 14.7 percent in 2021 to 5.2 percent in 2023, with women-headed households disproportionately affected by unemployment, poverty and food insecurity, forcing many women into informal, insecure labor ([CEDAW](#) 2025). These practices create inter-generational effects, with early marriage and interrupted education establishing long-term cycles of vulnerability for girls and future generations. Almost 70 percent of women describe their mental health as "poor" or "very poor," and women accounted for approximately 80 percent of reported suicide attempts in 2023 ([CEDAW](#) 2025). Social cohesion has deteriorated through family separation, loss of livelihoods, and the breakdown of traditional support systems that previously provided some measure of protection.

Response capacities have been severely degraded across all levels. Specialised GBV centres have been forced to close, and both humanitarian response mechanisms and local institutional capacities have been significantly reduced.

RISK 2 Child labour in dangerous or hazardous conditions and exposure to exploitation

Child labour remains a grave and escalating protection risk across Afghanistan, driven by the compounded impacts of economic deterioration, protracted displacement, and recurrent climatic shocks. Between January and July 2025, humanitarian actors have documented an alarming surge in the number of children engaged in labour, with field reports indicating that more than one-third of Afghan children now work to support themselves or their families. These children are found in hazardous sectors such as agriculture, mining, street vending, and brickmaking, frequently enduring dangerous conditions for extended hours, often at the expense of their health, safety, and education.

Protection monitoring indicates that around 30% of households nationwide have children involved in work, though this figure likely reflects significant underreporting given the stigma and legal concerns surrounding child labour. The situation is especially severe in some provinces: in Uruzgan, about 70% of households, and in Ghor, roughly two-thirds (68%), reported child labour, underscoring the depth of economic hardship driving families to harmful coping mechanisms.

The deterioration of household incomes, increase in debt levels, food insecurity, and widespread unemployment are forcing caregivers and families to increasingly resort to harmful coping mechanisms, with child labour being one of the most prevalent and visible manifestations. Previously identified trends in protection risks have continued to intensify, with economic vulnerabilities pushing more families toward survival strategies that endanger children's well-being and futures.

Large-scale returns from countries like Iran and Pakistan have placed enormous additional pressure on Afghanistan's fragile support systems. By June 2025, over 80,000 children had arrived, primarily through border crossings in eastern provinces (Nangarhar, Kunar) and southwestern entry points (Nimroz, Kandahar). Many of these returning children are either unaccompanied or separated from their caregivers, leaving them especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The crisis is particularly stark among returnees and internally displaced families who, deprived of stable livelihoods and essential services, are compelled to rely on the work of their youngest members for daily survival ([Tolo News](#) 2025).

Children working in these environments face immediate dangers of injury and exploitation, as well as long-lasting psychological harm. There are growing reports of hopelessness and despair among Afghan children, many of whom feel the weight of responsibility far beyond their years. Furthermore, for boys, the threat of recruitment or coercion by armed groups remains present, particularly for those out of school and disconnected from protective networks.

Girls face compounded vulnerabilities, often denied education and subject to exploitative work or early and forced marriage as families struggle to manage persistent poverty. Among respondents citing barriers for girls' education, 62% pointed to the ban on girls' education, 37% to financial constraints, and 20% to child labour pressures ([HRW](#) 2025).

In the absence of sufficient humanitarian resources and psychosocial support, many children are left to navigate survival alone, making child labour not only a necessity but, in some cases, the only available coping strategy ([Save the Children](#) 2025).

Local response mechanisms remain severely constrained. Community-based protection networks, including shuras and traditional support systems, are overstretched and lack resources to address the scale of need. While some community elders and religious leaders advocate against child labour, their influence is limited by the overwhelming economic pressures families face. Government social protection systems are largely non-functional, with limited capacity or willingness to enforce existing child labour laws or provide alternative livelihood support to vulnerable families. National child protection institutions remain under-resourced and unable to deliver protective services at scale.

Civil society organizations and local NGOs, though committed, operate with minimal funding and face significant access constraints, particularly in remote and conflict-affected areas. Vocational training programs and alternative education initiatives exist in limited pockets but cannot meet demand. Psychosocial support services for working children and their families are critically insufficient. Data from Afghanistan Protection Cluster partners and monitoring indicate that over 30% of Afghan children exhibit symptoms of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and behavioural changes, arising from exposure to violence, forced displacement, disruption of family structures, and uncertainty about the future. Girls (31.8%), women (29.8%), and persons with disabilities (16%) are particularly represented among those reached by psychosocial support and protection interventions, highlighting acute gendered and disability-related vulnerabilities. However,

these figures represent only those reached by services, while the actual prevalence is likely far higher due to severe funding constraints and significant access barriers (APC Monthly Update April 2025).

