

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Smuggling of Refugees and Migrants from Afghanistan

Since April 2020, MMC Asia has been interviewing returned refugees and migrants in Afghanistan to better understand their experiences and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The deteriorating socioeconomic and political situation in Afghanistan, compounded by COVID-19, is increasing pressure on returnees to re-migrate in search of greater safety as well as stable employment to sustain themselves and their families,¹ resulting in an increased demand for smuggler services. While border closures remain in place, journeys have become more dangerous and more expensive as smugglers adapt.

This snapshot on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the smuggling of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan aims to contribute towards building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- Continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on smuggling, with a focus on protection risks;
- Ensure that COVID-19-related border closures do not compromise human rights, monitor the use of force at borders and ensure that the right to seek asylum is upheld;
- Ensure refugees and migrants have access to healthcare and essential services by including them in COVID-19 response plans.

Profile

Information in this snapshot was collected between 2 July and 30 August 2020² in seven provinces of Afghanistan (Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Kunduz, Nangarhar, Kandahar, and Nimruz) as well as three border points (Zaranj, Islam Qala, and Turkham) in Afghanistan. 450 phone interviews were conducted. The majority (86%) of respondents were men. The high number of male respondents is likely due, in part, to a high proportion of returnees overall being men, particularly among those returning from Iran and Pakistan.³ The average age of respondents was 29. Respondents surveyed were primarily Hazara (29%), Tajik (26%), and Pashtun (23%), having attained secondary/high school (38%) or primary (24%) levels of education.

Returning migrants and refugees face increasing financial hardship

Nearly half of respondents (44%) reported that they returned to Afghanistan due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with most (75%, n=97) citing job loss as their main reason for return. Of those interviewed, 33% were deported, 32% returned independently and 26% were assisted by UN/IOM.

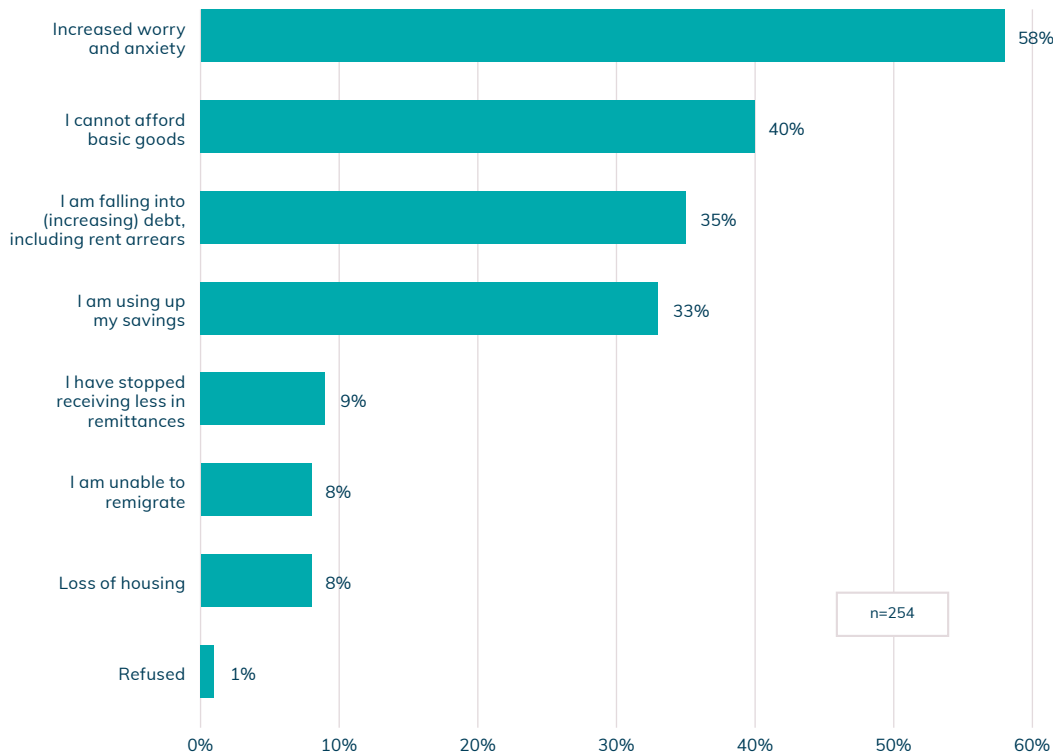
Many returning migrants and refugees have faced difficulties and challenges in securing an income upon return to Afghanistan due to lockdowns, ongoing movement restrictions and an already failing economy.⁴ Around half of all respondents surveyed (52%, n=450) reported that they had lost some form of income as a result of COVID-19. This is most frequently causing increased worry and anxiety (58%) and the inability to afford basic

