

## 2014 and beyond: implications for displacement

Aidan O'Leary

**2014 marks a watershed for Afghanistan, with the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) after twelve years, and the very real risks this withdrawal poses to the capacity of the Afghan state to meet the many internal and external challenges faced by the country. These challenges have significant implications for displaced and returning Afghans and for the potential for displacement in the future.**

It is still unclear at the time of writing whether there will be an international military presence after 2014, and the diplomatic atmosphere has long been marked by uncertainty and strained relations between the government and troop-contributing nations. These are, after all, the main development donors and unless the climate of cooperation improves, donor interest in the country risks evaporating just at a time when Afghanistan needs stable and predictable partnerships. This would undermine the important political and development gains made over the last decade. True, ISAF withdrawal in itself marks a positive opportunity for change, as both peace talks and a future political settlement between Afghans are predicated on the departure of foreign combat forces. Yet on the humanitarian front, the transitions in the security, political and economic spheres are likely to have a steadily deteriorating impact on the situation, and a significant impact on the displacement dynamics affecting the Afghan people.

Afghanistan is the largest refugee repatriation operation in the world. More than 5.7 million people have returned in the last ten years, representing nearly a quarter of the current population of 28 million and posing considerable challenges to the country's absorption capacity. As long as development conditions are not in place to absorb the return of refugees sustainably, this shifting population is inevitably added to the humanitarian caseload.

Approximately 124,350 Afghans are estimated to have been displaced from their homes in 2013, as a direct result of conflict.<sup>1</sup> Overall, the total number of recorded conflict IDPs

is 631,000,<sup>2</sup> with approximately 40% of IDPs moving to urban areas where they join the growing numbers of urban poor. While their immediate needs are humanitarian, protracted displacement in urban areas also requires the government to respond to longer-term development needs. Importantly, the primary reasons for displacement include armed conflict, general deterioration of security, and intimidation and harassment by anti-government elements. And the majority of people seek safety in the same or nearby districts, and overwhelmingly in the district or provincial centre.

### The humanitarian agenda post ISAF withdrawal

As foreign troops leave Afghanistan, the humanitarian community requires a new approach to maintaining its presence, securing access to people in need, and ensuring people in need can access assistance and protection. Whereas Afghanistan is emerging from a period where aid was highly politicised and frequently militarised, ISAF withdrawal represents an opportunity to recast humanitarian action as impartial and independent. The next phase is likely to be a period of limited financial means and diminished political attention from the western world. Key to ensuring the credibility and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance in the post-ISAF era will be the clear articulation and delivery of needs-based assistance. In the past, humanitarian programming was heavily concentrated in the north where it was relatively straightforward to fundraise and operate. Recent analysis has shown, however, that the south and the east are under-served, given the severity of identified needs including the prevalence of recurring displacement. A

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major challenge is to identify and invest in actors willing and able to operate in these areas, be they Afghan or international.

In the Common Humanitarian Action Plan for 2014,<sup>3</sup> the humanitarian community resolved to prioritise acute as opposed to chronic needs wherever they occur, including in contested areas that are difficult to access. This seems logical but putting the strategy into practice will require a series of mind shifts on the part of humanitarian actors themselves.

First, both humanitarian organisations and their donors need to show a greater tolerance of risk, coupled with appropriate risk mitigation measures. Second, there is considerable scope for experimentation with innovative approaches to programming in the Afghan context, including cash-based aid delivery, remote management and third-party monitoring. Third, humanitarians, working both individually and collectively, need to identify and engage a broader set of stakeholders.

A key priority is the negotiation with all parties to the conflict of safe access (though it is necessary to keep these negotiations separate and distinct from other initiatives). What humanitarian actors find obvious in terms of providing life-saving assistance solely based on need can only be understood – and made possible in practice – when other actors reach the same understanding. The practical application of the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence is indispensable to the ability to operate in relative safety.

Under the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, donors promised US\$16 billion in development assistance for Afghanistan from 2012 to 2016.<sup>4</sup> But the realisation of these aid pledges is conditional on Afghan progress in the context of a number of still unattained development benchmarks. This, coupled with shrinking aid budgets in the western world, means that Afghanistan faces significant decline in external assistance – in a context where by 2013 foreign aid represented 70%



A returnee refugee re-builds his damaged house after years away. Maymana, Afghanistan.

of Afghanistan's GDP. As an indication of what is likely to come, in January 2014 the US Congress proposed to reduce civilian assistance from \$2 billion to \$1 billion per year. This and other cuts in assistance may force the government to prioritise security over civilian spending, further undermining the delivery of basic services to the population.

