

We Do This to Survive

Afghan accounts of cross-border movement

“It is important for the world to understand that this is not a choice – we do this to stay alive, and to keep our families alive. We know the nightmares of trying to cross the border but there are no other options. We love our country, but we cannot survive here. So, we take the risks.”

- 26-year-old recently deported from Turkey, interviewed in Nangarhar province of Eastern Afghanistan



Photo 1. Afghan deportees return from Iran through Islam Qala border crossing, Herat province, November 2019.

Located at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, Afghanistan has long been the center of a complex, multi-generational migration crisis involving large and mixed flows of people in the region and beyond, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), people fleeing the country, and refugees returning – voluntary, or more often by force. By the end of 2021, an estimated six million Afghans have been driven out of their homes or country and remain displaced due to previous widespread conflict, human rights abuses, targeted violence, and unsufferable poverty. The return of Taliban rule over Afghanistan in August 2021 and subsequent establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) has sparked an even deeper humanitarian and human rights crisis within the country, with reports of systematic violations against women and girls, journalists, human rights defenders, minority groups, and individuals even loosely associated with the former government or international security forces – despite the group’s declaration of general amnesty. The surge in violence throughout 2021 and continued human rights violations, combined with hardships caused by political uncertainty and the dire economic and food security situation, has triggered an unprecedented outflow of Afghans attempting to cross international borders.

Islam Qala Border Crossing, Herat Province

In Islam Qala, a dusty border town in Herat province near the Afghanistan - Iran border, a former government official explains how his family frantically fled to Iran only a few days after the Taliban captured Kabul out of fear of retribution. For ten long months, Ismail* and his family remained largely confined to their home in hopes of avoiding deportation, until they were suddenly met with a loud banging on their door and a group of Iranian police demanding to see documentation. Without any money or their belongings, the family was arrested and transported to a prison along the border, where they were held for seven days and fed only a boiled potato and small piece of bread every 24 hours. The family of seven – soon to be eight, the wife explains as she cradles her stomach – are among a growing number of Afghans reporting exposure to excessive use of force and inhuman and degrading treatment by neighbouring country authorities in the process of irregular migration, detention, and deportation.

“I shouted for asylum, but they just laughed at us. They knew the situation they were sending us back to and they taunted us with it. My wife and children were crying and screaming ; it’s a form of psychological torture.”

Only an hour later, a woman arrives with four small children and is completely distraught – her husband has just been arrested and was taken by the Taliban the moment they re-entered Afghanistan. Since the political takeover in August 2021, there are credible allegations of enforced disappearances, unlawful detentions, and extrajudicial killings by the de-facto group. According to Human Rights Watch, IEA forces killed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former security force members in just four provinces within the first three months of their rule, and have also targeted family members. ¹



Photo 2. An Afghan woman, who was deported back to Afghanistan with her family, at Islam Qala ‘Zero Point’ in Herat province.

After the collapse of the former government, desperate scenes emerged of thousands of Afghans lining up to apply for a passport, as a growing percentage of the population no longer view the country as livable. While international travel on an Afghan passport has been challenging even at the best of times, the IEA sank to the very bottom of the Global Passport Index in 2022, ranking as the weakest passport in the world in terms of travel freedom. Documentation is only the first hurdle for the millions of Afghans attempting to flee the country, with tightening restrictions along Afghanistan’s own borders often leaving no option but dangerous and irregular travel routes using smugglers. Many undertake long and grueling journeys overland via Iran and Pakistan, some hoping to continue onward to other

¹ Afghanistan Protection Cluster (APC) Protection Analysis Update Q4, Feb 2022.

countries such as Turkey or Greece. Afghans face human rights violations and protection risks nearly every step of the way, with transit hubs and border areas posing some of the greatest threats.²

Maku, Iranian-Turkish Border Area

Nargina* was her daughter’s age when the Taliban first came into power in 1996, and was overcome with panic and disbelief as she watched the group retake control of the capital city last August. Her husband is a mechanic in Kabul tasked with repairing private cars, including the ironclad armored vehicles of the previous government. His mere distant connection with the former regime has incited very real fears of retaliation, as the general amnesty announced by Taliban leadership has not been fully respected. No longer feeling safe, the family attempted to migrate to Turkey three months ago, where they planned to join relatives who had already settled in the central province of Aksaray.