1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/covid-19-creates-new-challenges-migrants-afghanistan-and-abroad>

2 MMC Asia moved into a new data collection phase in July focusing on the longer-term impact of the pandemic on returnees in Afghanistan including smuggling, protection risks, and migration intentions.
3 According to [UNHCR's Border Monitoring Updates 23 – 20 August](#), the female-male ratio of returnees from Iran was estimated at 1:5.
4 See <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/coronavirus-threatens-push-afghan-returnees-deeper-pov-erty>

needs including food, water and shelter (40%), see Figure 1. Further, 35% reported falling into increasing debt and 33% reported using up their savings during the pandemic.

Figure 1. What impact has this loss of income had?

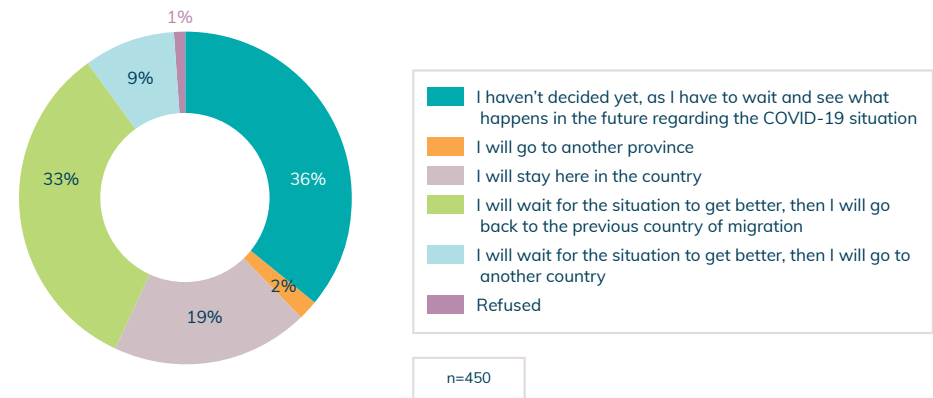


Continued economic uncertainty may increase pressure to re-migrate irregularly in search of opportunities

With the gradual reopening of the informal sectors in neighboring countries, including Iran, it is expected that many will seek to remigrate in search of job opportunities as the economic situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen.⁵ When asked about their future migration intentions, responses from participants were mixed, see Figure 2.

Overall, 42% reported that they were planning to migrate once the COVID-19 situation improved, with most hoping to return to their previous country of migration (33%). 36% reported that they were not certain. Only 19% reported that they intended to stay in Afghanistan.

Figure 2. What is your plan for the future?



"Prices have doubled or tripled since the lockdown started. I have already spent most of my savings and cannot go outside to work. There is no chance of going back to Pakistan for work, as the border is closed. I'm really worried about the future..."

33-year-old Afghan man returned from Pakistan, interviewed in Nangarhar

⁵ See <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/what-the-covid-19-outbreak-means-for-afghanistans-troubled-economy/>

"I cannot wait any longer for my visa. It seems that they won't start issuing visas until at least the next three-four months... I have to go [back to Pakistan] as my employer called several times and said if I want to keep my job, I have to be there by the end of this month."

