

Conflict escalation affecting multiple provinces since 21 February 2026

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Clashes between the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) forces and the Pakistani military have escalated since 21 February, with both parties engaging in fighting along the Durand Line (*The Guardian* 26/02/2026; *CNN* 27/02/2026 and 22/02/2026). On 27 February, the Pakistani defence minister announced the launch of a major offensive against Afghanistan, describing it as “an open war”, and conducted airstrikes on Kabul and two cities in Paktia and Kandahar provinces (*CSIS* 27/02/2026; *Afghan Times* 28/02/2026; *Dawn* accessed 27/02/2026).

According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 21 February airstrikes in Behsud and Khogyani districts of Nangarhar province killed at least 18 civilians and injured seven others (*UNAMA* 23/02/2026). UNAMA also reported that fighting between 26 February–2 March killed 42 people and injured 104 others, including women and children. These casualty figures, which UNAMA described as “preliminary,” include those resulting from indirect fire in cross-border clashes in residential parts of Khost, Kunar, Paktia, Paktika, and Nangarhar provinces (*UNAMA* 03/03/2026). Along with civilian casualties, both parties have reported the death, injury, and capture of combatants (*AP* 28/02/2026; *AJ* 27/02/2026).

The current escalation follows a period of increased clashes between the two parties since 10 October 2025 over cross-border militant activity and disputes over armed group sanctuaries, primarily related to attacks on Pakistani security forces by the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, which Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of harbouring (*ECHO* 27/02/2026; *OCHA* 30/12/2025; *ACLEL* 27/02/2026). Along with the fighting, the Durand Line has been closed since 12 October. Despite a 15 October ceasefire brokered by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, clashes continued throughout the remainder of 2025 (*ACLEL* 08/12/2025; *UNAMA* 08/02/2026; *The Diplomat* 03/03/2026; *ECHO* 24/02/2026). Further talks on the implementation of a lasting ceasefire and the reopening of cross-border trade have failed to make progress (*France* 24 27/02/2026).

ACCESS CONSTRAINTS

Communities' access to assistance and essential services

If hostilities continue to escalate, the resulting deterioration in the security environment is likely to constrain civilian movement and disrupt access to essential services, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Movement restrictions on women and girls, including the Mahram requirement, may limit their ability to flee clashes and relocate to safer areas. Women-headed households and single women without an available Mahram may face particular difficulty fleeing violence, accessing aid distribution sites, and seeking healthcare (*ACAPS* 14/08/2025). The ITA's ban on women working with NGOs also complicates the delivery of assistance to women and girls during crises (*ACAPS* 09/11/2025). People with disabilities are also often less able to flee in conflict situations, increasing the risk that they get caught in active hostilities.

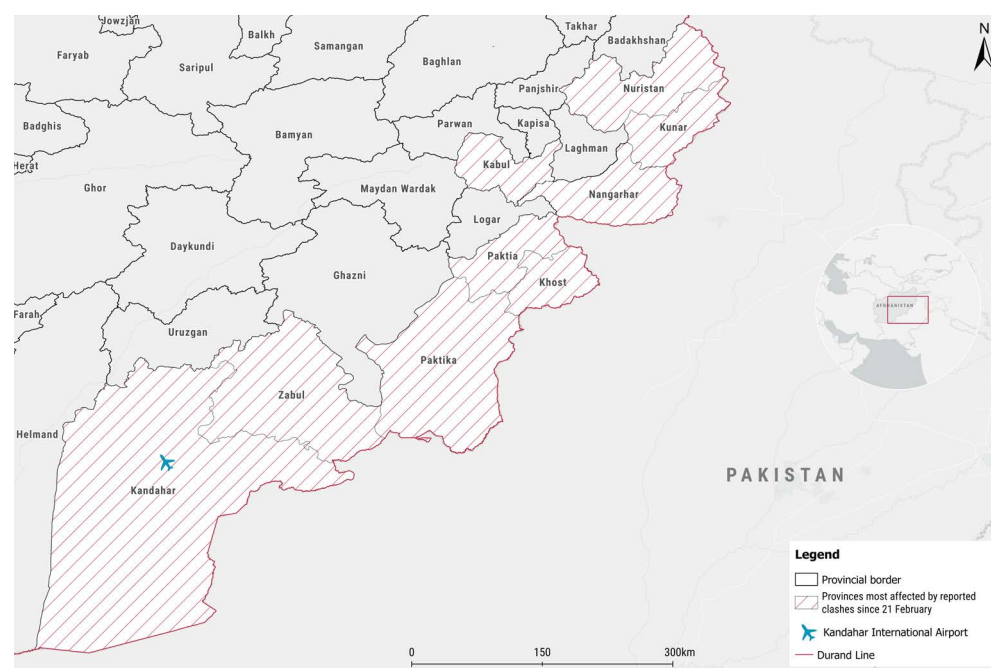
Humanitarian access

By 3 March, movement restrictions in areas around the Durand Line had limited the ability of humanitarian responders to deliver assistance to affected communities. WFP was forced to suspend its activities in affected areas, leaving an estimated 160,000 people without food assistance. Fighting also caused damage to an IOM transit centre (*UNAMA* 03/03/2026). Clashes that restrict movement and increase safety and security risks to humanitarian workers and affected communities are expected to further constrain access in coming days.

