COVID-19 response in the Islamic Republic of Iran

December 2021

As of the end of 2021, Iran had registered over 6 million cases and more than 130,000 deaths, and the country had overcome the fifth wave of the pandemic. The Iranian Health Ministry reported that by the end of December, over 50 million of Iran's population were fully vaccinated, of which over 1 million were Afghan nationals including refugees and undocumented individuals. Working closely with the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant's Affairs (BAFIA), UNHCR continued to provide emergency support to the Government of Iran's COVID-19 response.

UNHCR and the Government of Iran continued to provide **ESSENTIAL MEDICINES AND PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT** to help bolster Iran's health system. As part of the government's inclusive policy, refugees and foreign nationals were being included in the COVID-19 **National Deployment and Vaccination Plan** (NDVP), albeit with some delays given procurement and economic issues. UNHCR, in collaboration with the UN country team (UNCT), supported the government application for the supply of vaccines for 20% of persons of concern through the **COVAX Humanitarian Buffer**, for which Iran received approval on 28 September 2021. A consequent shipment of 1.6 million doses arrived in Iran on 16 November 2021 and were used to vaccinate persons of concern. In the same vein, some additional 3.8 million doses were also delivered in 2021.

Throughout the last quarter of 2021, UNHCR provided cash assistance to 2,974 individuals.

The main objectives behind the intervention were to mitigate the negative impact of pandemic on persons of concern, curtail the spread of the virus and reduce the risk of refugees resorting to negative coping mechanisms.

Refugees continued to have access to free COVID-19 testing in designated Ministry of Health affiliated centers. **If refugees are enrolled in the Universal Public Health Insurance (UPHI), they also continue to have access to subsidized treatment and hospitalization** and only pay the franchise fee of 10%. However, UNHCR continued to receive reports of uninsured refugees facing challenges in affording COVID-19 treatment costs.

UNHCR and BAFIA continued efforts to communicate with communities to share information on hygiene and health practices through refugee focal points, UNHCR-hired lawyers, psycho-social counsellors and other partners.

Remote community engagement continued to take place via virtual focus group discussions, online awareness raising sessions, and key informant interviews.

UNHCR offices continued to provide group counselling when the approaches were related to resettlement requests (both by new arrivals and the old caseload).

UNHCR strengthened its hotline capacity at the start of the pandemic so that refugees could continue to access **protection services** such as counselling, referrals or inclusion into relevant programmes.

This capacity began to be further bolstered since late August 2021 by recruiting more staff which was finalized in December 2021 , in order to respond to the increase in approaches linked to new arrivals from Afghanistan. As of the end of December 2021, **21,123** refugees had approached UNHCR more than one time (43,101 approaches, with Financial Assistance being one of the main topics of concerns of refugees).

With your support, we can help prevent the virus from spreading.

In 2021, UNHCR sought USD 10.05 million for its COVID-19 response in Iran, which was mainstreamed into its wider programmes. This was part of UNHCR's global funding needs and fed into the wider UN appeal.

In Iran, strengthening and promoting the inclusion of refugees in national systems can help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable.

Support for UNHCR's regular activities, as part of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), further complements the emergency response to COVID-19, by strengthening inclusive national systems, notably for health, and mitigating the virus' socio-economic impact.

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