RISK 3**Discrimination and stigmatization, denial of resources, opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access**

Systemic discrimination under Taliban policies has intensified in both scope and severity throughout 2025, manifesting in laws and everyday practices that directly and indirectly exclude and marginalize key population groups. This is not merely a matter of policy but a day-to-day reality that bars millions from essential resources, legal identity, safety nets, and even life-saving humanitarian relief across Afghanistan ([UN News](#) 2025). The geographic distribution of discrimination mirrors patterns observed in gender-based violence, with northern provinces, Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Samangan, and Sar-e-Pul, experiencing the highest severity levels. In these areas, ethnic minorities and marginalised groups face compounded vulnerabilities, subjected to both systematic policy-based exclusion and localised forms of stigmatisation and denial of services. Nationally, about 55% of households lack essential civil documentation such as tazkira or birth certificates. The problem is particularly acute in Uruzgan, Ghor, and Badghis, where close to nine in ten households reported missing documents. Without documentation, families face serious barriers to accessing assistance, services, and legal protection.

The civil documentation crisis remained acute in 2025, driven by decades of conflict, political displacement, ongoing economic contraction, and strict policies from de facto authorities (DfA). For many households, the ability to afford the official fees attached to obtaining civil documents is well beyond their means. The financial burden extends beyond fees: those living in rural areas, informal settlements, or distant provinces must also overcome significant associated costs for transport, accommodation, and the time required to travel to urban registration offices. Poor families often report having to borrow money, sell belongings, or forgo other basic needs just to cover these expenses. Taliban policies have systematically rolled back previous modest gains in inclusion and rights. Since late 2024, service provision has been drastically curtailed, with ACAPS data revealing that legal aid centers are closing, protection desks in border areas have been downsized or shuttered, and outreach to IDPs and returnees in rural areas has nearly halved. Nationally, about 55% of households lack essential civil documentation such as tazkira or birth certificates. The problem is particularly acute in Uruzgan, Ghor, and Badghis, where close to nine in ten households reported missing documents. Without documentation, families face serious barriers to accessing assistance, services, and legal protection.

Large-scale returns from Iran and Pakistan in 2025, bringing the total number of returnees to nearly 3 million, have intensified the documentation crisis. Most return home without legal documentation and are unable to reclaim lost property. Since 15 September 2023, UNHCR Afghanistan has identified nearly one thousand returnee cases with heightened protection profiles, with 220 individuals falling within UNHCR's non-return advisory categories. UNHCR continues to receive such cases daily and anticipates an increase in the number of individuals with high protection needs.

Women and girls face the most pervasive restrictions: the Taliban continue to bar them from secondary and higher education, most forms of employment, and require strict adherence to dress codes and male accompaniment in public. Reports from OHCHR and ACAPS highlight that many female-headed households are unable to access humanitarian distributions or civil documentation, leaving them at heightened risk of exploitation and malnutrition ([ACAPS](#), [OHCHR](#) 2025). Single males at the Islam Qala border crossing have similarly been denied access, illustrating how discriminatory policies affect multiple population groups across different contexts.

Persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected. Taliban policies have led to the closure of specialised support centres. Due to both stigma and heavy restrictions on movement, these individuals are often invisible to aid actors and cut off from essential health and rehabilitation services ([OCHA](#) 2025).

Returnees encounter layered discrimination and frequently face community-level stigmatization, especially if perceived as having adopted 'foreign' values. Women and girls among returnees face even steeper obstacles, as Taliban officials often deny them civil paperwork, further limiting movement and access to services ([NRC](#) 2025).

This is particularly difficult for recently returned refugees and IDPs, who arrive with few resources and face a double burden: not only do they lack savings or family networks to help cover costs, but they are often required to present identification or documentation to access rental housing, humanitarian assistance, SIM cards for mobile phones, education for their children, and even basic health care. Many recent returnees report having only outdated, damaged, or no documents at all. Without

civil documents, they are sometimes unable to rent a house (landlords frequently demand official ID), enroll their children in school, or register with aid agencies. The combination of high costs and logistical barriers leaves them especially vulnerable to exploitation, social exclusion, and a perpetual struggle to rebuild their lives in safety and dignity (APC Monthly Update April, FGD Protection Monitoring 2025).

