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AFGHANISTAN: IN A TIME OF CONFLICT

One year after President Obama's announcement of the Afghanistan strategy, the country continues to slide into crisis. The U.S.-led military surge in the south is driving insecurity north, causing thousands to flee. Internal displacement has increased by 50 percent and natural disasters and chronic food shortages continue to erode Afghans' ability to survive, leading to rapid urbanization and the rise of slums. Aid used as a tool in the counterinsurgency strategy continues to endanger aid workers and undermine sustainable development. Given the Afghan government's endemic corruption and inability to protect the population, NGOs, donor governments and UN agencies must strengthen humanitarian programs and regain access to insecure communities.

SECURITY PLUMMETS

The worst case security scenario in the northern half of the country was realized this summer. Analysts attribute the deterioration to military pressure in the south pushing armed opposition groups to new fronts where there is little to no resistance. In contrast to the freedom that aid workers and civilians enjoyed in the region one year ago, improvised explosive devices, kidnappings and criminal attacks are now an everyday threat. Attacks in five of the northern provinces and civilian casualties have both doubled since last year. In October alone, fighting displaced over 17,000 people in the region. New actors, including criminal groups, are exacerbating the sharp decline in security. Internally displaced people (IDPs) report an influx of foreign fighters, often more radical. Furthermore, aid workers complain that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has "opened Pandora's Box" by training and equipping local militias, which at best, are ineffective and at worst, exploit the local population to their personal gain and remain beyond any command or control.

The south, the focus of the U.S. military "surge," has seen few security gains. Military operations and the Taliban's intimidation and assassination campaigns have displaced at least 27,000 people. According to the International Committee

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- International donors, particularly USAID, should prioritize disaster mitigation, humanitarian and early recovery programs, such as those outlined in the UN's 2011 Consolidated Appeals Process; and ensure that its development
- programs target vulnerable groups, including returnees and displaced people.
- Non-governmental organizations should increase their humanitarian staff and programs.
- OCHA, in partnership with the UN Humanitarian Country Team, should devise and implement a humanitarian access strategy to negotiate with all parties to the conflict and promote best practices on remote management and monitoring of programs.
- UNHCR should expand partnerships with local NGOs to improve its response and protection monitoring and ensure access to basic services for displaced people and returnees in both rural and urban areas.

of the Red Cross (ICRC), war-related injuries more than doubled in August and September. Violence is limiting the UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) ability to monitor and assist IDPs beyond urban areas and information sharing on displacement from the military or embedded civilian sources is non-existent, despite the military's "protect the population" mantra. Civilians who receive aid linked to ISAF also face retaliation. According to local NGOs, the pomegranate and grape harvest, assisted by US Agency for International Development (USAID) activities only months before, were destroyed by recent military operations. This will have a long-term impact on Afghan farmers' livelihoods.

Quick impact projects intended to "hold" and "build" areas following military operations are perceived to fuel corruption and fail to have a lasting development or security impact. Massive contracts, some more than \$300 million, lack oversight, are sub-contracted through numerous partners and targeted in highly insecure areas, where proper monitoring is impossible. A USAID contractor in Helmand, where farmland has no water shortages, ordered 16,000 water pumps from a notorious drug trafficker and paid twice the market cost. Political pressure to show quick results often translates into a focus on quantifying how much aid money has been spent, rather than the quality of programming.

PERSISTING AND GROWING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Afghans are subjected to frequent cycles of natural and manmade disasters, which threaten lives and access to basic services and livelihoods. Over 400,000 people are severely affected by frequent natural disasters each year. At least half a million people in the south have lost access to health services and 100,000 children cannot even be vaccinated due to insecurity. Six million people have returned from exile since 2002, but untold millions are still on the move in search of means to survive.

Conflict is displacing more people now than in the past eight years. Over 120,000 were displaced in the past year, a 50 percent increase in the total IDP population, estimated at 320,000. UNHCR readily admits that the figures are likely higher, but is unable to adequately monitor all areas because of the rising insecurity. Furthermore, displacement is highly politicized, particularly when people flee due to ISAF's presence or are encouraged to return home to support a message of a successful stabilization operation, as in Marjah. One aid worker said, "When governments want IDPs to exist, we throw money into the Afghan government coffers, but when they don't, we call them 'informal settlements' because they're not entitled to assistance."

Monitoring IDP movements and protection concerns of returnees are a massive challenge. UNHCR now recognizes that its returnee assistance, at under \$100 per person, barely covers transportation costs and that the government's Land Allocation Scheme for returnees has largely failed due to limited water, markets or jobs. Additional UNHCR aid is limited to the most vulnerable families, with disabled, widowed or elderly members. Emergency winterization packages provide meager supplies, including an empty gas canister and one pair of socks for extremely vulnerable adults. IDPs, whether failed returnees, or displaced by conflict or natural disaster often have little choice but to join the ranks of the urban poor, where they drop off UNHCR's caseload.

