



**A Glance at Health and Treatment  
Conditions of Afghan Asylum Seekers,  
Refugees, and Immigrants in Iran**



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**ORGANIZATION FOR DEFENDING VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE**

**[www.odvv.org](http://www.odvv.org)**

## Foreword

The Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) is a nongovernmental, non-political, and non-profit organization in special consultative status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) and was established in 1988 in Tehran. Due to its membership in a number of international coalitions and networks – including International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) – and in line with its main mission, this organization has always strived to include all groups of society in its working agenda, without discrimination and away from political environments. Therefore, it has offered support to all such groups, including Afghan asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. In order to achieve this goal, the organization has conducted various projects over the past years, both independently and within the framework of numerous bilateral and trilateral agreements, to support such groups. For this end, and to shed more light on the situation of these groups, the ODVV is planning an expert study of conditions that govern Afghan asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in Iran. The main goal is to come up with a complete analysis of their situation in order to provide such groups with better and more effective support.

In the first issue of this analytical booklet, the general conditions of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran and their living conditions are discussed and reviewed and in the second issue of this newsletter, the education of these groups was reviewed. In this issue also their health, hygiene and treatment situations are discussed and reviewed.

## Introduction

Iran has been one of the countries that due to geographical location always been involved with issues related to refugees and asylum-seekers, particularly from Afghanistan. Even though especially in the recent years Iran has been struggling with numerous economic and social issues, nevertheless through the adoption of open-door policies Iran has provided the opportunity for the refugees of Afghanistan to enter the country and let them seek asylum. In fact, since 1979 to-date, Iran has continuously almost been hosting to more than three million refugees and migrants, and at times these figures have exceeded past four million (Sadeghi 2021:101). Although this acceptance existed before the founding of the Islamic Republic, but with the victory of the Islamic revolution the migration of foreign nationals particularly Afghans to Iran escalated.

In spite of the Islamic Republic of Iran's capacity in providing services, the flood of asylum-seekers into Iran particularly following the unplanned exit of Americans from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 and Taliban taking over the country, various infrastructures such as hospitals and health and hygiene services centers in Iran have faced challenges. Furthermore, the living conditions of Afghan refugees in Iran also has been affected by the targeted subsidies, global economic inflation and expansion of international sanctions against Iran which resulted in inflation and as a result a notable rise in cost of goods and various services. In view of the lack of an aid network and other social support measures, the livelihood of refugees, due to low income and lack of access to financial and credit services which are available to

the host community, these refugees become even more vulnerable. These issues put together have resulted in the health and hygiene of Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees and migrants be faced with problems and these problems affect the host community too. Therefore, in this research while reviewing Afghan refugees' access to the health and hygiene system, the existing challenges are also reviewed, and recommendations given.

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## **Afghan nationals' access to the health and medical treatment services in Iran**

From the onset of the arrival of Afghan refugees into Iran, due to a weak health and hygiene system in Afghanistan and the difference of their living system with Iran, transmitting diseases also came into the country and as a result a heavy cost was imposed on the medical treatment system until these diseases were brought under control. Currently also for the prevention of the spread of contractual diseases such a cholera and COVID-19 and without consideration of the residency status of Afghans, medical services are provided to the sick for free.

In the current conditions, besides contractual diseases where everyone including Afghans receive equal treatment as Iranians, one of the most important problems among hospitals and medical treatment centers in Iran

which have always existed is the economic conditions of Afghan refugees and migrants, not having national insurance as well as inability of a notable portion of them in paying treatment costs. According to its guidelines a hospital is obliged to accept patients, but ultimately a notable number of Afghans are not able to pay admission fees, particularly for vital surgeries. This problem led to the Iranian government and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to provide universal insurance for vulnerable refugees. This insurance which in itself is a first in the world began in 2016 and in the current year nearly 120,000 vulnerable refugees have registered in this plan for free. Nonetheless, still a large portion of Afghans have not registered; including the new arrivals and or those refugees that have not been identified as vulnerable. Meanwhile, a part of refugees due to financial reasons have not been able to freely register in insurance plans as well. Therefore, the problem still notably exists.



