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UNICEF Afghanistan

CROSS BORDER CONFLICT / TENSION

Flash Update #2

26 March 2026

Key Highlights

- **The Torkham border crossing with Pakistan has reportedly reopened for the return of Afghan nationals.** Humanitarian actors, including UNICEF and partners - as part of the Afghanistan Border Consortium, are preparing to support children and families at reception points. UNICEF continues to advocate that any returns must be safe, voluntary and carried out with children's protection and wellbeing at the centre.

- **Returns from Pakistan are already significant and could rise further** following the reopening of the Torkham border point. OCHA reports that more than **160,000 Afghans** have returned from Pakistan so far this year, while Pakistan is estimated to host around **1.92 million Afghans**, including documented and undocumented populations[1].

- **Afghanistan is facing a fast-evolving, multi-layered crisis driven by conflict-related internal displacement linked to cross-border hostilities** with Pakistan, continued and potentially rising returns from Pakistan, and the risk of a large-scale influx **from Iran of up to 2 million people**. These shocks are unfolding on top of one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with 21.9 million people, including 11.6 million children, in need of assistance in 2026.

- **Conflict with Pakistan** has already caused civilian casualties, displacement and destruction. Between late February and mid-March, **289 civilian casualties were recorded, including 76 killed and 213 injured**, with women and **children accounting for more than half**. Initial reports indicate around 115,000 people are newly displaced, while verification is ongoing[2].

- A large-scale **influx from Iran remains a major risk**. UNICEF has a contingency plan in place, building on infrastructure and services scaled up during the 2025 return movements, when more than 2 million Afghans returned from Iran.[3]

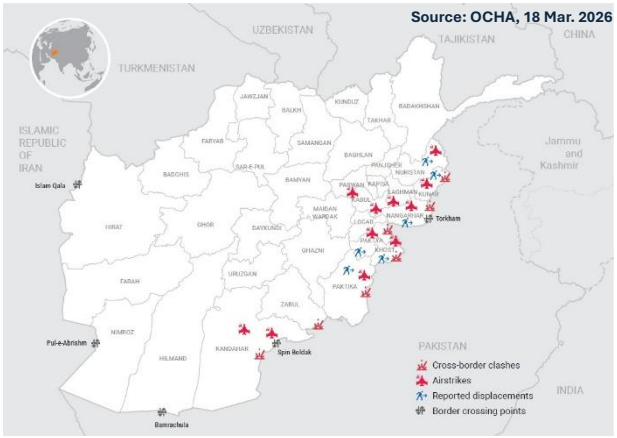
- **UNICEF is responding and preparing across all fronts**, supporting conflict-affected populations, addressing ongoing returns from Pakistan, and reinforcing readiness for potential large-scale returns from Iran – in close coordination with partners through the border consortium.

- In 2026, **UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal (HAC) for Afghanistan is US$949.1 million** to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance and support basic human needs for 12 million people in Afghanistan, including 6.5 million children. The scale of urgent needs demands sustained and adaptable support, **including US$9.0 million to provide lifesaving services and supplies for Afghan returnees from Iran** between March and December 2026. Given supply chain constraints and limited local availability, UNICEF is calling on all partners to **support airlifting of life saving nutrition and medical supplies** which cannot be purchased locally.

[1] Afghanistan Situation Update #2: Humanitarian Impact of Afghanistan-Pakistan Military Escalation (18 March 2026).
[2] OCHA Afghanistan weekly digest. Issue 230.
[3] 2025 Updated Afghanistan Returns Appeal - Sep 2025.

Background Information

Afghanistan is facing a deepening humanitarian crisis as intensified cross-border hostilities with Pakistan since late February continue to drive displacement, civilian casualties and **widespread destruction of homes and essential basic service infrastructure** in already fragile areas. The situation remains highly fluid and rapidly evolving, as conflict dynamics, border developments and population movements continue to shift. These developments come at a time when the country is also grappling with sustained returns from neighbouring countries and the growing likelihood of further large-scale arrivals, placing additional pressure on vulnerable communities and overstretched basic services.