Refugees International visited IDP families living around the brick kilns on the outskirts of Mazar e-Sharif facing eviction as operations were shutting down for the winter and water pumps were being turned off. UNHCR had registered this group, but many had already been forced to leave and their whereabouts are unknown. While displaced Afghans tend to return home soon after fighting ends, trends in the north indicate that people may be displaced for longer as the primarily non-Pashtun ethnic groups fear a Taliban resurgence. Near Mazar e-Sharif, displaced families indicated they would not return after the Taliban gained footholds and began to forcibly recruit young men, confiscate property and threaten locals. "My wheat fields are ready to harvest, but I'm not going back," said one farmer. Another IDP said, "We can't go back. The Taliban are suspicious of us and will accuse us of spying for the government."

UNHCR must improve its response to the rapidly growing number of conflict-induced IDPs. The Protection Cluster, coordinated by UNHCR, has made positive steps to profile the needs of the displaced, but far more needs to be done to strengthen response and protection mechanisms. In Kandahar, UNHCR has only one implementing partner, aside from the government's Department of Refugees and Returnees, widely known to be corrupt. A practical solution is to build capacity of NGO partners who are locally accepted in areas out of UNHCR's reach. These organizations can improve the registration process and increase outreach to vulnerable groups. In addition, UNHCR should raise awareness among at-risk communities regarding the registration process, as many rely on host families for advice on receiving assistance.

Agencies are further struggling to help Afghans recover from the numerous natural disasters that occur each year or to prioritize activities that mitigate the damage from these predictable events. Some 200,000 Afghans are

displaced from their homes and have had livelihoods destroyed by seasonal disasters, such as erosion, landslides and floods. While aid agencies are largely able to meet immediate food and health needs, few are equipped to rebuild shelters and livelihoods. Floods this year left more than 60,000 people homeless and most are forced to live with relatives or neighbors for the winter. Along the Amu River in the north, 2,000 families are under threat as their homes and farmlands are steadily eroded at a rate of one meter each day during the spring.

The current aid system remains broken in meeting humanitarian needs, especially as the government is incapable or unwilling to address them. Aid groups fear the national health system is breaking down, especially in conflict areas. ICRC and Doctors without Borders report that patients are not going to local clinics but coming too late to hospitals with basic health problems like child diarrhea and respiratory illnesses. Furthermore, health contracts are reported to be awarded to the lowest bidder, leading to low-quality services and little incentive for staff to work in remote or insecure areas, where health needs are often the greatest. At minimum, donors should ensure that transferring resources to the government is met by increased management capacity. “In their focus on the exit strategy and transition to government control, donors are paving the way to state failure,” said one aid official.

Aid workers say that traditional short-term humanitarian or long-term development programs are ill-fit to meet the chronic needs, and have left millions deeply entrenched in poverty and vulnerability. The European Commission’s humanitarian office has had some success in persuading its development office to target flood-affected villages with long-term food security programs. UNHCR continuously advocates to government and other UN agencies to ensure aid is channeled to areas where large numbers of people have returned. In contrast, USAID’s contracting mechanism, which processed nearly \$2 billion in aid this year, is too rigid and focused on stabilization to meet the evolving needs. Donors should ensure its development programs target those most in need and mitigate chronic vulnerabilities over the long term to promote recovery.

CALL TO HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Since 2008, there has been a growing recognition of humanitarian needs but not enough action. While the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and cluster coordination system were established in early 2009, few NGOs have increased their humanitarian capacity. The ICRC and UNHCR say that they are struggling

to meet the growing humanitarian needs and more NGO involvement is crucial, but the majority of NGOs continue to lack adequate humanitarian staff and resources and instead focus on longer-term development programs.

Following the premature shift to a post-conflict approach in 2002, donors prioritized reconstruction and development activities and UN agencies and NGO programs largely followed suit. In FY2010, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance had \$31 million to respond to humanitarian needs. In comparison, the U.S. military’s Commanders’ Emergency Response Program has \$1.2 billion and USAID has \$3.9 billion.

As the Taliban increases control over communities, virtually all NGOs agree on the need to ensure that aid is kept neutral and focuses on meeting the needs of all vulnerable Afghans. Yet, donor practices have made it more dangerous for aid groups to operate. USAID’s use of development contractors and frequent embeds with the military have dangerously blurred humanitarian principles by associating such programs with a party to the conflict. In the first trimester of this year, the Taliban explicitly targeted development contractors with complex attacks, resulting in over 80 casualties. Development contractors become further dependent on private security firms, some of whom are known to pay the Taliban for protection.

