

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

OP-ED

ASA 11/003/2012

Embargoed for 23 February 05.30 GMT / 10.00 Kabul time

Afghanistan: Fleeing War, Finding Misery – Op-Ed

At least 22 young children froze to death last month in the squalid camps in Kabul where their families had sought safety from escalating fighting in Afghanistan.

More infants have died from the cold in the last few weeks.

The thought of children dying of cold has understandably motivated many people in Afghanistan and abroad to offer help.

The food, water, blankets, and medicine now being directed to displaced families will save some lives. But such stopgap measures are no substitute for effective, coordinated government strategies to deal with displacement.

The truth is that the Afghan authorities have largely ignored their large displaced population, which reached half a million at the beginning of the year.

The national development strategy speaks in vague terms about their eventual return to their home communities, studiously ignoring the reality that most cannot do so in safety, now or in the foreseeable future.

And over the last four years, as we've regularly visited displaced communities and then met with government representatives we've repeatedly heard officials speak dismissively of the displaced families that have sought refuge in their midst.

"Economic migrants," they say disparagingly, even though over 180,000 fled the fighting in 2011 alone.

One local authority, the provincial government of Herat, denied the very existence of internal displacement, as if make-believe made for good public policy.

The sad reality is that displacement is a feature of life in Afghanistan, and has been for decades.

Many of these families flee to Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and other cities. Uprooted from their homes and separated from their communities and their livelihoods, they are plunged suddenly into an unfamiliar cash economy.

Housing is scarce in Kabul and other Afghan cities, and the high cost of rent is out of reach for most displaced families.

They find shelter where they can, often constructing crude shelters on empty lots. In Kabul alone, some 35,000 displaced people live in slums that have sprung up in the past few years. Conditions in these communities are abysmal. Rainwater readily enters the makeshift tents displaced families build. When we visited during the rainy season earth floors inside these shelters were soggy beneath our feet.

Even worse, the residents of adjacent buildings use these plots of land as refuse dumps, meaning that displaced families must walk around mounds of trash to reach their homes. In one community we visited in Herat, the latrines from the nearby mosque leaked into the ground around displaced families' homes, surrounding them with an ooze of mud and human excrement.

It is difficult to stay healthy in such unhygienic conditions. Even securing enough water to drink, cook and clean is a daily struggle.

On viewing such misery, it's tempting to respond just in the way that individuals and organisations have done in the last few weeks, with offers of money and immediate help. Private donations might help some lucky families get through the winter without having to bury more children. But such assistance won't do much more to address the unrelenting misery that most displaced families now endure.

Here's why: Following the official line that displaced families will soon return to their home communities, government officials discourage aid that suggests people will stay for more than a very short time.

Instead of drilling wells, humanitarian agencies must often truck water to displaced communities. Public health clinics and schools are frequently far from the slums where displaced families live.

The cost and time involved in getting to distant health clinics means that health care is just not an option for many.

"Sometimes we simply don't go and stay sick longer," one woman in Kabul's Kart-e-Parwan slum told us, saying they could not afford transport.

Another woman explained how many displaced families must deal with childbirth: "If a pregnant woman has difficulties during the night, we hope that she survives until morning." Help with resettling in another community is one way to provide a more viable, longer-term solution for displaced families. To its credit, the national government has a land allocation programme that would do just that.

Unfortunately, some families have been offered plots of land that are impractically far from jobs, health clinics, and schools. One that we visited even lacked a water source. A man whose family had been offered land an hour and a half's drive from Kabul told us, "I can't afford to live there," pointing out that getting to and from his only source of income would cost him more than he would earn each day.

Much of Afghanistan's internal displacement is a consequence of human action, as a result of the conflict. It persists because of inaction—because policymakers choose to ignore it or, worse, insist on responses that deny reality.

Effective protection requires acknowledgement at every level that displacement exists and that most displaced families can't return to their homes any time soon. Unless local and national officials recognise this reality and act on it, small children will continue to die in the middle of Afghanistan's largest cities.

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