

28 October 2008

Afghanistan: Increasing hardship and limited support for growing displaced population

Hundreds of thousands of people in Afghanistan have been internally displaced by armed conflict, ethnic tensions or human rights violations, natural disasters such as drought, or secondary displacement in the case of refugees and deportees who have returned from neighbouring countries.

An ongoing exercise by the Afghanistan IDP Task Force suggests that over 200,000 people are internally displaced in the country, and this estimate does not include most of those displaced by conflict between the government, international coalition forces and the armed opposition; it is composed primarily of a protracted caseload from before 2004. The conflict is estimated to have displaced tens of thousands of people every year since 2006, but their number has been impossible to determine due to a lack of access to the conflict zones. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) are believed to have urgent humanitarian and protection needs which are not being met due to limited and increasingly restricted humanitarian access. It is unclear how many people experience multiple cycles of short-term displacement due to the conflict and whether those who return to areas of origin do so voluntarily or because they have no other alternatives.

Around 185,000 people, internally displaced before and just after the 2002 fall of the Taleban government, continue to live in camp-like settlements in the south, west and south-west. Many are reluctant to return to areas of origin due to the worsening security, ethnic tensions, and lack of opportunities to rebuild their lives there. Thousands of families are also believed to have been displaced by ongoing localised conflict. Meanwhile, there is anecdotal evidence that Afghanistan has seen rising levels of displacement due to food insecurity and a severe winter over 2007-2008.

Tens of thousands of Afghan refugees have been displaced again after returning to their areas of origin or have not been able to return to areas of origin. Some returnee families are living in squatter settlements in and around Afghan cities and towns. Landlessness remains a serious obstacle to the reintegration of returnees.

Access to IDPs and other vulnerable groups remains limited as insecurity grows, and humanitarian workers are being increasingly attacked across much of Afghanistan. A major factor in the undermining of humanitarian space is the blurring of the identities and functions of military, political, private sector and humanitarian actors. It is imperative that proper roles and responsibilities are respected, and that military and political actors and objectives do not encroach on the activities of humanitarian actors, in order to make it possible for aid agencies to reach the displaced and vulnerable people.

Background

Following three decades of conflict, Afghanistan continues to face significant political, humanitarian and development challenges, including a resurgent insurgency, limited government capacity and embedded traditional institutions, corruption, prolific production and trafficking of opium and other narcotics, and some of the worst development indicators globally. A major humanitarian challenge is to provide protection and assistance to the rising numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs), given the significant obstacles to profiling them and responding to their needs.

In 2002, the Taleban government was ousted by a US-led international military intervention. Afghanistan underwent a period of reconstruction and development, and a new and moderate Islamic constitution was ratified and a president and national assembly elected. The Afghanistan Compact of 2006 set out an ambitious programme for development over the next five years, and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy was endorsed by the government and the international community in mid-2008. However, the renewed vigour of the insurgency from 2005 made clear that few of the underlying conditions that had helped bring the Taleban government to power had been addressed (ICG, 24 July 2008, p.7).

The establishment of a democratic government, the increased presence of the international humanitarian and development community, massive development funds, and tens of thousands of troops under two international military commands, the NATO-led International Se-

curity Assistance Force (ISAF) and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), created high expectations that after decades of conflict the country would be rebuilt and the lives of its citizens improve. However, slow progress and the continuing health of the insurgency have led to frustration. For most Afghans, neither physical security nor the possibility of accessing jobs, health care and education have improved fast enough, and in some areas they have actually deteriorated over recent years. Afghans have begun to lose confidence not only in the international presence but in their own government. Poverty levels remain high despite the billions of dollars in aid committed to the country (RI, 10 July 2008, p.2) and Afghanistan ranks 174 out of 178 countries on the UN Global Human Development Index (UNDP, September 2007, p.18).

According to the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), too much aid has been prescriptive and driven by donor priorities. A disproportionate amount of aid has been directed to Kabul and other towns and cities, rather than to rural areas where it is most needed and where more than three-quarters of Afghans live, while a number of major donors direct a significant share of funds to the southern provinces where the insurgency is strongest. Over half of all aid to Afghanistan remains tied and donors require services or resources to be procured from their own countries, while vast sums are lost to contractor profits (ACBAR, 25 March 2008).

