

Hope on the brink

by Filippo Grandi

As a rainy spring – the first after years of drought – brings out the blossoms in Afghanistan's orchards, many questions remain unanswered about the future of this battered country.

Four months after the establishment of the Interim Administration,¹ the central authority and regional power holders are still finding a balance and a *modus vivendi*. The most striking feature of the situation is perhaps this contrast – between the warlords who have been fighting since the Soviet occupation, bringing to the country first freedom, and later fragmentation; and a newly emerging – but still fledgling – political leadership, keen to rush Afghanistan rapidly through the difficult road from 'failed state' to 'normal' country after 23 years of war.

Yet despite this apparent fragility, no one should discount the enormous progress made since the Bonn Accord:² the establishment of the Interim Administration, the timely formation of the Loya Jirga Commission, the return of the diplomatic community to Kabul, the re-opening of crucial road axes, the possibility for aid agencies to have access to increasingly wider areas of the country, the presence of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), albeit only in Kabul, and the proliferation (at least in urban areas) of businesses and shops.

Even the most cynical Afghanistan observers – and there are many – must admit that the country, in spite of all its daunting problems, is opening up to the outside world. We should not forget that for the first time in decades, and despite the dangerous flare-ups, Afghanistan is not at war with itself. The absence of a generalised civil war is perhaps the most significant change of all.

Fragility and determination

Two contradictory impulses – political/ethnic rivalries and a palpable desire for peace – are both evident on the ground in Afghanistan. A series of 'fragility factors' cloud the prospects for stability and for the sustainable return of refugees and displaced people, including:

- tensions and frequent clashes in several areas between the regional political factions; these are confined outbreaks of fighting, which however can bring a sense of profound insecurity in a given area: in Nimroz province in South-Western Afghanistan, for example, clashes erupted recently between different local groups, which prevented UNHCR from going ahead with its first repatriation convoys from Iran in that remote area.
- unwillingness of the international community to expand the presence of the multinational force (ISAF) beyond Kabul

- harassment of minority Pashtun communities identified (or threatened) as "Taliban" in the North and the West, often in the vicinity of camps hosting internally displaced people; and consequent fresh displacement of these communities, sometimes all the way to Pakistan; this situation has improved, especially in the West, after central and local authorities took decisive action, but it needs continued vigilance and monitoring.

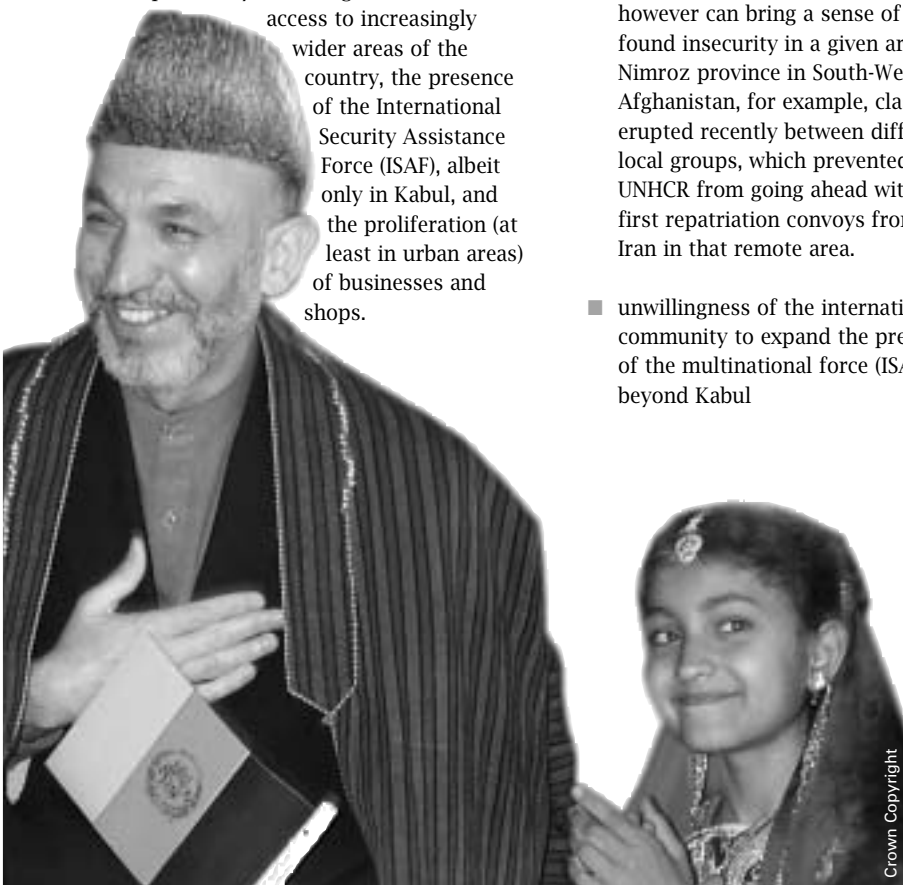
- tenuous Interim Administration's control on many parts of the country, and an almost complete lack of resources on the part of the central government (only 20% of the national budget for recurrent costs can be funded by national revenues – the rest, for this year, will depend on foreign aid)

