

A closing window? Are Afghanistan's IDPs being forgotten?

by Pete Spink

Afghanistan has developed a national IDP plan but, without resources, is failing to assist those who comprise three-quarters of the country's remaining IDP population – the Kuchi nomads.

In early 2004 it seemed that ethnic-based persecution and drought – the two main drivers of internal displacement in Afghanistan – had abated. Due to significant levels of return (and a stricter redefinition of what makes somebody an IDP rather than an economic migrant) an internally displaced population that had peaked at over one million in 2001 had been reduced to under 200,000. However, finding solutions for the remaining displaced population is fraught with complex obstacles. As the attention of the international community moves away from humanitarian assistance to development, the needs of IDPs are no longer a priority.

In April 2004 the government committed itself to an IDP National Plan to promote and accelerate return and sustainable reintegration of IDPs in villages of origin by 2007. The plan has brought together the Ministries of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), Frontiers and Tribal Affairs (MFTA) and Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) – itself no mean feat in Afghanistan. The plan has demonstrated government commitment and desire to play the lead role in addressing problems of internal displacement. It does not confine itself to caring for the currently vulnerable IDP caseload but looks forward to durable solutions.¹

The IDP plan distinguishes four groups of IDPs: Pashtuns displaced from the northern provinces; Kuchi IDPs displaced by drought from the Registan desert in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Nimroz; Kuchi IDPs whose migratory routes encompass the pastoral lands in Ghazni, Uruzgan and Bamyan; and drought-affected non-Kuchis. These categories are not necessarily exclusive.

For the Pashtuns of the first category, the security situation has improved and they are no longer directly targeted as a result of their ethnicity. Pashtun representatives from IDP camps in the south and west have visited their areas of origin on UNHCR-led 'go and see' visits. While local power-holders have made statements encouraging return, the offers of return packages from UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Organisation for Migration are insufficient. Returning Pashtuns still fear illegal taxation, forced recruitment and exploitation at the hands of military commanders in provinces where the central government struggles to impose its authority. The removal in May 2004 of the pro-Kabul governor of Faryab – a key province of potential Pashtun return – has sent a clear signal. Pashtuns in Faryab are not encouraging those who were displaced to return until there is disarmament and the establishment of the rule of law.

Life in the villages of Faryab is hard. It takes many hours on foot to reach the nearest school or clinic, access to clean drinking water is limited and groundwater is often too salty for either human or animal consumption. By comparison, in the IDP camps in the south, there is adequate provision of health, education and water, and security is not a concern. Displaced Pashtuns want to see evidence that the billions of dollars pledged to Afghanistan are having an impact in their districts. Faryab has so far seen very little.

Kuchis left in the lurch

Kuchis ('those who move' in Persian) is a term applied by outsiders to groups of tribal Pashtuns from southwestern and eastern Afghanistan who have migrated across large

parts of Afghanistan with herds of goats, sheep, donkeys and camels. Kuchis have traditionally lived in a symbiotic relationship with settled peasants. Kuchis sold young animals, dairy products, wool, sheepskins, meat and dung or bartered these goods for grain and other foodstuffs. Nomads made substantial contributions to the national economy. In the late nineteenth century, King Abdul Rahman created ethnic tensions by moving some Kuchis into northern areas populated by Tajiks and Uzbeks. With the collapse of the Taliban, many were forcibly displaced to camps in Herat.

The current drought ... has decimated flocks and turned self-sufficient people into casual labourers and beggars

Kuchis are not a separate, self-identified ethnic group. Their affiliation to their settled fellow-tribespeople was much stronger than any identity as 'nomads'. In the 1960s an estimated 2.5 million people spent at least part of the year living in tents – combining pastoralism with trading, smuggling, wage labour and land ownership. The migratory aspects of these livelihoods have been eroded by the growth of road transport, conflict, the presence of mines, US cluster bombs and other kinds of unexploded ordnance and by recurrent droughts. It is estimated that only a few tens of thousands now follow a nomadic life. The current drought, which began in 1999, has decimated flocks and turned self-sufficient people into casual labourers and beggars dependent on food assistance. Drought has baked winter grazing areas in the southern plains, forcing hundreds of thousands northward, but the snow-melt has failed to replenish rivers and summer pastures have also failed.

The fact that the Taliban had good relations with the Kuchis – both are ethnically Pashtun – has complicated matters. Under the Taliban some Kuchis returned to provinces that

had been battlefields during the war against the Soviets and subsequent civil conflict. Locals in those areas had converted the nomads' pasturelands to farming but the Kuchis reasserted what they believed to be their traditional rights to allow their animals to graze on post-harvest stubble. In some areas the Taliban encouraged the Kuchis to let their animals eat trees and tall grasses in order to remove hiding places for their opponents. The Hazara people of Afghanistan's central highlands accuse the Kuchis of complicity in massacres perpetrated against them by the Taliban and have cut off access to grazing land Kuchis have used for generations.

'Nomadism' was for most Kuchis an uncomfortable necessity rather than an essential feature of their identity. It would therefore be a romanticisation of their lifestyle to assume that all displaced Kuchis yearn to return to 'traditional' livelihoods. Most are now accustomed to accessible health and education services and the easy availability of water. Kuchis unable to return to the central highlands due to the hostility of the Hazara would like to be allocated land in

Kandahar - it is a right enshrined in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement that IDPs can settle in a location of their choice. However, the provincial government in Kandahar as well as surrounding communities are unwilling to let them do so.