In the four years after the fall of the Taleban government, levels of conflict-related violence were relatively low. From mid-2006 onwards, the conflict be-

tween the Afghan army and international forces and the Taliban and other armed opposition groups has intensified dramatically, with severe consequences for civilians.

The main zone of combat has encompassed the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan (CRS, 29 September 2008, p.21). According to the UN, the level of insurgent activity increased sharply in 2007. The conflict had been previously concentrated in a fairly small area, with 70 per cent of security incidents occurring in ten per cent of Afghanistan's districts, which were home to only six per cent of the population. However, the insurgency has recently spread to other parts of the country including the far north-west, and encroached into provinces bordering Kabul (UNSG, March 2008). In 2008, the activities of armed opposition groups expanded to new areas such as Logar and Wardak, close to Kabul, as well as the previously stable Herat, where such groups had traditionally had few sympathisers (CRS, 29 September 2008, p.22).

Civilian casualties have increased as the conflict has intensified, as unplanned "rapid-response" aerial strikes have not always been accurate and armed opposition groups have adopted tactics of using civilian shields or targeting civilians. In 2007, over 1,500 of the 8,000 conflict-related fatalities were civilian (UNSG, March 2008). Among civilian victims of coalition action, more were killed by air strikes than ground fire (HRW, September 2008, p.2).

Between January and August 2008, 2,500 people have reportedly lost their lives and this figure could include up to 1,000 civilians; according to initial estimates there

have been over 260 civilian casualties in July 2008, which is higher than in any other month in the last six years (ACBAR, 1 August 2008). About two-thirds of the civilian casualties were reportedly due to attacks by armed opposition groups while the increased number of air strikes by international forces also contributed to the civilian death toll (Reuters, 1 August 2008). The air strikes led not only to civilian casualties but also the significant destruction of property, and forced civilians to flee and vacate villages, adding to the displaced population within Afghanistan. The fear of future air strikes has also caused people to flee their homes (HRW, September 2008, p.5).

Internal displacement has not only been caused by the armed conflict, but also by a complex combination of ethnic tensions and human rights violations, natural disasters such as drought, and the return and secondary displacement of refugees and deportees from Pakistan and Iran. Humanitarian access to the displaced and other vulnerable groups has remained limited as a result of the insecurity. In March 2008, 78 out of 376 districts in the country, including most areas in the east, south-east and south, remained largely inaccessible to officials and aid workers (UNSG, March 2008).

Number of people displaced

According to the initial findings of a profiling exercise conducted by the Afghanistan IDP Task Force, there are at least 200,000 IDPs in Afghanistan. The figure largely reflects a protracted caseload, and does not cover most of those displaced since around 2004, including by the conflict between the Afghan army and international coalition forces and the armed

opposition groups, due to the severe limits on access to conflict areas. This total also excludes those displaced due to the harsh winter of 2007-2008, and many displaced by drought in 2008; it also fails to reflect “invisible” IDPs in large cities. The actual number of IDPs in Afghanistan may therefore be substantially larger than 200,000 (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

A breakdown of IDPs shows 166,153 people from a protracted caseload, 6,598 from a 2008 drought that affected the north and west of the country particularly hard, 9,901 displaced by conflict between tribal and ethnic groups, 52,422 returnees in a situation of secondary displacement, and 759 people displaced due to combat between international coalition forces and armed opposition groups.

At the end of July 2008, 1,843 people were displaced in the north, 119,958 in the south, 14,624 in the south-east, 55,884 in the east, 36,288 in the west and 7,236 in the central region. Approximately 51 per cent of the IDPs were male and 49 per cent female.

In August 2007, the Representative of the Secretary General on the Human Rights of IDPs noted that the armed conflict in Afghanistan had triggered the displacement of tens of thousands of persons in the last year alone and there was the potential for a significant increase in the number of IDPs if the conflict continued at its current pace (UN Human Rights Council, 20 August 2007). Since then the conflict has escalated and spread to more parts of the country. Measuring and profiling displacement and its impact on people in areas of the most intense conflict remains virtually impossible.