32-year-old Afghan man returned from Pakistan, interviewed in Kabul

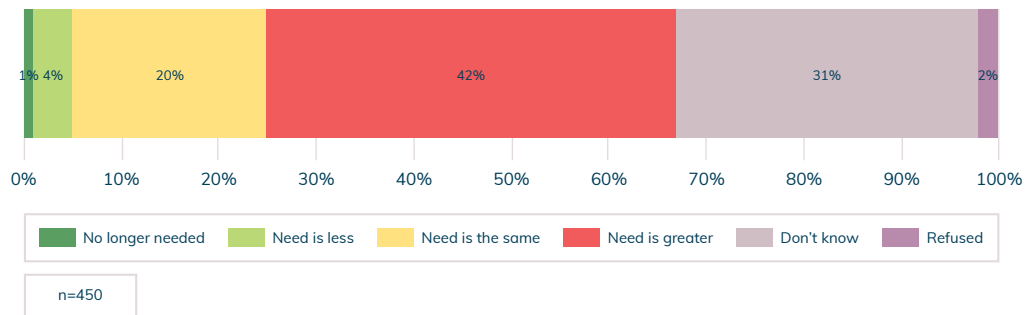
"Many Afghans like me returned from Iran as we lost our jobs. Now most of our workplaces have re-opened. We will go to Iran to get our jobs back."

28-year-old Afghan man returned from Iran, interviewed in Herat

The need for smugglers has increased, and access has become more difficult

With many considering re-migration in the face of continued economic uncertainty in Afghanistan, 42% of respondents reported a greater need for smugglers since the outbreak of the pandemic, see Figure 3. The increased need for smugglers also reflects the reduction in avenues for regular migration for Afghans caused by COVID-19-related border closures, movement restrictions and pauses on visa grants from neighboring countries. For example, Iran, the main country of destination for many interviewed, stopped issuing visas to Afghan nationals in March.⁶

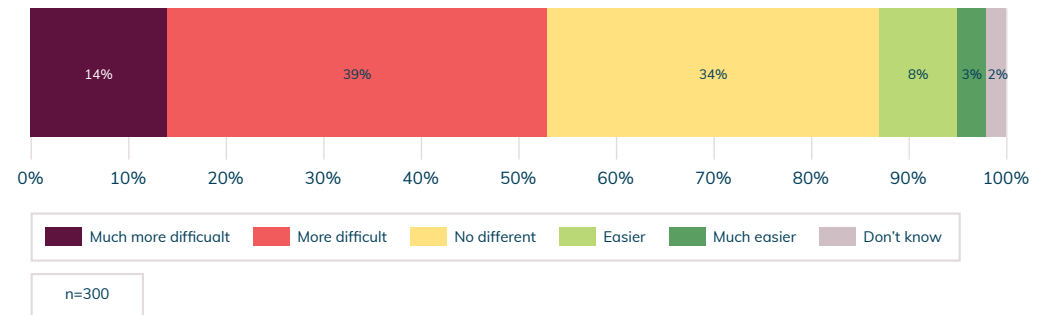
Figure 3. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, how has the need for using smugglers changed?



⁶ See <https://evisa.mfa.ir/en/>

While need is perceived to have increased, at the same time access to smugglers has become more difficult. Among respondents, 53% reported that access to smugglers was either somewhat or much more difficult due to the crisis, see Figure 4. Only 34% reported their access to smugglers was no different to pre-COVID-19 times.

Figure 4. How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted on access to smugglers?



Smugglers' fees have risen

The majority of respondents (70%, n=450) reported that smugglers' fees had gone up since the COVID-19 crisis began. This is reflective in the increase in average fees since 2019. Table 1. indicates the fees charged by smugglers for journeys to Tehran, Istanbul, and Quetta from Zaranj or Spin Boldak, which are higher during quarter 2 and 3 than in the same period in 2019.⁷ For example, smugglers' fees for a journey from Zaranj, Afghanistan, to Tehran, Iran were on average 29% higher in July and August 2020 than in the third quarter of 2019. For the same time period smuggling fees were 25% higher for the journey from Spin Boldak to Quetta in Pakistan, and 7% higher from Zaranj to Istanbul in Turkey.

