

After severe winter, floods threaten Afghanistan and Central Asia

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Following one of the harshest winters in living memory, which claimed at least 1,000 lives, the Afghan people are now confronted with the danger of disastrous spring flooding. At least 21 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces are considered vulnerable. Unusually cold conditions and flood threats have also affected the neighbouring Central Asian states, where the backwardness of infrastructure has contributed to hundreds of deaths and ignited social and political tensions.

Throughout January, temperatures frequently plummeted to as low as minus 24° Celsius (minus 11° Fahrenheit) in the mountainous areas of Afghanistan. Among the worst affected were the western districts populated by ethnic Hazaris, one of the country's most oppressed communities. The winter cold resulted in the loss of food stocks and at least 316,000 animals. Thousands of subsistence farmers have been left struggling to feed their families.

An Afghan herder, Muhammad Amin, told the United Nation's newsagency IRIN last month: "We don't have fodder for our sheep. If we can't sell them, they will die. This is the only income for my family. I have nothing else to feed them."

An IRIN article on March 10 reported that communities in the Ajristan district of Ghazni were on the brink of starvation. A government official stated: "Many families in Ajristan are eating different kinds of dried grass and vegetables like alfalfa, which are normally given to cattle, due to food shortages and extreme poverty." A local elder appealed: "Our children will die if we do not receive urgent assistance." A similar situation probably exists in many other areas. Roads to more remote villages are still blocked by snow.

Food shortages are being exacerbated by the

deportation of Afghan refugees from Iran. According to Afghanistan's Ministry of Refugees and Returnees Affairs, Shir Mohammed Etibari, more than 17,000 people were forced back over the border into Afghanistan by the Iranian regime in recent months. Over 7,000 have been deported since January 16. Etibari told IRIN: "We will face a humanitarian catastrophe if Iran resumes mass deportations of Afghans." Iran estimates that there are one million unregistered Afghan migrants in the country and threatened on March 3 to deport them all.

The surrounding Central Asian states also experienced a particularly harsh winter. Tajikistan's outdated hydroelectric power system was brought to a standstill when rivers froze. The capital Dushanbe is the only place in the country where residents were receiving electricity for 10 hours per day. The rest of the country could rely on just four hours a day while some areas were completely blacked out. As in Afghanistan, Tajikistan's rural poor suffered heavy losses of crops and livestock.

The situation worsened when neighbouring states, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, cut off gas supplies due to non-payment. Schools and hospital were left to operate with limited electricity and no heating. According to official figures, 232 newborn babies died in maternity wards during January alone.

According to the UN, at least 260,000 people in Tajikistan are in immediate need of food assistance, while almost one-third of the population of 7 million is in need of some form of assistance. The situation has led to discontent and anger.

A Dushanbe-based lawyer told Tajik journalists Konstantin Parshin and Kambiz Arman: "We have double standards in our society. We see a number of new construction sites in Dushanbe. Five-star hotels are

being erected. And we see the fancy cars and homes in the city. Everybody knows who these things belong to. These ‘masters of life’ control the economy, but they are deaf to the people’s cries. In the spring we will be facing another serious threat—dirty water from taps. And somebody will be appealing again for international assistance. It happens time and again.”

The February 20 article, which was published by Eurasianet, cited a National Bank of Tajikistan estimate that the winter cold had inflicted \$250 million in losses. Tajikistan’s entire state budget is just \$610 million.

As temperatures warm, flooding has begun in areas hundreds of kilometres from the higher regions affected by the freezing winter.

An operation report released by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on March 5 documented flooding in the South Kazakhstan region, where the level of the Syr-Darya River has risen sharply. “As of 25 February, 24 localities have been flooded with 259 houses being destroyed and 2,345 flooded; 12,744 people have been displaced, 1 died.” The report continued: “...the situation could escalate and a larger number of people could be displaced.”

The March 11 UN update on Kazakhstan assessed the flooding as the worst in 50 years and warned that in many villages, “agricultural land and irrigation canals have been covered by mud and sand, which will make it very difficult to start the usual agricultural works in the spring”. As many as 250,000 people may be forced to evacuate as flooding spreads. Damage already is estimated to be \$150 million.

A March 10 report by Radio Free Europe quoted a Tajik official noting that snow falls were 20 percent higher this winter than normal. If temperatures rise quickly, the volume of water rushing into the Amu Darya River may cause extensive flooding in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and parts of Afghanistan later this month or in early April.

In southern Afghanistan, officials are warning of severe flooding in the lower-lying areas of the country’s south. Eng Wali Mohammad, an Afghan reconstruction expert, told Radio Free Europe: “Floods are coming once in a century or maybe every 70 years and are a major problem in the country, especially those of big rivers that always have water. For example the Helmand River, after joining the Arghandab River, would be flowing at a rate of 20,000 cubic metres per

second during flooding season. So nothing can prevent it from flooding. It needs time and a dam needs to be constructed, large dams, which could prevent these floods.”

The provinces that will be particularly affected by flooding include Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan—the main areas where the insurgency against US and NATO troops is being fought. The added hardships will fuel hatred of the US-led military presence.

Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics do not have the technical or financial resources to address the crisis. Even before the impact of the expected inundation, Abdul Matin Edra, the head of the Afghanistan National Disasters Management Authority, told IRIN in February: “Lack of coordination has been a major problem for us. The level of need is beyond our capacity.” As happens in so-called natural disasters around the world, millions of poor and oppressed are being left at the mercy of the elements by the indifference of the major powers.

US government press releases on relief operations to alleviate the impact of the harsh winter in Afghanistan have not spoken of financial assistance. Instead, the four releases made references to a combined medical team that “treated more than 80 patients”, a clinic that “treated 750 people”, a veterinary course attended by 50 elders, and the provision of humanitarian assistance to “nearly 200 villagers”. This aid is miniscule alongside the \$16 billion that the US officially spends every month to occupy Afghanistan and Iraq, and highlights the cynicism of the claims that the US-NATO occupation is concerned with the well-being of the Afghan people.



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