Lack of access to several parts of the country has prevented the accurate assessment of the numbers and conditions of IDPs there and the development of strategies to respond to their needs. The humanitarian community has been unable to verify the nature and scope of the humanitarian caseload, especially in the southern areas. In addition, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) lacks the staff and resources to collect and maintain such information. The lack of an overview of the humanitarian situation is further complicated by problems with coordination and response capacity of the government, and the UNAMA Humanitarian Affairs Unit and the Human Rights Unit being under-staffed and under-resourced (NRC, 14 August 2008, p.2).

Patterns of displacement

People displaced due to conflict between international coalition forces and armed opposition groups

Violence and insecurity are believed to have resulted in renewed and increasing displacement, particularly in the southern provinces, but also in south-eastern, central and eastern areas. The displacement appears to have been especially serious in and around Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabul, Paktika, and Kunar, provinces in which international and national humanitarian organisations have extremely limited or no access, and armed opposition groups have support bases and tribal or family roots (HRW, April 2007, p.12).

Many IDPs have reported abandoning their villages after being approached for food and shelter by armed opposition groups at night, and then being ques-

tioned and accused of helping them by international forces during the day (ICRC, 18 February 2008). Others said they had to flee after receiving death threats from insurgents who believed they were affiliated with Afghan and international forces (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

Some people in the southern provinces have been displaced by the intense aerial bombing by international forces (IRIN, 27 September 2007). The frequency of airstrikes has increased in recent months; during the first six months of 2008, 1,853 munitions were dropped by air over Afghanistan, more than twice the 754 dropped in Iraq during the same period. In June alone, 646 bombs and missiles were used in Afghanistan, the second highest monthly total since the end of major combat operations in 2002 (NYT, July 23, 2008). Most harm to civilians and their properties has not resulted from planned air strikes against predetermined targets, but from fluid rapid-response strikes, often carried out in support of ground troops under attack. There have been several instances where insurgent forces have contributed to the civilian toll from airstrikes by deploying in populated villages, at times specifically to shield themselves from counter-attack (HRW, September 2008, p.5).

According to local authorities, many displaced families have sought refuge at their relatives' homes, in rented housing or in empty government buildings, or have built illegal mud huts around cities such as Kandahar. Shelter, food, medicine and drinking water are among their most urgent needs (IRIN, 20 November 2007).

It has been impossible to determine the exact number of people displaced by the conflict due to a lack of access. However, reports indicate that they number at least in the tens of thousands. An estimated 44,000 people were displaced by the conflict during the first half of 2007 (UNSG, 28 October 2007). Officials in the three insurgency-affected provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan estimated in November 2007 that about 80,000 people had been displaced by the insurgency and counter-insurgency military operations (IRIN, 20 November 2007).

According to data compiled by UNAMA, UN agencies provided food and non-food aid to over 40,000 displaced families (or upwards of 240,000 people) in Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan in 2007, largely at the request of government offices, and on the basis of numbers reported by those offices and verified by implementing partners of the UN (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

In the first six months of 2008, 12,646 displaced families (or over 75,000 individuals) were assisted by UN agencies in the south. Other IDPs were assisted by Provincial Reconstruction Teams or international forces, which often provide food and non-food items as well as pay compensation to people for damaged property or loss of life. Additionally, these numbers do not show the displaced families assisted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008) or NGOs.

Officials in Kabul have described the people displaced in the south and southwest of the country as "short-term IDPs" who are able to return to their homes

soon after military operations conclude (IRIN, 17 July 2007). However, the many people who have fled to cities, whose houses and property have been destroyed or whose land has been confiscated following changes in groups' control over different areas are likely to remain displaced for longer. Those who have been threatened or targeted as collaborators by insurgents may also be reluctant to return (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008) and some may only be returning due to the lack of other options.

