

# Report documents poverty and social misery in Afghanistan

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2 March 2005

A recent United Nations report on social conditions in Afghanistan provides a glimpse of the social reality behind the American media's talk of a "new democracy" and the supposedly benevolent role of the US government in that country.

A quarter of a century after Washington intervened to support Islamic fundamentalist forces fighting a pro-Soviet government in Kabul, and three years after the American military invaded Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime, the war-torn nation ranks 173rd out of 178 countries in the United Nations 2004 Human Development Index. Only a handful of sub-Saharan African nations suffer more wretched conditions.

The survey, *Afghanistan, National Human Development Report 2004: Security with a Human Face*, was recently released in Kabul. It begins by asserting that the country has not seen any significant "span of stability" over the past two decades—i.e., shortly after the US first intervened in Afghanistan. "Years of conflict and neglect have taken a devastating toll, as measured by dramatic drops in human, social and economic indicators," the report's authors write.

After noting that a global survey in 1992 revealed atrocious conditions in Afghanistan, the report continues: "By the beginning of the new century, human development estimates as recorded in this NHDR [National Human Development Report] had become even more alarming: Life expectancy today is approximately 44.5 years, with healthy life expectancy at birth estimated at 33.4 years. One out of five children dies before the age of five, and one woman dies approximately every 30 minutes from pregnancy-related causes."

The infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world, with life expectancy at least 20 years shorter than in neighboring countries.

Eighty percent of the deaths of children under five are due to preventable diseases. About half of this same age group are physically stunted due to chronic malnutrition, and some 10 percent suffer acute malnutrition.

Only 25 percent of the population has access to clean drinking water—one in eight children die from lack of the resource. One of two Afghans can be classified as poor, with 20.4 percent of the rural population consuming less than 2,070 calories per person per day. Only Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali

have lower literacy rates.

"Human poverty in Afghanistan is a multidimensional problem that includes inequalities in access to productive assets and social services; poor health, education and nutritional status; weak social protection systems, vulnerability to macro and micro-level risks (both natural and human-triggered); human displacement; gender inequalities and political marginalization," summarizes the report.

Children have been the primary victims of more than two decades of conflict. Of the estimated 1.5 million people killed during this period, some 300,000 were children. Abduction and trafficking in children is now a rapidly growing threat, with the most common forms of trafficking being child prostitution, forced labor, slavery, servitude and the removal of body organs.

Only 14 percent of women are literate, and the rate of pregnancy-related deaths is 60 times higher than for women in industrial countries. Seventy percent of those affected by tuberculosis are women.

Afghanistan is one of the countries most heavily saturated with land mines. An estimated 10 million scattered throughout the country have been responsible for disabling hundreds of thousands of Afghans. The country is also one of the world's major sites of human displacement, where one in every three people is either a refugee or an "internally displaced person."

The report states: "Mental disorders are another of Afghanistan's war wounds, yet they have been largely ignored. WHO [World Health Organization] estimates indicate that 95 percent of the population in Afghanistan has been affected psychologically, and one in five suffers from mental health problems." Some 30 percent of the population may suffer from forms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A survey of women in Kabul found that 98 percent met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, major depression or severe anxiety, and 40 percent met the criteria for all three diagnoses.

The relationship between the state, the warlords and the narco-mafia bosses have added to the level of psychological "insecurity." The report quotes a man from Jalalabad who provides a description of the dysfunctional, US-supported government of President Hamid Karzai: "It has no education policy, it has no health policy, it has no economic policy, it has no environmental policy, it has no security policy. It just takes

everything by the day and many of the days are bad.”

The report argues that progress has been made in certain areas since the US invasion in 2001. School enrollment has increased, particularly among girls. It notes, however, that more than 61 percent of children are not going to school in at least nine provinces. In ten provinces, more than 80 percent of girls are not enrolled in school.

Afghan gross domestic product (GDP) has increased, but it was climbing out of a very deep hole. The nation’s GDP was estimated to be about \$3.7 billion in 1977; it dropped by some 20 percent over the next decade. By 2000, GDP had fallen even farther, to an estimated \$2.7 billion. It has now risen to approximately \$4 billion.

According to a *New York Times* article on the UN report, while there has been progress, Zphirin Diabr, associated administrator of the United Nations Development Program, says, “the country has a long way to go just to get back to where it was 20 years ago.”

One part of the report attempts to place this disastrous state of affairs within an historical context. The chapter provides a brief overview of the “Afghan conflict,” beginning in the 1970s, whose predominant causes stem from “external factors such as foreign invasion and interference.”

The country’s present borders were established at the end of the nineteenth century, “when the great powers sought to establish a buffer state between the British and Russian empires.” In the 1970s, two political coups brought to power, in 1978, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which installed a pro-Soviet regime.

In response to the destabilizing impact of the anti-Soviet Mujahideen guerilla insurgency, according to the report, the PDPA “invited” the USSR to enter the country in 1979, marking the beginning of Afghanistan’s 23-year-long war.

The UN report does not explain that in July 1979, US President Jimmy Carter signed a secret directive providing clandestine assistance to the Islamic fundamentalist forces. This was six months before the USSR invaded.

Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski acknowledged this in a 1998 interview. He explained, “We didn’t push the Russians to intervene, but we consciously increased the probability that they would.... Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap. You want me to regret that?”

Asked if he regretted providing sustenance for future Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, Brzezinski replied: “What is more important to the history of the world...the Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?”

Along with the present social disaster in Afghanistan, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks can also be traced, in the final analysis, to the strategy first employed by Carter-Brzezinski and actively pursued by the Reagan administration

during the 1980s of manipulating Islamic fundamentalism to undermine the Soviet Union.

The UN study points out that during “the phase of the Cold War that stretched between 1979 and 1989, the Mujahideen groups received about \$7 billion in military and economic aid from the US and some other western countries.” In this same period, the war created 5 million Afghan refugees.

The fall of the Afghan government of Mohammad Najibullah in 1992 “and the total chaos in the country in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the Soviet forces left a weak state with weak military capability,” argues the UN report. In an earlier chapter, the authors write: “The Western world was more interested in curbing the expansion of the Soviet Union than in the consequences of heavily arming resistance groups. It then abandoned Afghanistan, and its people, after the pull-out of the Soviet Army.”

Until the late 1990s, the US turned a blind eye to the extremely regressive social policies of the Taliban, which had come to power in 1994. Under the Taliban, according to the report, “the war economy was further consolidated and Afghanistan became the world’s major source of opium.” The September 11 terrorist attacks provided the Bush administration with the pretext to invade Afghanistan and oust the Taliban regime.

The years following the US invasion witnessed “a deeply embedded war economy, which leaves the majority of Afghans living in heightened states of both fear and want.” This era has seen an expansion of narco-warlordism and the opium trade. It is estimated that in 2003, Afghanistan produced three-quarters of the world illicit opium, and officials warn that the country could become “a narco-terror state in the future.”

The survey also contends that besides opium, trafficking in archeological artifacts has been a source of booty, estimating that since 1992, approximately 75 percent of the ancient artifacts belonging to the National Museum in Kabul have been smuggled out of the country.

*Security with a Human Face* presents a harrowing picture of a country whose “free election” last October was timed to provide Bush with a pre-election boost. The prescriptions advanced by the report in its later chapters for a stable and democratic society appear absurd in light of current Afghan reality: foreign imperialist occupation, political power in the hands of mafia-like warlords; unspeakable conditions for broad masses of the population.



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