

Returning home, Afghans continue to face challenges in rebuilding their lives – UN agencies

In 2017, about 58,000 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned to their country after decades abroad only to be met with protection risks and “significant” barriers to long-term reintegration into society, two United Nations agencies working in the Asian country reported on Thursday.

The [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) and the [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM) said that despite efforts to support those coming back, the greatest challenge lies in a comprehensive, community-wide response that leaves no one behind.

“In spite of the inherent challenges of returning home after many decades abroad, IOM and UNHCR are working hand in hand to ensure sustainable solutions are provided to returning Afghans,” said Laurence Hart, the head of IOM operations in the country.

“[We] work together to complement each other’s efforts in areas of high return, with partners and the Government, for greater efficiency and to ensure support to those communities to mitigate protection risks,” added Fathia Abdalla, the head of the UNHCR office in Afghanistan.

Each year, registered Afghan refugees and undocumented Afghans make the decision to return home from Iran and Pakistan, in spite of the difficult situation in Afghanistan.

Since 2002, more than 5.24 million registered Afghan refugees have returned – more than 58,000 in 2017, according to a new, first of its kind, joint IOM-UNHCR report.

“Given the scope of the ongoing conflict, high levels of internal displacement, already overstretched services and difficulty finding jobs, returning Afghans face protection risks and significant barriers to sustainable reintegration,” said the two UN agencies.

UNHCR and IOM have been collaborating closely in the country to assist the returning refugees and undocumented migrants. Together with the Government, they have also been actively coordinating the provision of humanitarian post-arrival and reintegration assistance.

With estimates that 280,000 registered refugees and 420,000 undocumented Afghans expected to return in 2018, the two agencies are harmonizing their operations, in particular related to monitoring, reporting and analysis and developing key indicators for displacement and mobility tracking.

These estimates depend on a number of factors, including the situation in

places of return as well as countries where the refugees and undocumented persons are staying in.

[UN human rights experts urge Viet Nam not to stifle dissenting voices](#)

United Nations experts have urged Viet Nam not to crackdown on civil society or stifle dissent, after the authorities jailed several human rights defenders for “conducting activities to overthrow the people’s government” – a charge that carries the possibility of the death sentence or life imprisonment.

These activities have received rulings, with the founder of Brotherhood for Democracy, Nguyen Van Dai, sentenced to 15 years in prison and five years of house arrest. The defenders have two weeks to appeal against the sentences.

“We are [deeply concerned](#) at the way these peaceful campaigners have been treated and in particular, over the use of Article 79 of the 1999 penal code of Viet Nam,” which carries the possibility of the death sentence or life imprisonment, the experts said.

Two human rights lawyers were arrested in 2015 while attempting to meet European Union delegates before an annual EU-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. Another four activities were arrested in July 2017 amid a general crackdown on freedom of expression.

Created in 2013, the Brotherhood for Democracy consists mostly of former jailed dissidents who set up an online group calling for democracy.

The UN experts are particularly concerned that all six were held in pre-trial detention with very limited access to legal counsel, in a clear breach of international human rights standards, and that they were prosecuted in relation to their activities as human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists.

In 2017, there was a substantial increase in the number of arrests and detentions of human rights defenders in Viet Nam.

“We urge the authorities not to crack down on civil society to muzzle dissenting voices and stifle the people’s rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association in violation of the country’s obligations under international human rights law,” the experts stressed.

The UN experts are Michel Forst, Special Rapporteur on the situation [of human rights defenders](#); José Antonio Guevara Bermúdez, current Chair-Rapporteur of

the [Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#); and David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the [right to freedom of opinion and expression](#).

[UN chief calls for unity in Security Council to avoid Syria situation 'spiraling out of control'](#)

Amid the risks of the situation in Syria “spiraling out of control,” the United Nations chief has appealed to the five permanent members of the Security Council to break the current impasse on reported use of chemical weapons in the war-torn country.

“I have also been closely following developments in the Security Council and regret that the Council has so far been unable to reach agreement on this issue,” [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) said in a statement issued late Wednesday night.

“Let us not forget that, ultimately, our efforts must be about ending the terrible suffering of the Syrian people,” he added.

Mr. Guterres said that he called the ambassadors of the five permanent Council members – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – on Wednesday to reiterate his “deep concern about the risks of the current impasse” and stressed the need to “avoid the situation spiraling out of control.”

On Tuesday, the 15-member body voted on three separate draft resolutions in response to recent allegations of a chemical weapons attack in the Syrian town of Douma. None of the texts garnered enough support.

The [first draft considered today](#) – penned by the United States – which would have established a new investigative mechanism for one year, as well as identify those responsible for the use of chemical weapons, was rejected owing to a negative vote – or veto – from Russia.

Similarly, [a competing draft](#) – penned by Russia – which would have established the mechanism for one year as well but would have given the Security Council the responsibility to assign accountability for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, was also not adopted.