## **Challenges and solutions for solving Afghan nationals' health and medical treatment problems**

The spread of COVID-19 in and particularly in Iran resulted in Afghan refugees and migrants in being faced with serious challenges in the Iranian medical care system. The COVID-19 pandemic and continued economic downturn in Iran resulted in Afghan refugees and migrants in becoming more vulnerable. Although according to UNHCR the Iranian government continues to generously facilitate the opportunity for refugees access to health and education services and Iran is among the few countries in the world that refugees have the chance to register in national health insurance plan and benefit from urgent state health services in second and third levels just like Iranians ([www.unhcriran.org](http://www.unhcriran.org))



nevertheless, still many refugees, especially new asylum-seekers are faced with numerous problems in the health and medical treatment sector.

For the reduction of refugees' problems in the current year UNHCCR agreed to temporarily increase the number of refugees covered by insurance to 20thousand compared to last year, and as a result the figures for refugees covered by insurance rose to 120thousand in the current year.

The national insurance programme facilitated the free access of COVID-19 patients' hospitalization and medical treatment. All refugees and migrants benefited from free services such as vaccination in the programme also with the payment of surgery, dialysis, radiology, medical tests, and medical treatment services are covered through subsidies.

According to published official data, there are approximately 180,000 women in the fertility age range among refugees, which makes up 18 percent of the total Afghan refugee population in Iran. Out of this 94 percent are refugee mothers regardless of having insurance or not, have been under pregnancy coverage and all received all governmental services like their Iranian counterparts. Also 50,000 under one year old Afghan refugee children have been covered by Iranian government services and get all services such as vaccinations the same as Iranian children. Nearly 100 percent of children have been given vaccination services (Bureau for Aliens & Foreign Immigrants' Affairs - BAFIA).

But unfortunately, Afghan nationals and refugees who even their number is higher than the legal individuals, are denied the free healthcare insurances programme. According to official figures there are 800,000 registered refugees in Iran, the most vulnerable of which (120,000) have been identified for healthcare insurance programme. Furthermore, unofficial figures indicate that 2,300,000 Afghan nationals took part in the new census programme who are not included as refugees. Aside from these figures, also it is estimated that there are between one and one and a half million other Afghan nationals who have not taken part in any census programmes

Aside from 120,000 refugees whose insurance coverage is provided by UNCHR, other refugees with direct payment of insurance fees by themselves, can be included in the healthcare insurance programme. But most of them do not have the means to pay for the insurance. The pandemic's impact on the livelihood of refugees who usually rely on unstable and temporary jobs, is much higher. Most other refugees do not have the means to provide their most vital needs, let alone provide the medical healthcare insurance fees which is estimated to be approximately 40 percent on average of the monthly expenditure of each refugee family (UNHCR).

This matter is so serious that UNHCR has expressed concern lesser and lesser refugees are able to pay insurance fees in the current and upcoming years. This has resulted in the possible rise in the number of diseases not being treated in emergencies, getting loans from loan

sharks or sending their children (mostly under 18) to work to provide medical care costs, and cause further damages to refugees.

This is while Afghan nationals living in Iran who do not have valid residency permits are faced with more serious challenges these individuals are denied citizens' services in most countries of the world, one of which is insurance. Nonetheless in Iran these individuals can to an extent receive immediate and urgent free medical care (i.e. accidents, COVID-19 and other contractual diseases). At the same time primary medical services are accessible to all unregistered nationals and these individuals can through going to health and medical treatment centers receive primary medical services like other Iranians. But in comparison with refugees. Hospital care for this group are available at higher rates compared to refugees and Iranians which creates problems in hospitalization and medical treatment of these individuals. This is issue has also called problems for Iranian hospitals, because in most cases due to their critical health issues, Afghan nationals were forced to be hospitalized and did not have the finances to pay hospital fees and hospitals do not have any leverages to get the fees from the patients this issue created problems for both hospitals and patients, and deepens the gap between the host society and migrant society.

