



CASE STUDY :

UNHCR helps Afghans to rebuild their shattered homes

KABUL, Aug. 16, 2004 (UNHCR) – When Abdel Khalil returned this year from Pakistan after 12 years in a refugee camp where he had buried both his parents, he found only a ruin instead of the Kabul home he had known as a child.

"It was completely destroyed by fighting during the Taliban period," the 25-year-old man said in front of a pile of sun-dried bricks made with his own hands. Now, after weeks of labour, the two-room house that will house him, his wife, his 18-month-old daughter and two brothers, has literally been resurrected from the earth.

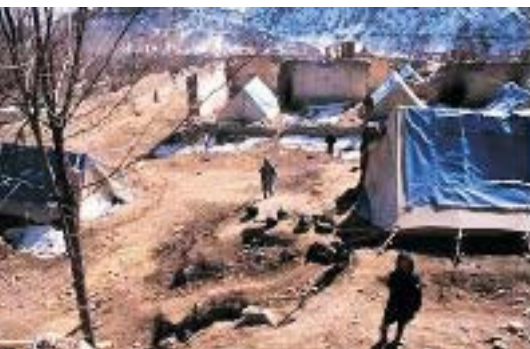
But even Abdel Khalil's hard work – the five-metre-deep well, dug by hand, still ends in dry gravel – would not have been enough to rebuild his home without assistance from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He has been one of some 90,000 beneficiaries since 2002 to receive UNHCR help to rebuild in Afghanistan.

"I still owe thousands of Afghans to the labourers who helped me," he said. "I am waiting for the rest of the aid to come from UNHCR and then I'll be able to pay them. I couldn't have rebuilt without this UN assistance."

Abdel Khalil was among 70 recipients of shelter assistance in District 7 of the Afghan capital, an area that was devastated in the fighting that led to the Taliban capture of Kabul in 1996. Those accepted for the programme are returnees with land who most need the assistance to rebuild a destroyed house.



A young girl washes clothes in the courtyard where UNHCR is helping her widowed mother to rebuild her house at Kalota in Afghanistan's Kapisa province. © UNHCR / J.Redden



The assistance for rebuilding a completely destroyed house – routine in many areas – can be worth a total of \$625, including building materials like window frames and roof timbers plus some cash to pay for extra labour. Assistance is adjusted for less damage, with diagrams prepared in advance showing how much of the walls still exist.

Shelter assistance by UNHCR, implemented through non-governmental partners, has been provided throughout the country ever since the first of the more than three million refugees and internally displaced started going home at the beginning of 2002.

While the shelter programme provides invaluable aid to some, it is not a panacea. After 25 years of war, the need in Afghanistan is far greater than the number of shelters that can be provided. This year plans by other organisations to supplement the UNHCR programme, which itself has been scaled back from previous years, largely disappeared because of a shortage of funds.

Most obviously, the programme helps the poor – but not the absolute poorest. Assistance can be provided only to those who have land to erect a house, not those without even a plot. The resolution of requests for land – a tangle of conflicting claims and interests – will take years for the government to resolve. Without the UNHCR shelter assistance many of those returning to their shattered houses would remain homeless.