At its General Assembly gathering member organisations from 36 countries, in Cairo, on 6 September 2005, the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) recognised the serious housing problems that the people of Afghanistan are facing, in particular, those Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. HIC calls for immediate action by the concerned governments to uphold human dignity, and to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of the Afghan people, including their rights to security, adequate housing and the right to freedom of movement and residence.

The people of war-ravaged Afghanistan still endure severe problems due to the absence of comprehensive housing and land policies and programmes, as well as a lack of basic services, including access to food, water, health, electricity and sanitation. Despite the persistently grave situation, international attention to the country has been gradually dwindling, as have the rights of Afghanistan’s people.

The plight of the people has been further exacerbated by a recent decision of the Government of Pakistan ordering all Afghan refugees in Pakistan to return to Afghanistan. Some three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan face grave uncertainty. The original houses of many have been destroyed, while they have not been provided any alternate land and housing. Despite this, the Pakistani government recently has evicted refugees living in Kurma Agency and in Bajawour; thereby, forcing them to return to homelessness in Afghanistan. Some Afghan refugees actually have crossed the border to Afghanistan, while some have settled in the refugee camps located at Subha Sarhad, in Peshawar. Reports indicate that a some Afghan children have died in that settlement due to the harsh conditions, and others have been subjected to violence by the Pakistani police. In a recent press conference, Afghan government spokesman Rahim Karimi confirmed the fact of that forced displacement, and has asked the Pakistani government to discuss the issue and develop solutions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Roughly one-third of the villages in Afghanistan already were destroyed during the 23-year Soviet occupation, creating approximately six million refugees and IDPs. The U.S.-led invasion and resulting war against the Taliban have rendered further thousands of Aghans homeless. Coupled with this is the recent and growing trend of land grabbing and forced evictions, including those carried out by Afghan officials, that have worsened the already acute landlessness and homelessness.

Kabul has a colossal housing shortage. About 40% of Aghans are displaced. Returning Aghans, including those from Europe and America, are settling in the capital, a large part of which remains in ruins. Housing costs are at a premium, and rents are on the rise. In Wazir Akbar Khan and Shahr-e-naw private housing rents have reached US$ 7,000. Unemployment in Afghanistan is high, and even for the majority of working people, the average income is low. With the average monthly salary for a government employee at around 1,600–1,800 afghans (roughly US$ 35), the lowest monthly rent in Kabul now has risen to US$ 200–400. That makes it impossible for the poor to pay for housing in Kabul, and dramatically widens the class of impoverished Aghans living without adequate housing. Moreover, 85% of Afghanistan’s population lives in rural areas without adequate facilities, including housing, water, food, sanitation and electricity.

Recognising the critical post-conflict struggle for housing and land rights, after his 2003 mission to Afghanistan, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing recommended an analysis of housing, property and land issues based on human rights law and the obligations of concerned States. He called for protection of the home, tenure security and security of the person in the home as cornerstones of policy formulation, especially applying the mandatory principles of nondiscrimination, gender equality, rule of law and international cooperation to address the existing housing and land rights crisis. The Special Rapporteur also identified the urgent need accordingly to develop, adopt and enforce housing and land legislation.

HIC supports the Special Rapporteur’s recommendations in his March 2004 report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and strongly urges not only the Government of Afghanistan to protect the rights of displaced and homeless Aghans, but that also other governments, especially those in countries hosting Afghan refugees, uphold these human rights as an obligation of international cooperation and applicable treaty law.