

The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

DISPLACEMENT AND SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN

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THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION – UNIVERSITY OF BERN
PROJECT ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

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SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction by Khalid Koser, Deputy Director, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

The most recent statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicated significant global increases both in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). While around 750,000 refugees have returned to Afghanistan over the last two years, the scale of internal displacement there has increased substantially, in part made up by returning refugees who cannot return to their places of origin. In addition to displaced returning refugees, there is a wide variety of internal displacement in Afghanistan, including urban IDPs, disaster-induced IDPs, IDPs in protracted situations, IDPs displaced as a result of ongoing military operations, and even some people displaced by development projects. There are both human and national security issues that arise from internal displacement in Afghanistan. Many of the most vulnerable IDPs cannot be accessed because of security constraints on humanitarian workers. And there is growing evidence that some IDPs are becoming involved in the drug trade, cross-border human-trafficking, and resistance groups in Afghanistan.

Remarks by Ewen McLeod, Deputy Representative for the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees in Afghanistan

Background

Displacement within and from Afghanistan has taken place at an enormous scale, is complex, and has been protracted. Despite significant returns, the number of registered refugees is still approximately three million, the vast majority of whom are in Iran and Pakistan. There is also a growing population of IDPs inside Afghanistan, although it is very hard to estimate their number as many are not in camps. Official statistics almost certainly underestimate the number of IDPs in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan did not have international borders until 1949. Even today, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is very permeable. In addition to refugees, it is estimated that as many as half a million Afghans from border provinces are in Pakistan as labour migrants. Movement back and forth across the border is common; and there is a growing dependence on remittances from Afghans working in Pakistan. These remittances have almost certainly prevented a major famine in Afghanistan.

Durable solutions for both refugees and IDPs will depend on the establishment of a viable Afghan state. Security and political stability alone are not enough, the state will also need to establish an economic base, a development plan, and address pressing issues such as population growth.

Causes of Displacement

Reasons for displacement within Afghanistan generally differ from those that led to the flight of refugees. The current IDP situation in Afghanistan can be attributed to several factors. One that is often overlooked is that significant internal displacement occurred during the Soviet invasion. More recently people have been displaced by severe drought, poverty, and ethnic violence. Since 2001, conflict, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces have displaced around 40,000 people, although normally on a short-term basis only. The closure of some of the refugee camps along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has resulted in increased refugee returns to Afghanistan, of whom UNHCR estimates that up to 20 percent cannot return their places of origin and are displaced in Afghanistan. There is also currently a drought in the north, which is increasing displacement in that region, and it seems likely that food shortages may also become a factor in displacement.

Trends

There are some worrying trends in internal displacement in Afghanistan. Displacement is becoming more protracted for many. For example people currently displaced by conflict have not been able to return home after the end of local conflicts as quickly as they have in the past, and there is a risk that these IDP populations are becoming permanently displaced.

Growing insecurity is coinciding with drought and rising food and fuel prices in certain areas, and the combined effects are likely to be compounded during the winter months.

This combination may result in more movement toward cities, placing greater demands on urban service providers and swelling the number of urban poor.

A lack of economic opportunities within Afghanistan is also fuelling more labour migration to Iran and Pakistan.

Institutional Arrangements

There is no single agency that has responsibility for IDPs; however, the institutional response is better organized than previously. Within the Government of Afghanistan there are three ministries that claim some jurisdiction over IDPs: The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, the Natural Disaster Management Authority, and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. In reality, it is often the provincial governor's office and not the national government that deals with internal displacement issues. Ultimately the international community can only respond to the government's requests. The government has been more forthcoming in seeking international assistance, but still has a way to go in this regard.

At the international level, a humanitarian country team has been put in place and UNHCR is moving toward creating an IDP team. Security remains an important constraint and by and large international humanitarian workers do not have access to southern Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Red Crescent Society is active in the south and in some instances the provincial governors and/or Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) personnel can provide some humanitarian assistance. While greater coordination within the international community can foster more effective assistance for the displaced, limited resources and insecurity mean that the needs of the displaced cannot comprehensively be met.

Discussion

A series of questions included UNCHR preparations for the upcoming winter, rural-urban movements, and the interaction between humanitarian workers and the military, particularly in insecure regions.

UNHCR recently published its findings on the impact of its work in Afghanistan last winter and is using these findings to prepare for the upcoming winter: for example UNCHR in planning to purchase charcoal to help mitigate the high costs of heating homes.

It was noted that it can be hard to distinguish the movement of IDPs to urban areas from more traditional rural-urban migration. Among both types of movement, the usual pattern is that the male goes first, and is subsequently sometimes joined by part or all of his family. Town planning is a challenge, especially in Kabul, and 17 different government departments claim some stake in the management of cities. There is talk of establishing a new city to the north of Kabul.

There is an erosion of humanitarian space in Afghanistan. About half of the country is currently inaccessible to humanitarian groups. Attacks on humanitarian workers have

been increasing since 2005. In areas that UNHCR cannot travel, such as in southern Afghanistan, UNHCR takes a pragmatic response and works through the local governor's office and with PRTs. This situation stresses the need to upgrade not only the quality of national governance, but local governance as well.