

# Afghanistan and the challenges of humanitarian action in time of war

by Roberta Cohen

ICRC/Franco Pagetti

*In Afghanistan, unlike in most other humanitarian emergencies, the international community's focus, in the wake of the events of 11 September, was on those at risk inside the country.*

This was a welcome change, sharply contrasting with the international response in Kosovo or Rwanda where the lion's share of international aid and attention went to those fleeing the country, while those left inside basically remained unaided and unprotected until the war was over.

Three major reasons accounted for this shift. To begin with, there was an enormous humanitarian crisis looming inside the country that could not be overlooked - up to 6 million people were at risk of starvation. Although the threat of famine predated 11 September, the departure of international humanitarian staff prior to the US bombing made the situation more urgent. Second, the massive refugee flows that had been predicted in response to the US bombing campaign did not materialise. With the sealing of the Pakistani and Iranian borders, and Taliban restrictions on

departure, no more than 200,000 people were able to flee the country from 7 October until the end of the year. This closing of the refugee steam valve had the effect of shifting attention to the people inside. Third and most decisive, the US and its Western allies made humanitarian aid to those inside the country a substantial component of their military-political strategy, in an effort to demonstrate that the war on terrorism was not a war against Islam or against the people of Afghanistan.

But protecting and assisting people inside Afghanistan was to be no easy task. The political will was not always there, international mechanisms were not in place, and there were clashes among the actors, which resulted in uneasy compromises that at times undermined the overall result. A brief look at some of the challenges should prove instructive.

## **Tensions between refugee and IDP protection**

*ICRC depot near Kabul airport.*

When the US military campaign began, UN agencies predicted that between one to two million Afghans would flee the country and become refugees. It did not happen. Neighbouring countries closed their borders and the Taliban blocked mass movements, especially of young men. Only people with the physical strength and resources to hire trucks or donkeys, cross difficult mountain passes and bribe border guards managed to get out - a total of 200,000, mostly to Pakistan. The result was that the number of IDPs within Afghanistan soared from 1.15 million prior to 11 September to up to 2 million. Large numbers of these IDPs risked starvation in camps and settlements where there was little or no food or medicine, where conditions were unsanitary, and where people had to dig holes in the ground for shelter. Armed elements, too, entered IDP camps, where young men were forcibly conscripted and violence was reported, especially against women. As one international aid official observed: "People who can't leave the country are ... much worse off than

those at refugee camps outside Afghanistan ... The number of internally displaced persons, or IDPs, who are facing death must have already reached 1.1 million."<sup>1</sup>

While UNHCR attended to the needs of refugees, there was no operational locus of activity for the IDPs. A range of international organisations, the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNICEF, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and a number of NGOs, did their utmost from outside the country to bring food and medicines to those inside Afghanistan despite the bombing campaign and the war on the ground. Local staff and NGOs valiantly worked with them, distributing relief supplies when they could to those at risk of starvation and disease. But overall, as in so

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many other humanitarian crises, there was no centralised or comprehensive monitoring of IDP conditions, assessment of their needs, or development of strategies for protecting and assisting them. In short, the internally displaced had no champion on the ground, especially in the area of protection.

The explanation lies at UN headquarters. Following debilitating turf battles among humanitarian agencies in 2001, the UN Secretary-General reaffirmed, at the behest of donor governments and many agencies, that no one agency would be in charge of IDPs. Although UNHCR had been proposed as a suitable candidate to assume this global responsibility, it was decided instead that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN's officially designated coordinator of relief, would remain the UN's focal point on IDPs. To help it perform more effectively, the Secretary-General approved the creation of a special IDP Unit. But this new Unit was not to come into being until January 2002, well after the Afghan emergency began. Given the vacuum of responsibility and the fact that neither OCHA nor its Unit was operational, UNHCR requested authorisation to assume a 'lead' operational role in Afghanistan for refugees, IDPs and other war-affected populations. But the request was not

considered until after the war was over, UNHCR being encouraged instead to 'go back to basics' and focus primarily on refugee protection.

Accordingly, throughout the entire period of the war, UNHCR stuck close to its mandate and provided protection and assistance mainly to refugees. To its credit, UNHCR did authorise the trucking of some needed supplies into the overcrowded and desperate IDP camps near the Pakistan and Iranian borders but it declined to work directly in these camps or set up new ones. It cited both security concerns and the fear that such involvement could impede refugee flows. Nor did it assume a strong advocacy role for these or other IDPs despite the protection problems reported in the camps. Stung by criticism of too much overall involvement with IDPs, faulted for being ill-prepared during the Kosovo emergency (when refugees needed attention), and influenced by those at headquarters who supported a more narrow focus, UNHCR staff insisted that the best protection for those at risk inside Afghanistan was 'open borders'.

