



**Statement of  
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**“Countering the Threat of Failure in Afghanistan”**

**Written Statement before the:  
United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

Statement by Dr. Khaled Hosseini, US Envoy for UNHCR

***Introduction***

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, on behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today to offer our perspectives and concerns regarding the Afghan refugee situation.

My name is Khaled Hosseini, and I am the US Envoy for UNHCR, a position that I have held since 2006.

UNHCR currently has twelve offices inside Afghanistan. It has been working inside Afghanistan since 1989 to support the return and integration of Afghan refugees. Since 2002, more than five million Afghans have returned to their homeland, including more than four million with UNHCR's support. UNHCR also has offices in Pakistan and Iran, through which we continue to assist some 2.6 million Afghan refugees.

I returned yesterday from a five-day trip to Afghanistan, where I met with returned refugees, ordinary Afghans, aid workers, and officials. I will focus my comments today first on the needs of Afghan refugees, particularly those who have recently returned to Afghanistan from neighboring countries, and on the needs of the Afghan people in general.

In a nutshell, my impression is that Afghanistan faces yet another pivotal moment in its recent, unstable history. There is an opportunity to consolidate the clear progress that has been made since 2002 in a number of areas – education, health, energy, trade, communications, and construction. Progress in these sectors has assisted one of the largest repatriation movements in history.

No country in history has been able to establish a functioning state, a performing government, a strong economy, and a stable society in just a few years. After the level of conflict that a poor country like Afghanistan has suffered for three decades, we should not be surprised that recovery and development will take some time.

To address these issues, my strongest recommendation is that the international community maintain its continued support for the Afghan people. During my visit, all the Afghans that I encountered expressed their concern about the future and some disappointment about the present. They clearly expected more from their government and more from the international community. But none of them wanted to go back to the past. And I see no reason why we should allow ourselves to become defeatists and let the country slide back toward the past. I see no reason why we cannot secure the modest level of improvement in people's lives that would earn us some good will and make such a difference to Afghanistan's stability.

In my judgment, the international community – not just the US government - must press the Afghan government to demonstrate greater commitment to improving the lives of its citizens. But we, the international community, must also hold ourselves accountable. Could we have organized ourselves more coherently? Could we have worked more cost-effectively? Could we have prioritized our support more logically to address the most pressing needs? I believe the answer to all these questions is “Yes.” I am nevertheless convinced that the challenges Afghanistan faces can be overcome, difficult though they may sometimes appear.

### ***Background***

UNHCR is charged by the international community with ensuring refugee protection and identifying durable solutions to refugee situations. The agency's mandate is grounded in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (hereinafter “ the Refugee Convention”), which define a refugee as a person having a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

UNHCR has had a presence in Afghanistan since the late 1980s and maintained an office during the Taliban rule in the 1990s. At the peak of the Afghan displacement crisis in the mid 1990s, some eight million refugees had fled their homes to neighboring Pakistan and Iran. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, UNHCR began the largest repatriation operation in the history of the agency. Since 2002, UNHCR has repatriated more than five million Afghans. Despite such a large number of returns, approximately 1.5 million Afghans remain in Pakistan and approximately one million in Iran. In recent years, there has been a decline in returns, which peaked in 2006. Security remains of great concern to Afghans residing in the

surrounding region, and surveys demonstrate that the major additional challenges to return are primarily social and economic in nature.

### ***UNHCR Activities***

Upon returning to Afghanistan, families face difficulties establishing a new home and securing employment. The single most pressing need of the returnees is shelter. UNHCR has established a shelter program in Afghanistan in close cooperation with the Afghan government. Since 2002, we have built close to 200,000 houses for returning refugee families in rural areas. The government's own National Land Allocation Scheme offers the potential to assist landless returnees who so far have not been able to benefit from UNHCR's shelter program. To date, more than 300,000 plots of government land have been identified in 29 provinces.

UNHCR focuses its efforts in helping the government of Afghanistan and local communities develop strategies to address the reasons for displacement. In addition, the office assists the government in strengthening its capacity to plan, manage and assist the return, reintegration, and protection of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

UNHCR also provides protection and assistance to IDPs. The displacement situation inside Afghanistan is highly complex, with factors such as insecurity, economic hardship, and cultural traditions providing a backdrop. In 2008, more than 235,000 IDPs were identified throughout the country. The majority of these individuals were displaced due to protracted conflict, poverty, and livelihood failure in the southern region of Afghanistan.

Any refugee or IDP return and reintegration operation is a complex process. Afghanistan's is perhaps the most challenging of all. It was clear on this recent visit that security and employment are the most essential requirements. It was also evident, however, that resolving land and property issues in rural areas is assuming greater importance as enlarged families return to their places of origin.