The Council rejected a third text – also proposed by Russia – which concerned the work of the fact-finding mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons ([OPCW](#)), the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons

Convention (CWC), which entered into force in 1997.

Despite the deadlock in the Security Council, OPCW has said that it would shortly [send a team](#) to Syria to “establish the facts” surrounding the incident.

On Wednesday, the UN [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) said that it has received reports that an estimated 500 patients at Syrian health facilities have exhibited signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals, after the shelling of a Damascus suburb over the weekend.

WHO has demanded immediate unhindered access to the area to provide care to those affected, to assess the health impacts, and to deliver a comprehensive public health response.

[Syria: WHO demands ‘unhindered access’ to site of suspected chemical attack](#)

The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) said Wednesday that it has received reports that some 500 patients at Syrian health facilities have exhibited signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals, after the shelling of a Damascus suburb over the weekend.

“We should all be [outraged at these horrific reports](#) and images from Douma,” Peter Salama, WHO Deputy Director-General for Emergency Preparedness and Response said, referring to reports from the agency’s [health cluster](#) partners – a WHO-led team of 118 national and international nongovernmental organizations, UN agencies, national authorities and donors working inside Syria to provide emergency and trauma care, as well as basic health services.

According to those reports, patients at health facilities displayed signs of severe irritation of mucous membranes, respiratory failure and disruption to central nervous systems.

More than 70 people sheltering in basements have reportedly died, including 43 with symptoms consistent with exposure to highly toxic chemicals. Two health facilities were also reportedly affected by these attacks.

These detailed reports from WHO’s partners come as the Security Council tried and failed on Tuesday to adopt two competing resolutions that would have established a mechanism to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria, as well as another concerning a fact-finding mission in the war-torn country.

[Secretary-General António Guterres](#) also [expressed his outrage](#) at reports that civilians in the enclave continued to be targeted by toxic agents, saying

that any confirmed use of chemical weapons, by any party to the conflict, “is abhorrent and a clear violation of international law.”

For its part, WHO demanded immediate unhindered access to the area to provide care to those affected, to assess the health impacts, and to deliver a comprehensive public health response.

WHO reminded the parties to the seven-year conflict of their obligation to refrain from attacking medical facilities and personnel, in line with Security Council resolution [2286](#), which was adopted unanimously in 2016 and which also demanded an end to impunity for those responsible for such attacks.

The agency emphasized that any use of chemical weapons for harmful purposes is illegal under international law. Moreover, global norms against chemical weapons reflect a particular abhorrence to their disproportionate harm to the eldest, the most infirm, and the youngest among us.

WHO is currently coordinating the health cluster response for people displaced from Eastern Ghouta and stands ready to step up assistance to the newly-accessible areas there once access is granted.

Since 2012 there have been sporadic reports of chemical events in Syria. WHO has no formal role in the forensic investigation of the use of chemical weapons. When an event is reported, WHO’s role is to conduct epidemiological investigations and implement public health emergency response measures, as necessary.

[‘Time to move from promises to action;’ UN envoy urges Malian parties to peace accord](#)

While Malians must ensure the successful holding of elections this year, their priority should be the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, a senior United Nations official said Wednesday.

“The peace process is complex, but it is time to move from promises to action to meet agreed deadlines,” Mahamat Saleh Annadif, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), told the Security Council, adding that advancing the peace process and holding the elections must go hand in hand.

He noted that the entire political class agreed that elections must take

place on time, with the utmost transparency and credibility. Just as the 2013 elections re-established constitutional order in Mali, those in 2018 must irreversibly anchor democracy.

Presidential elections are scheduled for 29 July and 12 August, and legislative elections in November and December.

In terms of preparations, he said, an agreement is in place to revise the electoral law and an order has been placed for eight million voter's cards.

In line with its mandate, MINUSMA has started to lend technical and logistical support, including the distribution of election materials and deployment of electoral personnel, while also preparing for any potential violence.

The Special Representative said the Security Council must call upon the Malian political class to respect the adopted timetable and encourage them along the path to consensual, peaceful and credible elections.

"The alternative would mean adding one crisis onto another, with the enemies of peace emerging the victors," he said. "They do not merit such a gift."

The security situation has deteriorated, particularly in the centre of Mali, he said, noting that an independent expert recently voiced concerns about serious human rights violations in the country.

With the UN country team, MINUSMA has launched an initiative to promote the restoration of State authority in central Mali, as well as economic growth and the provision of social services.

Emphasizing that a purely security approach is not enough, he said the Mission is continuing to support the specialist judicial system tackling terrorism, money-laundering and cross-border crime.

He emphasized the need for the training of peacekeeping troops, adding that the Mission remained about 100 armoured vehicles short. Troop- and police-contributing countries have been asked to do what they could to fill the equipment gap. Canada's offer of six helicopters, while welcome, fell short of what is needed.

Turning to the ongoing strategic review of MINUSMA, he said the Mission is awaiting the Secretary-General's recommendations with the hope that ensuing discussions will lead to a better alignment between its mandate and the realities on the ground.