

Reports document deepening social catastrophe in Afghanistan

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More than six years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, two recently released reports have again demonstrated the falsehood of the Bush administration's claims to be helping the Afghan people. The social indices on literacy, life expectancy and food availability contained in the reports provide an insight into the terrible social crisis confronting millions of Afghans.

The 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report produced by the United Nations and based on statistics gathered in 2005 shows that Afghanistan has actually fallen in world rankings. In 2004, it was placed 173rd out of 178 countries on the UN global human development index; in 2007 it has fallen another place to 174th ahead of only four poverty-stricken African countries—Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone and Niger.

According to the report, average life expectancy fell from 44.5 years in 2003 to 43.1 years in 2005, while adult literacy fell from 28.7 percent in 2003 to 23.5 percent in 2005. When these figures are cross-referenced with pre-invasion 2001 statistics, a picture of social retrogression becomes clear. Under the Taliban regime, average life expectancy was actually slightly higher at 45.5 years and the literacy rate for adults was 31 percent.

The report found that many Afghans lack the most basic dietary requirements, stating: “6.6 million Afghans do not meet their minimum food requirements, with 24 percent of households characterised by poor food consumption. Based on a minimum caloric intake of 2,067 kilocalories per day adjusted by sex and age, 30 percent of the population eats, on average, below their daily requirements. Households in urban areas are slightly more food-insecure than both rural and Kuchi [nomad] populations. When diversity of diet is included in the analysis, 61 percent of households are likely to

be below the threshold for food insecurity.”

The shortage of food has resulted in widespread malnutrition and undernourishment, with almost 40 percent of children below the age of three underweight, 54 percent of children under the age of five experiencing stunted growth and 7 percent dying of hunger. Considering that only 31 percent of households nationwide have access to safe drinking water, it is clear that a major humanitarian catastrophe is taking place.

The SENLIS Council report “Stumbling Into Chaos, Afghanistan on the Brink” examines the reasons behind the growing armed insurgency against the US-led occupation. In doing so, however, the think tank is compelled to consider the anger and hostility generated by the country's social crisis, endemic official corruption and broken promises of international aid.

The report quoted a doctor at the Bost Hospital in Lashkar Gar who explained: “If the international community has sent aid to Helmand province I haven't seen this. There are 25,000 refugees in the camps around Helmand. Not a single person has spoken of food aid delivery. In some districts there are not even any medical clinics; these were destroyed as a result of the fighting between the Taliban and the international forces.

“I don't think anyone is getting any aid whatsoever. We gave the British ambassador and Members of Parliament a list of all the hospital's needs. We haven't heard anything from them since. We have not received the medicines they promised, nor have we received the equipment or anything else they promised us.”

An article published last month in the *Ottawa Citizen* stated: “Major donor nations, including Canada, spent about \$1.36 billion in official development assistance to Afghanistan over a one-year period ending March

2006.” But it then pointed out that much of the money does not reach ordinary Afghans. A study by the Peace Dividend Trust found that “only \$424 million, or about 31 percent had ‘a local impact’.”

An element of US propaganda used to justify the invasion was the claim that it would end discrimination against women that prevailed under the Taliban’s Islamic fundamentalist regime. While some changes have taken place, discrimination is still widespread particularly outside the urban centres. The estimated literacy rate for women is only 12.6 percent, down from 15 percent in 2001. Child marriages and forced marriages are widespread.

Female enrolment rates at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels are about half those for males. Women and girls in rural areas have particularly limited educational opportunities, partly because of the lack of female teachers, who comprise only 28 percent of the teaching force.

After nearly three decades of war, the Afghan economy is in a state of decay. A certain hothouse development has taken place in Kabul, but in other towns and in the countryside, where the bulk of the population live, basic infrastructure and services are primitive or non-existent. The estimated unemployment rate is 40 percent and over half of the population lives below the poverty line.

Many people have been forced to flee their homes. The SENLIS report stated that internal displacement has increased over the past 18 months, due in large part to the intensification of fighting in the south of the country. The conditions facing refugees were described by two occupants at the Kandahar City IDP refugee camp.

“I cannot provide for my family; I don’t have any work and I am ill. My eldest son is only three years old. My mother is begging for food. Only the people at the mosque collect some money for us,” one said.

“We don’t receive any help, no aid whatsoever. My family and I don’t have anything to eat. We have no shelter and no drinking water. We can only get some water from the houses around the camp. We are forced to move from one place to the other,” the second explained.

The only flourishing industry in Afghanistan is the illicit growth and trade in opium. Forced to find a means of feeding their families, many farmers have

turned to growing opium poppies. So widespread and all pervasive is the drug trade that Afghanistan is often referred to as a “narco-state”.

According to the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report, between 80-90 percent of economic activity occurs within the “informal” sector. “The estimated area upon which poppy cultivation is taking place in Afghanistan increased by 59 percent,” it stated. Afghanistan is believed to produce about 90 percent of the world’s supply of illegal heroin.

According to the 2007 opium survey conducted by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, cannabis cultivation has also risen 40 percent this year. In an Associated Press article last month, a farmer explained: “The government cannot provide a good market for other crops like cotton, watermelon and vegetables, so I have to grow marijuana instead of poppy.”

Another farmer Akbar Khan said: “We know marijuana is an illegal crop, but we are very poor and we have to grow it to help our families survive. I don’t like growing poppy or marijuana. I don’t want people to become addicted to these things, but I have to feed my children and I have no other way.”

Britain, which is responsible for trying to eradicate opium production, is seeking to find ways of encouraging farmers to grow legal crops—such efforts have been tried and failed before. Washington, however, is pressing for poppy fields to be destroyed from the air. If that takes place on a wide scale, many farming communities will be left without any livelihood at all. Already there have been complaints of opium crops being destroyed.

While information and statistics remain scanty, the two reports constitute a devastating indictment of the Bush administration’s invasion, which has compounded, not alleviated the crisis facing the Afghan population.



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