

# Continuing conflict, continuing displacement in southern Afghanistan

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**With fighting and insecurity likely to remain dominant features of Afghanistan's landscape in the immediate future, displacement will continue to ebb and flow.**

Thousands of families from Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and a number of other provinces in southern Afghanistan have reportedly recently returned to their home districts from the cities where they had sought refuge for months and even years. However, the conditions that forced them to flee are still prevalent in many places and to a significant degree, meaning that many people continue to be displaced. This pattern will persist, with some families electing to stay in cities until the underlying security concerns are addressed.

Many families originally fled because of the expansion of military operations of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the International Military Forces (IMF) as a result of the 2009 military 'surge', increased door-to-door searches and harassment triggering fear of arrest and generally

making daily life difficult, and inability to cultivate their fields either because their lands had been taken over by international forces in order to establish military bases or because they were not allowed to cultivate their fields around military bases because of security concerns. Those who have returned to their homes have done so because of the high cost of living in the city and shortage of employment opportunities in an unfamiliar, urban environment. Additionally, anticipating a short stay, many never fully integrated into city life.

Places such as Chahar China district in Uruzgan Province experienced an inflow of IDPs from Kandahar City, Lashker Gha City, Nimruz and even Pakistan when ANSF and IMF forces withdrew from the area. Moreover, the pattern of returnees to a number of other

areas suggests that IDPs await the withdrawal of these forces as a first step towards having the confidence to return home.

#### Landscape of conflict and displacement

The patterns and prevalence of displacement vary depending on the current conflict landscape. In areas considered as **contested areas** – contested between ANSF/IMF and non-state armed actors – displacement is generally higher. In these locations, where day-to-day fighting occurs, large numbers of residents will flee to escape the fighting and also because they are unable to go to work or to cultivate or irrigate their lands. These contested districts will probably continue to be the areas from which most IDPs will originate in the coming two years in southern Afghanistan. Residents will re-evaluate their situation continuously, as they have done in the past; if they believe that the fighting will only go on for relatively short periods of time (up to two weeks), then they will go only as far as the nearest secure village with their family and, if possible, their livestock and some basic provisions. On the other hand, in heavily contested areas, residents will prepare for leaving their villages for the long term, usually to one of the major urban centres in the south or even to Kabul or to Quetta in Pakistan; these IDPs will seldom be able to take their possessions or livestock with them.

Additionally, many families leave due to fear of being killed in retaliation. When interviewed, local residents from Zhari district of Kandahar Province said that if a government soldier dies, then government forces accuse the locals of cooperating with or helping the Taliban – and take revenge accordingly. Likewise, if someone from the Taliban side dies, they search the village for an alleged spy to punish.

In contested areas, Taliban forces often plant IEDs<sup>1</sup> on main roads to block the ANSF or IMF; they may inform locals about which roads to avoid – but the locals need use of these roads too, and this is yet another reason for displacement. In northwestern Kandahar Province, roads to the centre

have been blocked since mid 2013. Not only has this prevented the delivery of food and other supplies but it has also forced people to flee as they cannot transport their harvest out or travel on the road safely to hospital, for example. In this case, as in others, local people know that the government will not give up the district to the armed groups, and therefore many anticipate that the situation will become a lot worse in the future as neither the armed groups nor the Afghan government are likely to back down.

People want to live in safety, where they can work irrespective of who is in control. There is a strong possibility that many areas which are currently **under government control** but have been taken from armed groups in the past will see a flare-up of intense fighting as armed groups try to leverage influence in these areas to retake the territory from the government. What does this mean for IDPs? Those who have been thinking of returning will wait until later in 2014 to see what happens. If security improves, there will be IDPs returning to their place of origin. If security does not improve, or deteriorates, not only will those IDPs not return but there will be new displacement.

In central Helmand, for example, when the military surge took place, many IDPs returned to their villages, both because of improved security and because of job opportunities with the international military forces. With the prospect of renewed fighting in these areas, many of the residents who took up these jobs are likely to become part of a new wave of IDPs in next two years. Thousands of people from Marja district alone were hired by various USAID and other donor-funded projects in Helmand province. These residents are consequently viewed with suspicion by the armed groups and may be penalised by them in various ways. Around 1,500 local men were engaged to become part of the anti-insurgent militia groups in Marja; later, when the IMF wanted to integrate these militia men into the Afghan Local Police scheme, the Ministry of Interior could only commit to a total of 450 police and those men

May 2014

who were not incorporated into the Afghan Local Police now find themselves potentially exposed to reprisal by the armed groups.

Areas **under the control of armed groups** are particularly susceptible to generating displacement, especially where the government is determined to regain control or conduct operations from time to time. Given the dangers that abound during military operations, many local residents were displaced during the surge, and similar dynamics are expected in the next two years in areas in southern Afghanistan which are held by armed insurgents or where armed groups are influential.

There are clear indications that the number of IDPs is likely to increase over the next two years as the Afghan government strengthens its position in most areas by putting in more forces, whereas the Taliban is likely to take advantage of the IMF departure. Since conflict areas are mostly rural areas, most of the IDPs will be from rural areas – unused to city life and unable to earn a living if not by farming. It is important to have a system to register new IDPs in order to ensure that vulnerable IDPs receive assistance quickly to help them survive.

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1. Improvised explosive devices