Lately a new programme called medicine assistance has been designed by the government to provide medicines subsidies for people. In this programme as well as Iranian

citizens, Afghan nationals are also included in this support. Foreign nationals who have residency permits can for the establishment of insurance coverage refer to Government Pishkhan Offices and undocumented individuals also with registration of their details and approval of the Interior Ministry can be insured. But in view of problems and shortage of medicines, until this programme shows results, Afghan nationals have no choice but bear a of problems.



Furthermore, with the implementation of the programme, individuals whose residency status is unclear will face problems in health and medical treatment.

In view of refugees' problems and particularly non-refugee Afghans and towards the organization of foreign nationals' health insurance, the Iranian government cabinet according to a law article 70(b)(5) of the Sixth National Development Programme in August 2020, the

“implementation guidelines regarding health insurance coverage for foreign nationals residing in the country” was ratified. The rules of these guidelines on undocumented refugees approved by the Interior Ministry and foreigners who have passports that have one-year visas in them, in accordance with article 5 of the said guidelines “those included in these guidelines are obliged to one hundred percent pay the medical insurance rates to establish health insurance coverage for members of household on a monthly basis. Insurance rights includes the vulnerable through fifty percent from government subsidies and fifty percent from the person who is insured or if possible, from international aid in the form of a group of refugees.” The rates of the insurance rights of eligible individuals in these guidelines according to article 4, every year in the implementation of article 70 of the Sixth Development Plan with the recommendation of the health insurance organization and the cooperation of the Interior Ministry and observation of mechanisms in article 9 of the permanent rules of the national development plans (ratified in 2016) must be approved by the cabinet of ministers (Yaran Association website).

With the decision of the cabinet in 2020 and implementation of the census of undocumented individuals which in the future more migrants will be covered by insurance and benefit from suitable and cheaper medical treatment services.

Another of the challenges which directly or indirectly affects the health and treatment of refugees and Afghan

nationals in Iran is the employment of these individuals in the health sector. Recently in the thesis and certificates of migrant medical students (migrant doctors) in medical sciences universities of Iran a strange sentence has been added. “This certificate is not a permit for receiving membership in the Iranian Medical System Organization and not a work permit inside the country” (E’temad newspaper 2 March 2022). This matter resulted in Afghan students to face ambiguities regarding education in health and future income.

Unfortunately, the laws in this regard have caused a lot of problems, because some of these laws are not enforceable and in some cases their implementation has various repercussions for the country. Dr. Ahmad Shah Ferhat a pediatrics specialist and assistant professor of Mashhad Medical Sciences Children’s Group who is an Afghan national in Iran, says in this regard: “even though Iranian people’s approach and treatment of migrants is good but problems are rooted within the laws, laws that were adopted in the 1950s. But we now live in the 21st Century while the laws from the 50s are still in use, therefore the laws are not suitable with the current conditions and cannot be implemented, to an extent that they cause problems and losses for the host country and migrants.” (ISNA 16 May 2022)

As well as refugees and foreign nationals in Iran have permits to participate in nationwide university entrance exams. But there are various restrictions in this regard for them. For example, even if a young migrant in Iran gets

first place in experienced sciences, still, this person wishes to take the field he or she is interested in they have to pay 80 percent of night school students' fees. Meaning in practice there are no advantages considered for migrant elite students. This means that all migrants who receive medical certificates from medical sciences universities in Iran, they have had to pay expenses. Of course, 80 percent fees of night school students' fees means that in any event the government contributes some of the expenses of these students. The addition of this sentence has caused a lot of problems for these students, because despite years of education in top Iranian medical sciences universities they won't even be accepted in their own countries. The country of origin's health ministry looks at it with suspicion because of this sentence and does not accept their education certificates.

But this sentence and the strange restrictions for migrant post-graduates in Iran shows a bigger picture in the Iranian higher education system which is ignoring the needs of the job market in Iran.

