

Pakistan's disastrous floods uproot refugees and citizens

Afghan refugees are among the 33 million people in Pakistan affected by torrential rains and flooding.

By Qaiser Khan Afridi in Nowshera, Pakistan | 02 September 2022 | [Español](#) | [Français](#) | [عربي](#)



Bahadur Khan and his family had only minutes to flee their home in Pakistan's north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province before it was swept away by flooding. © UNHCR/Usman Ghani

“That night was unforgettable as our house was inundated within minutes. We had no other option but to leave at once,” says Bahadur Khan, one of over 2,000 Afghan refugees living in Khashgi Refugee Village in Pakistan’s north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Bahadur and his family had weathered the torrential downpours of Pakistan’s annual monsoon since its onset in June, but he was not prepared for the dramatic surging of the Kabul River last Saturday. The waters broke through a nearby embankment in the early hours of the morning and he had only 10 minutes to evacuate his loved ones to the safety of higher ground before his home was swept away.

It was the third time the 60-year-old grandfather has been uprooted in his life. “We fled Afghanistan when civil war broke out in the early 1990s. Then I had to move again when my house was completely destroyed after floods washed it away in 2010,” he says.

Pakistan has suffered regular flooding in the past, but this year has been on a different scale, closer to the catastrophic floods of 2010 that left almost 2,000 people dead. This year’s monsoon floods have killed over 1,100 people already, while around 33 million have been affected by torrential rains and flash floods that have left 6.4 million people in need of shelter as well as food and other essentials.

Pakistan is home to 1.3 million Afghan refugees, over 421,000 of whom live in the worst affected districts. Many others have come to Pakistan for medical care, to study and work, or to temporarily find safety, or transit to another country.

Originally from Kunar province in Afghanistan, Bahadur earns his living herding livestock and is an elder in his community. He worries about the future, especially educating his 11 children.

The floods have brought more pressing concerns. For now, he is living close to his partially washed-away village. “When we left our homes, we went to the nearby higher grounds where we spent the night in the open,” he says. The next morning, staff from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, arrived and provided a tent.

“We are thankful for the tents and shelter, and a mosquito net, but there are lots of other problems that we are facing here,” Bahadur says. “We are sleeping on the ground. We don’t have clean drinking water or medical facilities, we can’t get food on a daily basis, and we struggle to feed our families. We need food for living,” he stresses. “We even need food for our cattle.”



The flooding has uprooted Afghan refugee Bahadur Khan, 60, for the third time. After fleeing Afghanistan’s civil war in the 1990s, his home was completely destroyed by the catastrophic floods of 2010. © UNHCR/Usman Ghani

The impacts of climate change do not discriminate between citizens and refugees. Across Pakistan there are countless stories of people whose lives have been upended by the catastrophic flooding of recent weeks.

Only a few hundred metres from Bahadur's refugee village, local Pakistani communities have also been devastated. Saleem Khan, a 25-year-old farmer, is among them.

The flood waters came in the dead of night, rushing through his home at 3am. "We were so scared. We never saw such a scary night. We were wondering how we would cross these waters, but my father calmed us down. 'Don't get frightened,' he said. Then we started moving to the higher ground. We left everything behind. Our rooms were totally damaged," recalls Saleem.

The UNHCR team provided the displaced citizens with shelter too. "But we need solar lights and fans," says Saleem. "We don't have a bed and I'm worried because there are snakes. And we don't have food so we can't eat."

Saleem says the sugar cane and corn crops that are his only source of income have been destroyed by the floods, robbing him of the 600,000 to 700,000 rupees (US\$3,000) he would earn in a year, even as new costs mount. "Now that our house is damaged, we have to rebuild. It would be difficult to live for a long period in this tent," he says.

Both Saleem and Bahadur — citizen and refugee — now live in the same location and share the same hardships.

The Government of Pakistan has initiated a response and appealed for international support as the floods continue to devastate many parts of the

country. According to government figures, over 287,000 houses have been destroyed, and a further 662,000 homes damaged, while 735,000 livestock have perished and 2 million acres of crops are inundated. There has also been significant damage to communications infrastructure.

UNHCR has already provided 10,000 tents and thousands of other relief items such as plastic tarpaulins, sanitary products, cooking stoves, blankets, solar lamps, and sleeping mats. Thousands of sacks have also been distributed to help households build sandbag defences around their homes. The assistance is being given to host communities as well as refugee villages.

Much more is needed. As part of a coordinated response alongside Pakistan's National Disaster Management Committee (NDMA) and other aid agencies, UNHCR has been delivering emergency relief items in the worst hit western areas of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces since July, drawing from its existing stockpiles for Afghan refugees and host communities. Support is also being extended to Sindh province as the scale of needs there mount.

“What’s urgently needed is quick humanitarian funding,” says Gayrat Ahmadshoev, UNHCR’s Head of Sub-Office in Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. “Pakistani communities and the refugees hosted in Pakistan say these are the worst floods they’ve seen in living memory.”

A UN funding appeal issued in support of the government-led response is seeking US\$160 million to help more than 5 million people in the worst-affected areas to cover the costs of essentials such as food, education, shelter, reuniting families and protecting separated children.