Other displaced populations

An estimated 185,000 IDPs have lived for a longer period in camp-like settlements in the south, the west and south-east of Afghanistan. They became displaced either as a result of the conflict with the USSR or fighting between Mujahadeen factions, or because of intimidation and attacks by the local commanders in the north after the fall of the Taleban, or due to the drought which hit the Kuchi nomads in the north, west and south. The Kuchi of the Registan desert in the south are not in a position to return as they have lost 90 per cent of their livestock and the drought has continued. The best chance of a durable solution for all these groups would be local integration (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008). Local officials have noted that the situation of protracted IDPs has worsened with the arrival of new conflict-affected IDPs, and that their humanitarian needs have gradually increased (IRIN, 16 January 2008).

Conflict between different tribal or ethnic groups or conflicts within a single tribe have also led to the displacement of thousands of families. For example, the long-

standing conflict between Hazara farmers in the Central Highlands and the largely Pashtun Kuchi pastoralists broke out again in June 2008 and led to deaths and injuries, the destruction of property, and the displacement of as many as 7,000 families to Kabul and the Central Highlands. After the fighting ended, a Peace Commission was established and the Kuchi withdrew, allowing the Hazara IDPs to return to their villages. However, the violence may recur if the Commission fails to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to both parties. There are similar conflicts in other parts of the country (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

In the past year, food insecurity is also believed to have led to displacement. A very harsh winter followed by drought (especially in the north and west) has caused severe crop loss, and hunger and poverty have been exacerbated by the rise in food prices. The areas of Balkh, Samangan, Sari-Pul and Jawzjan in the north, Badghis, Nimroz and Ghor in the west, Logar in the east, Wardak in the centre, and Khost in the south-east were significantly affected by the food insecurity. The combination of worsening security and drought presents a risk of considerable displacement in the western part of the country (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

Secondary displacement of returning refugees

Secondary displacement is believed to be widespread. Over 4.7 million people returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran between 2002 and 2006, increasing the immense pressure on resources. In 2007, 350,000 Afghan refugees were re-

patriated from Pakistan, while in spring 2007 Iran forced 44,000 refugees to return and also expelled 8,000 undocumented Afghans (Brookings, November 2007). Between 1 January and 15 July 2008, more than 180,000 people returned from Pakistan and Iran. Some of the returnees left their host countries voluntarily due to rising costs of living, particularly in urban areas. Many others were forced to return by the closure of camps such as Jalozi in Pakistan that hosted as many as 70,000 refugees, or because they were removed from “no-go areas” in Iran. Many returnees had lived in towns and cities abroad in for over 20 years, and were ill-prepared to return to rural Afghanistan, where they could expect neither job opportunities nor services, and where many had no land (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

According to the Afghanistan IDP Task Force profiling exercise, the majority of returnees from Pakistan have declared their intention to go back to their areas of origin, but more than 5,500 families (or 33,000 individuals) who have returned from Pakistan remain displaced in temporary settlements in Afghanistan in 2008. Most are in the eastern region, where they have created four settlements in the province of Nangarhar, with one formally recognised as a township for land allocation to returnees; and another in the province of Laghman, where the international community and the government are attempting to provide water, food, health services, non-food items and temporary shelter. The population in two of the settlements continues to increase daily as more people return from abroad. Other pockets of returnees who have been unable to settle in their area of origin in-

clude some 200 Pashtu-speaking Baloch families who returned to Sholgara district in Balkh in late May 2008, but remain displaced due to a land dispute with the surrounding Khalili Shia community (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008). Many returnees are unable to return to their areas of origin in Kunar or Nuristan in the east due to ongoing insecurity and conflict.

Fewer people have returned to the south than to other parts of Afghanistan, due to the deteriorating security and economic situation there. Since 2002, only ten to 12 per cent of refugee returns have indicated that they have returned to southern areas (Canadian Embassy Newsweekly, 2 July 2008). Whether they actually end up staying there or leave for other safer areas after arriving is not known.

2.1 million Afghans remain in Pakistan, and 915,000 in Iran. According to one estimate it is possible that a total of 540,000 refugees could return home in the next two years (UNHCR Appeal 2008-2009, p.1). Unless conditions are in place for this returning population to be absorbed, the likelihood of more people becoming internally displaced on their return remains high.

