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# AFGHANISTAN: RESPONSIBLE U.S. TRANSITION MUST ADDRESS DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

Afghan civilians are caught in the middle of an intensifying military campaign against a fractured armed insurgency. Despite the U.S. military's claims of progress, insurgent attacks are up by 50% over last year, and more than 250,000 people have fled their villages in the past two years. U.S. funded and trained militias are only exacerbating this explosive situation. As the U.S. begins to draw down its forces and transition responsibilities to the Afghan government, the Obama administration must mitigate further displacement and ensure that the Afghan government takes greater responsibility for the protection of displaced people. In addition, the UN must strengthen its capacity to respond to the growing humanitarian needs.

## RESPONSIBILITY OF INTERNATIONAL AND AFGHAN FORCES

Since January 1, more than 91,000 Afghans have fled their villages – compared with 42,000 over the same time period last year. This is mostly due to international and Afghan forces' military operations against the Taliban. The increasing use of airstrikes by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), as well as night raids by U.S. Special Forces is destroying homes, crops and basic infrastructure, traumatizing civilians and displacing tens of thousands of people. In the north alone, nearly 30,000 individuals have been displaced, a more than seven-fold increase compared to last year. Before the military escalated its campaign, Afghans were fleeing for brief periods and returning home shortly thereafter. Now, people are increasingly unwilling to return home because they fear their villages are no longer safe. To address this increasing instability, ISAF and ANSF must reduce the displacement caused by their operations.

In the past two years, ISAF has taken steps to minimize civilian harm by issuing tactical directives and guidelines to troops regarding the "disciplined use of force," the use of "close air support" in heavily populated areas, and conduct during night raids. Yet despite the rising displacement, and

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The incoming ISAF commander should issue a directive to all forces under his command to reduce displacement and share information on displacement with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
- The U.S. Congress should withhold payments to the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program until the Secretary of Defense certifies that adequate recruitment, vetting, discipline and command/control structures have been established, as well as a clear timeframe for the program's integration into the Afghan National Police.
- UNHCR and OCHA should request funding to double their protection and humanitarian affairs officers in critical regional offices to meet growing humanitarian needs.
- The UN should immediately appoint an experienced candidate to the Humanitarian Coordinator post.
- The U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) should work with the Afghan government to develop an inter-agency plan to address forced displacement.

increasing public resentment over military operations, military leaders have not issued similar guidance to troops to mitigate or prevent forced displacement. The toll on civilians is clear. For example, in Faryab province, heavy bombardments by ISAF and ANSF targeting the Taliban displaced nearly 10,000 people in January and more than 12,000 in May 2011. Incoming ISAF commander General John Allen should issue a directive to forces under his command that clearly provides guidance and intent for the military's role in reducing forced displacement.

Furthermore, ISAF and ANSF rarely engage with humanitarian actors or share timely or relevant information on humanitarian needs and displacement in their areas of operations. Officials from key donor governments, the Afghan government, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, humanitarian agencies and Afghan civil society all told Refugees International (RI) that ISAF and ANSF lack sufficient policies and practices on how to liaise with humanitarian actors regarding displacement. At best, military coordination with humanitarian agencies is ad-hoc and personality-driven, worsened by the high turnover rates in the military. Monthly NGO meetings with ISAF's deputy commander have ceased entirely in Kabul. NGOs describe the relationships with ISAF and ANSF as "fractured," "impossible," and "non-existent," particularly because the military's actions are contributing to displacement. UNHCR and OCHA have gone to great lengths to establish themselves as key interlocutors with the military on humanitarian issues by developing contacts and informing military actors of the broader humanitarian community's role and response capacity. But civilian-military coordination can only be effective if the military adopts a more pro-active and systematic approach to sharing timely and relevant information on the impact of its operations.

On June 12, 2011 ISAF issued a standard operating procedure to its troops that clarifies the roles, responsibilities and proper coordination channels for humanitarian response. Still, the lack of clear policies around monitoring and sharing information on the consequences of its operations is hampering humanitarian agencies' efforts to provide relief. Nearly every aid organization RI interviewed is struggling to reach beneficiaries in areas where military actors are operating. Given this limited access, it is even more essential that humanitarian actors have the most reliable information possible to effectively meet the needs of populations affected by ISAF and ANSF's military operations. General Allen should work to ensure that both ISAF and ANSF adopt a uniform system for monitoring displacement in military operational areas and sharing relevant information with UNHCR and OCHA.

