

22 December 2006

Afghanistan: Fighting in the south sets off new displacement

Fierce fighting between NATO troops and insurgents in southern Afghanistan has sent tens of thousands of people fleeing from their homes in a new wave of displacement. Although numbers are unverified, the government said that more than 20,000 families had been displaced due to the fighting in the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan as of November 2006.

In addition to this new wave of displacement, some 132,000 people – most of them displaced since 2001-2002, remained in relief camps as of September 2006. Most are Kuchi nomads who were forced to leave their home areas due to drought, but appear to be prevented from return by a combination of factors, including protection concerns in return areas. During 2006, thousands of Pashtuns who were previously displaced from the north and west of the country after the overthrow of the Taliban government in 2001 were able to return home.

Since 2002, over 485,000 internally displaced and millions of refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan have returned home. However, the increasingly volatile security situation in several areas, the lack of socio-economic progress, unemployment, drought and unresolved issues related to land and property rights make the returning population particularly vulnerable. Renewed displacement due to economic hardship is not taken into account in official IDP figures. The massive growth of urban slum areas might hide significant numbers of returnees who have found it impossible to reintegrate in their former home areas.

The risk of further displacement has increased in some parts of the country due to conflict and drought. This has also necessitated humanitarian assistance to the affected populations. At the same time, a successful reintegration of the internally displaced and refugees who have returned necessitates a massive long-term effort from both national and international actors in order to prevent a return to the chaotic and turbulent past.

Background

Displacement has been a constant feature of the political turmoil in Afghanistan over the past few decades. The overthrow of the monarchy, the invasion and subsequent withdrawal of Soviet forces, the short-lived Mujahideen government and the rise and fall of the radical Islamic Taliban rule each produced new waves of refugees and internally displaced people.

The present situation in Afghanistan reflects a blend of conflict, post-conflict, humanitarian, and development characteristics. In Kabul and in the north, security is not a serious issue and the legitimacy of the government is broadly accepted. In the most insecure areas of the east and south, agencies are either absent or have to operate through local actors (Donini, p 18).

The presence of thousands of Western troops has failed to bring stability to parts of the country. An upsurge in violence in the south, south-east and east of Afghanistan during 2006 reflects both growing opposition to President Hamid Karzai and his government and intensified fighting between NATO-led forces and insurgent groups. An increasing number of attacks by so-called anti-government elements – mainly a growing number of groups reportedly linked to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, and others – have intensified a climate of lawlessness and insecurity for the local population in some areas.

More than 3,000 people, mainly militants, had been killed as of October 2006 and the rate of casualties has increased four-fold compared to 2005. NATO reports that bomb and suicide attacks have killed more than 1,000 Afghan civilians during

2006 and schools are increasingly targeted. An estimated 400,000 students are affected as their schools have chosen to close due to threats and intimidations (BBC, 13 November 2006; UNICEF, 9 November 2006; IRIN, 26 October 2006; UNGA, 11 September 2006).

Admitting that parts of Afghanistan were a long way away from a post-conflict scenario, the UN Secretary-General said in his report to the UN General Assembly that “at no time since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 has the threat to Afghanistan’s transition been so severe” (UNGA, 11 September, para.4). In order to assess whether the international community’s efforts in Afghanistan were on track, the United Nations Security Council members visited the country in mid-November 2006. Re-reporting to the Council, the head of the mission, Kenzo Oshima, concluded that without determined efforts by its Government and sustained international support over the long haul, there was no guarantee that the country would not slide back towards broad conflict (UNSC, 7 December 2006).

Although the insurgency is now at a new level, declining security has hampered relief and reconstruction activities ever since the Taliban regime was overthrown in late 2001. While presidential elections in October 2004 confirmed President Karzai in his position and parliamentary elections in September 2005 were held in compliance with the Bonn Agreement, important problems of security and legitimacy have persisted. Many of those who stood for election were former warlords and while the general population appeared willing to give them a chance at power, their poor performance to date has been met with growing popular disillusion.

sionment and accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Although UNAMA reports that the situation is improving in three quarters of the country (IRIN, 7 December 2006; UN News Service, 27 April 2006), lack of socio-economic progress has also fuelled dissatisfaction. Today, one in four Afghan children dies before their fifth birthday, more than half of the population are thought to live on below \$1 a day and around 20-40 per cent of rural Afghans are malnourished (DFID, 10 November 2006, p.5).

Adding to the numerous challenges facing the Afghan government is a long-lasting drought, especially affecting north-western Afghanistan. Water shortage is a critical issue, affecting the population in more than half of the provinces, particularly in the south and east (BAAG, August 2005). The Afghan government and the UN issued a joint drought appeal on 22 October 2006. As of November 2006, more than half of the country is in need of humanitarian intervention due to violence and drought according to NGOs working in Afghanistan (NRC, 14 November 2006).