INGOs must also take responsibility for the weak humanitarian response and strengthen technical capacities. While a handful is undergoing major restructuring, several major INGOs still have no senior humanitarian staff. “The NGO community should be ashamed of its lack of humanitarian capacity,” one aid worker said. Despite 59% of children suffering from malnutrition, there is no nutrition surveillance system due to weak technical expertise among NGO partners. Others noted “inertia” and “laziness” among NGOs due to the wide availability of development funding. NGOs successfully lobbied for the re-establishment of OCHA, yet many have yet to institute the very changes they requested.

OCHA’s first year was fraught with growing pains but its new team shows promise. It has recognized the major weakness in clusters’ capacity and is fundraising for staff positions to coordinate each of the sector’s activities. OCHA is establishing a rapid assessment mechanism to dispatch an inter-agency team of UN and NGO experts to new crises. If OCHA is to have an impact on improving humanitarian coordination in a deteriorating security environment, NGOs and UN agencies need to provide a strong constituency to support its efforts. Moreover, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan should provide the

space to advocate openly on humanitarian needs. Improving UN leadership – for example, by establishing a separate Humanitarian Coordinator – would help address these challenges.

IMPROVE REMOTE MANAGEMENT

While most NGOs continue to operate throughout the country without armored vehicles and armed guards, community support alone will not protect their staff and projects from attacks. Vulnerable communities are also under threat of attack, and aid agencies must increasingly initiate discussions directly with armed groups to ensure access to insecure areas. The Taliban has demonstrated an acceptance of NGOs, even programs managed by the Afghan government, as long as they are not explicitly tied to the military or boost the government's legitimacy. While some agencies negotiate with the Taliban bilaterally, many NGOs lack the capacity and are restricted by donor policies. OCHA, as the mandated coordinating agency for humanitarian response, should work with NGO and UN agencies to devise and implement a strategy to negotiate with groups whose activities may obstruct aid operations.

NGOs are increasingly managing their programs from regional hubs to implement and monitor programs in remote areas. As these methods become the norm, they should be evaluated to identify good practices and disseminated. Aid provision in a complex emergency environment, where corruption is rife, requires agencies to significantly restructure programs and staff. Some agencies are restaffing their field offices with international staff in order to protect Afghan staff from intimidation.

To effectively expand coverage, INGOs should partner with Afghan NGOs, which have promising potential and often greater acceptance in conflict areas. These partnerships should build institutional capacity before crises occur so that the aid community can maximize geographical coverage capacities. This approach is not new and many Afghan NGOs note that before 2002, the aid community almost completely relied on their field operations. Afghan NGOs have significantly grown since then and while capacity is uneven, much more can be done to leverage their experience to reach at-risk communities.

MEET URBAN NEEDS

As violence spreads, urban areas provide the only measure of security and job opportunities for many Afghans, leading to rapid urbanization and the establishment of slums. The slums, or “informal settlements,” house over 13,000

people in 30 sites in Kabul alone and have grown steadily as people have fewer survival options. The UN Population Fund noted that satellite imagery shows significant urbanization in the capitals of the most insecure provinces, like Ghazni and Paktia.

In Kabul, residents of these slums are a mix of people displaced by conflict or natural disasters as well as people categorized as “economic migrants.” Many of these “migrants” are from the nomadic Kuchi group who lost their livestock-based livelihoods during the war and grazing lands due to desertification. Much of the land belongs to the government, which fears that providing services will only draw more people to the sites. This complicates the ability of aid groups to address the horrific living conditions, including the lack of clean water and extremely high rates of child malnutrition. Because the residents have no title to the land, NGOs are not permitted to build shelters, wells or other permanent structures.

UNHCR has commendably taken the lead in profiling the Kabul sites and pressing the government to allow services and provide other land options to this extremely vulnerable group. The lines of responsibility are many, but the slums are symptomatic of failed programs to help returning refugees and protect IDPs. The Ministry of Refugees and Returnees, which should be involved in resolving these problems, is a small advisory office with frequent staff turnover and is considered extremely weak. UNHCR should be supported by donors and aid agencies to assist these groups and expand profiling to other urban areas. Several Kabul sites are under imminent threat of eviction and residents have nowhere to go. Aid agencies say they could do much more if the government provided other uncontested land, but the government has been unwilling to do so.

CONCLUSION

As the conflict intensifies throughout the country, humanitarian needs can no longer be ignored. Failure by the government and the international community to meet even the basic needs of Afghans is seen as proof of failed governance, corruption and a recipe for greater instability. Donor-driven approaches have created a skewed aid structure in which people have electricity and roads but lack shelter, clean drinking water and basic health services. Principled and effective humanitarian programs should be prioritized by donors and NGOs to increase human security and to pave the way to a more sustainable recovery for all Afghans.

Lynn Yoshikawa and Dawn Calabria assessed the situation for displaced Afghans in November 2010.