After six years of some of the highest levels of return ever achieved by a UNHCR operation, signs of limited absorption capacity were apparent. As such, continued high levels are unlikely until greater security allows a more stable government and a more vibrant economy to take root. Overloading the

fragile reintegration conditions would be counter-productive and could generate internal displacement and even out-migration. It will require the coordinated interventions of assistance actors and government authorities to build greater absorption capacity in the future.

### ***Observations and Recommendations***

Although I met with some refugees who have reintegrated successfully and have resumed relatively settled lives, many continue to struggle. It has been a major challenge for many returnees to restart their lives in a country where basic services have collapsed. The returnees that I met lived in squalid, abandoned public buildings or in tents, or on government land in dry, inaccessible areas. They complained to me of the lack of basic services like water, food, schools, clinics and jobs. They had a great fear of the coming winter. This isn't entirely surprising. Afghanistan's population increased by 20 percent in a mere six years. This would be a huge challenge for any country, even a developed one. For a poor nation like Afghanistan, decimated by 30 years of war, this is an absolutely enormous figure. Given these difficult realities, maybe it's not surprising that 2.6 million Afghans still live in exile in Iran and Pakistan. Eighty percent of them have lived there for more than two decades, and nearly half of them were born there. After 30 years of exile, and given the difficult conditions inside Afghanistan and the state's decreased absorption capacity, many of them may not wish to return home.

It is important, however, that return and reintegration is made as attractive as possible. For that to happen, existing conditions inside Afghanistan have to be remedied, so that the environment within the country is more conducive to the social and economic well being of refugees. That means that Afghan authorities and the international community have to work on critical pull factors like security, employment opportunities, and access to land, water, shelter, education, and health facilities, in order for repatriation to become an attractive option and for refugees to become self-sufficient and reintegrate successfully. The needs of returning refugees and IDPs have to be included in national programs.

It is also important that UNHCR continue to view repatriation and reintegration as an important and achievable solution for as many Afghans as possible who wish to return. This will have the additional virtue of addressing the concerns expressed by the neighboring asylum countries that repatriation receives insufficient support.

To that end, it is essential that both the Afghan authorities and the international community provide both political and financial support to Afghanistan's National Development Strategy for the return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs.

UNHCR's expertise lies in emergency response and legal, physical, and material protection. Returning refugees also need security, stability, economic, and social opportunities. UNHCR can act as the advocate for these needs. However, beyond the initial reintegration assistance that UNHCR provides in shelter, water, transport and family grants, we depend very much on our reconstruction and development partners to create the socioeconomic conditions and opportunities required to sustain return. To that end, donor support and the continued engagement of the international community and the government of Afghanistan will be critical to sustaining refugee repatriation in the years to come.

I believe there is an opportunity to build on the progress that has been made since 2002. And despite the stream of negative news, we should not lose sight of the fact that there has indeed been progress, in a number of areas. For instance, over six million children are enrolled in some 9,000 schools around the country. Afghans have greater access now to the health sector; millions of children have been vaccinated against preventable illnesses. Commerce and enterprise are appreciably increased. Infrastructure is booming in cities like Kabul, and technology, particularly telecommunications and wireless technology, appear poised to leapfrog business development in Afghanistan. There is free press and greater person freedom.

But progress has not been as fast and as deep as all of us here would like, and it has not reached as many people as we would like. And there are many challenges that can undermine the progress that we have seen. The decline in refugee repatriation this year, for instance, is an indicator that security remains an obstacle and that the economy has not grown quickly enough, especially in rural areas. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Poverty is in fact the number one killer in Afghanistan. More than 25,000 women die during childbirth every year. That's more deaths than those caused by all the suicide bombs, IED attacks, and air strikes combined. And although historically there is no tradition of extremism in Afghanistan, poverty can make people, especially young people, more vulnerable to

exploitation by extremist groups. It has been stated many times that improved security alone will not end the insurgency. Investment in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres is also necessary.

There are opportunities that can be seized if all parties accept their responsibilities. The Afghans, certainly, have to do their part. This is their country after all. Afghan leaders have to acknowledge that their people expect more of them, and rightfully so. They have to restore the people's faith in the state institutions, and demonstrate leadership, vision, and a greater commitment to improving the lives of the population. For its part, the international community will need to organize its assistance more coherently around commonly agreed objectives.

### ***Conclusion***

Afghanistan has been in a state of conflict for almost three decades now. The country and its population made huge sacrifices during the Soviet occupation. Almost every family has been touched by tragedy on a scale that few of us can imagine. Many Afghans believe that the final violent chapter of the Cold War was inked with their blood.

Yes, Afghans do not want to be a source of regional and international instability. They do not want to be known for producing refugees and economic migrants around the world. They want no more and no less than other people in developing countries want for themselves and their children. If the basic essentials can be provided – housing, education, health care, and job opportunities – I sincerely believe that a new chapter of hope and happiness can be brought to the Afghan people.

Mr. Chairman, I again appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the other members of the Committee may have.