Nargina’s family sold nearly everything they owned, including their 300 square meter mud-walled home in Kabul to prepare for the journey, where they would be joined by three other extended families – making the group a total of 17 members, the youngest, a six-month-old girl. The families first made their way towards the South-West corner of Afghanistan, where their plan quickly began to unravel as they were unable to enter Iran through Ziranj, a major border crossing with a booming smuggling business as thousands of Afghans try to escape the country illegally – with well over a third of Afghans reporting a lack of civil documentation according to recent protection monitoring findings.³ This meant that they would first have to cross through Pakistan via a dangerous and laborious mountain pass, where Pakistani authorities are attempting to build a 2,670-kilometre fence to prevent illegal traffic. The group moved through darkness and below-freezing temperatures with the help of Baluch⁴ smugglers, staying hidden during the day in what was often a crowded single room, known as *khwabgah* – a place for sleep – and eating only once per day, with adults sometimes having to skip meals altogether. In five-seater vehicles packed with roughly 15 people each, the group was transported from Pakistan to Iranshahr, Iran. The entire journey from Afghanistan to Iran took a total of nine days, including a harrowing 24 hours on foot.



Photo 3. A group of workers wait for Afghan deportees to cross the border to transport their belongings for a small fee.

² MMC Asia 4Mi Snapshot, Afghans en route to Turkey: Access to critical information, May 2022.

³ Afghanistan Protection Cluster (APC), Quarterly Protection Analysis Update Q4, March 2022.

⁴ Group of tribes speaking the Baluchi language and estimated at about five million inhabitants in the province of Balochistān in Pakistan and also neighbouring areas of Iran and Afghanistan.

The families anxiously waited for the next chain of smugglers in Maku, a city in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran approximately 20 kilometers from the Turkish border. Two weeks later, at around midnight, the smugglers arrived to transport the group to their final destination: Turkey. When they stepped out of the vehicle, they were instead met by a group of aggressive criminals who took their money and phones and bound their hands behind their backs with thick rope. The families were forcibly divided into two groups, with one of Nargina’s daughters separated from the rest of the family. For four excruciating days, the men suffered extreme physical torture, which was recorded on the families’ cellphones and sent to relatives through WhatsApp alongside a Saderat bank account number and ransom demand of the equivalent of USD \$1,125 per person⁵ in Iranian Rial. Nargina’s husband was beaten so badly, that a bone in his left leg snapped.

“They told us, you are in hell and there is no God to save you. They used a lighter to heat the blade of a knife and pressed it into the [men’s] arms, beating and torturing them right in front of us, in front of the children. Every moment we thought they could kill us. There was no hope of ever escaping.”

On the fifth day at the peak of dawn, the families were put in a car and drove for hours through vast Iranian desert. Nargina explains her fears that they would be killed; their bodies left in the cold. What she didn’t know at the time, was that relatives of the four families had paid a combined total of USD \$18,000 to the kidnappers – more than the average annual salary in Iran⁶. While the car was still in motion, the driver shouted at the families to jump out. Hours later, the families were later met by authorities and a hefty fine for entering the country illegally, and were deported back to Afghanistan.

“My message to anyone thinking about crossing illegally is don’t do it. You are playing with your life. We lost everything – all of our personal documents were stolen. We have no money, no house, no peace of mind. We have nightmares when we sleep that will always stay with us.”

Like Nargina, some Afghans report a lack of access to reliable information in order to make informed decisions about their movement plans – unaware of the extent of risks, and prevalence of these risks, along the journey. However, as the situation in Afghanistan becomes increasingly desperate, illegal migration to neighboring countries and beyond is becoming even more prevalent and widespread than before⁷, with growing numbers of Afghans returning home with their own horrific accounts of human suffering, exploitation, and abuse. According to a [recent survey](#) conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Afghans anticipate a wide range of potential problems to be encountered enroute to their destinations, including concerns about deportation (93%), hunger and thirst (87%), and detention (83%). High shares of interviewees also mentioned a lack of shelter, robbery, financial extortion, physical abuse, and death. Many are aware of the potential life-threatening risks along the way, but consider staying in Afghanistan as its own death sentence.

