

Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Closure

NPR

Pakistan-Afghanistan border closures paralyze trade along a key route

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By

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Truck drivers eat on the ground by their stalled vehicles near Torkham, Pakistan, on Oct. 13, 2025. More than three months later, the Torkham border remains closed with no end in sight.

ABDUL MAJEED/AFP via Getty Images

PESHAWAR, Pakistan — **For more than three months**, Afghan truck driver Anwar Zadran has been parked in Pakistan with a truck full of cement he was supposed to transport from a factory in Nowshera district to Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. The task

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became impossible starting in mid-October, when Pakistan and Afghanistan shut their borders in response to fighting between the two countries, stranding Zadrán mid-route near the Torkham border crossing.

He now spends his daylight hours huddled at roadside tea stalls with other stranded drivers, waiting for a sign that restrictions at Torkham will loosen. Every day, Zadrán puts on the same thin clothes he arrived in months ago, when the weather was warm — retreating to his truck to sleep in the evenings when the air turns icy cold. "The people are destroyed and the goods are damaged as well," he says. "I wish the border would open soon so that we can get some relief."

Zadrán, who is from Afghanistan's Nangahar province, and his fellow drivers are used to intermittent closures along this border, which snakes more than 1,600 miles through the rugged mountains and deserts that separate Pakistan and Afghanistan. Normally hundreds of trucks pass through daily. In the past, border disruptions usually were [resolved](#) within days or weeks, but this one has stretched beyond 100 days — **the longest closure in recent decades**, with no clear end in sight. It has brought trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan to a halt and paralyzed a key transit route that extends across Central Asia.

The closure of five active trade borders is part of a larger dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan over how to handle a deadly surge in militancy, mostly along the border belt, but also including [a suicide attack last week](#) claimed by ISIS at a mosque in Islamabad that killed dozens. Pakistan has repeatedly accused Afghanistan of harboring militant groups that carry out attacks on Pakistani soil, a charge Afghanistan's Taliban government denies. Among the groups is the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, known as the Pakistan Taliban or TTP, which aims to bring down Pakistan's government and has become [more active](#) in Pakistan since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021.

The tipping point came when Afghan and Pakistani forces fired at each other across the border in October. The countries agreed to a [ceasefire](#) and took part in multiple rounds of peace talks in [Istanbul](#), [Doha](#) and [Riyadh](#). All failed to bring about a resolution. After the ceasefire, the Taliban government accused Islamabad of carrying out airstrikes inside Afghan territory that killed civilians, including [nine children](#). Pakistan denied attacking civilians.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif [said late last month](#) that Pakistan had no choice but to close its border because the Taliban couldn't commit to stopping militant groups that operate from Afghanistan. "We didn't want to, but they forced us," he said.

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The Taliban government [accused](#) Pakistan of shutting its borders as a way to assert economic and political pressure, and wants Pakistan [to provide](#) guarantees that it won't.

Looking for workarounds

In Peshawar, around 40 miles from the Torkham border, business leaders have been forced to look for possible workarounds. On a whiteboard in his office, trader Shahid Hussain has mapped out alternate routes for his exports through China. His shipments of food products to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan normally pass through Afghanistan. But not anymore.

The **China route is plausible**, Hussain says, but policies for Pakistan to use China for transit trade are unclear. Another option is through Iran. The country is under international sanctions, though, and banking channels with Pakistan are limited. Political instability there also makes this path uncertain.

Hussain, who normally also exports cement to Afghanistan, estimates losses of around \$400,000 just from damaged and expired stocks since the border closures started. He stopped paying salaries for his employees starting this month and compares his business of more than 20 years to a tree deprived of water. "There's no work," he says. "And what other activity should we do?"

In January, business leaders from both countries formed a joint committee to assess the situation. The group has so far held two meetings online and hopes to meet in the coming months at the Torkham border if they can get government approval. Both sides agree that the situation is dire and are trying to convince their respective countries' leaders of the same.

But the business community has been left without much leverage, says Jawad Hussain Kazmi, president of the Khyber Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a regional trade body. He heads the joint committee formed last month for the Pakistan side. "Our government has a one-point agenda," he says, "and that's that security problems should be resolved."

Naqibullah Safi, secretary general of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Kabul, says the border closures also have halted the entry of goods bound for Afghanistan from other Asian countries, including China, Malaysia and Vietnam. This includes shipping containers full of food, cloth and medical supplies, some of which remain stuck at the port in Karachi.

"This is the worst situation for the private sector," he says.

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Safi says there have been minor price increases in Afghanistan for goods including rice, medicine and cooking oil.

Losses in the hundreds of millions

Abdul Salam Jawad, the spokesperson for Afghanistan's commerce ministry, told NPR in a statement sent via WhatsApp that his country's exports to Pakistan (including fruits, vegetables and coal) were around **\$300 million less last year** — when border closures began — than in the previous year. Pakistan's commerce ministry did not respond to a request for trade figures. Last month, Pakistan said it would [allow](#) for stuck goods bound for Afghanistan to be re-exported to their countries of origin.

As the prolonged border closures drag on, Afghanistan has sought to [diversify its trade](#) with other countries in the region, including India and Iran. As part of this effort, the Taliban government has asked India to help facilitate the movement of Afghan goods through a port in which [India has been involved](#) in the Iranian city of Chabahar.

The Taliban separately ordered a complete ban on Pakistani pharmaceuticals starting this month, [citing quality concerns](#) — a blockade that could continue even if borders reopen.

Due to limited production in Afghanistan, the country relies on Pakistan for more than 60% of its medicine, and Pakistan's yearly **pharmaceutical exports to Afghanistan are worth around \$200 million**, according to Tauqeer Ul Haq, former chairperson of the Pakistan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association. He says stocks meant for Afghanistan can't easily be redirected, especially temperature-controlled medicine that got stuck in transit. "We fear that it will be wasted," he says. "It will not be usable."

At a market for Pakistani medicine in Peshawar, shop owners are already struggling with the loss of business from Afghanistan, which makes up a significant portion of their sales. In addition to wholesale buyers from Afghanistan, this market serves Afghan patients who come across the border to buy medicines in bulk that are hard to get in their country.

Aslam Pervez, a shop owner and general secretary for Peshawar of the Pakistan Chemists' and Druggists' Association, says he worries for patients who need lifesaving medicines such as insulin.

"From both sides, it's the people who are going to be the losers," Pervez says. "We can't change our neighbor."

Wasim Sajjad contributed to this report from Peshawar and the Torkham border.

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