⁷ Since 2018, MMC Asia has been recording the fees smugglers in Afghanistan are charging for their services. This is done by 4Mi monitors in Zaranj, Islam Qala and Spin Boldak, who ask the fees from, on average, 10 to 15 local smugglers on a monthly basis. The amounts in Table 1. are recorded as an average for each quarter. Prices are reported in USD and Q3 2020 includes averages for July and August only.

Table 1.

Departure	Destination	2019				2020		
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3*
Zaranj	Tehran, Iran	220	240	225	225	250	300	290
Zaranj	Istanbul, Turkey	1630	1500	1600	1500	1500	1700	1710
Spin Boldak	Quetta, Pakistan	80	75	80	85	85	105	100

“The prices are higher [due to COVID] because there are more guards on the borders and more checkpoints en route. So, they [smugglers] need to pay bribes to more people.”

35-year-old Afghan man returned from Iran, interviewed in Nimruz

“I tried to convince some smugglers to take me [back] to Iran with the regular price, but all of them asked for extra money from me and other Hazaras. They say that the militia and insurgents will cause them problems if they have migrants from my ethnic group [Hazaras] in the caravan unless they pay extra bribes.”

22-year-old Afghan man returned from Iran, interviewed in Nimruz

Smugglers are considered to be taking more dangerous routes

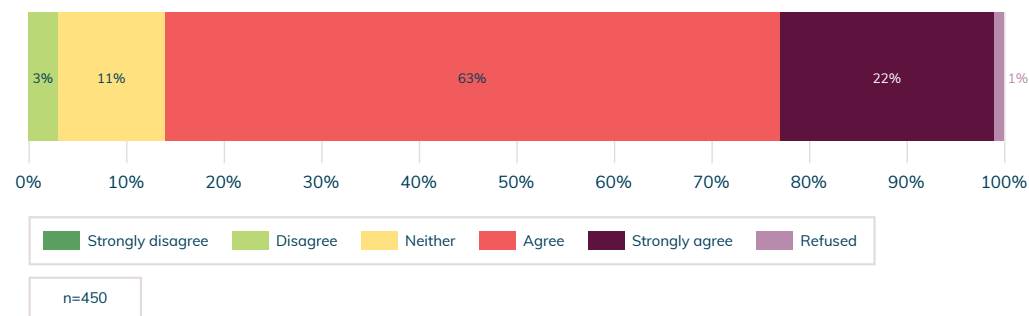
Afghanistan and surrounding countries in the region have maintained border restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19.⁸ As a result of border closures, smugglers are reportedly looking for alternative, often riskier routes to avoid detection from increased border surveillance, which has knock-on effects for the cost of journeys and likelihood of experiencing protection risks en route.⁹ 85% of survey respondents reported that

8 See https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/MPR/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_3_-_travel_restrictions_and_mobility.pdf

9 See <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GIATOC-Policy-Brief-003-Smuggling-COVID-28Apr0930-proof-4.pdf>

smugglers are using more dangerous routes since the pandemic began, see Figure 5.

Figure 5. How much do you agree with the following statement: Smugglers are using more dangerous routes since the COVID-19 crisis began.



“A few days ago, when I talked to the smuggler, he said that he will take us to Iran from Surkh-khak route but other people warned me that going by that route to Iran means three to four days of walking through mountains and difficult passes and it will be like playing with my life.”