Tens of thousands have fled fighting in 2006

The upsurge of fighting in southern Afghanistan during 2006 has compelled tens of thousands of people to flee their homes to seek temporary refuge with relatives and friends in neighbouring villages, districts and provinces. In some places where insecurity has persisted, such as in the Panjwai district of Kandahar, displacement has been prolonged as the security

situation has not improved. Some 10,000 families are known to have been displaced from this area (UNHCR, 3 December 2006).

Displacement has also taken place in other provinces. Unverified estimates say fighting has displaced some 20,000 families in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan between July and November 2006 (UNICEF, 9 November 2006; UNHCR 5 October 2006; UNHCR, September 2006). More than 500 civilians are reported to have been killed in the fighting since July 2006 (NRC, 14 November 2006). The Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) has set up Disaster Management Committees in the affected provinces to co-ordinate relief efforts (UNAMA, 30 October 2006).

Apart from this new wave of displacement due to fighting in the south, UNHCR, as of September 2006, assisted 132,000 people displaced since 2001-2002 from other causes. The majority live in IDP-camps in southern Afghanistan (UNHCR, September 2006). Most of the displaced are Kuchi pastoralists who were forced to abandon their way of life when they lost their livestock due to a drought which lasted for four consecutive years. They constitute the largest single group of displaced people in Afghanistan. The remaining displaced are ethnic Pashtuns who were perceived as being supporters of the Taliban. They fled harassment and human rights violations in the northern regions after the overthrow of the Taliban by a US-led coalition in late 2001 (BAAG, October 2006).

According to UNHCR, the subsistence needs of the displaced living in camps and who have been displaced for several years

are largely met. The conditions regarding water and sanitation in camps are reported to be above the national average. Many have also achieved self-reliance in the places of displacement. More updated information on living conditions for internally displaced has not been found for this report, mainly due to lack of access to the areas where the displaced reside.

Humanitarian access

The security situation varies from place to place across the country, with Kabul and the north being relatively stable and the south-western parts being particularly affected by insecurity.

After international staff became open targets for insurgent groups, most aid is distributed by local employees. Since January 2006, more than 30 Afghan staff working for international NGOs have been targeted and killed while carrying out humanitarian work (IRIN, 16 November 2006).

In areas where the UN and other agencies do not have access due to the security situation, the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) is the main organisation carrying out relief efforts. ARCS has been the main provider of assistance to families displaced due to fighting in Kandahar, Uruzgan and Helmand. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) monitors the human rights situation in several areas which are inaccessible for international organisations (UNHCR, 3 December 2006).

Many displaced opt for local integration, return rates are low

Since 2002, over 485,000 internally displaced and 3.7 million refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan have returned home with the assistance of UNHCR. In addition, more than one million refugees and an unknown number of IDPs settled outside camps have returned spontaneously without any assistance.

During 2006, only 7,200 internally displaced have returned (UNHCR, September 2006). It is likely that many internally displaced have chosen to remain in the camps instead of returning to an insecure future and difficult socio-economic conditions in their home areas.

The majority of the Kuchi displaced have opted to stay in the camps where access to education, health and food is comparatively much better than in their home areas. During 2007, UNHCR has vowed to advocate for local integration of the internally displaced who remain in southern Afghanistan (UNHCR, September 2006). UNHCR is also planning a pilot project to facilitate return of a limited number of Kuchis to their place of origin in 2007.

The large majority of those who have chosen to return during the past two years are ethnic Pashtuns from Zar-e-Dasht, who are going back to the north of the country. Although ethnic-based persecution of Pashtuns in their home areas is less of a concern today, certain protection problems have been reported such as threats of illegal taxation and land occupation (UNHCR, September 2006; September 2005).

Protection concerns for returning Kuchi nomads have also been reported due to conflicts with Hazara (central and eastern provinces), and Tajiks and Uzbeks (northern provinces) over pasture land. Some have also been accused of being associated with the former Taliban regime. Those Kuchi continue to face difficulties with access to grazing lands (USDOS, March 2006, 28 February 2005).

Lack of opportunities in return areas perpetuates displacement

No recent IDP-specific information has been found about assistance provided to internally displaced once they have returned. Ongoing development projects in return areas by aid actors as well as work by NATO run Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which are joint civil-military units deployed throughout most of Afghanistan, are likely to benefit many returnees.

In general, the biggest challenge meeting Afghan families when they return home is the widespread poverty in their home areas. Most of those who returned to Afghanistan during 2002 and 2003, as well as many internally displaced, headed for Kabul and the main cities. While the absence of economic opportunities in rural areas and the reality of urban migration suggest that this trend will continue, the absorption capacity of urban areas, in particular Kabul, is reaching its limits (AREU, 2 November 2006). Since late 2001, Kabul's population has increased from 1.5 million to an estimated 4.5 million people. During the same period, the physical size of Kabul has expanded by only 35 percent (USAID, 3 May 2006).