Between **26 February and 17 March**, **289 civilian casualties** were recorded in Afghanistan, including 76 people killed and 213 injured. **Women and children account for more than half** of those affected, including 104 children and 59 women. Initial reports indicate that around 115,000 people have been newly displaced by the ongoing cross-border fighting. As of 17 March, humanitarian partners had verified approximately 40,000 displaced people (around 5,600 families) across 77 villages and settlements, while verification remains ongoing. This comes on top of around 49,000 people still displaced following the August 2025 earthquake in eastern Afghanistan, further compounding vulnerabilities in already affected areas.

The impact extends beyond displacement. **Damage to housing, basic infrastructure and service delivery points is constraining access to essential services**, particularly in hard-to-reach border areas. **Essential services are already under strain**: 16 nutrition sites were suspended in the past week, while insecurity continues to disrupt education, with 135 community-based education classes and 233 temporary learning spaces not operational, leaving thousands of children without safe access to learning. UNICEF-supported health facilities continue to serve as key treatment points for people injured by the fighting, operating under increasing pressure.

The conflict is also triggering **renewed displacement** among already vulnerable populations. Residents of makeshift camps established after the 2025 **eastern region earthquake** have been forced to flee again due to insecurity, often to areas where services are limited and conditions are increasingly precarious. Many families have few viable options for return, as homes in their areas of origin remain damaged or destroyed, raising concerns over overcrowding and heightened risks of communicable disease outbreaks.

Families displaced by the earthquake in eastern Afghanistan prepare to leave displacement camps as conflict in nearby areas forces them to move again. (c) UNICEF

At the same time, the situation must be viewed in the context of **continued returns from Pakistan and the risk of large-scale returns from Iran**, which could significantly increase humanitarian needs in border areas and places of return.

The Torkham border crossing was reportedly reopened on 26 March for Afghan returnees, and initial reports indicate that a limited number of individuals have crossed back into Afghanistan. While movements remain low at this stage, there are concerns that larger numbers of Afghans may be waiting to return, pointing to the potential for a rapid increase in arrivals. With possible movements in the order of **millions of people**, response capacities are being reinforced to prepare for a potential surge.

Preparedness and Response

UNICEF is working with humanitarian partners, including OCHA, sector stakeholders and local de facto authorities, to assess needs and support the response to conflict-affected populations and areas of return, while closely monitoring a highly fluid and rapidly evolving situation.

UNICEF partners are already positioned at reception facilities, located 2 kilometres from the Torkham border crossing, to provide life-saving services such as primary health care, vaccination, nutrition screening, safe water, hygiene support and child protection upon arrival. Emergency supplies have been pre-positioned across key locations to enable a rapid scale-up of response.

As part of the border consortium, UNICEF is working with UN agencies and partners to ensure coordinated and complementary services across entry points. At the same time, UNICEF is preparing for a possible increase in returns from Iran, alongside continued returns from Pakistan, with contingency plans in place to scale up support in border areas and places of return.

At the Torkham crossing point with Pakistan, a staff member from a UNICEF partner speaks with newly returned Afghans. ©UNICEF

This preparedness builds on systems established during the 2025 return movements and maintained in adapted form. With the potential for movements in the order of millions of people, UNICEF is reinforcing its capacity to respond rapidly and at scale.

RESPONSE TO COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY THE CONFLICT WITH PAKISTAN

Health and Polio

At the initial escalation of cross border hostilities, health response efforts were rapidly mobilized within 24 hours. UNICEF-supported health facilities continued to serve as key treatment points, enabled by pre-positioned emergency supplies across the Central, Eastern and Southern Regions.

Access constraints in hard-to-reach areas have required adaptive delivery approaches. On 22 March, UNICEF airlifted one tonne of essential medicines and nutrition supplies through its HER partners to eastern Nuristan, in coordination with the local authorities, to sustain life-saving services in areas cut off by ongoing conflict.

