

After two decades of imperialist occupation, Afghanistan faces a ‘humanitarian catastrophe’

Jean Shaoul
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United Nations (UN) Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned that “A humanitarian catastrophe looms” in Afghanistan as almost half of the population, some 18 million people, need urgent humanitarian assistance to survive.

Guterres said, “One in three Afghans do not know where their next meal will come from. More than half of all children under five are expected to become acutely malnourished in the next year.”

With the current \$1.3 billion UN humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan only 39 percent funded, there is a desperate need for further funding to get food into the country before the winter snows block the roads in a couple of months’ time.

Guterres’s remarks underscore the fact that in all the saturation coverage by the mainstream media of the evacuation of foreign nationals and Afghans associated with the US and its allies, little has been said about the economic and social devastation wrought on the country itself.

The US-led war and occupation that started in 2001 followed more than two decades of covert operations orchestrated by the CIA and carried out by its regional and local proxies against the impoverished country, by far the poorest in Asia. The invasion of Afghanistan had been planned well in advance of the 9/11 attacks which served as a pretext. It was launched not to prosecute a “war on terrorism,” but rather to pursue Washington’s geo-strategic interests—controlling a country that bordered the oil-rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian Basin, as well as China, and thereby securing US domination of Central and South Asia.

Afghanistan is itself rich in untapped minerals, variously estimated at \$1 to \$3 trillion.

The war in pursuit of these predatory aims was a war of aggression, concealed by massive lies, without popular support in the NATO countries, much less in Afghanistan itself. It violated international law and in turn gave rise to a

raft of other crimes that included civilian massacres, extraordinary rendition and torture, Guantanamo Bay and CIA “black sites.”

Costing the US at least \$2 trillion, the invasion and occupation has destroyed Afghanistan’s economy and plunged the population into poverty. The country was ranked as the world’s 169th poorest country out of 189 on the UN Development Programme’s Human Development Index in 2020. It now faces further economic collapse at the hands of the US and other imperialist powers.

The American government has frozen Afghanistan’s \$9 billion foreign currency reserves held in its banks, leaving the Taliban with access to just 0.1-0.2 percent of the country’s total international reserves. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in which the US has a controlling stake, as well as Western Union—the US financial services corporation that is the world’s second-largest provider of money transfer services—have all halted their operations with Afghanistan. The IMF has also frozen a recently approved \$340 million grant from its Special Drawing Rights.

Afghanistan’s currency has fallen by 10 percent as the physical supply of US dollars that supported its value ended abruptly. The banks have largely remained closed, with long lines of people trying to access their savings outside the few banks that have reopened, prompting the Taliban to limit withdrawals to the equivalent of \$200 a week.

As the currency falls further, prices are expected to skyrocket. They have already started to rise amid fears of shortages in the coming months, exacerbated by a severe drought, the second in three years, that has led to the loss of 40 percent of crop production and a ‘devastating impact’ on livestock. The price of lentils has more than doubled, while the price of vegetable oil has risen 25 percent along with that of chickpeas and beans.

According to Reliefweb, even before this latest crisis, 3.1 million children were suffering from malnutrition. In Ghor

province in December 2020, 15.9 percent of children under the age of five were acutely malnourished, including 3.4 percent who were suffering from severe acute malnutrition, the deadliest form of hunger. Fully 45.5 percent of children were stunted or chronically malnourished.

The Asian Development Bank reports that almost half the population, including more than one third of those who are employed, lived on an income below the national poverty line in 2020. Around one third of the population lives in such severe poverty they are unable to afford the basic necessities of life, including adequate food. Millions of people hover only slightly above the poverty line.

Some 70 percent of the population scratch out a living in the countryside, of which just 12 percent is suitable for arable farming and 46 percent for livestock grazing. More than 40 percent of the workforce are either unemployed or underemployed.

Over 70 percent of the population are under 25 years of age, with 400,000 young people entering the labour market every year. Apart from government positions and the army, such jobs as do exist are mainly poorly paid day-labouring or casual work, leaving young men with little alternative but to join the foreign-funded militant groups or criminal gangs, particularly as drug smugglers.

According to the World Bank, about 75 percent of government spending is financed by other governments, including international organisations. While the Taliban has said it will continue to pay government workers, including healthcare professionals and the armed forces, it is far from clear how they can do so, leaving hundreds of thousands of Afghans at risk of losing their livelihoods.

Close to 40 percent of the country's GDP comes from foreign aid that has often served to undermine the local economy. This, along with the insecurity, drought and natural disasters, has played into the hands of Afghanistan's warlords and drug dealers as impoverished farmers turned to poppy cultivation and the opium trade.

The country's wealth is in the hands of a few families that have profited from the vast inflow of foreign military contracts and their control of over business. The wealthiest 10 percent of Afghans control the economy and the government.

At the same time, the war, waged largely in the southern and eastern parts of the country, has created a huge disparity in income, wealth and economic opportunities between the south and north of Afghanistan.

Four decades of conflict and its consequences have turned Afghanistan into one of the largest refugee-producing countries in the world. As the UN refugee agency points out, Afghans represent the longest-displaced and the longest-dispossessed population in the world, with a staggering three

in four Afghans having suffered internal or external displacement in their lifetime.

The overwhelming majority of Afghan refugees are hosted by Pakistan or Iran—around 3 million in each, registered and unregistered. Large numbers live in the United Arab Emirates, Germany and other European countries, as well as in the US, although the number accepted has fallen significantly in recent years after the Trump administration slashed the already rock-bottom refugee admissions. Last year, the US accepted just 604 Afghan refugees.

According to a report in August 2020 by Amnesty International, there are a further four million displaced within Afghanistan itself. They have very little access to essential services like drinking water or healthcare facilities and live in dire poverty amid inadequate housing, food insecurity and insufficient access to sanitation—a situation made all the more dangerous by the pandemic. While healthcare and treatment at public facilities are free, families are unable to afford even the cost of transport to get to a hospital.

In recent days, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) reported that the worsening security situation across Afghanistan in the wake of NATO's troop withdrawal and Taliban advances had forced another 360,000 people from their homes since January.

It was the impact of these devastating conditions on the consciousness of the Afghan people that led to the swift collapse of Washington's puppet regime after President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of US troops. The rapid fall of Ashraf Ghani's government can only be explained by the magnitude of the crimes carried out against Afghanistan's people, who have seen their society destroyed, around 170,000 killed as a direct result of the war, and another 360,000 indirectly through disease, malnutrition and land mines.

These are world historic crimes whose perpetrators remain unpunished and occupy the leading positions of power within the US, the UK, Germany, France and other imperialist centres.



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