- in spite of continued international attention and commitment to peace, slow translation of pledges made at the January reconstruction conference in Tokyo into concrete financial contribution; and very limited recovery activities, especially outside Kabul and the main cities

The Interim Administration is undoubtedly trying – under these difficult circumstances, and with very limited means – to assert its authority and to promote the principles of the Bonn Accord: national unity and reconciliation, peaceful solution of conflicts, and the rule of law. With or without the support of the UN, it has attempted mediation efforts in various places. Chairman Karzai's trips to provincial centres have been very successful. UNHCR staff in Herat, for example, witnessed a spontaneous popular welcome when he visited that western city in February, that went far beyond any organised display. It spoke volumes about the Afghans' wish to recognise themselves in a credible leadership, and about their distrust of old divisions.

Hamid Karzai at ceremony to celebrate reopening of Kabul schools, 23 March 2002

Against this background, and within the emerging framework of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNHCR continues to



make preparations, in partnership with the Ministry of Repatriation of the Interim Administration, for what may be a massive return of Afghans from abroad and from inside the country. Since the Ministry of Repatriation and UNHCR started facilitating voluntary repatriation from Pakistan on 1 March, some 353,000 people have availed themselves of organised assistance. Refugee return is now facilitated also from Iran. Internally displaced people have expressed their wish to return in many parts of Afghanistan.

The 'fragility factors' described above, however; the experience of previous repatriation movements, which could not be sustained because fighting erupted again; and the uncertainty regarding the real effect of winter snows and rains - on which precise data are still missing - have a deterrent effect on many people who would otherwise return home this year. Although we at UNHCR are optimistic that repatriation will continue - and repatriation is, after all, a vote of confidence in the future of Afghanistan - many factors can still slow down or interrupt the return flow.

A population still on the move

Given the situation on the ground, it is perhaps not so surprising to hear of so many Afghans preparing for an early return - some of them after years in exile. At this early stage, it is possible that some returnees come back to assess the viability of bringing their families home but have not yet committed themselves to repatriation. However, a large percentage of returns from Pakistan - and, to a lesser extent, from Iran - are made up of families, and can be presumed to be intending to stay.

The situation of the internally displaced is more fluid, with conflict-related IDPs throughout the country (especially in the North, in the Central Region, and perhaps soon in the East and South) indicating however that they want to return home soon. Although some IDP situations will not be resolved in the immediate future, IDP programmes must be re-oriented towards return, wherever possible. Lingering and sometimes obsolete IDP situations may become an obstacle to refugee return. Returning refugees could be attracted

to IDP camps, and become IDPs in turn. In many parts of the country, the Afghan authorities are promoting IDP returns, and it is crucial that its international partners, and particularly UNHCR - the main UN agency for Afghan displacement - take on the role of 'facilitators' of such return.

It has been UNHCR's position in the last few months to look at displacement in a holistic manner. The causes of flight are similar, whatever the nature of displacement. To shift assistance towards return requires breaking a vicious cycle of which refugees, IDPs, trafficked people and illegal migrants have been one of the most visible and dramatic manifestations.

Upholding human rights - especially in the context of displacement - is also important for peace and security, not only at national but also at regional level, given the cross-border ethnic links. Earlier this year, UNHCR for example detected a clear connection between the harassment of Pashtun people in Northern Afghanistan and of non-Pashtun refugees in some areas of Pakistan. The ensuing tension in both areas was a clear danger signal. Refugee and returnee protection should be projected as a tool for stability as well as an end in itself.

The security imperative

Security and stability are the cornerstones of any return-and-reconstruction process - but, as High Commissioner Lubbers said during his recent visit to Afghanistan, the successful reintegration of returnees is also, in turn, a cornerstone of security and stability. This is of course well understood by everybody, and none better than by the ordinary Afghans, who have great expectations in this area.

The ISAF was created as a part of the Bonn Accord and entered into force in January 2002. It calls for a multinational peacekeeping unit of up to 4,500 soldiers to be deployed in Kabul, currently led by the British. Although the United States is playing an 'observer' role and has of course a separate military presence in the country - which continues the war on the remnants of the Taliban and al-Qa'ida groups - it will not commit troops to the multinational force.

Afghan public opinion continues to demand, sometimes vocally, that the

multinational force be expanded, both geographically and in numbers. Sometimes - with some notable exceptions - even conflicting factions request the deployment of international forces. With this appeal being clearly articulated by Chairman Karzai, and echoed by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, it is becoming difficult for Afghans to understand why the ISAF continues to be limited to Kabul. None of the reasons invoked for its limited deployment appears convincing to Afghans.