As a result, humanitarian actors report a 60% reduction in assistance reach for returnees and 70% for IDPs, including sharp drops in access to food, shelter, legal remedies, and psychosocial support ([NRC, 2025](#)).

Local response mechanisms are severely constrained by the discriminatory policies themselves. Traditional community leaders have limited influence in challenging Taliban directives, and many fear repercussions for advocating on behalf of excluded populations.

De facto authorities lack both the capacity and political will to address discrimination. Civil registration systems remain under-resourced and inaccessible, particularly in rural and remote areas. While some traditional support systems remain resilient, others have been severely strained or disrupted.

Civil society organizations that previously championed inclusion and human rights have either ceased operations or operate under severe restrictions. Women-led organizations, in particular, have been shut down or forced underground, eliminating critical advocacy and service delivery channels.

The humanitarian response has been drastically undermined by funding cuts and operational constraints. Legal aid centers are closing, protection desks in border areas have been downsized or shuttered, and specialized services for persons with disabilities are virtually non-existent. Without sustained funding, policy advocacy, and coordinated pressure to reverse discriminatory measures, millions will remain excluded from their basic rights and essential services.

RISK 4

Unlawful Impediments and/or Restrictions to Freedom of Movement, Forced Displacement and threats of forced eviction

In 2025, Afghanistan faces some of the most extreme and systematic unlawful impediments to freedom of movement, siege conditions, and forced displacement globally, particularly for women and girls. The de facto authorities have codified and strictly enforced a series of rules and decrees, such as the PVPV law, which institutionalise the mahram requirement for women to travel beyond short distances or to access public services. These measures, together with multiple discriminatory edicts, effectively bar women from moving independently, accessing healthcare, attending school, working, or even receiving humanitarian assistance without a male relative present ([GTS 2025](#)).

70% of women, compared to 60% of men, experience access challenges ([Kabul now 2025](#)). Women-headed households are particularly vulnerable. Without a male relative, they can be left unable to reach distribution sites or hospitals, sometimes waiting days for urgent services. At aid sites, the lack of female staff, due to Taliban bans on women working with NGOs, forces many women to interact with men outside their families, a practice that is culturally unacceptable and leads to social stigma or exclusion. Returnee women-headed households are experiencing greater hardship, given the fact that they have been outside of the country for a number of years; hence, community support is less, they have no male support in Afghanistan, and have no shelter support or access to livelihoods.

6.5 million Afghans remain internally displaced due to conflict, disasters, and government evictions, with forced removals from informal settlements particularly acute in urban peripheries around Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. In 2025, over 2.1 million Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan following policy changes and deadlines set by both countries, constituting unsafe returns with inadequate conditions for reintegration ([UNHCR 2025](#)).

The Taliban's siege tactics are enforced through policing, checkpoints, and the "morality" inspectorate, further isolating at-risk groups and deepening gender divides. Afghanistan's shrinking civic space and collapse of public services have created an environment of pervasive insecurity and deprivation. International humanitarian funding has nearly halved since 2022, with over 22.9 million Afghans, almost half the country's population, now needing humanitarian assistance for survival ([GTS 2025](#)).

Recent data from humanitarian organisations indicate that as of the end of 2023, approximately 6.5 million Afghans were displaced internally by conflict and violence. Authorities have continued to demolish informal settlements, leaving thousands

of the most vulnerable families with nowhere to live and launching new cycles of displacement, especially around major cities like Kabul ([NRC 2024](#)).

These compounding restrictions are felt most acutely in conservative rural regions but affect women nationwide (APC monthly updates, protection monitoring data 2025). Many women cite distance, cost, and the absence of safe transportation as major barriers to accessing essential services and humanitarian assistance.

Taliban-imposed mahram requirements have created additional vulnerabilities, with women travelling without male relatives becoming targets for exploitation by individuals claiming to "assist" with documentation or travel arrangements. Women's restricted mobility leaves them trapped and vulnerable, particularly during displacement.

Reports indicate an increase in family violence, in the case of both women and girls (IOM PM data for April-June 2025). This is likely linked to families imposing movement restrictions to internalise and enforce PVPV laws in the private sphere.