Following the reopening of the **Torkham border on 26 March**, UNICEF and partners are positioned at reception facilities to support returning populations with primary health care, vaccination and referral services as movements resume.

UNICEF-supported health facility at the Omari Camp reception centre near Torkham border preparing for Afghan returnees' arrival. © UNICEF

In the southern region, UNICEF supported immunization services at Spin Boldak reception centre, reaching 317 children with Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG), 1,319 individuals with pentavalent vaccine, and 1,079 children with measles vaccination. Emergency medicines have been distributed to cover approximately 50,000 patients, with additional capacity through Interagency Emergency Health Kits for 25,000 patients and 100 surgical kits supporting up to 5,000 procedures.

Efforts to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases continue at key entry points. Since January 2026, over 9,400 people have been reached through health education sessions at Takhtapul Reception Centre, supporting increased vaccine uptake, while thousands of returnees have received polio vaccination and related services.

Nutrition

Children's nutrition remains a critical concern in conflict-affected and border areas, where displacement and access constraints increase the risk of acute malnutrition among children and pregnant and breastfeeding women. UNICEF and partners continue to sustain essential services across the Eastern, Central and Southern Regions.

Nutrition supplies have been pre-positioned in border districts to support treatment, infant and young child feeding counselling and continuity of services. In the southern region, services remain operational at Spin Boldak and Bahramcha border points, where partners continue screening, treatment and preventive support for children and women. To date, **3,520 children under five** have been screened for malnutrition, with **162 enrolled in treatment for severe acute malnutrition and 109 for moderate acute malnutrition**. In addition, **444 pregnant and lactating women** were screened, with **109 receiving nutrition support services**.

UNICEF-supported health workers at the Omari Camp reception centre near Torkham border discuss preparations for returnees' arrival. © UNICEF

In the east, since the onset of cross-border tensions, UNICEF has delivered **2,000 cartons of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF)** to partners in Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman. **No supply gaps have been reported**, and no major shortages are expected through mid-April, with supply pipelines being reinforced to ensure continuity.

Access constraints persist in hard-to-reach areas such as Kamdesh and Barg-i-Matal in Nuristan, where nutrition risks remain high. Mobile health and nutrition teams have been deployed to support displaced populations in Kunar and Nangarhar, ensuring continued service delivery.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

UNICEF, together with WASH Cluster partners, continues to provide emergency water, sanitation and hygiene services to conflict-affected families, while sustaining support to communities impacted by the 2025 eastern region earthquake. In Kunar **892 displaced families** received hygiene kits, with a further **1,200 kits under distribution** and **1,000 kits pre-positioned**. Additional support reached **144 returning families** in Dewagal Valley. UNICEF continues to support WASH services for approximately **16,430 people** in remaining displacement camps, alongside ongoing hygiene promotion to reduce disease risks.

UNICEF partner in eastern Afghanistan distributing hygiene kits and family kits to conflict-displaced families in Khost. © UNICEF

In the Central Region, supplies sufficient for **77,000 people** have been pre-positioned, with distributions already underway in Khost, reaching **756 people**.

In the Southern Region, WASH services at border points and reception facilities continue at scale, with capacity to reach over **200,000 people**. To date, **13,445 returnees** have accessed safe water, sanitation and WASH supplies, while **10,084** have benefited from hygiene promotion. In addition, **507 families (2,621 individuals)** received targeted assistance, including vulnerable groups such as **persons with disabilities (160)** and **female-headed households (256)**.

Child Protection

Children affected by conflict, displacement and cross-border movements face heightened protection risks, including family separation, psychosocial distress and exposure to violence. UNICEF and partners continue to deliver child protection services across affected areas, focusing on psychosocial support, case management, interim care, and family tracing and reunification for unaccompanied and separated children.