Urban IDPs

Increasing numbers of forcibly displaced people and voluntary migrants have moved to the major cities of Afghanistan. With a population of 800,000 before the fall of the Taleban regime in 2002, Kabul was by 2007 home to over four million people, with as much as half the population in squatter settlements. The situation is the same in other larger cities such as Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar (WPR, 18

October 2007). In Kabul, the destruction of nearly 70,000 houses in almost thirty years of war has further exacerbated the problem.

Due to their long exposure to urban or semi-urban environments in Pakistan and Iran, many returnee families elect to seek shelter in squatter settlements in and around Afghan cities or in cramped conditions with relatives, sometimes with two or three families in one dwelling. Hundreds of informal settlements have sprouted around cities all over Afghanistan, housing thousands of returnees and deportees, and raising fears of a burgeoning humanitarian crisis (IPS, 26 February 2008).

More than 180,000 illegal migrants, most of them single men, were deported from Iran between January and July 2008. While they are primarily categorised as economic migrants and not IDPs, many have gravitated towards cities in search of employment (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

The extent of displacement into cities of people internally displaced by armed conflict and natural disaster is difficult to pinpoint as many IDPs have partially integrated, often living in irregular settlements among the non-displaced, and their recognition as an IDP has depended in part on self-identification, especially for those living individually instead of in collective groups (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008). Agencies working in Kabul are increasingly worried about the situation with daily new arrivals and little coordinated assistance.

Physical security

Due to limited access in much of Afghanistan, it has been difficult to determine the conditions of many of the displaced and their physical security needs. Everyone caught in the combat between the Taleban and other armed groups and the Afghan army and international forces is liable to face a range of threats to their physical security, while some specific threats against individuals have also been noted.

Landmines and unexploded ordnance continue to kill or injure people, restrict areas available for cultivation, and prevent people from returning to their areas of origin. The UN Mine Action Center for Afghanistan reports that Afghanistan remains one of the world's most heavily contaminated countries after almost three decades of war. About 15 per cent of the population is living in one of more than 2,000 contaminated communities. In 2007, 143 people were killed and 438 wounded by landmines and unexploded ordnance. Most victims were males aged 1-26, largely from the insurgency-affected southern provinces where due to insecurity, demining activities have been hampered (IRIN, 21 January 2008).

Decades of war have exacerbated poverty and unemployment, and undermined local social cohesion, causing further insecurity. A large number of local disputes relate to limited resources, particularly land and water. Despite a strong sense of national identity, ethnic and tribal differences have long been significant and lead to regular disputes. Another major source of local conflict is disagreements within or between families. Such disputes can easily spread to tribes or communities

and in a significant number of cases relate to women and marriage. Domestic violence against women or severely discriminatory treatment is often a cause and consequence of family, tribal or community disputes. Waves of displacement, both internally and beyond, have placed additional pressures on communities that have been forced to accommodate large numbers of newcomers and returnees. Social and cultural difficulties can be created among communities by the fact that many returnees have acquired different attitudes or mindsets as the result of their overseas experiences (Oxfam, February 2008, p.9-10).

The impact of the conflict on the security of children is reflected in their reduced access to education. In Helmand province, which has been severely affected by the insurgency, 30,000 fewer students attended school in 2007. Access to education has been limited by insecurity in rural areas, particularly in the south. Data from April 2008 reveals that 300,000 children cannot go to school because of insecurity and threats (IRIN, 10 April 2008). However, the number of female students has increased across Afghanistan as rural families have flocked to provincial capitals to escape the insurgency-related violence and girls have had more opportunities to access schools (IRIN, 8 October 2007).

Obstacles to durable solutions

When the Taliban government fell in 2002, there were approximately 1.2 million IDPs in Afghanistan, the majority of whom were able to return spontaneously to their places of origin over the course of several years. UNHCR helped 98,838 families (or around 490,000 individuals)

to return between 2002 and February 2008. The majority returned to the north (35 per cent), west (32 per cent), and central region (21 per cent) (UNHCR, June 2008, p.1).