For returnees, the situation is particularly dire. The 2.1 million Afghans who returned from Iran and Pakistan in 2025 face unsafe conditions, lacking proper documentation, housing, livelihoods, and protection mechanisms. Many returnee women and girls face compounded vulnerabilities due to movement restrictions, making it nearly impossible to access registration services, humanitarian assistance, or livelihood opportunities without male accompaniment.

Local response mechanisms are severely constrained by the very policies creating the crisis. Community-based support structures, including traditional networks that might have assisted displaced families or women in distress, are unable to operate effectively under Taliban surveillance and restrictions. Community leaders who might advocate for relaxed movement policies fear repercussions.

Civil society organisations, particularly women-led groups that previously provided safe spaces and support services, have been shut down or severely restricted. The ban on women working with NGOs has eliminated female humanitarian staff, creating a critical gap in service delivery to women and girls.

RISK 5 Presence of Mines and Other Explosive Ordnance

Afghanistan remains among the world's most mine-contaminated countries, with the HALO Trust warning that one in five Afghans, over 6 million people, remain at risk from landmines and explosive remnants of war, making Afghanistan the world's second-most contaminated country after Ukraine. Between January and June 2025, the Protection Cluster recorded 2,429 hazardous areas covering nearly 379 sq km nationwide, including 256 areas in five northern provinces affecting 225,000 people within 1 km, 526 areas across four north-eastern provinces affecting 213,600 people within 1 km, and 1,647 areas in ten central and south-eastern provinces covering 316 sq km. Monthly civilian casualties exceed 50, with 80 percent of victims children, reflecting global patterns where children comprise over one-third of landmine casualties worldwide. The International Committee of the Red Cross documented 434 children among 564 total casualties in 2024, with an injured child admitted to hospital roughly every three days ([APC Strategy](#), APC monthly updates 2025).

Protection monitoring reveals critical gaps in explosive ordnance risk education (EORE), with only 2.4% of respondents reporting awareness of mine hazards, while 12% stated "don't know", signalling alarming knowledge deficits, particularly in new returnee and displacement areas.

The crisis has been driven by decades of conflict that left extensive contamination across the country, compounded by the recent collapse of mine action services amid severe funding cuts. UNMAS staffing has fallen by 70 percent, and active clearance teams have dropped from 273 to 190, a 31 percent reduction year on year. Mine-action coordination funding ends on 1 July 2025, mirroring the broader humanitarian access crisis described by OCHA. Norwegian People's Aid halted all US-funded mine action activities, and the UN estimates a funding shortfall of \$21.9 million for clearance in 2025.

UNMAS now operates with minimal staffing at headquarters and a severely reduced field presence, while pending Memoranda of Understanding with de facto authorities further delays the implementation of remaining clearance activities (APC Monthly Update). Over 949,000 assisted returnees arrived at northern border points in early 2025, settling near contaminated areas with minimal risk education, a vulnerability echoed by UN experts warning of returnees' unfamiliarity with explosive hazards.

The collapse of mine action services has left critical gaps in life-saving support precisely when demand is highest. Each fatality and injury imposes an estimated lifetime economic loss of \$37,625 and \$29,101, respectively, devastating already

impoverished households and pushing families deeper into poverty. Beyond the immediate human toll, the failure to address mine action risks produces cascading consequences across multiple dimensions of Afghan life. Contamination prevents safe use of agricultural land, grazing areas, water sources, and forests, directly undermining food security and income generation.

Contamination blocks 133 sq km of agricultural land and 878 sq km of grazing areas, directly preventing families from cultivating crops or raising livestock, the primary means of subsistence for millions of rural Afghans. This creates a vicious cycle: families cannot access productive land, driving food insecurity and forcing reliance on humanitarian assistance or negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, debt, and distress migration.

Communities are forced to relocate or avoid essential routes, markets, and services, disrupting social cohesion and economic activity. The presence of explosive hazards near critical infrastructure endangers 400 schools and 210 health facilities within 1 km of hazardous zones, restricting children's access to education and families' access to healthcare. Communities living near contaminated areas face daily decisions between risking their lives to access essential resources or remaining isolated and impoverished (OCHA 2025). Injuries or fatalities from explosive ordnance reduce household labor capacity, especially among breadwinners, compounding poverty and dependency.