In the eastern region, **830 individuals** – including **559 children and 271 caregivers** – received psychosocial support. In addition, **739 individuals** were reached with child rights and Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) messaging. Child-friendly spaces remain operational across affected districts, with **four additional spaces planned** to expand coverage, while programmes targeting returnee populations are being scaled up.

In the southern region, UNICEF and partners are responding to both conflict-related displacement and return movements. A joint response in Zabul supported displaced families with essential assistance. Along key return routes, services are being delivered at scale: **4,400 children** have received psychosocial support and related services, while **3,245 women and girls** have been reached with gender-based violence awareness. Support to unaccompanied and separated children remains a priority. A total of **334 children** have received case management, including interim care and family tracing and reunification, ensuring safe return to their families where possible.

Child protection monitoring continues across affected areas to identify risks, document violations and ensure timely referral and response.

Education

Conflict and displacement are disrupting children's access to learning in border areas, while continued and potential increases in return movements are placing additional pressure on already fragile education services in areas of arrival and return. UNICEF and Education Cluster partners are working to restore and expand learning opportunities for affected children.

In conflict-affected areas, partners have resumed **125 community-based education classes and 466 temporary learning spaces** in coordination with local de facto authorities. However, **135 classes and 233 temporary learning spaces remain suspended** due to insecurity, leaving thousands of children without safe access to education.

At the same time, UNICEF is scaling up services for returnee children. In the eastern region, **105 temporary learning spaces** have been established in Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman, reaching **3,360 students, including 1,586 girls**. Overall, **605 temporary learning spaces** are supporting emergency education activities, alongside the distribution of teaching and learning materials and child-friendly spaces.

Meeting increasing needs, **1,500 returnee children** have already accessed education through temporary learning spaces, with additional capacity being expanded **60 new TLS already established for 1,800 children** and a further **100 TLS, serving 3,000 children** being installed. More than **2,500 children** have also been registered through the Takhtapol education helpdesk and provided with education support and learning materials.

Community Engagement and Accountability to Affected Populations

Community engagement and accountability to affected populations remain central to UNICEF's response, ensuring that communities are informed, able to access services and provide feedback on their needs and priorities. During the first quarter of 2026, a total of 72,933 individuals - including 56,430 men and 16,563 women, among them 656 persons with disabilities – were reached through awareness sessions in the southern region. These sessions focused on life-saving messages related to health, immunization, nutrition, WASH, child protection and education, supporting informed decision-making and service uptake among affected populations.

UNICEF and partners are also strengthening feedback and referral mechanisms. During the reporting period, 835 individuals – including 541 women and 294 men – shared feedback and requests through community engagement and feedback centres, primarily seeking information on available services and assistance.

To support access to services, social mobilizers accompanied 16,936 returnees – including 5,994 women and 10,942 men, among them 29 persons with disabilities – to service delivery points, facilitating referrals and helping ensure that vulnerable individuals can access the support they need.

These efforts are critical in ensuring that response activities remain responsive, inclusive and aligned with the needs and priorities of affected communities, particularly in a rapidly evolving context.

AFGHAN RETURNEES FROM IRAN

Preparedness and Response

Alongside the response to conflict-affected populations and continued returns from Pakistan, UNICEF continues to prepare for a possible increase in arrivals from Iran. **While no major changes have been observed in recent days**, preparedness efforts are being maintained and strengthened in anticipation of potential shifts in return movements.

This readiness builds on systems and services that UNICEF and partners scaled up during higher return movements in 2025 and maintained in adapted form as arrivals later declined. As part of the Border Consortium, UNICEF is working closely with UN agencies, humanitarian partners and relevant authorities to **align services, strengthen coordination, and ensure efficiency and complementarity of the response** at border points, reception facilities and in areas of return.

