

# Oxfam Briefing Note

## Afghanistan's crisis is far from over

23 January 2002

**While there have been improvements in humanitarian access and food distribution in many areas, security is deteriorating in some places key to the relief effort. Donors, the United Nations, and the new Afghan interim government all need to focus on security, protection, financing and coordination.**

### Insecurity

On 15 January, two UN lorries carrying 40 tonnes of food aid were hijacked by gunmen on the road between Mazar-I-Sharif and Kabul. This is the first time that relief has been looted on such a large scale, and is a menacing sign of increasing lawlessness in some areas where relief distribution is a priority.

Kabul has experienced escalated crime in the last few weeks, including increased car-jacking, theft and robberies. The road from Kabul to Jalalabad is not safe, as robbery and murders have occurred in Sarobi, and the Kabul-Kandahar road is considered unsafe after Ghazni. International staff travel is restricted, and local staff are moving with increased caution in many areas.

Landmines, cluster bombs, and other unexploded ordnance (UXO) are more of a danger after the recent bombing campaign. There are some 50-100 victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance every week. In addition, planes continue to bomb in the east of the country.

Despite insecurity, humanitarian relief has been reaching more of the people in need in recent weeks. Oxfam International and our partners have been able to distribute food in Hazarajat, Badakshan, Zabul, Badghis, Ghor, Herat, and other places as well. The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) brought in an unprecedented 118,000 metric tonnes last month, but staff of all the organisations working on the ground struggle against winter conditions and insecurity to deliver the food on to people in need. While relief has reached many of the vulnerable populations, there are still places, particularly in far rural areas, where insecurity has hampered the distribution of food and other humanitarian relief.

One of many Afghans' greatest fears is that security will drift painfully back to the levels of the past, of the pre-Taliban era. Unless security conditions, law and order are improved throughout Afghanistan, people will continue to flee, and humanitarian aid will not reach all of those in need.

An agreement on the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan was initialled on the 31 December. The deal allows up to 4,500 troops to enter Kabul, initially under British command, although the force will be made up of troops from 17 countries. The fact that the agreement only allows troops in Kabul, however, means that there is an urgent need for creative solutions for the problem of pockets of insecurity in other parts of the country.

There has been a recent report that the US and allies in the coalition are considering an expansion of an international security force to address continuing violence and lawlessness in other cities, such as Jalalabad and Mazar-I-Sharif. If this does go ahead, this could be an

important step towards restoring law and order in the key cities, but would still not address insecurity in rural areas and on transit routes, which also need to be safe for the transport of humanitarian relief .

### **Refugee Protection**

As of the second week in January, UNHCR reports that some 100,000 people have returned to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan since the end of November.

However, thousands of new arrivals are still attempting to cross into neighbouring countries, as people flee crime, continuing military activity, and the lingering effects of drought. In the last three weeks, some 13,000 people have crossed into Chaman, Pakistan. 40,000 people are reportedly in camps on the Afghan side of the border, waiting to cross. Many of these people are living in the open with little or no protection from the winter weather.

The Pakistan Government has refused to recognise the people crossing as *bona fide* refugees, choosing instead to label them as “externally displaced.” There is real concern that the rights of these people are not clearly upheld.

For Afghans inside Pakistan, uncertainty reigns. The government of Pakistan has been working with UN agencies to relocate refugees from Jalozai and Peshawar to new camps in tribal areas. Since mid-November, UNHCR has moved 37,000 people to these newly established camps. It is expected that these camps, in addition to the camps at Ashgaro and Khanzadgan, will have received some 67,000 re-located people by the end of March 2002.

NGOs are concerned that these moves may not be voluntary, and that people may be soon pressured to return to Afghanistan against their will. Many of these relocated refugees have been living as “invisible” refugees in Pakistan for many years, and may be thrust into much harsher conditions. **In this volatile situation, it is important that international laws, conventions and standards are adhered to by all government officials and UN agencies involved in the repatriation and protection of refugees.**

### **Immediate funding needs**

In order to address the most pressing issues, the Afghan interim administration has announced that it needs 100 million dollars immediately to pay salary arrears, to re-appoint female staff sacked by the Taliban, and for other urgent needs. As they attempt to pull their country out of decades of war and into the reconstruction phase, it will be crucial that the international community show them full support in the next coming days and weeks.

There have been many pledges at the international donors conference in Tokyo on 20-21 January, but it is important for the money to be forthcoming, as donors demonstrate their commitment to reconstruction and recovery. *For more information about Oxfam International’s position on the Tokyo meeting, please see our briefing paper titled “Winning the Peace? The Tokyo Conference: a Challenge to Donors.”*

Up to one million Afghan refugees are expected to return to their home country in the next year, according to the UN. Their successful return will depend on promises about security, food availability, financing, and reconstruction being fulfilled.

The combination of humanitarian relief with recovery and reconstruction efforts will stretch the capacity of the aid community. There are some coordination mechanisms in place but they must in turn be adapted to reflect the coordination structures that the UN and the new administration put in place. The donor community, too, must ensure that institutional support and reconstruction work is coordinated, with clear systems for monitoring and accountability.

## Recommendations

- **Innovative partnerships between the UN, the ISAF, members of the new Afghan interim government, and local governors need to make security their highest priority.** The proposal of international security forces extending to cities beyond Kabul must be explored vigorously, with full involvement with Afghan leaders and civil society. It is further important that a security force that can bring security to the whole of Afghanistan is quickly established under the responsibility of Afghans. The international community is well placed to support the development and realization of such a force. Donors should also come forward with long-term funding in support for the **judicial system**, to help underpin a reliable process of law and order throughout the country.
- **UN agencies must ensure that they are not party to moves that may lead to forcible repatriation of refugees.** It is vital that UNHCR abides by its protection mandate and its own operating principles, and must strongly denounce violations of international refugee law. UNHCR should ensure that systems are in place for determining refugee status, including registering and documenting the individuals involved, and ensuring that return programmes are voluntary.
- **Donors must come forward in the next few days to provide more humanitarian assistance and long-term support for the Afghan administration.** Promises and spoken pledges have been very generous, but only about sixty percent of the pledges have materialised, according to the UN's financial tracking system. Afghanistan is still in the grip of the worst drought in 30 years and signs are that this year may be worse than last. While recovery projects are important, it is crucial that humanitarian funding is forthcoming, quick and reactive, to suit the immediate needs of the country.
- **Coordination is key to the planning and implementation of humanitarian, recovery and reconstruction activities at once.** Verbal commitments to coordination over planning and implementation of humanitarian, recovery and reconstruction activities must be conscientiously acted upon. The Implementation Group (the donors) must ensure that it coordinates effectively with the interim government and NGOs in-country.

Oxfam International has worked in Afghanistan since 1989 and also works in Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It is urgently distributing food in Afghanistan to people who have been displaced by the crisis. Working through both Afghan staff and partners, Oxfam also carries out a range of activities including providing safe water and sanitation, health care, trauma counselling, rural development and advocating for women's rights.



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