Kuzkunar District, Nangarhar Province

Kuzkunar, commonly known as Khava, is a rural district in the north of Nangarhar province with an alarming number of inhabitants who have been forcibly displaced across other parts of Afghanistan or pushed to attempt dangerous and informal travel routes to neighboring countries. According to the head of the district’s Youth Council, roughly 70% of men and boys from Kuzkunar have attempted or plan to leave the country, with many having returned after numerous unsuccessful - and often traumatic - attempts. In June 2022, in Dagan Daman village, 20 men and boys from the district gathered around to share their stories of cross-border movements, and the cruelty they faced along the way.

Matiullah,* who is in his early thirties, first attempted to travel to Turkey six months ago, as he was a member of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and feared for his life under IEA rule. Matiullah spent days in the mountains of Pakistan’s Baluchistan province with only a small bag and little food and water, until he was smuggled into Iran in the trunk of an old sedan with four other passengers. A few weeks later, Matiullah and three other men attempted to cross into Turkey late at night.

⁵ Excluding the 6-month old.

⁶ \$17,678 USD, June 2022.

⁷ IOM DTM Afghanistan Emergency Event Tracking, September 1 2021 – October 5 2021.

“The Iranian police released dogs on us. They were barking so loud and charged right towards us. It was terrifying, but we got away.”

While Matiullah was able to escape the dogs with only minor injuries, the group was soon captured by criminals on the Iranian side of the border. Matiullah and the three other men were beaten with a metal pole and then locked in a small latrine – about one square meter in size – where they were trapped for over 24 hours without food or water. The space was so cramped that the four men had to take turns standing and squatting, with the smell of sewage and lack of air making them fall sick one-by-one. Instructed on exactly what to say, including that they would be killed otherwise, the men were forced to contact their families to send the equivalent of approximately USD \$650 each in Iranian Rial, and were then let go, only to be deported back to Afghanistan shortly after.



Photo 2. A group of men and boys meet with DRC staff in Kuzkunar district, June 2022.

Farjad,* only 20-years-old, also traveled to Turkey in 2021 after the Taliban took control of the country. While attempting to cross the border through Iran, he was shot in the arm by border police. Four other Afghans were also injured; two, shot dead.

“I didn’t know them before, but we came to know each other on the journey. They were both from Khost province. We had no choice but to leave their bodies in the desert. This will always haunt me.”

After the shooting, the smugglers forced the passengers out of the car and left them in the desert. Farjad was then captured by authorities, and spent 10 days in the hospital before being transferred to a prison where he would spend more than three weeks before being deported back to Afghanistan. Revealing his 8-inch scar on his upper arm, Farjad explains that he is planning to go back to Turkey, describing life in today’s Afghanistan as a slow death.

Jammas,* the eldest of the group in his mid-sixties, spent three nights at the Spin Boldak border with his family until they were able to cross into Pakistan with a bribe. He explains how he was beaten on both sides of the border by authorities, but that the real danger began with life as an undocumented refugee in Pakistan. Jammas found work in Pakistan at a brick factory, and was given an advanced payment by his employer to cover medical treatment for his sick daughter. He would quickly discover that this loan came with a high price – in grueling conditions, Jammas was forced to work from 3:00 am – 7:00 pm, often without any food or breaks, and was struck throughout the day by the site supervisor.

Abbas* found himself in a similar situation earlier this year, after being captured by Pakistan authorities while also crossing through Spin Boldak. As a supposed payment for entering the country without proper documentation, Abbas was taken to a military camp where he was forced to work for free from morning to night, carrying heavy military equipment and tools from vehicles for a couple of weeks before he was let go.

The group shared an extensive range of violations along their journeys, including being subject to physical beatings and psychological trauma, sustaining gunshot wounds, being robbed of all of their money and belongings, as well as experience exploitation and abuse at the hands of criminal elements. What they described was survival migration; people fleeing their country of origin because of an existential threat for which there is no domestic remedy. Despite the horrors and traumas faced by every individual there, almost all of them plan to attempt to cross the border again sometime soon, with one man leaving the gathering midway – the vehicle to transport him to the Pakistan border had arrived.

“Of course we are scared to go, we know better by now but have no other options. What does it say about the situation here, when risking our lives is the best way to survive?”

- 38-year-old, who has made five attempts to reach Turkey so far, interviewed in Kuzkunar district



Founded in 1956, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest international NGO, with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC is present in close to 40 countries and employs 9,000 staff globally.

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