

AFGHANISTAN

I. SITUATION UPDATE (Katharina Lumpp, UNHCR)¹

The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated over the year 1999, in as far as civilians were – more than in previous years – targeted by the armed conflict between the Taliban and the United Front (UF) opposition forces. The fighting was marked by the deliberate destruction of livelihood, and particularly in the Shomali plains north of Kabul – Kabul's fruit-basket – houses were systematically burnt, crops destroyed and orchards cut. Large parts of the population were internally displaced; many of them were forcibly relocated, with the men being detained and the women and children taken to Kabul.

I.1. Fighting

In 1999, the "fighting season" in Afghanistan started with an uprising of the predominantly Hazara Shia population in Bamyan (Hazarajat). Under the control of the Taliban for several months, Bamyan fell on 21 April. The Taliban, however, were able to re-gain control over the territory within a short period of time. On 28 July 1999, the main summer-offensive by the Taliban started North of Kabul, allowing the Taliban to move close to the entrance of the Panjshir Valley within only ten days, capturing the strategically important Bagram airbase. However, on 5 August the United Front, under Ahmed Shah Massoud's military leadership, launched a counter-offensive in the Shomali plains, causing heavy casualties among the rank and file of the Taliban forces and pushing back the front line more or less to the original positions prior to the launch of the Taliban offensive. This led to a renewed more brutal offensive by the Taliban on 11 August, advancing while forcibly relocating the civilian population and destroying the agricultural infrastructure and homes along the front line. The scorched-earth policy of the Taliban, widely condemned by the international community, generated a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Fighting equally continued in some areas of the northern provinces, mainly along the front line between UF-controlled Takhar and Taliban-controlled Kunduz, in Dar-e-Suf (Samangan province), at times reaching into Balkh province with the main city of Mazar-i-Sharif, as well as in the area of Saripul in the South of Jowzjan province. In these areas, the opposition forces are fighting from the mountains into the plains. Similarly, clashes and increased

¹ The report on Afghanistan does not follow the concept of the other reports as it was included as a response to the pronounced interest from the audience. It contains mainly an update on last year's fighting and displacement as well as questions and answers concerning specific asylum cases, but does neither include broad historical and political background information nor an extensive analysis of specific groups at risk.

insecurity were reported in parts of the Western region, while crime (mainly armed robberies) was also on the increase and prevalent in all urban centres towards the end of 1999.

Given the very limited prospects for a peaceful solution of the conflict in the near future and the fact that fighting has only temporarily ceased in most of the locations in 1999, it is likely that heavy fighting will resume in 2000.

I.2. Displacement

As a consequence of the armed conflict in Afghanistan, with major fighting and devastating consequences for the civilian population (but no major territorial gains for either side of the conflict), as many as 275.000 persons have been internally displaced in only one year in Afghanistan. The main reasons for people leaving and fleeing their areas of origin or residence in Afghanistan are the ongoing fighting, the increasing insecurity and the rapid deterioration of the economic situation with increasing food insecurity in many parts of the country.

An initial survey conducted at the end of August indicated a number of 120,000 IDPs in Panjshir valley alone. This number decreased to around 100,000 by mid September and 80,000 by early October, reaching 60,000 by early November. The results of a survey undertaken in late 1999 indicated that 57% of IDPs were still living in the open, 16% in public buildings and 27% with host families. The bulk of IDPs originated from Charikar and Bagram districts. The main city of Charikar is situated dangerously close to the front-line. Some 15% are from areas in the southern parts of the front-line in Shomali and many remained during the winter, requiring urgent humanitarian assistance. In late November, the UN was able to negotiate a humanitarian corridor with the two factions to allow humanitarian relief items and personnel to proceed through the front-line from Kabul to Panjshir valley. Movements of IDPs back to the Shomali to retrieve some of their property have been ongoing but permanent returns did not seem to be possible during the reporting period, as the area remains close to the front-line and fighting is likely to erupt again as soon as the winter is over.

Kabul city hosts an estimated number of 107,000 recent IDPs from areas north of Kabul, including the Shomali plains. Of these, some 12,000 were and still are accommodated in the compound of the former Soviet embassy while the majority are with host families.

In Northern Afghanistan, heavy and sporadic fighting between the Taliban and forces of the United Front in Bamyan, Yakawlang (Hazarajat), Dar-e-Souf (Samangan), Khanabad, Archi (Kunduz), Bangui, Taloqan, Khaje Ghar (Takhar), Sangcharak (Sar-i-Pul) Shulgara (Balkh) and Nahrain, Khenjan (Baghlan) has equally displaced large numbers of civilians, estimated to be 91,000 persons during 1999. In Kunduz, surveys indicate the presence of as many as 22,300 IDPs, the majority from surrounding districts and some 10,000 from Shomali. In Hazarajat, 24,000 IDPs are reported to be in districts surrounding Bamyan. In Dar-e-Souf, 35,000 persons have reportedly been displaced due to heavy fighting in. Moreover, in other parts of the North (Pul-i-Khumri and Baghlan) some 8,000 IDPs from Shomali have been identified.