By 2008, the rate of returns had dropped considerably, due to continued insecurity in large areas of the country, unresolved inter-tribal and localised conflicts, landlessness, drought and lack of job opportunities or services in rural areas (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008). Consequently, the government launched a new effort to encourage the return of thousands of long-term IDPs from the three largest camps, Zhare-e-Dasht in Kandahar, Mukhtar in Helmand and Maslakh in Herat, to their areas of origin that are mostly located in the north. The Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) offered transport and food assistance to those wanting to return to their homes, but few IDPs have taken up the offer (IRIN, 28 April 2008).

Recently in 2008, though, mostly due to the deteriorating conditions in the province of Kandahar, IDPs from Zhare-e-Dasht have approached UNHCR indicating their strong will to return to their regions of origin in the north. Considering this latest development in the south, UNHCR will continue to work with the MoRR to facilitate more IDP returns, particularly from the south, which are likely to occur in 2009 (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

Local integration remains complicated by the perception of many Afghan leaders and provincial governors that IDPs are allowed to only stay “temporarily” in their province if they cannot return to

their areas of origin because of security considerations. There is significant opposition to permanent integration, due to the belief that people not born in a certain area do not belong there, even though Article 39 of the constitution recognises the right of Afghans to travel or settle in any part of the country except areas forbidden by law (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

The return of some people displaced in the short-term by fighting between international and Afghan forces and armed opposition groups has reportedly been delayed due to the armed opposition groups laying anti-vehicle and anti-personnel landmines on roads and footpaths (IRIN, 22 June 2008).

Currently the number of returnees continues to outpace the capacity of regions to support and reintegrate them. The initial euphoria expressed by refugees returning home has long since tapered off as they have begun to struggle with the lack of land, homes, shelter, services and employment. Many returnees have not been able to go back to their areas of origin in Afghanistan because of the insecurity, and lack of access to livelihoods, and poor economic and social infrastructure (Brookings, November 2007). While the enduring poverty affects all Afghans, these returnees have often found themselves more vulnerable as they lack the links to subsistence structures that others have developed over time. Nonetheless, assistance and development programmes must continue to take into account the needs of the returnees and host communities together (UNHCR, April 2007, p.7).

Landlessness remains a serious obstacle to the reintegration of returnees. Accord-

ing to Al Jazeera, 90 per cent of the two million Afghan refugees remaining in Pakistan say they do not own or have access to housing, land or property in Afghanistan. Along with insecurity, this will be one of the greatest challenges facing return and reintegration in the country (Al Jazeera, 12 August, 2008). According to UNHCR, more than 46 per cent of those who have returned face housing problems (UNHCR, 2008-2009 Appeal, p.1). Despite the government's promise of land for every returnee, the scarcity of land has meant that returnees are often allotted land 50 kilometres from urban centres, and usually in areas where they have no means of livelihood, transport or family connections. International relief organisations and UN agencies dealing with returning refugees and their reintegration have said that too much emphasis is placed on the initial stage of return and not enough on issues which may later arise (Al Jazeera, 12 August 2008).

Land and property disputes continue to prevent return. Disputes normally arise from illegal occupations of houses and land, their redistribution or reallocation to other families in the absence of the original owner, or disagreements over sharing inherited property. These disputes have flourished because of successive waves of fighting and an absent rule of law that has allowed opportunist land grabbing practices to continue. Long-term displacement of landowners and entire communities, disruption of traditional social structures, an increase in the population with refugees returning to Afghanistan and a corresponding increase in the value of land have all contributed to illegal occupation throughout the country (NRC, February 2007, p.5). At the same time the country's complicated and con-

fusing land registry system has exacerbated land disputes, regularly leading to violence between communities (UNDP, September 2007, p.7).

New government law enforcement initiatives are required to formalise land ownership and establish an effective system of land management and property registration in order to tackle these complex challenges. In order to ease social tensions, the land use reform agenda should focus on vulnerable groups such as the Kuchi, poor landless rural populations, women, and returning displaced persons and refugees. To improve the administration of land in Afghanistan, both formal and informal mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as *jirgas* and *shuras*, should be fully engaged (UNDP, September 2007, p.65).

