

Kabul, 31 March 2011 - There were fewer Afghan asylum-seekers in 2010 and this could, in part, be due to tighter immigration controls in destination countries, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Returnees.

The number of Afghan asylum-seekers in "44 industrialized countries" (mainly European countries, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea) dropped by 9 percent in 2010 compared to the previous year, but Afghanistan still produced 7 percent of the world's total number of asylum-seekers, and was second only to Serbia, according to UNHCR.

Afghans made 24,800 asylum claims in these countries in 2010 (27,200 claims in 2009); the vast majority (22,939) were registered in Europe, UNHCR said in a 28 March report entitled *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries 2010*.

Worsening insecurity, poor socio-economic opportunities at home and a growing sense of anxiety about the future of their country are the main push factors for Afghan asylum-seekers and migrants, according to aid agencies.

"Another factor could possibly be attributed to difficulties asylum-seekers face due to tighter migration control in countries of asylum," Nader Farhad, UNHCR's spokesman in Kabul, told IRIN.

"Norway's ranking [as a destination country] dropped to 12th place in 2010, possibly as a result of the introduction of overall stricter asylum policies," the UNHCR report said.

Most European countries and Australia have tightened their rules and procedures for the acceptance of Afghan asylum-seekers and migrants, officials in the Ministry of Refugees and Returnees said.

In 2010, asylum applications lodged by Afghans in the UK - compared to 2009 - dropped by 50 percent, and by 75 percent in Norway, but Germany reported a rise of 75 percent (5,900 claims) and Sweden a rise of 41 percent (2,400). Afghans also applied for asylum in the USA (548 claims), New Zealand (1,266 claims) and the Republic of Korea (16 claims) among other countries.

Deported

Hundreds of Afghans, whose asylum claims were rejected in Europe and Australia, have been deported over the past few years.

UK-based Amnesty International has criticized a controversial 17 January 2011 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the Afghan and Australian governments which, according to the Australian authorities, allows for the deportation of rejected Afghan asylum-seekers.

However, Afghan officials say the MoU does not warrant forced deportations of failed asylum-seekers, and accuse the Australian authorities of misinterpreting the mutual agreement which also has UNHCR's blessing.

Most asylum-seekers and migrants pay large sums and face serious risks in reaching their desired destination country.

"People are disappointed. They've been discouraged by too many rejections and deportations from Europe and Australia over the past few years. Who would like to spend thousands of dollars, risk his life and end up being rejected and deported?" said Shukria Barakzai, a member of parliament and of the local human rights organization Afghanistan Rights Monitor.

Returns from neighbouring countries

Most Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers are still in the region, mainly in Iran and Pakistan, resulting in fewer asylum claims in the 44 "industrialized countries" in 2010, UNHCR said.

A total of 112,968 Afghan refugees, mostly from Pakistan and Iran, voluntarily returned home in 2010 under a UNHRC-assisted programme. Last year's return rate was significantly higher than in 2009 when 54,552 refugees came back to Afghanistan, according to UNHCR.

Pakistan, where some two million Afghans are still registered as refugees, has been the top host country for about three decades. Some 900,000 documented Afghan refugees are living in Iran.

In all, over five million Afghan refugees have returned home since 2002, according to UNHCR.

Source: [INRI](#)