### Political and security transition

Despite systematic support over the past 12 years, the country's political and administrative institutions remain generally weak and frequently paralysed by corruption, turf battles and personal feuds. The centralised model of government is marked by concentration of power in the President's office, while ministries and agencies remain chronically weak in human resources, infrastructure and thus output. One major consequence is that the government's capacity to absorb development funding provided as direct budget support is estimated at no more

than 40%. A key weakness of Afghanistan's governance is the poor alignment between the central administration, as the main recipient and manager of foreign aid, and the provincial institutions whose job is to deliver basic services to the population. The perceived inefficiency of the administration, coupled with its perceived dependence on the foreign military presence, has impeded the task of building state legitimacy.

As to the security situation, a key factor since the ISAF deployment in 2001 is its generation of a military economy in Afghanistan. In 2012 alone, the US government spent \$22 billion on contracts to sustain its operations. Military-run Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and Military Commanders' Emergency Response Programs (CERPs) were just two of the civilian tools intended to generate stability through development. Yet, at the start of 2014, 90% of civil-military aid teams had been closed down. The security transition thus marks the end of foreign military spending on development. While much of this spending was arguably poor value for money, it nevertheless oiled the machinery of governance and enabled Provincial Governors to deliver some services.

In the spring of 2014, armed non-state actors (ANSAs) and pro-government forces remain locked in stalemate. With a steadily decreasing ISAF footprint, the expansion of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) appears sufficient to secure key urban centres but inadequate to reverse ANSA momentum in rural areas. Meanwhile, peace talks have failed to get off the ground and in the absence of political settlement, the exposure of civilian populations to accidental and collateral harm will remain high, displacement – whether short-term, recurring or prolonged – will continue, and sustainable reintegration prospects for refugee and IDP returnees will be precarious.

Thirty-five years of conflict have clearly hampered development. Afghanistan's youth bulge and low life expectancy (49 years) means 70% of the population is under the age of 25

and only 25% of the population lives in urban areas. In rural areas unemployment stands at 60%. This predominantly rural population is reliant on extremely fragile livelihoods in agriculture, in a country highly prone to drought and other disasters. More than 8 million Afghans are chronically food insecure. Despite the billions spent on aid, there has been negligible investment in disaster preparedness, risk reduction and management of natural resources, including water management. Without progress in these areas, the humanitarian emergencies perpetuated by small- to medium-scale disasters are set to continue, and migration within the country and beyond its borders will continue to be both a coping strategy and a last resort.

Development spending in the post-2001 period translated into a predominantly peace-building and stabilisation agenda in which foreign assistance had a negligible impact on poverty levels. Gaps in basic service delivery not only sustain chronic vulnerabilities and low human development but also translate into an acute need for life-saving assistance for no fewer than 5 million people. And these figures are compounded by further shocks such as sudden increases in conflict, natural disasters and displacement.

### **A preliminary conclusion**

Within the Afghan operational context, there are five main groups of actors determining humanitarian access opportunities and constraints: humanitarian actors themselves; affected communities; government; armed non-state actors; and humanitarian donors. While humanitarian actors seek to expand access through advocacy and engagement with all other actors, the actions they themselves take are crucial.

Safe and credible humanitarian action requires all members of the community to demonstrate their buy-in to humanitarian principles. Yet principled action has been far from consistent in the past. Pressures and opportunities to work in support of non-humanitarian objectives were considerable but, with the ISAF operation

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coming to an end, humanitarian funding and assistance may yet be disentangled from a wider political-military agenda.

Displacement arising from armed conflict, general security deterioration and harassment and intimidation originates in rural areas where more than 70% of the population of Afghanistan lives; effective and timely humanitarian response therefore requires a commensurate deployment in the southern half of Afghanistan in particular. The more protracted the displacement, the more unwilling displaced Afghans are to return home. Humanitarian agencies need to build a culture of 'how to stay' as opposed to 'when to leave', allowing actors to take acceptable risks when these are warranted and using creative approaches to reduce risk. And, finally, a concerted effort will be required

to reach understandings with armed non-state actors that allow safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to Afghans in need and by the affected communities themselves.

**Aidan O'Leary [oleary@un.org](mailto:oleary@un.org)** is Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Afghanistan. [www.unocha.org](http://www.unocha.org) This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of the UN.

1. Conflict-Induced Internal Displacement – Monthly Update, UNHCR Afghanistan December 2013 <http://tinyurl.com/UNHCR-Afgh-Dec2013>
2. Conflict-Induced Internal Displacement – Monthly Update, UNHCR Afghanistan January 2014 <http://tinyurl.com/UNHCR-Afgh-Jan2014>
3. <https://afg.humanitarianresponse.info/funding/common-humanitarian-action-plan-chap> or see the Afghanistan page of the Humanitarian Kiosk app <http://kiosk.humanitarianresponse.info/>
4. July 2012 <http://tinyurl.com/TokyoMAF>