Another enormous obstacle to durable solutions for those displaced is the lack of income and basic services in large areas of the country (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008). Livelihood opportunities are particularly limited for many of those who returned from Pakistan and Iran since 2006 as they have low levels of education, assets and skills (UNHCR, April 2007, p.5).

Humanitarian access

Attacks on humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan have increasingly curtailed their ability to deliver assistance to IDPs and other vulnerable communities. Poor access is further inhibiting the monitoring and collection of data on the numbers of the displaced and their humanitarian and protection concerns – in some areas such as Kandahar and Helmand where the conflict is most intense and displacement believed

to be high, it has been impossible to profile the displaced, let alone assist them.

In 2007, international NGOs, UN workers, and recipients of NGO assistance were attacked by members of armed opposition groups on 70 occasions. There were reports that anti-government forces in the south were increasingly attacking those who had accepted foreign assistance, causing villagers to begin refusing aid (USDoS, 11 March 2008).

In early 2008, UN agencies were unable to operate in 78 districts in the south, out of 376 districts in the country, and UN road missions to almost all districts in the south were suspended for several months (UNSG, March 2008). The World Food Programme suffered 40 attacks on its food aid trucks from January 2007 to June 2008 in which 1,000 metric tonnes of food worth \$800,000 were lost (IRIN, 30 June 2008).

Organisations such as the ICRC have stressed that they have less access to displaced people in 2008 than at any time over the past 27 years, and with the emphasis placed on security and development aid, humanitarian needs are being overlooked (Guardian, 13 February 2008). The Afghan Red Crescent Society and national NGOs have had greater access than international agencies to insecure areas and have provided most of the assistance to displaced people in the insurgency-affected provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan. Local governments in some cases have provided food aid and housing assistance to newly displaced people through provincial emergency commissions.

In 2008, the direct and indirect targeting of humanitarian workers by armed opposition and criminal groups has not been confined to southern provinces, but has spread to more and more areas previously considered safe. From 1 January to 15 July, only 12 per cent of reported NGO security incidents took place in the south, also in part due to fewer NGOs operating there, compared to 20 per cent in the central provinces including Kabul, and 19 per cent in the north (IRIN, 22 July 2008).

There were more than 120 attacks on aid programmes in the first seven months of 2008 according to the UN, and 30 aid workers killed (Reuters, 20 October 2008). According to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, between January and September 2008, 72 aid workers were abducted (ANSO, 30 September 2008). The killings, attacks and kidnappings are hampering NGO operations, with reduced or limited use of roads that were previously safe making it very difficult to access beneficiaries, particularly the displaced in areas of intense conflict.

NGOs have consistently argued that humanitarian space has shrunk in Afghanistan due to the blurring of the roles and responsibilities of military and humanitarian agencies through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) duplicating NGO activities. The PRTs were established in 2002 for the international community to provide both improved security and to facilitate reconstruction and economic development throughout the country. The US and its coalition partners initially envisioned the PRTs as transitional structures (USDoS, 31 January 2006). Currently the PRTs perform activities ranging from resolving local dis-

putes to coordinating local reconstruction projects (CRS, 29 September 2008, p.32).

At present there are 26 PRTs in Afghanistan led by 13 different ISAF nations. US officials have attributed recent successes in stabilising some provinces such as Ghazni and Khost to the PRTs' ability to enhance reconstruction by coordinating different security and civilian activities (CRS, 29 September 2008, p.32). NGOs maintain that both provinces have become more hostile and insecure, with attacks on their projects and intensified conflict.

NGOs have noted that the PRTs have gone beyond their interim, security-focused mandate, to engage in substantial development work of variable quality and impact. Although arguably necessary in some highly insecure areas, PRTs have in many cases undermined the emergence of effective institutions of national and local government and other civil development processes, by diverting resources which otherwise could have been devoted to these activities (ACBAR, March 2008, p.3). The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs has voiced concern over the blurring of military operations and humanitarian assistance by the PRTs, and stressed that it is critical that PRTs in Afghanistan do not involve themselves in humanitarian assistance unless there is absolutely no other alternative for security reasons, and do not describe their activities as humanitarian work (UNAMA, 29 June 2008).