Insecurity from explosive ordnance risks deters investment, reconstruction, and humanitarian programming, prolonging vulnerability and impeding resilience. For returnees settling in contaminated areas, particularly in the southern provinces where both contamination and service gaps are most acute, the risks are compounded by their unfamiliarity with local hazards and the absence of risk education programs that have been scaled back due to funding cuts.

Local response mechanisms are virtually non-existent. Communities lack the technical capacity, equipment, and training to address mine contamination independently. Traditional community structures can provide some basic awareness but cannot conduct clearance or adequately protect populations from explosive hazards.

RESPONSE

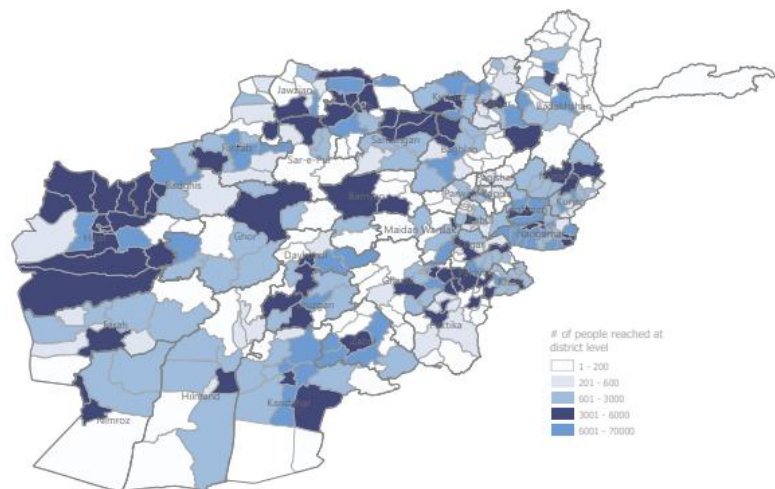
PROGRESS MADE ON PROTECTION

Between January and June 2025, the Protection Cluster reached 1.7 million people (51% of the 3.4M target) across 145 reprioritized districts. Despite severe funding constraints (47% funded, \$70M gap) and access restrictions, partners sustained delivery of core protection services, while monitoring data highlighted persistent risks and barriers faced by affected populations.

Protection partners reached large numbers of affected people with critical interventions. Awareness and information activities benefited over 600,000 individuals through GBV, legal rights, child protection, and mine risk education. Targeted EORE reached more than 415,000 people in high-risk provinces, while MHPSS support was accessed by around 226,000 individuals, mainly women and girls. Child protection services supported over 370,000 children and caregivers, including UASC through case management and family tracing. More than 22,000 individuals were referred to specialized services, and 18,000 dignity kits were distributed to women and girls. Seasonal protection efforts provided warm clothing to nearly 6,900 children and access to heated safe spaces.

The HNRP results demonstrate significant reach in awareness, CP, GBV, and mine action, showing partners' operational resilience despite funding and access constraints. At the same time, PM findings reveal gaps in outcomes: persistent child labour, widespread lack of civil documentation, exclusion of women and girls from education and services, and low

MAP SHOWING NUMBER OF PERSONS REACHED AT DISTRICT LEVEL



community awareness of mine hazards. Together, these show that while coverage has expanded in several sectors, risks remain acute and unevenly addressed, especially for returnees, FHHs, persons with disabilities, and adolescents.

ACCESS-RELATED CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS

Across the reporting period, access to protection services in Afghanistan remained highly constrained due to a convergence of security, administrative, cultural, and funding barriers. According to the APC monthly updates for 2025 many of the reported barriers directly affect the pace, quality, and comprehensiveness of assistance delivery to the most vulnerable.

Policy restrictions imposed by the De Facto Authorities (DFA) have been a pervasive challenge, particularly the recurrent policies limiting the movement and work of female staff. These restrictions are especially severe in conservative and hard-to-reach areas, drastically curbing women's and girls' access to essential services ranging from legal support to psychosocial and healthcare interventions. In the southern provinces, an explicit ban on psychosocial support (PSS) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services has resulted in almost total unavailability of these crucial aids for returnees and other at-risk groups.

