

As major powers jockey over aid

Millions of Afghanis lack food, shelter and medicine

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Nine weeks of US bombing and the seizure of much of the country by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance has put large sections of the Afghani population at risk from starvation, exposure and disease. Winter is setting in and vital food, clothing and medicine, on which an estimated seven million people depend, has not been distributed.

The UN-sponsored conference of rival Afghani factions in Bonn has anointed a new interim administration which is due to be installed on December 22. But it will preside over a country in which central authority has broken down and rival warlords, tribal leaders and militia commanders have established a patchwork of individual fiefdoms. In the south, where the Taliban still holds Kandahar and other areas, US bombing is continuing.

The confusion and chaos combined with a lack of basic infrastructure have severely impeded aid efforts. The UN World Food Program (WFP) has transported 55,000 tons of food to Afghanistan or neighbouring countries during November—sufficient to provide bare sustenance for six million people for one month. But the non-government organisations (NGOs), which distribute the aid on behalf of the WFP, have either ceased operating or are refusing to dispatch relief convoys due to security fears.

Medecins sans Frontiers (MSF) spokesman Georges Dutreix told the *Los Angeles Times*: “In the northern parts of Afghanistan, many areas are unsafe due to the banditry... When you don’t know who is the boss and who is in control—and sometimes you have different people controlling the same area—it is very difficult.” The southern areas were a “no-go area”, Dutreix said. “Half the population is out of reach.” According to Mark Bartolini from the International Rescue Committee: “We’re probably operating at 20 percent of what we could be, due to security problems.”

To the extent aid is being distributed, it is largely confined to the country’s east and the capital Kabul. Aid convoys have begun to arrive from the Pakistani town of Peshawar. In Kabul, while initial food distributions have been conducted among its 1.1 million inhabitants, the long-term situation is bleak. Only a quarter of the city has electricity. US bombing severely damaged the already dysfunctional water system and drinking water, where available, is unsafe. Bombing also destroyed the last operating international telephone antenna and only 14,000 telephone lines are believed to be functioning. There is no transport system and the airport runway is damaged.

UN spokesman Khaled Mansour said that the number of doctors in Kabul has fallen from 1,000 to 759. Mohammed Naim, a doctor at the city’s main emergency hospital, told the *Washington Post* on December 2: “The health sector has nothing. It is totally demolished. We get a lot of sick people in need. We can only provide them shelter and medical advice—nothing else. There are no medicines, little food and no modern equipment. Even the old equipment we had has been looted.”

Another *Washington Post* report described as “almost apocalyptic” the

way people are living in the Kabul suburb of Darulaman, the scene of heavy fighting between rival warlords in the early 1990s. “Block after block of bombed-out, shelled, crumbling buildings, with the twisted wreckage of cars strewn about like rags. In many houses, the roofs are gone, allowing the sun to shine through the ruins. In many others, the wall on one side has been peeled away, revealing the interior like a giant dollhouse.”

Outside Kabul, the situation is worse. Even in Jalalabad, just 150 kilometres from Kabul, relief agencies have had serious concerns about resuming aid distribution. Upon taking the city in mid-November, troops loyal to the local Northern Alliance warlord looted food warehouses and stole over 100 UN vehicles. The MSF withdrew its foreign staff this week amid rising local anger over the scores of civilian deaths caused last weekend by US bombing in the nearby Tora Bora area. Around 1,500 refugees have fled to Jalalabad to escape ongoing attacks.

In the south, no food aid has reached Kandahar since November 12, due to both US bombing and ground fighting. US marines have cut the roads into the area. Over 240,000 people in the city were being fed by relief agencies, with aid coming from Pakistan, via the border town of Spin Boldak. On November 27, the Pakistani government sealed the road to Spin Boldak, leaving 60,000 people in three refugee camps with only enough food for one month and cutting off Kandahar completely.

In the north, food aid arriving in Mazar-e-Sharif has plummeted to just half the amount that had been getting through before the Northern Alliance took the city on November 10 and looted WFP warehouses. A 10-truck United Nations Children’s Fund aid convoy was also hijacked last month and two of its drivers kidnapped, possibly murdered. This week, the UN withdrew its last remaining staff due to gun battles between rival ethnic Uzbek and Hazara factions of the Alliance.

The best supply route to the city—the Amu-Darya bridge from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan—has been kept closed by the Uzbekistan government for “security reasons”. The airport is being held by American troops but is closed to all except military flights.

In a refugee camp housing 150,000 people on the outskirts of the city, children are dying from exposure as temperatures drop. Brendan Paddy, from the Save the Children group, told the British *Guardian* on December 3: “I don’t even want to think about the body count last night, but it will only be the beginning because the aid agencies have still not got the access they need to do their job effectively. There are people with no tents, no warm clothes. We’re going to see a lot more child deaths.”

Some relief is beginning to arrive in the city of Herat, trucked in from Iran and Turkmenistan, but it may be too late to assist the drought-stricken north-western provinces. Nabil Khalili, an Afghan journalist, told the *Los Angeles Times* that many people “are naked and eating the roots of grass”. The Maslak refugee camp to the west of Herat, which lacks safe drinking

water or adequate sanitation, now holds 150,000 people. Thousands more are reported to be arriving to escape starvation and the winter.

