

# Millions face starvation in Afghanistan

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A social catastrophe is unfolding in Afghanistan. 2008 was the seventh consecutive year of drought and poor harvests and as many as 8 to 10 million people face starvation as the harsh winter sets in and snow falls isolate rural communities. The worst affected provinces are in central and northern Afghanistan where US and NATO forces have exerted almost unchallenged control since the 2001 invasion and claim to have spent billions of dollars on reconstruction and development.

A minimum of 6 million tonnes of wheat and other cereals are needed to feed the country's population, which has swollen to nearly 30 million after the return of refugees from Pakistan and Iran. Last year just 3.5 million tonnes of cereal were produced with the entire crop being lost in some areas. Over 1.5 million animals—some 10 percent of livestock—also died due to water shortages.

The problem of drought is vastly increased by the lack of water catchments and the backwardness of the country's irrigation systems. A study by the Afghan Ministry of Water and Energy estimated that 70 percent of available water was lost to evaporation or leakage as it flowed through crumbling, decades-old canals.

The US occupation has done nothing to address the problems. Instead, Afghan communities have sought to overcome the water shortages by tapping into underground basins. The Ministry of Water and Energy estimates that 50 percent of ground water has now been depleted.

The lack of irrigation has contributed to as much as four million hectares of potentially productive land not being cultivated. At some point during the last 30 years of war and political chaos, areas of land have simply

been abandoned.

The result is a population dependent on food imports they cannot afford to buy. The price of imported wheat for example, which sells at close to 80 US cents per kilogram, puts it out of reach of many ordinary people whose income is generally less than one dollar a day.

The US and NATO occupation forces were warned well in advance of the risk of widespread starvation this winter. The British Royal United Services Institute wrote in October that Afghanistan faced a "calamitous famine". The World Food Program (WFP) and other agencies have rushed additional supplies into the country. Susanna Nicol, a WFP spokesperson in Kabul, told the Canadian *National Post*: "The current situation is extremely fragile."

WFP and other relief organisations have delivered some assistance. The quantity, however, is insufficient to guarantee food security through the winter. In the province of Badakhshan, in north-east Afghanistan, government officials told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that after the delivery of 15,000 tonnes of food aid, another 105,000 tonnes were still needed. An official estimated that 1.3 million people in that province alone were at risk of malnutrition.

Malnutrition further weakens a vulnerable population, especially young children, who do not have access to adequate health care, sanitation or basic services such as electricity. According to UNICEF, an estimated 327,000 children under the age of five died during 2006—a year of severe drought.

Diarrhea and acute respiratory infections were responsible for 41 percent of child deaths, while illnesses such as measles and polio that could be

prevented by vaccination caused a further 21 percent. Over 50 percent of children who survived beyond five suffer stunted growth.

Overall life expectancy for men and women in Afghanistan is just 44 years old. Women die in child birth at the rate of 1,600 to 2,000 per 100,000 births.

This year, even the Afghan government's own Health Ministry is warning of a massive spike in the country's staggering annual death toll. It has estimated that 1.6 million children under five may die.

The prospect of hundreds of thousands of children dying from famine or easily preventable diseases underlines the sheer cynicism of the claim that the US and the major NATO powers have over 70,000 troops in Afghanistan to bring its people "security, governance and economic development".

The vast bulk of foreign spending in Afghanistan is to sustain the military operations of the occupation forces, which are aimed at crushing the resistance among the Afghan people to the attempt to transform the country in the US-backed client state in Central Asia.

The resources that have been allocated to so-called "reconstruction" have been spent without a coordinated national plan and with virtually no input from the Afghan people. Forty percent of the "aid"—some \$6 billion as of mid-2008—did not even reach the country. It was paid out to the Western-based contracting companies and agencies hired to oversee various projects.

Another large portion has been siphoned off by the various political parties, factions and warlords that make up the regime in Kabul. Common practices include inflated salaries for government officials, demands for bribes and rampant overcharging for permits, labour, raw materials and transport.

Even the *New York Times*, which has consistently supported the occupation of Afghanistan, had to note on January 1 that the US/NATO-backed government of President Hamid Karzai is "shot through with corruption and graft" and "now often seems to exist for

little more than the enrichment of those who run it". Karzai himself told a recent conference: "The banks of the world are full of the money of our statesmen."

The concern of the occupation powers, however, is not that they have created a dysfunctional and corrupt puppet state or that much of the population faces starvation. It is the realisation that the worsening plight of the long-suffering Afghan people is a major factor in the resurgence of support for the Islamist-led insurgency and the growing casualty rate last year among US and NATO troops.



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