## **U.S. SUPPORT TO MILITIAS: ENGAGE RESPONSIBLY**

Although General Petraeus touts local defense initiatives as successfully thwarting the insurgency, the proliferation of militias is increasing insecurity, especially in the north. Many new militias operate under the guise of the U.S./ISAF-backed Afghan Local Police (ALP) initiative. Internally Displaced People (IDPs), government officials, security analysts and humanitarian actors told RI that the expansion of poorly vetted, ill-trained and unsupervised ALP units and irregular militias are a major threat to civilians and stability. These armed groups have allegedly committed abuses including murder, theft, extortion, bribery and intimidation. To prevent further harm to civilians, the U.S. must pressure the Afghan government to halt the further expansion of this program and address its shortfalls immediately.

The ALP is an Afghan Ministry of Interior (MOI)-led initiative intended to recruit local defense units to repel insurgents and stabilize remote, insecure areas of the country. General Petraeus considers the ALP an essential component of ISAF's security hand-over to the ANSF. According to the Afghan plan, recruits are nominated by a local "shura" council, then vetted by Afghan Intelligence and trained for up to three weeks by U.S. forces or ISAF. They are provided with a uniform, a small salary and an AMD-6 assault rifle, and are assigned to the local district police chief to defend their communities. In the ten months since the program was rolled out, the government has mobilized more than 6,200 members in over 34 districts. Afghan officials and international force commanders are so convinced of the ALP's potential for success that they are planning to recruit, train and mobilize as many as 30,000 personnel in 100 districts by the end of 2011. According to the Congressional Research Service, the Pentagon will contribute at least \$35 million in FY11 Afghan Security Forces Funds toward the program.

The rapid rollout of the ALP program has been widely criticized by Afghans and humanitarian actors. RI interviewed IDPs who reported that newly formed militias had been sent to their village in Jawzjan province and proceeded to loot, harass and forcibly tax the population. In March, a UN report cited concerns regarding the ALP's "weak oversight, recruitment, vetting and command and control mechanisms, limited training for recruits..." Afghans, government officials, UN staff and aid workers all told RI that many recruits are receiving as little as "a couple of days" of training, a highly concerning trend given the fact that a large majority are illiterate and lack policing experience. They reported that local leaders are circumventing the ALP vetting process due to pressure to expedite recruitment.

Moreover, RI was told of instances where powerful warlords pressure local leaders to formalize pre-existing militias into the ALP – often around tribal, ethnic or political lines – so they can use these units to avenge personal disputes or strengthen their influence.

The ALP is not officially a component of the government's Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program, which is designed to take the “fighter out of the fight” by providing disarmed insurgents with vocational training, a small salary and the option to join the ANSF. However, the ALP program is being used as a viable employment option for “reintegrees.” One local organization reported that a Taliban “reintegree” in Uruzgan province was even recruited with the support of international forces to serve as an ALP commander. He is notorious for using his position for personal gain and ordering night raid operations against those who get in his way. As further ALP and militia abuses come to light, ISAF and the government should reverse policies and ensure that the ALP is not used as a reintegration tool.

Such a rapid rise of unmanageable armed actors in the north should deeply concern the Afghan government, ISAF and U.S. forces. Afghans' negative views of militias are a result of decades of experience with similar predatory forces led by local strongmen. The fact that many of today's militias operate under the ALP name is doing little to assuage the population's fears. Without proper vetting and training, the rapid expansion of the ALP could even become a catalyst for the insurgency. As one security analyst noted, “Militias are not accountable to anyone; they will only drive the community to seek help from the Taliban.”

To prevent further harm and destabilization, the U.S. Congress should withhold payments to the ALP program until the Secretary of Defense certifies that adequate recruitment, vetting, discipline and command/control structures have been established, as well as a clear time-frame for the program's integration into the ANP. Congress should also exercise its oversight responsibility by ensuring that no U.S. funds are used to train or equip individuals or units suspected of committing human rights abuses.

## **INCREASE UN CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO HUMANITARIAN NEEDS**

UN agencies, such as OCHA and UNHCR, have begun to take concrete steps to better meet the needs of vulnerable people. However, agencies currently lack the capacity to handle the growing displacement and insecurity. This challenge is compounded by the lack of access. To address this,

OCHA and UNHCR must request funding to double the number of Humanitarian Affairs and Protection Officers in priority regions in order to regain humanitarian access, identify information gaps and train Afghan organizations to conduct humanitarian needs assessments and response. The UN should immediately appoint an experienced candidate to the Humanitarian Coordinator post, which has been vacant for seven months, to increase the humanitarian community's effectiveness and influence and ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered in a neutral and principled manner.

The humanitarian challenges in Afghanistan are growing increasingly complex. The intensifying conflict coupled with a drought in the north and increasing food prices are leaving few options for safety or survival. One group of IDPs from Badghis province told RI that they had been displaced more than five times in one year, and were forced to live in a cave during one period of intense fighting. Furthermore, the international community and the Afghan government are reluctant to recognize these growing humanitarian needs. The Afghan government refused to declare a drought and failed to recognize the problem until May, despite warnings from the humanitarian community.