Attempts are also being made to resume deliveries to the mountainous central highland regions, where over one million people are on the verge of starvation due to drought. A number of villages have not received aid since relief organisations fled Afghanistan before the US attacks began in October. Aid workers reported then that villagers were eating their livestock and the seed needed for next year's crops. WFP plans to ship 30,000 tons of food to the area, essential to feed the population throughout the winter months, have been at a standstill. A convoy of 73 trucks finally left Peshawar on December 5.

The harsh central mountains are home to the Hazara ethnic minority who, because of their adherence to the Shi'ite sect of Islam, are among the poorest and most oppressed layers of the population. In Bamyan province, for instance, there are only two doctors to care for a population of 434,000 people. In an interview in the *Los Angeles Times*, Yusef Vaezi, a spokesman for the Hazara-based Islamic Unity Party, warned: "If the world is not going to move more quickly to help, we will witness a humanitarian disaster. At least two million will die."

The provision of aid has itself become a political football as the major powers vie for influence in Afghanistan following the collapse of the Taliban regime. Britain and France both want to deploy troops to establish their political presence inside the country and have argued that military protection is needed to enable aid convoys to reach their destinations. The US, however, blocked these plans in November, and has since made clear that it does not support a large multi-national force.

The determination of the US to retain its military monopoly in Afghanistan has already led to criticism in the European press over the inadequacy of aid operations in Afghanistan. On November 29, the European Commission criticised the US reliance on air drops, following the death of a woman near Mazar-e-Sharif when a crate of US food parcels hit her house. The EC used the incident to argue for the opening of land routes, and the deployment of European troops to protect the convoys.

The Bush administration has ignored the European demands, insisting that any "peacekeeping" force would get in the way of US military operations against the Taliban. Up to 1,000 US marines are now dug in near Kandahar after being airlifted into place last month. The US has also deployed its own troops to occupy airfields at Bagram, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and now Jalalabad.

One of the US commanders bluntly declared after his troops landed near Kandahar: "America now owns a piece of Afghanistan." He was mildly rebuked by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld but the comment reflects the line of thinking not only in Washington but in other capitals—in order to have a political say in Afghanistan, troops are needed on the ground.

The political function of aid was clearly seen in the course of the UN-sponsored meeting on Afghanistan held in Bonn over the last week. US, UN and German officials all made abundantly clear that no money would be provided for aid or financial assistance unless the Afghani factions represented agreed to the political framework determined by the UN Security Council.

Now that the delegates have rubberstamped the UN proposals, the major powers are jockeying for position at various meetings being held to discuss Afghanistan's "reconstruction". The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the UN Development Program, as well as relief agencies, met in Berlin on December 5, following an earlier summit in Pakistan, and a hastily-called government-level conference in Washington in late November.

The wrangling over the Washington meeting again highlighted the underlying tensions. The Bush administration initially attempted to convene the talks, under American and Japanese chairmanship, to extract

financial pledges for Afghanistan. According to Japanese sources, the French and British governments insisted that the meeting be held under the auspices of the UN, with the European Union (EU) sharing chairmanship and China, India and Australia also participating. The EU then convened a foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels effectively scuttling the Washington talks which were downgraded to a "preparatory" meeting.

Whatever the outcome of this manoeuvring, the amount of aid will not match Afghanistan's needs. Some estimates put the aid figure as low as \$US6.5 billion, spread out over five years and much of it in the form of repayable loans. A recent World Bank report, prepared as a guide for the "reconstruction" talks, highlights the extent of the social and economic breakdown in Afghanistan and thus, without saying so, the inadequacy of the proposed aid package.

Summing up the situation, the report states: "Afghanistan's infrastructure has been destroyed or degraded; its human resource base severely depleted; and its social capital eroded. State institutions are largely non-functional, and the economy and society have become increasingly fragmented. Afghanistan faces serious political problems, a dire humanitarian emergency in the short run and large needs of reconstruction and development over time.

"Afghanistan's economy is in a state of collapse. The three-year drought and resulting famine, the recent ban by the Taliban on opium production, the choking of trade via Pakistan and the massive displacement of the population, have exhausted what coping capacity was left among families and civil society. The key economic institutions of State—central bank, treasury, tax collection and customs, statistics, civil service, law and order, judicial system—are extremely weak or simply missing. Basic infrastructure—roads, bridges, irrigation, canals, telecommunications, electricity, markets—have been destroyed or oriented to the war effort."

According to the latest World Bank statistics, half of the country's children are malnourished and stunted, and one quarter die before they reach the age of five. Diarrhoea and respiratory infections cause 41 percent of child deaths and vaccine-preventable diseases are responsible for 21 percent. Only 39 percent of boys and 3 percent of girls attend school.

An Afghani woman dies every 30 minutes from pregnancy-related causes—15,000 per year. Nearly 99 percent of all deliveries take place at home and only 9 percent are attended by personnel with any training. Only 13 percent of the population have access to safe drinking water and the average life expectancy is just 41 years. Close to one million people have been disabled as a result of war. Land mines and unexploded bombs, which cover 11 percent of the country, are still maiming between 40 and 100 people per week.

To overcome this tragedy would require the injection of tens of billions of dollars over a sustained period. The World Bank report commented: "Merely restoring the pre-1978 economic situation in Afghanistan (even if that were possible) would leave the country one of the poorest in the world in terms of both incomes and social indicators." Clearly the World Bank does not believe that money for even this limited objective is going to be forthcoming.



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