

A humanitarian catastrophe in the making in Afghanistan

Our correspondents
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Whatever form the military assault being prepared by the US and its allies against Afghanistan takes, a humanitarian crisis is already under way in the impoverished country, which has been ravaged by more than two decades of civil war, drought and a long legacy of economic backwardness and deprivation.

Around three million Afghans are living in rudimentary refugee camps in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Within Afghanistan itself, an estimated one million people are described as “internally displaced”—refugees in their own country, desperate for food and shelter. According to several reports, the situation facing many trapped in villages, lacking basic resources and transport to escape, is even worse.

Now, the danger posed by US military attacks and an escalation of fighting between the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime and the opposition Northern Alliance has driven thousands more onto the roads. Even though Iran and Pakistan have closed their borders, some 10,000 refugees have crossed into Pakistan using small back roads. Aid agencies estimate that over a million people are already trying to get out of the country—a figure that will rise sharply as the conflict escalates.

Reports from Afghanistan indicate that the cities are emptying. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the southern city of Kandahar, where the Taliban have their headquarters, was half-empty. Kabul and Jalalabad were also being cleared out.

UNICEF spokesperson Gordon Weiss, speaking from the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, warned: “We have less and less of a picture of what’s going on as our sources of information are shut down. Thousands of women and children without food, medical care or even proper clothing are on the move... Women will be giving birth on the roads and dying and the newborns will be taken up by siblings, children weak and sick themselves, clothed in rags and desperately hungry.”

Aid agencies are stockpiling food and other basic items at points along Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan, anticipating a flood of hundreds of thousands of new refugees. Life in the dusty camps within Pakistan is bad enough. But within Afghanistan itself a significant proportion of the country’s population of 20 million faces disease and starvation. Aid agencies warn that some 7.5 million people—the majority of them women and children—are at risk.

According to a recent current affairs program on the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s *Four Corners*, one third of Afghanistan’s population can no longer afford to feed themselves. Newly arrived refugees to Pakistan interviewed on the program pointed to the civil war and the country’s three-year drought. Previously, one man

explained, they had enough resources to survive and rebuild, despite the fighting. “This time,” he said, “we had nothing left.” Another said the group had run out of water and had no means by which to survive.

Conditions in the refugee camps inside Afghanistan are appalling. Earlier in the year, aid agencies reported the deaths of nearly 500 people in a camp near the city of Herat. Most were children who had perished in the bitterly cold winter due to the lack of adequate clothing, shelter, food and medicine.

Those currently fleeing to areas held by the opposition Northern Alliance can expect no better. About 6,000 refugees exist in primitive conditions at the Anoba camp in the opposition-held Panjshir Valley. According to its manager Mohammad Tareq, he has room in tents for just 800 people and the rest are living in makeshift shelters, with winter approaching. Lack of food has forced them to scavenge for seeds, nuts and berries, which in turn has led to the outbreak of skin diseases.

The US has not yet fired the first shot, but among the first casualties of its war drive have been aid programs inside Afghanistan. On September 12, the day after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the UN World Food Program (WFP)—on which an estimated four million Afghans depend as their primary food source—announced that it was stopping the transport of food into the country.

The program’s spokesman Khaled Mansour pointed to the lack of available transport to take supplies into rural areas but also made clear that the decision was political—aimed at ensuring that none of the food got into the hands of the Taliban or its militia. “We can’t allow food to be diverted,” he said. “We have to be assured that the people who deserve the food will get it.” Despite the protests of non-government organisations, the WFP has not resumed food supplies.

With only three weeks of WFP food stocks left inside Afghani cities, Mansour is well aware of the consequences. “We have pre-famine conditions. If for a long period of time we cannot have access to Afghanistan... then I’m afraid people may starve,” he said. “About one million people would be most threatened... The last time I was there, I saw people eating locusts, eating animal fodder, eating grass. People are just trying to live by any means available. Due to the drought three years ago, they spent their savings. The year after, they sold their houses.”

For its part, the Taliban has ordered all international aid workers to leave, saying it could not guarantee their safety, and banned the remaining national aid employees from using communication equipment. On Monday, it shut down the UN communications network inside the country, took over the UN office in Kandahar and seized 1,400 tonnes of WFP food supplies. According to UN

spokesperson Stephanie Bunker: “While some activities are going on, most UN activities have been disrupted or have ceased.”

