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Contacts:
Patrick Duplat and Kristèle Younès

AFGHANISTAN: OPEN EYES TO HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Despite the investments made in Afghanistan in the last eight years, the country is still facing a serious humanitarian situation, the result of both natural disasters and ongoing conflict. The UN and donors must increase budgets for humanitarian assistance and support the recently re-established UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). They must address the needs of vulnerable Afghans, including the internally displaced and the returnees, and the UN Development Program must devise a country-wide early recovery strategy. The international community must also look to resolve the root causes of the problems by putting the protection of civilians at the center of its involvement in Afghanistan, in collaboration with the Afghan government.

RESPOND TO HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

In 2009, access continued to deteriorate both for the UN and international aid organizations. From January to June 2009, security incidents increased by 43 percent compared to the first half of 2008, and hampered the humanitarian community's ability to assess vulnerable Afghans and respond to humanitarian needs. Conflict-affected areas like the south or the southeast of the country are virtually no-go zones, and information on the scope of needs is vague at best.

Security is only one of many challenges that humanitarians face in Afghanistan. There are other major causes of the lack of adequate humanitarian response. First, the UN is reluctant to acknowledge the scope of the humanitarian situation. In particular, it is politically difficult for the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) to discuss the humanitarian consequences of the armed conflict when it has been mandated to support the Afghan government, a party to the conflict. Other UN actors are intimidated from raising humanitarian issues in this politicized context. One senior UN official criticized this situation, which he sees as "job preservation."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Donors, OFDA in particular, should reallocate their budgets to respond to humanitarian needs in Afghanistan.
- All UN agencies, led by OCHA, should work on a country-wide assessment to identify and respond to the humanitarian caseload.
- The UN, OCHA headquarters in New York, and donors should provide support to the OCHA office in Afghanistan.
- UNDP should immediately establish and lead an early recovery cluster.
- The U.S and other military actors should support UNAMA's Human Rights Unit.
- Donor governments and international aid agencies should work with the Government of Afghanistan to address the needs of internally displaced Afghans and end protracted displacement.

Second, dedicated humanitarian funding remains scarce. The humanitarian appeal of \$604 million, launched on February 3, 2009, is well funded, but over 52 percent of the appeal addresses food security, and most pledges have gone to the World Food Program's (WFP) operations. Major humanitarian donors still have very limited budgets compared to the main development players. Indeed, the Europe Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has a 2009 budget of €35 million, while the U.S. Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) has a budget of only \$29 million, half of which is dedicated to urban projects. By comparison, USAID has a budget of more than \$1 billion for 2009. More focus, and funding, is needed to respond to humanitarian needs.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is a lack of humanitarian actors in Afghanistan. Most NGOs get the majority of their funding for development projects, as donors have emphasized this sector over the past few years. As many donors are looking to fund projects in the areas where their troops are located, development has been used since 2001 as a tool for counter-insurgency activities instead of being focused on responding to needs alone. This, combined with the UN's partiality derived from its political mandate, has made it extremely difficult to get a real picture of humanitarian needs in Afghanistan. In the words of one UN official, Afghanistan is a "faceless emergency" – nearly eight years after the collapse of the Taliban regime, the needs are significant, but the international community is still unable to define their magnitude.

One example of the consequences of the lack of information is the debate taking place over the food security situation in Afghanistan. While WFP is by far the largest humanitarian recipient of aid in Afghanistan, some of the other agencies and donors believe that WFP appeals are based on speculation, not on facts. Many object to the fact that WFP assistance is often distributed by the local government, leading to situations where assistance can easily be

politicized, especially during an electoral year. Others challenged food security data. This debate illustrates how little the humanitarian community actually knows about the situation in Afghanistan and how essential it is to conduct a basic survey.

The lack of funding, the politicization of the humanitarian situation and the lack of adequate information have led to poor humanitarian response and coordination. Despite the establishment of the cluster approach in June 2008, coordination remains hesitant and Kabul-centric. Clusters have still not been rolled into the field, and have experienced management problems due to agencies' turf battles and high staff turnover. Minutes are often not taken, making it almost impossible for field offices to be informed, and many agencies are no longer attending these meetings as they are time-consuming and do not lead to action. Coordination outside the clusters is not much better. The humanitarian country team meets on an ad hoc basis, and still has no concrete strategy for dealing with major humanitarian issues such as returns of refugees and internal displacement.