It is likely that fighting has disrupted supply chains in areas close to the Durand Line. Some aid destined for Afghanistan relies on transit through Pakistan, and previous escalations have caused significant shipment delays (*AP* 04/12/2025). Delays can cause perishable goods to spoil before they reach affected communities.

Before the current escalation, humanitarian access already faced constraints from physical challenges to the safety and security of personnel and assets, harsh winter conditions from October–March, and interference with the delivery of humanitarian assistance. In January 2026, humanitarian responders in Afghanistan reported a total of 121 access incidents, representing a 13% increase on those reported in December 2025. The most frequent type of incident was interference with the implementation of humanitarian activities, including delays and issues related to the signing of memoranda of understanding and the ITA's imposition of dress code requirements for female staff. Nangarhar and Kabul provinces – both affected by the current escalation – reported the highest number of incidents nationwide, at 25 and 19, respectively (OCHA 12/02/2026).

Map 1. Provinces in Afghanistan most affected by reported fighting between 21–28 February 2026



Source: ACAPS using Radio Pakistan (27/02/2026); AJ (27/02/2026 and 26/02/2026); RFI (01/03/2026); RFE (24/12/2024); ATN (02/10/2025); ACLED (06/10/2025); BBC (28/02/2026); Khaama (01/03/2026); France24 (03/03/2026)

ANTICIPATED IMPACTS

Impacts in Pakistan, including on Afghan refugees and Afghans of other status

While this note focuses on the humanitarian impact of clashes in Afghanistan specifically, the escalation has also affected civilians and contributed to humanitarian needs in Pakistan (UNICEF 02/03/2026).

This includes impacts on the safety, security, and wellbeing of Afghan refugees, Afghan Citizenship Card holders, and undocumented Afghans in Pakistan. Since the October 2025 escalation of hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistani authorities have intensified security operations targeting both documented and undocumented Afghan nationals, around two million of whom still reside in Pakistan. There has been a surge in formal deportations and “spontaneous” returns by Afghans in response to actual or feared arrest, detention, harassment, violence, extortion, and other protection and security threats. November 2025 recorded the highest monthly return figures of the year, at 225,000, including at least 70,000 Afghans formally deported, as enforcement measures expanded following the conflict escalation (UN 17/12/2025; UNHCR 19/12/2025 and 24/02/2026; Protection Cluster 31/10/2025). More than 17,000 Proof of Registration cardholders have been arrested since September alone, indicating the risks that even documented Afghans face (UNHCR 19/12/2025; MMC 02/09/2025). The current escalation, rising anti-Afghan sentiment, and increased identity checks by Pakistani authorities increase the risk of arrest, detention, harassment, and violence against both documented and undocumented Afghans in Pakistan, **likely driving a spike in returns in the coming weeks** (Arya 27/02/2026; Nation 27/02/2026).

Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Nangarhar, all affected by the current escalation, are among the top returnee hosting provinces in Afghanistan (IOM accessed 01/03/2026).

Displacement and shelter

By 3 March, an estimated 16,400 people were displaced by the clashes across Khost, Kunar, Paktia, Paktika, and Nangarhar provinces (UNAMA 03/03/2026). This includes returnees and households displaced by the August 2025 eastern earthquake, who already lack adequate shelter, NFIs, and access to basic services and assistance. The ITA reported evacuating a camp for recent returnees near Torkham after three civilians were killed and seven others were injured. It remains unclear where the evacuated population has been relocated (NYT 28/02/2026). Households displaced by the August 2025 earthquake, which particularly affected Kunar and Nangarhar, have also been advised to relocate to their villages of origin or stay with relatives (UNAMA 03/03/2026). Significant, unrepaired damage in earthquake-affected villages, however, will leave many of these households without sufficient shelter. Newly arrived returnees also lack the resources to obtain adequate shelter and often congregate in informal settlements, where they face high risks of insecure tenure and forced eviction (OCHA 30/12/2025). Without adequate shelter, people displaced by the current escalation will be exposed to harsh winter weather as well as safety and security risks.

Health and mental health and psychosocial support

Active hostilities are likely to generate a surge in conflict-related injuries and trauma cases, further straining Afghanistan's fragile healthcare system. The fighting has damaged at least one health facility – the emergency hospital at the Torkham border crossing in Nangarhar (UNAMA 03/03/2026). Health facilities in all affected provinces already face severe constraints, including shortages of qualified staff, essential medicines, equipment, and functional infrastructure (Health Cluster 04/08/2025; Emergency 26/06/2025). Recent shocks and stresses, including the August 2025 earthquake, US funding cuts, and the influx of returnees from Pakistan and Iran have further strained the healthcare system. Kandahar, Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, and Paktia are all among Afghanistan's provinces most affected by the suspension and closure of US-funded health facilities since February 2025, with 11–65 suspended or closed facilities in each province by September 2025 (Health Cluster 31/08/2025). Increased caseloads are expected to further reduce the system's capacity to deliver routine and preventive services, including maternal and reproductive healthcare, child immunisation, and treatment for chronic diseases.

Women, girls, and returnees are particularly likely to face limited healthcare access because of gendered movement restrictions, low availability of female healthcare and humanitarian workers, and a lack of civil documentation required to access services and assistance (UNDP 12/11/2025).

The conflict and associated displacement, casualties, and humanitarian needs are also likely to increase the mental health and psychosocial support needs of affected communities, already persistently high. Primary healthcare centres and hospitals frequently lack dedicated mental health and psychosocial support services, limiting access to support (WHO 21/09/2025; Emergency 26/06/2025).

Protection

Attacks on civilians and civilian objects remain a significant risk across the affected provinces. As noted above, women, girls, and people with impaired mobility and other disabilities may face significant barriers to fleeing attacks. Newly arrived returnees, who often lack connections to social networks and community protection mechanisms, may also receive less information on the risk of attacks and lack the resources necessary to relocate safely and quickly.

Hostilities are likely to aggravate contamination by mines and other explosive ordnance. As fighting persists, newly affected areas may become hazardous, increasing risks for civilians during and after active conflict. Several affected provinces, including Kunar and Nangarhar, were already among the most mine-contaminated (ACAPS 09/11/2025). On average, 54 people are killed or injured each month across Afghanistan, with children accounting for nearly 80% of victims (UN 03/12/2025). Potential displacement may further heighten exposure to mines and other explosive ordnance, as families who are forced to flee may seek shelter in unfamiliar locations, including contaminated areas. Limited awareness of mine and EO locations, combined with the urgency of securing shelter and livelihoods, increases the likelihood of accidental explosions.

Food security

Cross-border fighting and the ongoing closure of the Durand line will likely continue to affect the prices and availability of staple food nationwide, as Pakistan serves as the primary source for approximately 60% of Afghanistan's staple food imports, including wheat flour, vegetable oil, sugar, and pulses (Logistics Cluster 11/02/2026). If fighting persists and trade restrictions worsen, food insecurity levels are likely to deteriorate nationally, with particularly acute impacts in eastern and southern provinces where people have limited alternative supply routes or purchasing power to absorb price shocks (AR 05/01/2026; WFP 11/02/2026).

Since October, closure of the Durand Line and trade restrictions have driven significant commodity price inflation in Afghan provinces along the Durand Line, with food prices in Nangarhar and Paktika rising by up to 39% in January 2026 compared to the same period in 2025, the highest increases nationally for staple commodities such as rice and cooking oil (WFP 11/02/2026; CRPPSS accessed 01/03/2025).

By December 2025, Kandahar, Khost, Nangarhar, and Paktika provinces were experiencing Crisis or worse (IPC Phase 3+) food insecurity levels, affecting 35–45% of the assessed populations, with districts along the Durand Line showing higher rates as a result of livelihood disruptions from previous closures. While Kabul experienced lower food insecurity levels in December (Stressed – IPC Phase 2), the city hosted significant populations of returnees and conflict-displaced households vulnerable to price shocks, with pockets of IPC 3 conditions in informal settlements (IPC 16/12/2025).

Recently arrived returnees from Pakistan are at particular risk of deteriorating food security outcomes, as many already lack access to adequate livelihood opportunities, services, and assistance, including food assistance, which is partly linked with their limited access to civil documentation (IOM 11/09/2025; UNHCR 28/08/2025).

Livelihoods

Continued escalations are likely to compound pre-existing exposures to livelihood loss in communities near the Durand Line already characterised by limited livelihood diversification, high unemployment, and dependence on trade with Pakistan and remittances from Pakistan-based family members, many of whom have returned and are unemployed or face deportation (IPC 16/12/2025; Express Tribune 20/07/2025; XCEPT 10/2020).

Closure of the Durand Line since October 2025 has already severely disrupted cross-border trade and labour mobility, which constitute essential livelihood sources for households in Afghanistan's provinces close to the Durand Line, particularly Kandahar, Khost, Nangarhar, Nimroz, and Paktika, where regional economies depend fundamentally on daily cross-border movement for informal wage labour, small-scale commerce, and agricultural exports (WFP 11/02/2026; FEWS NET 31/01/2026). This has generated acute economic shocks in towns close to the Durand Line, including Ghulam Khan, Spin Boldak, Torkham, and Wesh, where commercial activity contracted by an estimated 60–70% during closure periods, eliminating daily labour opportunities for porters, transport workers, and traders whose livelihoods depend entirely on cross-border traffic (Pajhwok Afghan News 02/11/2025). Market price volatility has increased significantly in Afghan towns near the Durand Line, with essential commodity prices rising 15–25% in Torkham and Spin Boldak as a result of reduced supply flows from Pakistan and increased transportation costs from alternative supply routes (WFP 11/02/2026).