While humanitarian agencies in Kabul struggle to develop a comprehensive strategy to access increasingly insecure areas of the country, OCHA has revamped its coordination efforts to address these needs by taking a more pro-active, regional approach. Recently, OCHA's staff trained Afghan NGOs and relevant government officials to conduct an inter-agency survey of IDPs in Ghor province, since neither international NGOs nor OCHA could access the area. These efforts should be replicated, and OCHA should increase the number of Humanitarian Affairs Officers in its regional offices to begin to cover the more than 50% of the country where UN agencies cannot access vulnerable populations.

UNHCR recently established an operations cell in Kabul to track and monitor IDPs throughout the country; however, it lacks enough protection staff in the field to properly coordinate humanitarian needs assessments and response by its NGO partners. UNHCR has only one Protection Officer to cover nine provinces in the north. In the west, RI met with IDPs in Guzara, a mere 30-minute drive from Herat city, who had not been assessed by either UNHCR or any government representatives in the three months since their arrival. UNHCR is working to cover some gaps by building a network of humanitarian partners but its response is limited by its existing capacity and budget. UNHCR's 2012 Global Needs Assessment and funding appeal should prioritize IDP response and reflect the need for additional

staff to meet growing IDP needs in Afghanistan.

Despite these challenges and staffing limitations, UN aid agencies in Afghanistan must continue to play a key coordinating role to ensure humanitarian needs are met. The Afghan government still lacks the expertise and personnel, while NGOs lack the resources and mandate. The rise in insecurity, the brutal killing of nine UNAMA staff in Mazar-e-Sharif in April, and the Afghan government's recent request for UNAMA to "reduce its footprint," have all led to a re-evaluation of the UN's role in Afghanistan. UNAMA's deeply political mandate, particularly in support of two highly contentious elections, has watered down the UN's humanitarian voice and as a result, led to greater mistrust by the Afghan people. As the Afghan government becomes increasingly fragile, the U.S. government and other UN Security Council members should ensure that the next UN mandate strengthens an active and independent humanitarian role.

### **BUILD THE CAPACITY OF THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT TO PROTECT IDPs**

The Afghan government has the primary responsibility for assisting and protecting IDPs, but it has not fulfilled its obligations due to weak capacity, low budget allocations and minimal donor government support. Moreover, there is no legal framework and no clear institutional focal point to ensure IDP needs are met. In a country where at least one-quarter of the population has been forced from their homes the Afghan government must take steps to meet its obligations – as outlined in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement – to prevent, respond and find solutions for its displaced people. The U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) should coordinate assistance between the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department to work with the Afghan government to prioritize IDPs and to develop an inter-agency plan to address forced displacement.

The Afghan government's national development strategy gives both the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR) and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Agency (ANDMA) responsibilities for IDPs. Both agencies are relatively small, weak and neglected within the government and receive little technical assistance from foreign governments. Filling this capacity and coordination gap is critical. As the displacement crisis grows in complexity, it requires the involvement of the defense, interior, health, education, agriculture, justice and social protection ministries. The government must clarify the lead institution on IDPs, step up coordination efforts and ensure that

all sectors and levels of the government are aware of its responsibilities and can respond in a timely, cohesive manner.

The newly-designated lead agency must immediately develop an IDP plan with other key ministries. This plan should first and foremost ensure ANSF troops receive training to understand their role in preventing and mitigating displacement, as they clearly lack respect and understanding of humanitarian action. For example, in Faryab province, an ANP unit accused Pashtun IDPs of being Taliban fighters, tried to prevent the distribution of aid and attacked one UN humanitarian officer. In addition, trainings should educate ANSF on humanitarian principles and existing civil-military guidelines, in conjunction with existing trainings led by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). The IDP plan should also aim to improve not just the immediate humanitarian response to IDPs, but also the longer term IDP needs including livelihoods, legal documentation, land tenure and access to basic services. AIHRC should report regularly on displacement information, which is already collected by its field monitors, to strengthen wider advocacy efforts within the government.

Furthermore, the IDP plan should make specific provisions for the rising numbers of displaced people in urban areas. In Kabul alone, over 30,000 people live in dozens of informal settlements with very poor health and sanitation conditions. (View video footage of these settlements at [www.refugeesinternational.org](http://www.refugeesinternational.org).) A recent UNHCR-World Bank report shows that 90% of IDPs in urban areas do not plan to return to their area of origin due to improved economic opportunities in host communities. The Afghan government's IDP plan must reform its return policy to address the lack of opportunities in rural areas and help people integrate outside of their area of origin.

*Lynn Yoshikawa and Matt Pennington assessed the needs of internally displaced people in Afghanistan in May 2011.*

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