28-year-old Afghan man, interviewed in Herat

Harshly policed borders and increased dependency on smugglers means more vulnerability for those en route

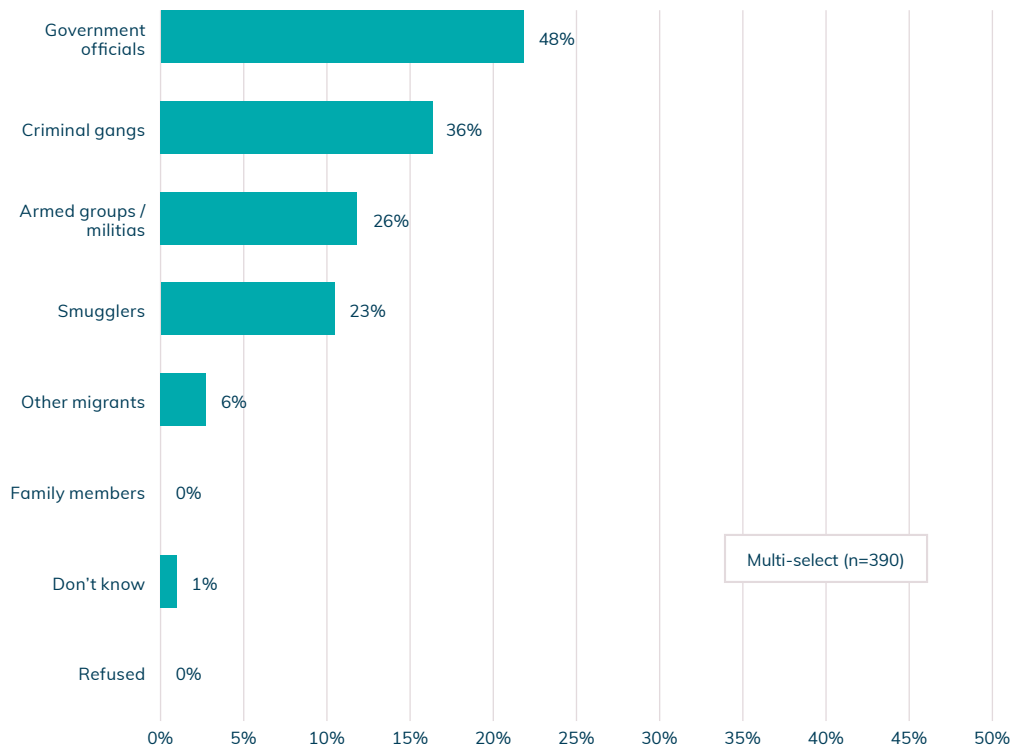
Between January and March 2020, survey respondents (n=469) cited criminal gangs (28%), border guards (22%), armed groups and gangs (22%) and smugglers (20%) as the main perpetrators of protection incidents en route from Afghanistan.¹⁰ However, in data collected since July, 48% of survey respondents reported that government officials were the most likely perpetrators of protection incidents on migration journeys, more than double the figure reported at the beginning of the year (see Figure 6).¹¹ This reflects

10 See <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-the-decision-to-migrate-among-afghans-access-to-information-and-key-influencers/>

11 Please note that 4Mi doesn't provide longitudinal data. This figure is based on interviews conducted in the same locations continuously, with different respondents.

reports of increased violence perpetrated by Iranian border guards, in particular.¹² Given the increased need for smugglers during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also potential that smugglers will be more responsible for protection violations. During this data collection period, 23% of respondents reported that smugglers were likely perpetrators of protection incidents, up from 20% between January and March 2020. The most commonly reported protection incidents reported by respondents included physical violence (31%), death (25%), robbery (22%), and detention (19%).

Figure 6. Who were likely to be perpetrating protection incidents en route?



12 For example, [on 1 May](#), about 50 Afghan migrants crossing into Iran irregularly were beaten and thrown into a river by Iranian border guards. In another incident [in June](#), Iranian police shot at a car carrying Afghan migrants who were being smuggled through Yazd province, sparking a fire which killed at least three Afghans.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands



4Mi & COVID-19

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative](#) (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi