

Out of reach: The impact of telecommunications shutdowns on the Afghan people

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BRIEFING PAPER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing paper summarises the experiences of Afghans from across the country during telecommunications shutdowns by the *de facto* authorities from 15 September 2025. It is based on more than 100 interviews conducted by the UNAMA's Human Rights Service in the aftermath of a 48-hour nationwide shutdown between 29 September and 1 October 2025.

The experiences documented provide a snapshot of the impact on Afghan people and specific sectors of Afghan society during the 48-hour telecommunications shutdown. These included: delayed or no access to healthcare and emergency services; disruption of people's daily and family lives due to the inability to contact people; exacerbation of existing restrictions on women and girls; and severe disruption of business, banking and humanitarian operations due to reliance on the internet to support access and delivery of essential, basic and lifesaving services to the Afghan people.

BACKGROUND

Since mid-September 2025, the *de facto* authorities have implemented a series of telecommunications shutdowns which affected, to varying degrees, access to fibre optic internet and phone services across Afghanistan.

The first shutdown occurred in Balkh province, in the evening of 15 September. The spokesperson for the *de facto* Balkh Provincial Governor's Office announced on his X account that the Taliban leader had ordered the suspension of fibre optic internet services in Balkh to "prevent vice".¹ Between 16 and 17 September, the shutdown of the fibre optic network expanded to Kandahar, Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar, Herat, Zabul, Nimroz, Helmand, Uruzgan, and other provinces, affecting both access to internet and, in some areas, also mobile phone coverage. In some provinces, fibre optic connections were entirely restored after several days, while in others they were restored partially, allowing certain entities such as *de facto* government offices, consulates, banks, commercial centres and UN offices to connect.

On 29 September, at 5pm, a nationwide shutdown of the fibre optic network disrupted internet and mobile phone services. While some telecommunications providers notified customers in advance, there was no prior public warning or notification of the shutdown from the *de facto* authorities. For 48 hours, across Afghanistan, people had no access to the internet and could not make mobile phone calls or send SMS messages. On 1 October, at around 5pm, the fibre optic network was restored.

As of the time of writing, no official reason has been given for the shutdown of the fibre optic network. On 2 October, the spokesperson for the *de facto* authorities denied an Associated Press report that the shutdown was due to infrastructure repairs.² Media quoted a *de facto* official confirming that the internet was back by order of the *de facto* Prime Minister.³ In an interview with Sky News published on 6 October, the spokesperson for the *de facto* authorities, Zabihullah Mujahid said: "We have not received any official communication from the ministry of telecommunications. Therefore, we are not in a position to comment on the matter."⁴

¹ <https://x.com/Hajisahib1234/status/1967677045007425539>

² <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-internet-outage-taliban-a5fd0e68d75dc3ab1af4519a33698044>; https://x.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1973559416541815280

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0jq2q5jn3o>

⁴ <https://news.sky.com/story/afghanistan-taliban-says-it-will-never-hand-over-bagram-air-base-to-us-13445422>

METHODOLOGY

This briefing paper sets out the findings of interviews conducted by the UNAMA Human Rights Service with individuals affected by the telecommunications shutdowns in Afghanistan in September 2025.

A total of 111 persons were interviewed (39 women and 72 men). Among the persons interviewed were individuals working in the private sector, healthcare, education, agriculture, media, international and national non-governmental organisations, civil society and international organisations. UNAMA also interviewed three persons who sought medical care during the shutdowns. Interviews were conducted with participants in 32 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

The methodology adopted reflects a human rights-based approach, consistent with the principles of impartiality, confidentiality, do no harm and informed consent. Participants were informed of the purpose and scope of the research, and their consent was obtained prior to participation. Names and identifying details have been withheld or anonymized where necessary to protect the safety and privacy of individuals.

IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

With no means of making calls or sending messages via SMS or digital messaging apps, people across the country were cut off from family and friends – whether for routine or urgent communication. Interviewees also reported being unable to access critical services or carry out basic tasks.

Some described the negative impact of the shutdown on their mental health, saying they experienced shock,⁵ stress,⁶ helplessness,⁷ sadness,⁸ fear,⁹ and/or distress.¹⁰

“Like many other locals, I just shut my shop and went home to make sure that if something bad happens, I can take care of my family because all of my family members were also in deep stress.”¹¹

One interviewee stated that, out of fear and anxiety, those: “who had money rushed to buy rice, flour, oil, and other essential goods”. But, he noted: “poor families were left devastated, imagining a dark and uncertain future.”¹² Two interviewees mentioned that the price of essential goods rose during the shutdown.¹³ Trust between people diminished, with shopkeepers who usually allowed customers to make purchases on credit refusing to do so during the shutdown.¹⁴ According to one man: “The sense of community weakened, and survival became the only focus”.¹⁵

People had no means by which to contact emergency services, except in person, which exacerbated some emergencies:

⁵ Interview no. 46.

⁶ Interviews no. 11, 34 & 41.

⁷ Interview no. 34

⁸ Interviews no. 37, 64 & 74.

⁹ Interview no. 100.

¹⁰ Interviews no. 7 & 68.

¹¹ Interview no. 41.

¹² Interview no. 107.

¹³ Interviews no. 106 & 107.

¹⁴ Interview no. 100.

¹⁵ Interview no. 107.

"I learned that a fire broke out in a nearby house. The family could not contact the fire department, resulting in serious damage. With no communication services, people had to walk to police checkpoints to report emergencies"¹⁶

At least three interviewees mentioned that someone they knew passed away during the shutdown, and as a result some family members of the deceased were only notified of their death after the internet was restored and the funeral had taken place: "In our village, a man passed away, but his son, who was in Kabul, remained unaware of his father's death and was unable to attend the funeral".¹⁷

Travel was also disrupted. One passenger went to the airport and found that his flight was cancelled. He said:

People were very worried and sitting in the corners, on the floor. Some people were sick, they needed to visit a doctor outside of Afghanistan for their treatment, but no one was listening to them.¹⁸

The shutdown also affected offices of the *de facto* authorities, impacting the delivery of public services. For example, *de facto* law enforcement agencies had to maintain their communication by using high frequency radios and sending people on motorcycles to deliver messages in person; passports and identity document applications could not be processed as they required access to a centralized data system.

IMPACT ON WOMEN

Several women said that, because of the shutdown, their family members became more concerned about them working outside of the home. One female entrepreneur explained: "[i]n a society like Afghanistan, it is particularly difficult for women to go even for an hour without being in contact with their family." The woman, who lives in an eastern province of Afghanistan, had travelled to Kabul for work when the shutdown occurred. She said:

"It took a great deal of effort to persuade [my mother] to let me continue working—but only under the strict condition that I would no longer travel outside of [our home province], not even for work-related matters."¹⁹

Another woman, a nurse, said:

"As a woman working in a remote area, it is already difficult to be accepted by the communities and even by our own families. When the phones and internet stopped working, I was completely cut off from my family. My husband and other relatives became very concerned, the families do not permit women to work if they feel it's unsafe or if there is no communication. I was at risk of losing my job just because I couldn't call to check in with my family."²⁰

Women also described how the impact of existing restrictions imposed by the *de facto* authorities were exacerbated by the shutdown. For example, the *mahram* decree requires

¹⁶ Interview no. 37.

¹⁷ Interviews no. 37, 38 & 40.

¹⁸ Interview no. 50.

¹⁹ Interview no. 11.

²⁰ Interview no. 13.

women to be accompanied by a *mahram* when travelling in a vehicle or for a distance of over 78 kilometres.²¹ In some parts of the country, *mahrams* are required to accompany a woman when she is going shopping, to work or to a healthcare facility less than 78km from her home.²² However, some women said they were unable to contact their *mahrams* during the shutdown:

*"I am a female and must be accompanied by a mahram [...] I could not contact my father, so I had to walk home alone. I was very scared when I was on my way home, but fortunately, I made it home safely after about one hour."*²³

Due to the movement restrictions imposed by the *de facto* authorities, many women rely on online shopping platforms to either generate an income or to do their shopping. The shutdown brought these online activities to a halt:

*"Following the imposed restrictions on women's employment and girls' education, many women have started online businesses, operating mainly through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and other social media outlets. The two-day nationwide internet blackout had a significant negative impact on our operations. Because online business depends entirely on internet connectivity, the blackout resulted in a complete shutdown of all online activities."*²⁴

Online learning is the only avenue left for many Afghan women and girls to receive an education because of the *de facto* authorities' ban on women and girls accessing education beyond the sixth grade. Female students who rely on the internet to continue their studies were distressed by the shutdown. One explained:

*"Our online learning sessions were suspended for two to three days. I can simply say that those were very difficult days and nights for us. We were extremely terrified that we may be pulled to the stone age era of the human history. It was an unbearable period of our life."*²⁵

IMPACT ON ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

UNAMA interviewed several healthcare workers and patients who reported that the outage impacted their ability to seek and deliver care.

Several healthcare workers spoke about preventable deaths which occurred because of the shutdown:

- A health care worker in a district hospital in Laghman province said that during the shutdown, her hospital ran out of critical medical supplies, including antibiotics and intravenous fluids. She said that normally, the hospital contacts the provincial office to request an emergency resupply, but with no phone or internet, there was no way to reach them. Additionally, the hospital's ambulance broke down and they could not

²¹ Announcement by the *de facto* Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice: <https://twitter.com/MOPVPE1/status/1476889768357150729?s=20&t=7TuX4pPt60QEvsPvgZDDFA>; and Article 20 of the Law on Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

²² See, for example, UNAMA, *Update on the human rights situation in Afghanistan: April-June 2025*, under 'Rights of women and girls: Freedom of expression and freedom of movement': https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/english_-unama_hrs_update_on_human_rights_in_afghanistan_april-june_2025_final.pdf.

²³ Interview no. 3.

²⁴ Interview no. 72.

²⁵ Interview no. 36.

call for a replacement. A pregnant woman came in with severe bleeding and needed to be urgently transferred to the provincial hospital for treatment, but without an ambulance or any way to call for help, they had to wait for hours for someone to travel to the provincial centre to deliver the message. The woman's condition deteriorated, and her baby died. The woman survived with complications. The nurse said:

"It was devastating. The phone call and internet blackout made me feel completely abandoned. As a health worker, I am trained to save lives, but without communication, I was feeling helpless. There was very little I could do. I started sending support staff by motorcycle to the provincial hospital to deliver urgent messages. Sometimes this took hours or even a full day."

- A healthcare worker from Zabul province said that three children died in the hospital because they were unable to contact their family members to bring blood from the blood bank.²⁶
- A doctor from Badghis province said that the first night of the shutdown, five children who were suffering from malnutrition died because they were understaffed and could not call doctors to come to the hospital and treat them.²⁷

Several people said the shutdown delayed their access to much needed healthcare. One man said he experienced chest pains which he feared might be a heart attack. Due to the shutdown, he could not contact the hospital to make an appointment, so he went to the hospital without one. When he arrived, all the patient registration processes had to be done manually because there was no internet. As a result, the man waited many hours, in pain, for treatment.²⁸ Others reported similar experiences, saying that routine diagnostic tests took far longer than usual due to the shutdown.²⁹ A woman said that her pregnant sister-in-law became seriously ill during the shutdown, and without any men at home or any way to contact their male relatives, they were unable to take her to the hospital in a timely manner because they needed a *mahram* (male guardian) to accompany them. She said that this resulted in a deterioration in her sister-in-law's health until she was eventually treated.³⁰

A woman from Farah province said that on the night of 29 September, her husband had travelled to Herat. Late in the evening, her son suffered a seizure. She had medicines at home, but could not call a doctor for advice on how to administer them, so she had to travel to the nearest clinic to receive instructions. In the morning, she did not want to leave her son, but had to physically go to her workplace to inform her colleagues that she would be absent from work that day to care for her son, as she had no other means of contacting them.³¹

Healthcare workers spoke of the various challenges they faced because of the shutdown. A number mentioned issues of coordination – with patients unable to contact hospitals and clinics to make appointments, they went without appointments, causing overcrowding in some facilities. One said that some patients travelled from the districts to their hospital without appointments and had to be sent home, because their specialist was not available.³² In other places, hospitals reported a sharp drop in patients because people were unable to

²⁶ Interview no. 95.

²⁷ Interview no. 70.

²⁸ Interview no. 17.

²⁹ Interview no. 93.

³⁰ Interview no. 95.

³¹ Interview no. 2.

³² Interview no. 33.

make appointments or call ambulances for assistance:

"Normally, we receive dozens of emergency calls daily from districts, but during the blackout, these calls stopped".³³

Another said:

"In emergency cases, we usually receive several calls within 24 hours requesting ambulance services. During the blackout, we had no way of knowing how many patients required urgent transportation to the hospital, and many could have suffered due to this lack of communication."³⁴

Healthcare workers said they had to take additional measures to check on patients during the shutdown, because they were unable to check on them via the phone. A nurse said she was caring for a patient remotely prior to the shutdown, communicating with them via telephone to monitor their symptoms. She said during the shutdown, the patient deteriorated and because his family were unable to contact her, they brought him to her house in the middle of the night. She monitored his condition in her home until the following morning.³⁵ A doctor said he hired a taxi, at his own expense, to take him to visit his patients during the shutdown, as he could not monitor their condition remotely.³⁶

Healthcare workers also reported they were unable to send lab results and X-rays to Kabul or other hospitals for expert analysis and diagnosis, because they rely on the internet to transmit the files.³⁷ They said this caused delays in patients receiving diagnoses and treatment. A healthcare worker in Mazar-e-Sharif said that their X-ray machine stopped working during the shutdown and could not be repaired, because the X-ray technician who usually supports them remotely from Pakistan could not be contacted due to the shutdown.³⁸

A number of interviewees mentioned the difficulties caused because of patients' inability to contact their family members to inform them of their condition.³⁹ One hospital said they were unable to discharge patients because they could not contact family members/*mahrams* of unaccompanied women and children to ask them to come to the hospital to collect them.

A pregnant woman from Nangarhar began having labor pains in the evening of 29 September. Her husband was at work and she had no way to contact him, so she went to the hospital with her mother-in-law. When her husband arrived home, he did not know which hospital in Jalalabad they had gone to and while he searched several hospitals in the city, he could not find her. Later that night, the doctors told the woman she would give birth soon, and so her mother-in-law went back to the house to find her husband. The woman said of the experience:

"By the time [my husband and mother-in-law] returned, I had already given birth without any assistance or presence of my family members, which was extremely difficult and painful... The only thing I could manage was to remain alone in the hospital while in

³³ Interview no. 37.

³⁴ Interview no. 33.

³⁵ Interview no. 105.

³⁶ Interview no. 106.

³⁷ Interviews no. 33 & 37.

³⁸ Interview no. 59.

³⁹ Interview no. 31.

*labor and send my mother-in-law to bring my husband. For her, as a woman, traveling alone at night all the way to [our district] was extremely difficult. I can say without hesitation that this was one of the most traumatic experiences of my life.*⁴⁰

Patients also struggled to pay for healthcare because they could not withdraw money from banks or receive money from family members via electronic transfer.⁴¹ One man said that his wife's medical treatment was delayed because he was waiting for his relatives in Iran to send him money to pay for her care. The transaction could not be completed due to the shutdown.⁴² Similarly, a nurse reported she was unable to purchase any medicine to treat her patients, because she could not withdraw money from the bank.⁴³

IMPACT ON THE MEDIA SECTOR AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The absence of any official statement concerning the shutdown led to confusion among members of the public. One journalist said: "[m]any people visited my office seeking answers, but I was unable to explain why the communication services were disrupted."⁴⁴

The information gap gave rise to rumours and misinformation, adding to a general atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety among the population. The rumours circulated by the public were diverse and fear-inducing, ranging from US forces having landed at Bagram Airport,⁴⁵ to a national coup⁴⁶ or uprising⁴⁷ having taken place, to the Taliban leader having prohibited the use of the internet.⁴⁸ According to one journalist, in his local area, "the majority of the residents stayed in their homes, panicked and confused."⁴⁹

Given the overall lack of freedom of expression in the country, one journalist said that he was afraid to contact the *de facto* authorities for information about the shutdown for fear of arbitrary arrest.⁵⁰ Another journalist, who did attempt to contact the *de facto* authorities to inquire about the reason for the shutdown, did not receive any answer: "[a]lthough I tried to reach many *de facto* Departments including the *de facto* Department of Information and Culture to find the reason behind, but they were also just informed of the cut."⁵¹ One journalist summed up the impact of the shutdown on freedom of expression:

*"The shutdown also limited freedom of communication and press freedom, silencing the media and preventing coverage of possible abuses, protests, or emergencies. In this way, it acted as a form of censorship [...] It also put people's safety at risk because they couldn't contact law enforcement officers, family members, emergency services, or humanitarian organizations. Many were left scared and confused. Even members of the *de facto* authorities were deeply worried, some tried to flee, while others felt betrayed by the *de facto* authorities and angry, believing that their years of loyalty had been ignored. The incident showed a loss of trust in the *de facto* authorities."*⁵²

⁴⁰ Interview no. 14.

⁴¹ Interview no. 59.

⁴² Interview no. 77.

⁴³ Interview no. 105.

⁴⁴ Interview no. 18.

⁴⁵ Interviews no. 2, 12, 16, 34, 42, 45, 47, 49 & 50.

⁴⁶ Interviews no. 42 & 45.

⁴⁷ Interviews no. 42 & 45.

⁴⁸ Interview no. 40.

⁴⁹ Interview no. 4.

⁵⁰ Interview no. 6.

⁵¹ Interview no. 45.

⁵² Interview no. 41.

Media outlets reliant on the internet to transmit their programmes halted their operations entirely during the telecommunications shutdown.⁵³ Television and FM radio stations that do not transmit through the internet continued to operate, however, they reported that their broadcasts were affected. Journalists were unable to collect information from sources via internet or telephone, nor could they file reports to their headquarters.

“During the blackout, we lost contact with [local journalists] entirely. Our news and public programmes –where people usually call to discuss various issues–had to be suspended. We had no access to reliable news sources, as both international and national TV and radio websites, which serve as our main sources of information, were inaccessible.”⁵⁴

Many live programmes were cancelled as hosts could not contact their invited guests and viewers and listeners could not phone into talk shows. One journalist said his radio station was broadcasting old programmes which he considered “boring” for the audience.⁵⁵ Another journalist explained he continued his work by conducting in-person interviews, which were time-consuming, entailed costly travel, and led to delays in reporting:

“Recently, there was an earthquake in Kunar province [...] and I was assigned to report from the field. When the internet and mobile services went down, our reports were delayed for several days.”⁵⁶

IMPACT ON BUSINESSES

UNAMA interviewed a range of businesses and professions, including: money exchangers, representatives of banking and financial institutions, internet service providers, online shops, small business owners, educators, farmers, rickshaw drivers, tailors – all of whom reported negative impacts on their businesses due to the telecommunications shutdown.

Money exchange shops were forced to close during the shutdown as they depend on an online system for conducting transactions, to obtain exchange rates updates, communicate with other exchangers both inside and outside of Afghanistan, and to process payments.⁵⁷ One money exchanger estimated there were around 100 money exchange shops in his province, earning a revenue between 100USD and 350USD per day, all of whom would have been affected by the shutdown.⁵⁸

Bank machines across the country were out of service and almost all banks were closed, with those that remained open offering only minimal services during the shutdown.⁵⁹ Both domestic and international money transfers were suspended.⁶⁰ A bank employee recounted:

Some clients needed to secure loans from the bank, while others had deadlines to return their loans that day. You can't imagine how much I suffered during that blackout. Customers were distressed about potentially losing their money or halting their usual business operations. The entire banking system was interrupted and shut down.”⁶¹

⁵³ Interview no. 86.

⁵⁴ Interview no. 4.

⁵⁵ Interview no. 69.

⁵⁶ Interview no. 8.

⁵⁷ Interview no. 60.

⁵⁸ Interview no. 108.

⁵⁹ Interview no. 62.

⁶⁰ Interview no. 53.

⁶¹ Interview no. 66.

As the shutdown occurred at the end of the month, some interviewees mentioned delays in salary payments, causing them financial difficulties.⁶² Many Afghans depend financially on remittances from abroad. One money exchanger recalled that people were, "deeply concerned, as many had relatives in hospitals and urgently needed money sent from abroad."⁶³

Local-level internet service provider shops did not have any customers during the shutdown as clients "were afraid that the services would not be reinstated".⁶⁴ One such retailer estimated his loss during the two-day shutdown to be 100,000AFN (\$1,517USD).⁶⁵ Some retailers said their customers are now fearful of another shutdown and are therefore reluctant to resubscribe to fibre optic internet.⁶⁶

Owners of online businesses could not receive new orders, arrange delivery, or receive payments during the shutdown.⁶⁷ Most businesses – whether online or not – rely on at least some form of telecommunication to operate, using the telephone and/or the internet to communicate with suppliers, customers, and between colleagues. The shutdown affected all kinds of businesses negatively: a farmer said he travelled twice to the bazaar in order to purchase items which he would ordinarily have ordered over the phone;⁶⁸ a rickshaw driver said his clients could not contact him to arrange transportation and he lost money as a result;⁶⁹ and a tailor said she was unable to communicate with a client regarding an urgent order.⁷⁰ Hotels and restaurants could not receive reservations,⁷¹ with one hotel manager saying: "Before the shutdown, most of our rooms were taken by guests, especially foreign visitors and staff from international and national organizations. However, from 29 September until now [7 October], we have not had even one guest."⁷²

Some merchants tried different ways to ensure business continuity and minimize losses during the shutdown. Some business owners went to the border areas with Iran and purchased Iranian SIM cards for communication.⁷³ A dairy product vendor used a taxi as a means of maintaining communication, which was much more expensive. She said:

My business relies on local farmers as I collect milk from them and process it into dairy products such as cheese, butter, yogurt and distribute them to different markets [...]. I was also unable to coordinate such activities with my colleagues in [different provinces]. During this period, I used to take a taxi to connect with contracted shopkeepers for coordination that I usually do over the phone or internet. I had to use the taxi to prevent a huge loss since the dairy products spoil very quickly. I did not make any profit during those two days, but I managed not to incur loss and protect my contracted farmers, too.⁷⁴

The telecommunications shutdown led to flight cancellations and delays at land borders. Customs officials are reliant on the internet to process entry and exit records; as a result, at

⁶² Interviews no. 50, 65 & 51.