In addition to the continued fighting and subsequent destruction of livelihoods of many Afghans, the plight of large parts of the population was further increased by a very dry winter in 1998/1999, due to which the cereal harvest in Afghanistan fell 16% short of the expected volume. This exacerbated the poverty and food insecurity which is already very high during winters. The reduced harvest in 1999, coupled with reduced supplies from Pakistan (after the military takeover and the implementation of stricter border controls between Pakistan and Afghanistan) and the imposition of UN sanctions on the Taliban on 14 November 1999 lead to a considerable increase in wheat prices as well as prices of other basic food commodities. The World Food Programme (WFP) is – as a consequence – running bakery programmes for subsidised bread in most of the urban areas (Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad) at least during the winter season. Emergency food distributions are equally ongoing to IDPs as well as to the regular population in parts of the Hazarajat. In Kabul some 266,000 beneficiaries, mostly female-headed households, were dependent on food-aid all year during 1999. The number of Afghans living off their assets without generating additional income is growing. For refugees this means that return is only possible if they can go back to their places of origin or previous habitual residences, where they have family and tribal links and possess or have access to land; otherwise their economic survival would not be guaranteed.

I.3. The United Nations

UNHCR, like most other international organisations, closed its main offices in Kabul in 1992, and relocated to Islamabad, Pakistan. In 1995 a Field Office was re-opened in Kabul. Nevertheless, with the exception of the period after the US-missile attack and subsequent insecurity during which one UN official was killed, and UN international staff was not allowed to stay in Afghanistan, UNHCR continues to operate offices in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat,

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Kandahar and Jalalabad and a number of field units all over the country. UNHCR assists but does not promote the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan. In 1999, as in previous years, close to 100,000 Afghan refugees returned voluntarily with UNHCR assistance from Pakistan and close to 20,000 from Iran. The majority of the returnees are Afghans of Pashtun ethnic origin, returning to rural areas in the Eastern region (Jalalabad), the Central region and the Southern region (Kandahar). Only very few refugees have voluntarily returned to the North, although numbers were higher in 1999 than in previous years.

On 14 November 1999, UN-sanctions were imposed against Afghanistan for hosting and refusing to extradite alleged Saudi terrorist leader Osama-bin-Laden. The sanctions comprise the freezing of assets of the Taliban abroad and the halt to the operations of the Afghan airline ASRIANA. As a result of the sanctions there are no flights into and out of Afghanistan, the postal system collapsed, and it will be difficult to transfer the revenues of an estimated number of 300.000 Afghans working in the Gulf states to their families in Afghanistan. Also, supplies, such as low-volume medicines and others can no longer be transported on Cargo flights from the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, the tightening of border controls from Pakistani authorities in combination with the imposition of the UN-sanctions led to a rapid increase of food prices and a devaluation of the Afghan currency. At the moment, especially after the UN-sponsored talks between the Taliban and the opposition failed, there are neither signs of alleviation nor indications for the resumption of peace talks in the near future. The war and the economic misery seem nowhere near an end, and the future remains uncertain at best.

II. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (UNHCR - Katharina Lumpp)

II.1. Women

Responding to a question from the audience, Ms. Lumpp stated that in principle women receiving other women at home to give them a haircut would not run the risk of persecution. However, officially there is a limit to the freedom of women to meet and assemble in larger groups. Therefore, in urban areas if there appeared to be regular gatherings of women - even if simply for the sake of hairdressing - it would definitely raise the attention of the authorities. This could lead to a house visit by members of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice, the Taliban's religious police, and possible further consequences.

In urban areas women typically do not have problems if they stay at home and perform household tasks. In rural areas it is common that they even work in groups in the fields as they have done for generations. Furthermore, in the public sector, there are several departments where women can be found exceptionally. For instance, there are women working in the education department in Kandahar and under the ministry of health in hospitals in Herat, Kandahar and Kabul. Thus, there are women working with the Taliban although they are certainly not part of the Taliban movement or the Taliban forces.

II.2. Ethnic and political persecution

The most frequent pattern of persecution linked to imputed political opinion - i.e. suspected or potential opposition to the Taliban - is the systematic arbitrary detention and arrest of males of fighting age based on their ethnic and regional origin. In the last year, there were reports of systematic arrest and prolonged detention of Uzbeks from areas in which the opposition is mounting, of Hazara from the Bamyán area, of Tajiks from Panjshir ('Panjshiris'), and of males from the Shomali valley. Particularly in the context of an ongoing armed conflict and in light of the fierce fighting in 1999, ethnic and regional origin definitely constitute possible reasons for persecution.

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Ms. Lumpp added that membership in a political party, such as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), is but one element that may lead to persecution. It has to be seen in connection with the place of origin, family background and exposure to the public of the respective person, as well as the way the population would associate this person with the atrocities committed by the Najibullah government. Additionally, the degree is important with which the Taliban would identify the applicant with a Communist ideology, which is still considered the worst and most anti-Islamic ideology. Ms. Lumpp also emphasised that more comprehensive information on persecution on political grounds could be found in the UNHCR Submission to the European Union High Level Working Group on Afghanistan of March 1999.