Cycles of droughts and displacement are not a new phenomenon for the Kuchis. What is new is the availability of assistance and the impact this is having on the willingness to return. Many observers doubt whether anything can be done to re-establish the livelihoods of the Registan Kuchis until three or four years of good rain restore their range land.

Dogged efforts by a number of determined individuals, agencies and government civil servants continue to be made to find durable solutions to the Kuchis' dilemma:

- Cessation of assistance to IDPs in the Spin Boldak camps near the Pakistan border has eased tensions with local landowners: those Kuchis who have not secured regular income through trading are being offered the choice of relocation to Zhare Dasht camp, about 40km from Kandahar, or, for those who wish to return to places of origin, an attractive package of food and non-food items and provision of shelter, water and sanitation.
- In order to break the chain of dependency UNHCR and WFP are replacing relief food with food-for-work/training: experience from Maslakh IDP camp in Herat suggests that this can filter out vulnerable people in genuine need of assistance whilst those who have access to other economic opportunities do not present themselves for work. However, it is an enormous challenge to identify suitable and feasible projects that will provide enough work opportunities to sustain the whole IDP population.
- UNHCR and its partners have carried out research among displaced households in the camps in Kandahar and Helmand to identify willingness and capacity to return and the obstacles to be overcome.

IDPs in Kandahar, Afghanistan



- The Central Asian Development Group - with funding from UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) - has surveyed the depths of the water table, the condition of water sources and the availability of pasture in order to define the current and potential absorptive capacity for a return to the Registan.
- Cordaid, an international NGO, along with its national partner is working with the Kuchi shura (council of elders) on a pilot restocking and water-source rehabilitation project in the Registan.

Major problems remain:

- In drought-affected areas where permanently sedentary residents also face food security difficulties it is not feasible to offer assistance to IDPs only.
- The deteriorating security situation in the Kandahar districts of Panjwai and Maiwand - off limits to the UN since September 2003 - makes it almost impossible to access half the country's IDPs.
- Implementation of food-for-work projects depends on NGO and provincial government officials but in recent months several staff have been murdered - including Hajji Agha Hashimi, the tireless Director of the Department of Refugees and Repatriation in Kandahar.
- Many Afghan authorities and development agencies see IDPs as solely UNHCR's and WFP's responsibility.
- As Pakistan closes refugee camps established at the end of 2001 Kuchis could cross the border and attempt to join IDP settlements and receive assistance, rather than be relocated to other refugee camps in Pakistan with significantly reduced levels of assistance.
- In the southern provinces there is a risk of further displacement as the drought intensifies and more people move in search of water.

Time for action

Though there is increasing recognition that the sustainable return and reintegration of IDPs, especially the Kuchis, is a long-term development issue, the government and international community are doing relatively little. The six national priority programmes launched in 2003 were not accessible to IDPs in the camps or to Kuchi returnees. One new priority programme, the National Vulnerability Programme, will specifically target IDPs and Kuchis but only the extremely vulnerable. The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) targets areas of high refugee and IDP return but does not include the Registan as it does not have settled communities.

The inclusion of IDPs in existing flagship national development programmes is probably the only way to ensure they receive sufficient financial support. The World Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) has stated its preference for funding to go to national priority programmes and has been reluctant to support the IDP National Plan as a stand-alone project. Political manoeuvring is also hampering the mobilisation of funds. Although the IDP Plan is an inter-ministerial effort, its reintegration activities fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). However, as ARTF resources are already supporting existing national programmes within MRRD there is a reluctance to offer support to another programme.

President Karzai has repeatedly emphasised that reducing the IDP caseload is a national priority. The IDP National Plan outlines the strategy for a return and sustainable reintegration but funding has not materialised. Four months after its public launch, only UNDP's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Recovery has offered funding support for the Plan.

The distinction often made between 'conflict-induced' and 'drought-induced' IDPs is an oversimplification of Afghanistan's complex internal displacement problem.

Many drought-induced Kuchi IDPs may not have become displaced had conflict not destroyed their livelihoods. Today rainfall alone will not be enough to solve the plethora of problems confronting the Kuchis. There is a need for livestock, regeneration of pasture, provision of veterinary support, addressing land disputes, guaranteeing access to land and restoring fractured relationships with other ethnic groups. Since much of Afghanistan is suitable only for seasonal grazing the ecological niche for nomadic herding remains open.

The question of how to support alternative livelihoods for those Kuchis who do not wish to return to pastoralism can no longer be ignored by policy makers. The Afghan and Pakistan governments, UN agencies and NGOs need to initiate training and micro-finance programmes in refugee and displaced persons camps to prepare Kuchis for alternative livelihoods to nomadic grazing.

Solutions to the problems of displaced Kuchis remain elusive. If impetus is lost and if additional funding is not allocated to address the needs of IDPs and to support sustainable return programmes, the IDP caseload could increase. This would necessitate allocating more resources for care and maintenance - funding which should instead be invested in achieving durable solutions.

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This article was written in a personal capacity and does not reflect the views of MRRD or the UN.

For more information about the Kuchis, see www.refintl.org/content/article/detail/3017/ and http://traprockpeace.org/kuchi_nomads_marc_herold.pdf

¹ The Plan is online at: www.afghanistangov.org/resources/mof/PIP1383/1.4/ProDoc/english/AFG-04613.pdf