The picture is not completely grim however. In contrast to last year, humanitarian issues are now on the table, and openly discussed by donors and the Afghan government. Donors have also accepted that for aid agencies to get a clear picture and secure access to populations in need they must be able to talk to all parties to the conflict. This is a major step in the right direction, and could help restore at least some of the humanitarian space lost over the past eight years.

ADDRESS INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

The UN Refugee Agency estimates there are 235,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in Afghanistan. The exact number is disputed, and UNHCR readily acknowledges that it has little information and access to certain groups of

IDP CASE STUDY I: THE U.S. ARMY'S HEAVY FOOTPRINT

Refugees International met with families that fled after American forces set up a new base in their home village in Wardak province in central Afghanistan. They explained how the military compound's outer wall had come to encompass the local cemetery and school, which forced students and villagers to go through a checkpoint every time they wanted to go to school or visit the cemetery. Furthermore, the presence of the U.S. military had drawn Taliban militants, who harassed villagers for information and threatened them.

Many students stopped going to school. One man told Refugees International: "We are not safe in our own village because of the presence of the Americans." Fearful of fighting, some 30 families left their village in Jalrez district and sought refuge with relatives in Kharabagh, an hour outside Kabul. The UN Refugee Agency investigated in Jalrez and corroborated the villager's claims. Since the families fled, there has been fighting in the village, and some civilians have died. The issue was taken up at the civil-military working group, but subsequently dismissed by the military. To date, these families have received no assistance or compensation. They do not know when they will be able to return home.

IDP CASE STUDY II: LOCAL INTEGRATION IN HERAT

Some of the displaced in the three settlements of Maslakh, Minaret and Shaidayee in Afghanistan's western province of Herat fled their homes during Taliban rule. While around 150,000 of them returned to their provinces of origin after the fall of the Taliban, the vast majority of the remaining 30,000 individuals are unable to return because of ethnic tensions. They live, and many work, in Herat, but they are in a legal limbo.

The displaced built their homes on public land, and the government wants them to leave, denying them provincial identity cards. Government officials have repeatedly broken their promises to find durable solutions. The leaders of Maslakh camp recently met with President Karzai, who vowed to issue a decree granting them identity cards and land to help them stay in Herat. So far nothing has happened; bureaucratic inertia, complex land rights and ethnic tensions lengthen the process. Moreover, the displaced are excluded from the National Solidarity Program and other government development initiatives.

This discrimination is particularly striking in the Minaret settlement, which is surrounded by Herat neighborhoods. The displaced are not eligible for city programs such as electricity, schools and water management due to their temporary status. While UNHCR is eager for these populations to be no longer considered IDPs, this status remains their only protection and should be removed only if their legal situation is resolved. The humanitarian community should forcefully advocate for local integration, which has been promised by the government and is their constitutional right.

displaced people. The humanitarian situation for IDPs in Afghanistan is often overlooked because of the complexity of finding durable solutions. More than half of the IDP population was displaced as a result of conflict prior to and around the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Some of the internally displaced were previously refugees in Pakistan or Iran, yet have been unable to settle back home upon their return. Others have been displaced by natural disasters that created unsustainable economic conditions. Finally, as the security situation deteriorates, a growing number have been displaced because of conflict between international and Afghan forces against Taliban groups.

OFDA, which has the mandate to respond to internal displacement, has no programs for conflict-affected displacement. Instead, it is often the army's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) which provide humanitarian assistance to recently displaced families, especially in the conflict areas. The predominance of PRTs in the humanitarian landscape is a trend that has continued – if not accelerated – under the Obama administration.

PRTs were supposed to be humanitarian actors of last resort and focus on activities where they have a comparative advantage, such as governance and rule of law. Instead, they have been used to manage collateral damage in the ongoing military campaign. In the words of one humanitarian actor, PRTs “give stuff out” to score political points. In a recent emergency, a governor called-up a PRT instead of going through the provincial disaster response mechanism or engaging humanitarian agencies. Furthermore, the international aid community is reluctant to address the needs of the displaced, dismissing them as either economic migrants

or urban poor. Worse, the scale of conflict-induced displacement is often minimized or ignored to avoid blame on international forces.

SUPPORT A STRONGER OCHA

The establishment of an OCHA office in Afghanistan in January 2009 was not universally welcomed. Some UN agencies have criticized what they perceive as an added layer of bureaucracy, while others have questioned OCHA's added value. UNAMA in particular was reluctant to lose its coordinating role and its oversight on humanitarian affairs. In certain locations, this animosity has translated into UNAMA refusing to share information with OCHA staff or assist OCHA logistically. This behavior is short-sighted and should not be tolerated.