The situation further deteriorated when dozens of female UN national staff in Kabul were subjected to explicit death threats from unidentified individuals related to their work with UNAMA and other UN agencies ([Al Jazeera](#), [Afghanistan International](#) 2025). Armed Taliban-affiliated individuals reportedly followed and harassed female staff, visited their homes, and threatened male relatives at gunpoint to prevent the women from returning to work, warning that failure to comply would result in death ([Afghanistan International](#), 2025).

These threats, which included surveillance, phone harassment, written warnings, and in some cases forcing male relatives to sign pledges at gunpoint to stop their female family members from working, forced several female UN employees to work from home for weeks until further notice ([France 24](#), 2025). The UN implemented interim operational adjustments to ensure staff safety, while the Taliban denied responsibility for the threats and claimed to be investigating the incidents ([Al Jazeera](#), 2025). This marked the first known escalation from general work restrictions to direct death threats against female humanitarian workers, affecting staff from multiple agencies, including UNICEF, UNDP, UNAMA, UNFPA, and the World Health Organization ([Afghanistan International](#) 2025).

Security and operational constraints remain an ever-present barrier. Ongoing risks from insecurity, the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO), and intermittent conflict restrict the physical access of teams to several districts. The withdrawal of UNMAS field presence and the loss of capacity among mine action NGOs, both driven by severe funding cuts, have left communities more exposed and halted or drastically curtailed clearance and awareness activities in hazardous areas.

Many communities struggle with poorly maintained roads and weak transportation networks, compounded by limited electricity, inadequate school and healthcare facilities, and difficulties accessing safe water. These gaps not only impede the delivery and utilization of humanitarian assistance but also amplify existing vulnerabilities especially for women, children, and persons with disabilities.

Moreover, according to ACAPS ([ACAPS Thematic Report: Implications of the US Foreign Aid Cuts on Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan \(April 2025\)](#)), funding cuts have had a profound and escalating impact on humanitarian access and service continuity nationwide. These reductions have forced key organizations to scale back or suspend critical protection, legal, and mine action activities.

Many frontline agencies report that, due to limited resources, they cannot sufficiently cover essential case management or legal aid for returnees and other high-risk populations. The cumulative effect has been to deepen service gaps, especially in regions facing overlapping crises, and reduce the ability of humanitarian actors to pivot or expand as new needs arise.

CRITICAL GAPS IN FUNDING AND POPULATION REACHED

Despite ongoing efforts, protection activities remain far below the scale of identified needs. Large segments of the population, especially in hard-to-reach districts and among vulnerable groups such as women, children, and persons with specific needs, continue to face serious risks without adequate support. The limited scope of protection monitoring weakens early warning and response mechanisms, while reduced case management and specialized AoR services leave survivors without sustained assistance. Gaps in psychosocial



support and emergency shelter/NFIs further heighten exposure to violence, exploitation, and secondary displacement, undermining people's dignity and coping capacities. These critical gaps erode community resilience and jeopardize prospects for recovery.

While humanitarian actors are prioritizing the most urgent needs, the response remains severely constrained by funding shortfalls: of the \$149 million requested, only 47% (approximately \$70 million) has been received, limiting the ability to scale up, expand coverage, and sustain essential. If by the third quarter 2025 funding for protection including Mine Action, child protection and GBV millions is not increased, people who remain unreached, particularly in hard-to-access districts including women, children, and persons with specific needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RISK 1 Gender-Based Violence

HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Advocacy with the DfA to rescind the bans on women and girls, with particular focus on:
 - The PVPV Law and mahram requirements that have driven 54% of women to report no access to safe spaces or shelters
 - The December 2024 NGO employment ban has forced 72% of organisations to operate with male-only staff
 - Education bans that are projected to increase child marriage rates by 25%
- Enhance multi-sectoral, integrated programming to address the full spectrum of vulnerabilities in implementation of the HNRP 2025, ensuring GBV prevention and response is integrated across sectors to address the compounding drivers of the crisis
- Engage men in prevention efforts using contextualized messaging and a community-led approach at the community level by largely targeting community leaders to address harmful coping mechanisms including child marriage and domestic violence.

DONORS

- Enhance advocacy with the DfA to rescind all bans on women and girls, especially the PVPV law and the December 2024 NGO employment restrictions.
- Prioritize flexible, multi-year funding for locally based women-led organizations (WLOs), which enables and empowers them to reach most at-risk groups, including survivors in remote areas and participate across the humanitarian response architecture

RISK 2 Child labour in dangerous or hazardous conditions and exposure to exploitation

DfA

- Reopen access to schooling that meets international standards for all children especially girls. With 30% of households nationally reporting children in work (and up to 70% in Uruzgan, 68% in Ghor), strengthening safe education access is critical to reversing harmful coping strategies.
- Enforce prohibition of hazardous labour, across the country to limit the number of children impacted by engagement in hazardous work.

HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Expand cash and livelihoods support in provinces where monitoring shows highest child labour prevalence (Uruzgan, Ghor, Farah).
- Integrate child protection case management with food and NFI responses in high-return provinces (e.g., Nimroz, Kunduz) where families are most economically strained.
- Scale up accelerated learning and vocational training programs for adolescents to reduce drop-outs.

DONORS

- Finance predictable, multi-year child protection and EiE programs, particularly in provinces flagged by monitoring.
- Invest in community-based child protection networks to sustain risk identification and referrals.

RISK 3**Discrimination and stigmatization, denial of resources, opportunities, services and/or humanitarian access****DfA**

- Simplify and waive fees for civil documentation WHO FOR? to enable easy access. 55% of households report at least one member of the family does not have a civil document, and in Uruzgan, Ghor, and Badghis, nearly nine in ten households are excluded from services.
- Coordinate and facilitate with humanitarian agencies to expand mobile registration teams to displacement sites and return corridors.

HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Expand legal services to Nimroz and Kunduz, where partner presence is limited despite large returnee caseloads.
- Integrate documentation support and referral pathways into existing service delivery points (food, NFI, winterization).
- Prioritize outreach to Female Headed Households (FHHs), PwDs, and minorities, groups most disadvantaged by documentation gaps.

DONORS

- Enhance advocacy with the DFA to remove all discriminatory laws and other restrictions, especially against women and girls.

RISK 4**Unlawful Impediments and/or Restrictions to Freedom of Movement, Forced Displacement and threats of forced eviction****DfA**

- Remove all restrictive directives that impede women and girls from accessing services. According to protection monitoring data, 9% of all people interviewed are Female Headed FHHs, and these households face systemic limitations to access aid.
- Halt all planned forced evictions of IDPs/informal settlers. Many people remain concerned about the fear of eviction, and yet they have nowhere to go.

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- Deploy mobile female-staffed teams to reach women and FHHs restricted by movement barriers.
- Expand rental support and HLP legal aid; 5W data shows HLP reach (30k) is far lower than other AoRs.
- Strengthen eviction monitoring and integrate findings into inter-cluster planning.

DONORS

- Provide flexible funds for eviction response packages (legal aid, rent subsidies) to address sudden shocks.
- Support scaling of mobile protection services where restrictions are acute.

RISK 5**Presence of Mines and Other Explosive Ordnance****DfA**

- Enhance collaboration and investment in explosive ordnance clearance working closely with humanitarian and BHN partners.
- Facilitate humanitarian access for clearance teams in high-risk provinces including Kunar

HC and HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- Ensure that EORE is integrated in all projects as a measure of enhancing prevention, including BHN, school programs, CFS, and protection monitoring.
- Integrate mine risk indicators in all assessments since according to protection monitoring, only 12% of the people have been reached with information, and according to protection monitoring, fewer than 3% of households are aware of contamination.

DONORS

- Support survivor assistance and rehabilitation, particularly in high-return areas and long-term clearance of agricultural land to restore livelihoods and food security.
- Engage the DFA to increase support for Mine clearance in collaboration with humanitarian agencies.

Methodology

This publication was done in collaboration with ACAPS and thanks to the contribution of the Protection Cluster and some partners. The analysis is based on both quantitative and qualitative data from existing secondary data sources, protection assessments and reports covering events from January to December 2024, including data from key country-wide protection monitoring tools e.g. the Afghanistan Protection Monitoring tool, and in consultation with Areas of Responsibility, Protection Cluster Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) members and sub-national coordinators. This product has been made possible by the generous support of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Limitations

Data collection and case management have proven to be challenging for humanitarian protection services due to ongoing interference and restrictions from the DfA, particularly regarding the hiring of women staff, the mahram requirement, and access to women community members. These operational constraints and challenges affect the level of protection data that can be collected and used in understanding protection risks. In addition, some issues are perceived highly sensitive, therefore the data gathered may not offer a definitive assessment of the extent of the protection risks.



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