The absence of a broader ISAF hampers efforts to conduct relief and reconstruction activities outside Kabul, especially by bilateral actors - thus strengthening the 'pull factor' provided by the capital on the population, and especially on returnees, half of whom have so far chosen to return to Kabul. In this context, it is crucial that UNHCR and other actors encourage more systematic efforts (not just by agencies but by governments with power and means) towards the disarmament and reintegration of combatants - a Herculean task in Afghanistan but one which at some point will be necessary, and towards which very, very little has been done in reality so far.

Another challenge, one which is intimately related to the security of returns, is that of demining. Afghanistan is one of the most mined countries in the world. Thousands of Afghans working for the UN and for NGOs are patiently trying to free the country from this scourge. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General has termed them the true, untold heroes of Afghanistan. Their work needs to be supported.

Looking ahead

All this begs the question of how the UN, and UNHCR in particular, can help the process of stabilisation pick up speed and become irreversible. This is the pre-condition not only for the return of refugees but also for the return of wealth - of the skilled Afghans who have been in exile for years, and of the financial and material resources that diaspora Afghans could be encouraged to invest in the reconstruction of the country.

For the time being, UNHCR enjoys some relative advantages in the

Afghan reconstruction process. It has a well-organised presence in all major cities and is branching off to a number of field locations. This will give it access to better information about areas of return, something that is crucial to help refugees and IDPs make decisions about their future. Regional presence will also give UNHCR more credibility in speaking about the needs of Afghans. Finally, so far at least, UNHCR enjoys support from the authorities, which have recognised the importance and the urgency of its task: the return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs are a clear priority in the Interim Administration's National Development Plan.

These comparative advantages allow UNHCR to try and look beyond day-to-day operations to the key features of the environment to which it is taking the heavy responsibility of helping people return.

Despite whatever pragmatic deals and compromises the international agencies and other external actors may have to continue to make with local power holders in order to deliver much-needed assistance, all must learn to think in terms of support to a central authority, and to its suitably decentralised, but nevertheless structured, provincial branches. This is made psychologically difficult, particularly for aid agencies, by years of tension with the Taliban and of *ad hoc*, war-time compromises with Mujahedin forces. Yet, it is crucial that all follow the Interim Administration's firm invitation to use aid to enhance the credibility of the legitimate authorities, and not to promote the visibility of respective countries or agencies.

It is particularly important that a mental shift takes place. Humanitarian assistance for example, especially food, is still necessary in Afghanistan; but it needs to be thoroughly re-examined, and better targeted to areas of acute need, or to areas where it can constitute a pull factor towards return and stabilisation, rather than the opposite. There must be a decisive move towards real recovery. Free distributions in or near large cities and in IDP camps have become a factor of displacement in themselves as desperate city-dwellers try to access assistance meant for the displaced; in contrast, development assistance provided in rural areas and

systematic interventions for urban or urbanised populations are still very limited.

This may have another, unwanted effect: thousands of returnees, both refugees and IDPs, are already opting for going back to urban centres even if they originate from the countryside; clearly, especially in the case of refugees, this is linked to the fact that they have spent many years working in the cities of Iran and Pakistan, and have become urbanised. But in many other cases, it is simply the opportunities provided by the Afghan cities - which are totally lacking in the rural areas - that lure people to Kabul, Herat and other major centres. IDP camps in the vicinity of cities risk becoming urban slums. The links among displacement, return and urbanisation will have huge implications for the repatriation programme; UNHCR needs to examine them thoroughly, together with its partners and the Interim Administration.

The reintegration process is a huge task even for a relatively small actor like UNHCR. But because UNHCR is - somehow - at the forefront of international efforts in Afghanistan; and because its government counterpart, the Ministry of Repatriation, is something of an 'emergency ministry', they have a significant responsibility in creating good precedents. This concerns the agencies' way of doing business in Afghanistan but also - and much more importantly - the need to help the Interim Administration create a culture for its officials of working with Afghan communities, rather than simply for and within their bureaucracy.

And finally, whichever way one looks at the situation, it is essential that everyone involved in Afghan efforts - including agencies like UNHCR - take more seriously the imperative that Afghans must become owners of the reconstruction process, and ultimately of Afghanistan itself. A huge amount of rhetoric is currently being piled upon Afghans on this subject but too little is happening yet. UNHCR, and other agencies as they establish their operations in

Afghanistan, will need to be very creative and 'think out of the box' - for example, in terms of recruitment, secondments and training.

One thing should be clear, and should be made clear. The international community is in Afghanistan for the long haul, even in terms of repatriation and return. Obviously, in a country so rife with arms - in a country where war, as an old Afghan told me, "has changed our way of talking to each other" - improvements will take years to be felt by ordinary people. But this has to begin at some point. Now is the time.

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The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

1. According to the Bonn Accord, the Afghanistan Interim Authority "shall consist of an Interim Administration presided over by a Chairman, a Special Independent Commission for the convening of an Emergency Loya Jirga, and a Supreme Court of Afghanistan as well as such other courts as may be established by the Interim Administration."

2. The full title is the 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan pending the re-establishment of permanent government institutions' and it is commonly known as the Bonn Accord.