⁶³ Interview no. 60.

⁶⁴ Interview no. 10.

⁶⁵ Interview no. 54.

⁶⁶ Interviews no. 54 & 55.

⁶⁷ Interviews no. 64, 68 & 72.

⁶⁸ Interview no. 79.

⁶⁹ Interview no. 78.

⁷⁰ Interview no. 74.

⁷¹ Interview no. 76.

⁷² Interview no. 76.

⁷³ Interviews no. 7 & 24.

⁷⁴ Interview no. 20.

the Zaranj border, one businessperson said: “[h]undreds of trucks loaded with goods being imported through Iran were stopped there. The situation has inflicted financial losses and an unwanted waste of time on the traders”.⁷⁵

IMPACT ON THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

At the time of the shutdown, in addition to the overall challenging humanitarian situation facing the country, humanitarians were responding to the needs of communities impacted by the 31 August earthquake which hit Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar provinces as well as an influx of people involuntarily returned from Pakistan.

UNAMA spoke to humanitarian workers who said the shutdown disrupted their work and delayed the provision of vital support to the population. Interviewees said that because the shutdown impacted banking systems, they were unable to get cash or do banking transactions to pay the daily costs of running their humanitarian operations, such as paying staff and contractors’ wages and purchasing fuel and other supplies.⁷⁶

A humanitarian worker reported their response in earthquake affected areas was affected by the shutdown. During the internet outage, a huge rainfall flooded some of the tents which had been erected for those whose houses had been damaged by the earthquake. The colleagues on the ground were unable to contact their headquarters to seek support and resources to resolve the issue, meaning that those with flooded tents had nowhere to sleep for two days.⁷⁷

Humanitarians responding to the influx of returnees from Pakistan reported the shutdown severely impacted their operations.⁷⁸ They said that their biometric registration processes, which are reliant on the internet, failed, and they had to register people manually. They were also unable to distribute cash to returnees, because they ran out of physical cash due to the banking outage and were also unable to transfer it electronically to people because they could not do electronic transfers without the internet. This disruption in the work resulted in the overcrowding of camps at the border, because returnees who would have usually moved on immediately after receiving their cash distribution had to wait longer to receive their money. They said that some returnees had already arranged transport to their home provinces and decided to travel onwards without receiving any cash assistance.

For returnees, the shutdown impacted their ability to contact their families to let them know their whereabouts. Interviewees said that unaccompanied female returnees were unable to contact their *mahrams* to come and collect them. People who had been deported could not contact their relatives in Pakistan to let them know what had happened to them. One interviewee said that on the day of the shutdown, his brother was deported from Iran and had to go to the hospital because he was very ill, but could not contact any family members to let them know his location.⁷⁹

The shutdown also disrupted coordination, affecting the provision of support to people in need. A female humanitarian worker said:

⁷⁵ Interview no. 24.

⁷⁶ Interview no. 22.

⁷⁷ Interview no. 25.

⁷⁸ Interview no. 25.

⁷⁹ Interview no. 7.

“During the shutdown, I could not access emails, data collection platforms, or communication channels like Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp, which disrupted coordination with field teams and delayed urgent referrals of the affected population [...] There were cases that needed immediate attentions, but we could not be able to do so due the shutdown of the networks and internet.”⁸⁰

A humanitarian organization reported that at least two elderly people died, due to delays in crossing the Torkham border because of the internet outage.

CONCLUSION

This briefing paper provides an overview of harm caused by the 48-hour telecommunications shutdown, with the accounts highlighting the wide-ranging – and in some cases life-threatening – implications for people in Afghanistan from lack of access to internet and mobile phone services.

The entire country – from its health systems to its banking sector and small businesses – is substantially reliant on telecommunications to operate and provide essential services to the Afghan people. Afghans, already facing significant challenges in their daily lives, should not be subjected to imposed telecommunications cuts which negatively impact their daily lives and ability to exercise their basic human rights.

⁸⁰ Interview no. 48.