UNICEF continues to support life-saving services for returnees through health, nutrition, WASH, education and child protection interventions. In the western region, this includes vaccination services for children crossing through border points, including measles, oral polio and inactivated polio vaccines, alongside nutrition screening, infant and young child feeding counselling, referral and treatment support for children under five and pregnant and breastfeeding women. UNICEF also supports water supply and sanitation services at reception and transit facilities to ensure safe and dignified conditions for families arriving.

Child protection services remain a core component of the response. UNICEF-supported partners provide identification, screening and assistance for unaccompanied and separated children, including interim care and family tracing and reunification. Across both the Western and Southern Regions, UNICEF and partners continue to support returnee families through integrated services at reception and transit facilities, while maintaining readiness to scale up rapidly should return numbers increase.

Western Region

In the Western Region, UNICEF continues to support returnees at border and transit locations in close coordination with WHO, IOM and other partners, delivering integrated services across health, nutrition, WASH, education and child protection.

Immunization services remain a key priority. As of 24 March, 882 children aged 9 months to 10 years have received measles vaccination, while 1,193 children received oral polio vaccine and 917 children received inactivated polio vaccine, supported through UNICEF provision of vaccines, cold chain equipment and essential supplies.

Nutrition services are being delivered alongside health interventions, including screening, referral and treatment. During the reporting period, 779 children under five were screened for malnutrition, with 28 severe acute malnutrition cases and 98 moderate acute malnutrition cases identified and supported. In addition, 230 caregivers received infant and young child feeding counselling, while 451 adolescent girls and lactating women received iron and folic acid supplementation, and 108 pregnant women received multiple micronutrient supplements.

At Islam Qala border point, a UNICEF-supported social worker speaks with a recently returned Afghan adolescent to assess child protection needs and provide support. © UNICEF

UNICEF has also established critical WASH services at Islam Qala Reception Centre, including a solar-powered water supply network and latrine facilities. During the reporting period, an estimated 63,343 returnees benefited from safe water, while 55,891 returnees accessed sanitation services, ensuring safer and more dignified conditions at the reception centre.

Child protection services are fully operational, with 1,277 unaccompanied and separated children identified, screened and supported through interim care and family tracing and reunification services, ensuring protection and safe return for vulnerable children.

In areas of return, UNICEF has scaled up education services, establishing 260 temporary learning spaces across Herat, Badghis and Farah provinces, providing access to learning for 7,800 returnee children. A total of 265 teachers have been equipped with teaching and learning materials and completed specialized training to support quality education delivery. An additional 200 temporary learning spaces are planned to further expand capacity and support the integration of returnee children into the formal education system.

Southern Region

In the southern region, UNICEF continues to support returnee and deported families through integrated services at reception and transit facilities, covering health, nutrition, WASH, education, child protection, vaccination and community engagement.

Health services focus on primary health care, immunization and emergency treatment. Emergency medicines distributed to UNICEF-supported facilities are sufficient to cover over 50,000 patients, while immunization services at Milak border reached 2,291 children during the reporting period.

Nutrition services remain integrated within the response. From January through 25 March, a total of 927 children aged 6–59 months received micronutrient powders, 700 children received Vitamin A supplementation and 68 children were dewormed. In addition, 343 pregnant women received multiple micronutrient supplements, while 656 caregivers benefited from infant and young child feeding counselling.

WASH services have provided access to safe water, sanitation services and essential WASH supplies to approximately 67,620 people, complemented by hygiene promotion activities.

Child protection remains a priority. UNICEF and partners have supported 1,920 unaccompanied and separated children through family tracing and reunification across 34 provinces. In addition, more than 6,200 individuals have received psychosocial support and related services, while 2,266 women and girls have been reached with gender-based violence awareness.

Education services are being scaled to support returnee children, with 3,000 children accessing learning through temporary learning spaces and more than 4,000 children registered at Milak border and provided with education support and learning materials.

Community engagement remains central to the response. Since the beginning of 2026, over 33,600 individuals have been reached with life-saving awareness messages, while 8,330 returnees have accessed community engagement and feedback centres to seek information and services.

Next Update: *02 April 2026*

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