There is a lot of imbalances between the needs of the job market and the expertise of university post-graduates in Iran. On one hand the job market suffers from the shortage of a lot of experts in fields, and on the other hand the higher education system does not train in specialist forces which the job market does not need. Iran suffers from shortage of doctors particularly in regions away from the centre. Millions of people live in remote regions away from the capital and have shortages in specialist medical

forces. According to the Iranian Medical System's High Council public relations in the past year more than 3,000 doctors and nurses have emigrated from Iran.

## **Recommendations**

- Identification of newly arrived Afghan refugees and nationals who meet requirements as refugees: In view of the 800,000 officially registered refugees in Iran, for better and more universal services it is recommended that at least 2.3 million Afghan nationals who have taken part in the census programme also be recognized as refugees. Not only will this result in international organizations to provide services more transparently to them, but also the Iranian government can request further participation from the UN and donor countries (burden sharing).

- Possibility to grant work permits to migrant doctors and nurses in Iran: The granting of work permits for doctors and nurses, particularly those who have been educated in Iranian universities, can be a positive step towards the improvement of the health and medical treatment of Afghan nationals in Iran. In fact, considering the needs of the Iranian job market, and also the various challenges and problems of Afghan nationals living in Iran in the health sector, this action can be an effective step towards lightening the financial burden from the government. The fact that the government and in fact the people of Iran brunt the cost for the training of a doctor and nurse, and then just for being migrant doctors and nurses are not



allowed to work in Iran, indicates the disregard towards the needs of the job market in Iran and the domination of discriminatory views on national interests. The creation of monitoring mechanisms instead of elimination of the problem can be effective in solving the problem.

- Reduction in hospital fees: considering hospital fees are usually higher for foreign nationals than Iranians, but in view of the vulnerability of Afghan nationals in Iran (non-refugees) it is necessary that a mechanism is created so that this group can benefit from fair hospital fees similar to Iranians and refugees.

- Creation of a comprehensive data bank: the creation of a comprehensive data bank regarding the health and medical treatment of Afghan nationals can while identifying problems, to also help the Iranian government make more transparent requests in this regard from the international community.

- Setting comprehensive health programmes: the setting of education programme for Afghan nationals and also presenting simple and comprehensive training for this group is vital. Since the health and medical treatment costs of individuals are closely linked with their health knowledge levels, it is recommended that effective steps are taken towards educating migrants to raise their knowledge and awareness levels on their health so that the creation of care and preventive programmes, as well as reducing treatment costs, will help towards the formation of a healthy migrant community. In view of the

vulnerability of the Afghan community in Iran, their population rise and the ensuing challenges, makes attention towards health and hygiene programmes more urgent and failure to plan and set policies in this regard will create serious economic, social and health problems for Afghan nationals and subsequently the Iranian society.

- Amendment of existing laws: amending and updating of some laws particularly those regarding the enjoyment of education and employment in the health and medical treatment sector and existing services for Afghan nationals in Iran.

## **Conclusion**

The Afghan refugee and migrant population in Iran is the largest refugee and migrant population in Iran. The cultural, religious, and linguistic closes of the two nations on one hand and the particular conditions in Afghanistan on the other hand has resulted in fact that Afghans do not show much inclination to return to their country. But their presence in Iran also has seen some problems especially in health and medical treatment sectors. Sectors which can almost be claimed that the use of the Afghan community in them could reduce a lot of the problems and improve their living conditions alongside the Iranian people

Suitable planning and policy-setting in the health and medical treatment sector, the utilization of the Afghan elite and educated, particularly Afghan doctors and nurses

and also the opportunity for the enrolment of Afghan university students in this field can help the government in reducing existing threats and dangers.

Furthermore, making decisions regarding non-refugee Afghans in the country and also transparency on health and medical treatment information and statistics can improve the basis for the international participation and ultimately result in improvement the country's health and medical treatment system and also the host and guest communities' relations to a certain extent.

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