In order to address the problem, UNAMA, NATO-ISAF, and other military and humanitarian organisations have developed the National Civil Military Guidelines through a National Civil Mili-

tary Working Group comprised of representatives of NATO-ISAF, UN agencies, NGOs and the Afghan government. However, the US-led OEF forces are not under the purview of the Guidelines, and the Taliban are apparently unaware of them. The Working Group is expected to monitor the implementation of the Guidelines (IRIN, 5 August 2008). While the acceptance of the Guidelines is an important step in the right direction, the real test will be how well they are implemented on the ground and whether the PRTs and military actors will cease the use of emergency relief for political and military objectives (Asia Times, 20 August, 2008).

National and international response

The government has acknowledged and taken measures to address the problem of internal displacement. There is no single agency that has responsibility for IDPs, and three ministries claim some responsibility towards them: the MoRR, the Natural Disaster Management Authority, and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. The central government has intervened in some of the most severe displacement situations, but the provincial governor's office and provincial offices of government ministries have more often dealt with internal displacement issues (Brookings, 23 June 2008).

The government adopted an IDP strategy in 2003, but due to lack of institutional capacity, effective management of returnee and IDP affairs remains a challenge. The high turnover of both central and provincial officials also complicates the government response (IRIN, 5 December 2007). While exploring durable

solutions to end displacement, authorities have generally focused on return for those who have been living in displacement for protracted periods, but for whom local integration may be a better alternative. The Government of Afghanistan has, however, agreed that local integration is the only viable option for the protracted IDP caseload (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

In 2008, the government created a National IDP task force, chaired by MoRR and co-chaired by UNHCR. The task force has led the profiling and analysis of the displacement situation and the needs of IDPs relating to assistance, protection and durable solutions (UNHCR, June 2008, p.2). Provincial task forces have also been established to support this work.

Among the international community, UNHCR plays a lead role in relation to IDPs following a memorandum of understanding signed in 2002 between the government, UNAMA and UNHCR. In 2005, a consultative group on returnees, refugees and IDPs endorsed a national policy which emphasised the promotion of durable solutions through voluntary return and local integration and affirmed the lead role of the government. The 2005 policy further delineated responsibilities so that UNHCR would continue to play an active role in "protection of IDPs", in helping the government to address obstacles to return and in providing aid to IDPs returning to areas of origin, while the government would take greater responsibility for those displaced by natural disasters (communications with Afghanistan IDP Task Force, 2008).

In line with government efforts to avoid a protracted humanitarian emergency and dependency on aid, UN agencies have since March 2006 ended their aid programmes to IDP camps in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. UNHCR is working with the government to try to find durable solutions for the long-term IDPs (IRIN, 20 November 2007). However, this raises serious concerns about support to those displaced by conflict in the south since 2006. Provincial officials there have acknowledged their lack of capacity to effectively tackle the IDP issue (IRIN, 3 October 2007) and international and national humanitarian actors generally have no access to these people. Neither the UN nor the government of Afghanistan has supported the establishment of new camps - fearing this may encourage other people to leave their homes in search of aid (IRIN, 20 November 2007).

UNHCR and international NGOs, particularly in the east, have constructed homes and implemented income-generation programmes to help facilitate sustainable returns. However the scale of this assistance has been small and it should not be understood as large-scale infrastructure development. There is a need for greater involvement of agencies responsible for early recovery. The government recognises the challenge of

integrating returning refugees and in November 2008, UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs will host a conference in Kabul on returns and reintegration with the intention of engaging regional governments, donors and international institutions like the World Bank on refugee and return issues (RI, 10 July 2008, p.6).

Many of the humanitarian agencies aiding IDPs and other vulnerable groups in Afghanistan, and all UN agencies, are working with the humanitarian component of UNAMA, which is a political mission. NGOs have expressed the need for an OCHA presence in Afghanistan in order to provide some independence of the humanitarian response from the political mission (NRC, 14 August 2008, p.3).

The cluster approach is being rolled out in Afghanistan in 2008 to improve the humanitarian response and enable better leadership and coordination. It is in a very early phase, and clusters have only been set up in Kabul and not at the provincial level.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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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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