Long the subject of great power rivalry for control of the strategic Central Asian region, Afghanistan is one of the most impoverished and backward countries in the world. Its social and economic disintegration has been compounded by the protracted war since its invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979—first, between the Soviet-backed regime and Islamic Mujahideen groups armed and financed by the US and Pakistan, then following the Kabul regime’s collapse in 1992, between the various factions based on clan, language and religion.

The Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, backed by Pakistan with tacit US support, took control of Kabul in 1996 and now controls most of the country. The disparate coalition of opposition forces that comprises the Northern Alliance, which receives varying degrees of support from Russia, Iran and India, controls just 5 percent of the country from bases bordering the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

For decades, Afghanistan has been highly reliant on economic aid. In the late 1980s, according to the government’s own estimate, financial contributions from the USSR constituted 40 percent of the country’s civilian budget. Eastern bloc countries accounted for almost 70 percent of the foreign trade turnover in 1986-7. But these arrangements rapidly broke up after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Subsequent financial assistance from the UN and European Union has sharply declined in recent years, due to the imposition of sanctions against the Taliban regime at the insistence of the US.

Even prior to the Soviet invasion, around 67 percent of Afghanistan’s labour force was engaged in eking out a living on the country’s 12 percent of arable land. Agriculture, however, has been severely disrupted by continuous warfare. By the first half of the 1990s, there had been a sharp reduction in the production of traditional crops such as wheat, fruit and nuts, and a 50 percent increase in land under opium poppy cultivation.

Much of Afghanistan’s traditional economy has been replaced by one based on drugs and smuggling. In 1999, the country was the largest producer of opium in the world and up to a million Afghans were involved in the opium trade. In an effort to avoid even tougher UN sanctions imposed earlier in the year, the Taliban, which has been intimately involved in the opium trade, has banned poppy farming.

Afghanistan’s industry has been largely destroyed over the last two decades. Prior to the Soviet invasion there were about 220 state-owned factories and manufacturing employed about 11 percent of Afghanistan’s labour force. By 1999, only one of the four existing cement plants and about 10 percent of its textile mills remained in operation. The country’s annual per capita GDP is estimated at just \$US800.

Basic health services, scarce even before the outbreak of civil war, are now available to only a handful. There is only one doctor per 7,357 people. Life expectancy is one of the lowest in the world—46 years for males and 45 for females. Infant mortality rates are the highest in Asia—250 for every 1,000 live births, three times that of neighbouring Pakistan and 100 times that of Britain.

There is a very real danger of epidemics. World Health Organisation representative Hilary Bower said last week that some 5,000 cases of cholera and 100 cholera-caused deaths have already been reported. “These numbers are only indicative: low because in the current situation there is underreporting.”

Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of adult illiteracy in the

world—estimated at 53 percent for males and 85 percent for females. The Taliban’s reactionary social measures against women, including forbidding them from working and banning girls over the age of eight from attending school, has resulted in a large-scale exodus of teachers. In addition, prolonged warfare has resulted in nearly 2,000 school buildings being destroyed with only 600 primary and secondary schools currently operating.

Until this month, notwithstanding the devastation of Afghanistan’s infrastructure, the Pakistan government had been forcibly repatriating some of the two million Afghan refugees in its camps. A UNHCR spokesperson reported that mass deportations were creating a climate of constant fear among the refugees. At least one death had been recorded after Pakistani police hit an Afghan refugee over the head with a bottle and threw him out of a police car.

According to Mohammad Zahin Jabarkhil, leader of the Nasir Bagh camp, home to some 100,000 Afghan refugees, 80 percent of the camp’s residents did not want to return to Afghanistan because it was not safe. Jabarkhil said Pakistan had treated Nasir Bagh as a “showcase” camp during the 1980s. “When we were fighting the Soviets, President Carter came here, Vice-President Bush came here. The refugees were called ‘heroes of the world’. But those times are gone now. Now the government just wants us to leave.”

While backing the US war plans, Western powers have refused to accept all but a handful of Afghan refugees, leaving the vast majority trapped inside the country or in the sprawling camps of Pakistan and Iran, which are also among the poorest countries in the world.

In all of the extensive media coverage of the US administration’s preparations for war in Afghanistan, scant attention has been given to the plight of the Afghani people. In 1999, heart-rending pictures of Kosovo refugees were cynically used to justify the NATO bombardment against Yugoslavia although the humanitarian pretext for the war did nothing to deter the US and its allies from perpetrating atrocities against the civilian population of Serbia or levelling much of its infrastructure. But it is an ominous sign that in the US drive to war against one of the most destitute countries in the world, the rhetoric in Washington, London and elsewhere does not even pay lip service to humanitarian concerns.



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