

AI Index: PRE 01/098/2012
23 February 2012

Afghans fleeing war find misery in urban slums

Half a million Afghans displaced by fighting are struggling to survive in makeshift shelters let down by their government and international donors that look the other way, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

At least 28 children have died in the harsh winter conditions in the camps around Kabul. The Afghan government estimates more than 40 people have frozen to death in camps across the country.

'Fleeing war, finding misery: The plight of the internally displaced in Afghanistan', highlights how an escalation in fighting has left half a million Afghans internally displaced with around 400 more joining their ranks every single day.

Kabul alone houses up to 35,000 displaced persons in 30 slum areas around the city.

"Thousands of people are finding themselves living in freezing, cramped conditions and on the brink of starvation, while the Afghan government is not only looking the other way but even preventing help from reaching them," said Horia Mosadiq, Amnesty International's Afghanistan researcher.

Throughout Afghanistan, UN agencies and humanitarian organisations cannot deliver effective aid to the displaced communities, as they are prohibited from assisting in ways that implies the permanence of settlements. So, instead of digging permanent water wells, they are forced to deliver water to displaced communities in tankers.

"Local officials restrict aid efforts because they want to pretend that these people are going to go away. This is a largely hidden but horrific humanitarian and human rights crisis," said Horia Mosadiq.

"We don't know where all the international aid is going...we don't know why the government isn't able to provide us with basic shelter," said Yahya, a man living in Kabul's Chaman-e-Babarak slum area who spoke to Amnesty International.

Most slum residents told Amnesty International that they had fled their homes to escape conflict. Fighting has spread to parts of the country previously considered peaceful. Civilian deaths have increased every year since 2007 and in 2011, more than 3,000 Afghan civilians died as a result of the conflict, according to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The vast majority of civilian casualties are caused by the Taliban and other insurgent groups, but many displaced Afghans told Amnesty International that they had fled in fear of aerial bombardment by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and to avoid being used as human shields by the Taliban. Amnesty International has called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate war crimes by the Taliban and all other parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.

"The Americans and the government told us to leave the area before they wanted to attack Marjah. The Taliban.. did not allow civilians to leave the area. They also told people that the foreign forces will come and rape our women and girls," said Zarin, a 70-year-old woman who came to Kabul in February 2010 from Marjah, in Helmand province.

Entire communities are now fleeing their homes in search of greater security.

"Afghans have real grounds to feel less secure now than at any point in the last ten years," said Horia Mosadiq. "International and Afghan forces should address the impact of conflict on civilians, including displacement. The Taliban must also look to protect civilians, by ensuring humanitarian access to the areas they control."

Those Afghans who have fled to the relative safety of cities face problems of a different kind. Housing in Afghanistan's cities is scarce and rents comparatively high. Families construct makeshift dwellings from

mud, poles, plywood, plastic sheeting and cardboard, which offer little protection from the elements. Food is scarce in the settlements. Many displaced families told Amnesty International that they could only provide their children with one meal each day at most.

“Since we came there is no assistance or anything; the family has not eaten anything for the past two days.... We are displaced and have lost all our livelihoods,” said Zarin.

“Many Afghans have adapted to rural lifestyles that provide them with at least basic food and shelter. When they reach the cities, they are poorly prepared for dealing with a cash-based economy, higher prices, and the complexities of urban life,” said Horia Mosadiq. “They can’t go back home, but they can’t establish a new proper home either.”

Cramped conditions, poor sanitation and few health clinics combine to promote the spread of disease. Most women give birth in difficult and unsanitary slum conditions without skilled birth attendants, increasing the risk of maternal and infant death in a country already ranked among the world’s worst.

Children in slum communities have little access to education. They may be refused school attendance if they cannot produce a national identification card, a document which the authorities say can only be obtained in their home province. Some are turned away from school simply for wearing dirty clothes. “I don’t know which problem I should talk about – school, unemployment, not having proper housing, food, health – when my children are getting sick and I have to pay for the doctor.... It’s everything,” said Fatima, a woman in her 20s living in Kabul’s Chaman-e-Babrak slum area.

“The increasing population of displaced people in urban slums threatens to undo the fragile advances in health care and education that we’ve seen in Afghanistan in the last decade,” said Horia Mosadiq. Displaced families in makeshift camps are under constant threat of forced eviction. In some cases, families have had to scramble to move belongings before bulldozers level their shelters.

“These people are especially vulnerable – they must seek shelter, provide for themselves and their families while coping with the trauma caused by the conflict they have fled,” said Horia Mosadiq. Under international law, Afghanistan is required to provide for displaced persons’ immediate needs and help them to find long term solutions. To fulfil this role, Afghanistan relies on international assistance and the efforts of humanitarian organisations.

“Even with its limited resources, the Afghan government can aid its displaced citizens,” said Horia Mosadiq. “Authorities must use the international aid available and remove conditions placed on humanitarian assistance, and provide for displaced families’ immediate needs.

“International donors which fund over 90 per cent of Afghanistan’s total public expenditure should ensure that their humanitarian assistance addresses the needs of internally displaced people.

“Afghanistan should also protect the displaced against forced eviction, guarantee displaced children access to primary education, and allow identity cards to be issued throughout the country so that they can exercise their legal rights.”

Background

‘Fleeing war, finding misery: The plight of the internally displaced in Afghanistan’, is based on three years of research by Amnesty International. Amnesty International interviewed more than 100 internally displaced persons and returning refugees in 12 slum communities in and around Herat, Kabul, and Mazar-e-Sharif, and met with government officials and international agencies.

[For the full report please click here](#)