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Developments in Afghanistan throughout 2021 intensified protection needs for many Afghan nationals. The deterioration of the security and human rights situation created waves of displacement for the general population, in addition to increased risks for particular groups, including human rights activists, former employees or persons who had cooperated with western actors in the country, journalists and specific minority groups. The increased needs were depicted by the number of first-time Afghan applicants for international protection in EU+ countries doubling in 2021 compared to the year before, and the number of subsequent applications submitted by Afghan nationals also increased.

In addition to efforts coordinated at the EU level *(see Section 2),* EU+ countries took a number of actions to adapt procedures and accommodate the evolving needs of Afghans. An immediate consideration was to provide quick access to safety, so EU+ countries organised rapid evacuations. These were implemented through evacuations, which provided pathways to safety for thousands of people, and humanitarian admissions, either directly from Afghanistan or from neighbouring countries where people had fled.

Various practices were introduced for the types of stay that were granted to evacuated Afghans, ranging from providing protection under the status of resettled refugees to channelling them through the asylum procedure or granting residence permits outside of asylum. Some countries provided humanitarian protection at first and then allowed newcomers to apply for international protection.

Dedicated information campaigns focused on providing information to Afghan nationals on matters related to asylum, including sections on websites with frequently asked questions to explain what each process entailed.

EU+ countries adapted their working methods to receive and process applications lodged by Afghans, including recruiting additional staff and creating separate streams for the registration of cases submitted by Afghans. Due to the volatility in the country of origin and the difficulty in accessing up-to-date COI, many EU+ countries suspended the processing of applications by

Afghans at both first and second instances, with the exception of cases where protection needs were clearly evident.

In some cases, courts called first instance authorities to reassess applications on the basis of updated COI, as significant changes occurred in Afghanistan since the first instance decision had been issued. At the same time, the suspension of processing applications added to an already-large number of pending cases concerning Afghan applicants, thus prolonging the time they spend in the asylum procedure.

Efforts were also made by EU+ countries to bring Afghan families together, either by prioritising these cases through traditional family reunification processes or by establishing special admission programmes for family members of Afghans already living in Europe. When needed, special arrangements were made for the provision of material reception conditions, including accommodation.

Other national initiatives focused on the integration process of Afghan evacuees. Naturally, in response to the sharp deterioration of the security and human rights situation in Afghanistan, many EU+ countries suspended the return of Afghan nationals who had received a negative decision to their application.

The responses of EU+ countries to the protection needs of Afghan nationals in light of 2021 developments were not always uniform. Yet, efforts to facilitate access to safety and adapt procedures made it possible to swiftly offer protection solutions for those who needed them the most. The large number of pending cases by Afghan nationals, as well as the status of those who do not qualify for protection but cannot be returned, are issues that remain to be tackled and would require constructive and realistic approaches by EU+ countries.

icon closing in focus section 3

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