European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

Iran

Introduction

Four decades of conflict in Afghanistan have led to massive displacement of Afghans into the neighbouring countries. Iran alone has received around three million Afghan refugees. Close to one million of these refugees have been registered by the Iranian government; they are therefore afforded protection and are eligible for assistance. However, up to two million displaced Afghans remain undocumented and have neither formal legal status nor access to assistance. Up to 800 000 of them are considered to be extremely vulnerable.

What are the needs?

The majority of Afghan refugees reside among host communities, whereas less than 3 percent live in 18 refugee settlements. Without legal status, undocumented Afghan refugees live under the permanent threat of deportation and have difficulty accessing basic services such as healthcare, education, and legal assistance. However, the current combined resources of the Iranian refugee agency (BAFIA) and international donors cannot subsidise access to healthcare services for all of the most vulnerable registered refugees.

The official decree of May 2015 allowed all children in Iran, regardless of their legal status, to access formal education. In the 2017-2018 academic year, 420 000 Afghan children (103 000 of whom are undocumented) registered for primary and secondary school, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

However, even if education is free, there are still many barriers to access: undocumented children need to pay for an enrolment card and books, and overcome social and linguistic obstacles. Children often speak only Pashtun and are sometimes the breadwinners of their families. Having children in school affords undocumented families a certain protection from deportation, but it still does not improve their access to other basic services.
How are we helping?

In April 2019, the European Commission announced €1.2 million in response to the devastating floods that affected northern and south-western parts of Iran. The new funding will support humanitarian partners, including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in delivering relief assistance through the distribution of cash which will allow the most-affected to cover their most urgent needs.

In 2018, the European Union committed €5 million to ensure the delivery of vital assistance, including protection and access to basic services such as education and healthcare, to Afghan refugees in Iran.

Currently, the EU’s assistance in Iran is channelled through three international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and one UN agency that support BAFIA in providing a basic package of assistance to the most vulnerable refugees. Initially, this was largely aimed at providing registered refugees with protection, shelter, water and sanitation, food security, and access to basic education and healthcare services. Support includes the provision of cash to the most vulnerable refugees to allow them to pay the premium for the government-run universal public health insurance scheme. This enables documented Afghans to access the comprehensive healthcare package that already exists for Iranian nationals.

Particular efforts have also been made to help the children of undocumented families take advantage of the access to education granted by the Supreme Leader in 2015. This involves assistance to get children into school, keep them enrolled, and help their families obtain alternative sources of income.

In 2017, the EU provided almost €10 million in humanitarian assistance. Up to half of this amount targeted the integration of Afghan refugee children into the Iranian education system. The European Commission’s Directorate General for Development has also included Iran as one of the beneficiaries of a €200 million package to help countries in the region address the issue of chronic displacement. Furthermore, the UN Refugee Agency and the European Commission have provided a platform for Iran to highlight the plight of Afghan refugees to EU Member States and other potential donors.

Since 1997, the EU has funded humanitarian projects targeting Afghan refugees in Iran, providing a total of more than €52 million in humanitarian aid, as well as responding to natural disasters. In the past, the EU also provided humanitarian help in the relief efforts after the 1997, 2002, and 2003 earthquakes. In April 2016, the EU and Iran agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation in support of better prevention, detection, and response to natural disasters.