The massive growth of urban slum areas might hide significant numbers of returnees who have found it impossible to reintegrate in their former home areas and ended up in a situation of renewed internal displacement. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) concludes in a study that a lack of basic economic and social rights is the primary cause of ongoing displacement and the main obstacle to durable integration of internally displaced persons (AIHRC, May 2006).

Lack of access to property threatens sustainability of returns

Landlessness, or the loss of land and housing during displacement, is often a major obstacle to return and a cause of renewed displacement. To benefit from the assistance of most shelter projects, the returnee must either hold title deeds to land or get his community to vouch for him. Many refugees and internally displaced are returning to places where they have no land and this is placing a strain on already overstretched resources in villages. Given the importance of land ownership in the process of income generation and as a prerequisite for receiving shelter assistance, this has often been the main reason for why many returns have been unsustainable.

Another common problem is that owners find land and houses occupied or confiscated upon return. Multiple property claims, the loss of registration books and forgery of documents add to the complexity of the issue. The Special Property Disputes Resolution Court, established in 2003, has significant flaws, one of which is that it does not address disputes involv-

ing internally displaced (NRC, September 2005). It is to be hoped that increased attention to land issues will contribute to enforcing the right of returnees (refugees and internally displaced) to access land and property, independent of the influence of powerful local individuals who tend to prevent the most vulnerable, in particular unaccompanied women and those outside local social and political networks, from enforcing their claims (NRC, March 2005; NRC, June 2004, p.3). Social networks are crucial to get protection, but also for accessing land. Group returns are now being encouraged by aid agencies as they make it easier for community groups to protect themselves, including by overcoming some of the significant challenges to finding durable solutions.

The Afghan government and humanitarian agencies have also recognised the immediate need for shelter for returning refugees and internally displaced as a pivotal means to make returns sustainable. Shelter construction is an ongoing and central activity of UNHCR (UNHCR, Shelter, September 2005) and of many local and international NGOs. The government and UNDP operate a National Area-Based Development Programme (NABDP) which includes shelter programmes and training for the government for operating land allocation programmes (UNDP Afghanistan website). The government land-allocation scheme has distributed property to thousands of landless Afghans who have been repatriated to northern and eastern Afghanistan (UNHCR, September 2006).

National and international assistance to internally displaced

The government of Afghanistan has generally acknowledged the problem of internal displacement and has taken measures to address the issue. In addition to a National Return, Displacement and Reintegration Strategy adopted in 2003, the government issued an IDP strategy in July 2003, followed by a Regional Operation Plan for internally displaced in the south in October 2003. The overall strategy is aimed at finding durable solutions to the remaining number of displaced while continuing to provide assistance and protection within a timeframe of three years (MoRR and MRRD, October 2003, pp.5-6). The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) has overall responsibility for the returnee and IDP programme but is supported in its work by the Consultative Group on Refugees and IDPs. This group consists of the relevant government ministries, UN agencies, NGOs and donors and its function is to support the MoRR in coordinating and facilitating work related to the return and initial reintegration of refugees and internally displaced. Other ministries involved include the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH), which assume responsibility for the reintegration of internally displaced within their respective geographic and programme areas (TISA, March 2003, p.4). Some of MRRD's programmes, such as the National Solidarity Programme, target returning internally displaced where they fall under the category of vulnerable groups.

In April 2004, a National IDP Plan was developed by the MRRD. The plan en-

courages a shift from care and maintenance to promoting the return of internally displaced to their areas of origin while ensuring reintegration and coexistence with receiving communities (MRRD, April 2004).

All UN humanitarian and human rights functions are integrated into the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). However, the primary role of the UN in Afghanistan today is to provide government support. The circumference of UN involvement is presently curtailed to Kabul and some other major city centres. The upsurge of violence in the south and the current drought has led NGOs and some governments to stress that UNAMA's humanitarian coordination capacity and field presence needs to be strengthened.

Among the international community, UNHCR has the main responsibility for Afghanistan's internally displaced. Its role is to support MRRD in assisting internally displaced and integrating needs of returnees into longer-term national development projects (UNHCR, 3 December 2007).

The most pressing problems for internally displaced and returnees in Afghanistan are linked to land issues, the lack of infrastructure, the absence of job opportunities and sources of income. Greater social service delivery is needed throughout the country, including in the relatively stable north, if refugees and internally displaced are to return home voluntarily, in safety and in dignity. Massive long-term investment will be needed from both national and international aid actors in order to build a basis on which durable solutions can be achieved. However, the drought

and recent displacement in southern Afghanistan has also shown that thousands are still in danger of being displaced from their homes and that national and international actors must continue to monitor and ensure assistance to displaced populations in the country.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Afghanistan. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the Afghanistan country page.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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