For OCHA to fulfill its mandate in Afghanistan, it needs the support of the UN family. OCHA depends on UNAMA logistically and is only present in a few of the country's provinces. UNAMA is set to open offices in all Afghan provinces by the end of 2010, and increase its budget by 90 percent, whereas OCHA worldwide is facing cuts to its resources by 20 percent. Moreover, UNAMA benefits from eight years of experience and contacts in the country, and OCHA needs to be able to tap into those assets.

Facing staffing limitations and the logistical obstacles inherent in working in Afghanistan, OCHA has not yet been able to clearly demonstrate its positive impact. It is urgent that OCHA produce results, because the need for increased information, coordination and advocacy is significant, but also because the organization is under tremendous scrutiny.

OCHA has focused on improving coordination, and it must continue to strengthen systems in Kabul and elsewhere, and ensure that information is shared between the capital and the provinces. It must also work on gathering information on the humanitarian situation in the country to inform humanitarian planning and garner funding for the effort. Finally, OCHA must show its expertise in negotiating with all parties to the conflict for better humanitarian access, and in advocating, privately and publicly, for the protection of civilians and respect for humanitarian principles by all.

OCHA needs more support from its headquarters in New York and from member states. Member states must be supportive of the humanitarian cause in Afghanistan, and provide OCHA and other humanitarian agencies with adequate resources. Further, in the context of an integrated mission, where the role of humanitarian coordinator is played by a triple-hatted Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General and Resident Coordinator, OCHA needs firewalls to operate as independently as possible. A direct reporting line to the Emergency Relief Coordinator would provide greater transparency.

FOCUS ON EARLY RECOVERY

Eight years after the fall of the Taliban, the UN still doesn't have a country-wide strategy to deal with displacement and the needs of the five million Afghans who returned to Afghanistan in the hopes of rebuilding their lives. Large-scale development projects do not target the specific needs of returnees and host communities, and these populations are in particular need of livelihood activities. In some of its field offices, UNHCR has stretched its mandate to respond with meager resources to these needs. NGOs also implement small-scale livelihoods projects. But more needs to be done at the national level.

Although the cluster approach has been implemented for over a year, the early recovery cluster has still not been established. Because UNDP is the global lead on early recovery, Refugees International has been pressing the agency in the last year to create and lead the cluster in Afghanistan, to no avail. Its peer UN agencies have made a similar request. UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery visited Afghanistan earlier this year, but failed to examine this particular aspect of the agency's mandate.

SUPPORT UNAMA'S HUMAN RIGHTS UNIT

Despite the arrival of OCHA, UNAMA's Human Rights Unit (HRU) has retained its mandate for the protection of

civilians. The unit has been able to pressure the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General to be more vocal on civilian casualties and for the international forces, including the U.S. military, to be more transparent. Through public reporting and closed-door advocacy, it has pushed the military to be more accountable over the consequences of air strikes, including revising the rules under which they can be used. The HRU is still housed inside the integrated structure of UNAMA rather than within a separate Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and this may give it greater influence. However, this proximity to the UN political leadership also leaves the unit open to criticism and rebukes, most notably when it questions the UN's objectivity. Troop contributing countries to ISAF, who are also the main donors to the UN mission, do not support a vocal and forceful HRU. They would rather the unit take a more politicized role by monitoring rights abuses during the upcoming elections rather than serve as an impartial watchdog.

The HRU has painfully carved its operating space by being critical of all parties to the conflict. Its credibility rests on its ability to be seen as an impartial actor. The protection of civilians has also improved since the Obama administration has publicly acknowledged the negative fallout from the collateral damage of air strikes. To build on this, Ambassador Eikenberry should publicly support the work of the HRU, foster greater collaboration with U.S. armed forces and encourage other members of ISAF to do the same.

CONCLUSION

The Obama administration has promised to rethink the way aid is disbursed in Afghanistan and to put the Afghan people at the center of the mission. This is certainly a long-term project. Part of the solution is recognizing what works and what doesn't; for example, the desire to expand the National Solidarity Program is a positive step. Yet the U.S. has so far failed to recognize the downward trend on the humanitarian front and the negative impact of the PRTs involvement in humanitarian relief. The U.S. will need to partner with the UN to get a better picture of the humanitarian situation. Moreover, as Refugees International has advocated over the past year, returning refugees and internally displaced Afghans will need targeted programs which take into account their specific situation. One measure of success for the U.S. should be an improved humanitarian environment and the establishment of national programs targeting vulnerable groups.

Patrick Duplat and Kristèle Younès assessed the situation for displaced people in Afghanistan in June 2009.