But 'open borders' was hardly a practical solution at a time when all six neighbouring governments were adamantly keeping their borders closed on security grounds and the US largely supported the closure. To be sure, Pakistan at times acceded to pressure and allowed in 'vulnerable' cases but basically it made quite clear that it could not absorb more Afghan refugees. Both it and Iran already housed nearly four million Afghans from earlier times and feared the international community would pack up, as it did when the Soviets withdrew, and once again leave them with enormous refugee populations to care for on their own.

Pressing for open borders against all odds, as most refugee and human rights advocates did, also had the effect of diminishing the energy that should have been directed toward developing strategies to try to protect the physical safety of the millions trapped inside. Remarkably little attention, for example, was paid to the possibility of creating safe areas in different parts of the country to protect IDPs and other affected populations, as the Taliban withdrew.

Either the Srebrenica trauma was raised to discourage this idea or it was pointed out that malnourished people would be in danger if they moved into unsanitary camps and contracted disease. But hundreds of thousands did just that, moving into camps in different parts of the country even though they were largely unaided and unprotected there. What, after all, did anyone expect Afghans to do when food supplies ran out at home, bombs began falling and fighting intensified? According to one military specialist, each safe area would have required 1,000 to 3,000 troops to assure adequate protection, and a number of countries might have helped.<sup>2</sup> But neither safe areas nor other comparable ideas were given serious consideration. Had the war not ended so quickly, this peremptory dismissal of safe havens could well have condemned many Afghans to death.

Now more than ever, comprehensive strategies are needed to protect and assist both the refugees and IDPs who are beginning to return home. Given the inter-ethnic conflicts in the country, possible reprisal acts and overall insecurity, UNHCR because of its protection mandate should be encouraged to play the central role in the return process both for refugees and IDPs. In neighbouring Tajikistan, from 1993 to 1995, UNHCR played the lead role in accompanying returning IDPs and refugees to their home areas, monitoring conditions in these areas, advocating with local authorities and groups on their behalf where there was harassment or other human rights abuse, even helping them go to court in property dispute cases. Such engagement should take place in Afghanistan as well. Unfortunately (as of time of writing - mid March), the UN has not yet decided to assign UNHCR overall responsibility for the return of refugees and IDPs. The returnees, moreover, are being provided with food, clothing and building materials but the protection of their physical safety and human rights is not being given the attention it warrants.

What is needed is the deployment of UNHCR protection staff in areas of return supported by field staff of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the formation of 'protection working groups' so that different international organisations, NGOs, civil society, and the new government can be brought together on a

regular basis to examine protection problems and design strategies to try to address them.

### The uneasy military/humanitarian relationship

Many in the humanitarian world argue that a clear separation of roles should be maintained in emergencies between humanitarian actors and military forces, especially when the forces are belligerents in the conflict. But for the United States, in its war in Afghanistan, military and humanitarian goals basically converged. To make more palatable its military campaign against al-Qa'ida and its Taliban supporters, the US sought to win the 'hearts and minds' of the people of Afghanistan and of the Islamic world initially by airlifting food packets into the country to stave off impending starvation. It was a public relations ploy but it resulted in 2.5 million readymade meals being dropped into

remote areas of the country over a two-month period.

For much of the humanitarian community, however, this 'dropping of food and dropping of bombs at the same time' constituted heresy. Major aid agencies countered that humanitarian action must be neutral, impartial and non-political, and 'led by civilians for civilians'. Unless sharply delineated from military operations, the independence and credibility of the aid would be compromised. Of course, the dropping of food packets from 20,000 feet without monitoring their distribution to the needy was hardly a strategy that humanitarians could be expected to sign onto. It was risky - it could attract people to a site where they would be unprotected or where the food could be diverted. And it only provided one meal, or less than 1% of the estimated overall food needs. But at a time when all international relief

workers had to leave Afghanistan, when local staff were being harassed, and most overland convoys could not get through, the airdrop constituted one of the few alternatives available to reach isolated areas. To a hungry person in Afghanistan, moreover, it could have hardly mattered whether the meal came from a civilian or military source. The humanitarian community's orthodox insistence upon the civilian character of aid had the effect of putting it into the unseemly position of begrudging food to people in areas of widespread malnutrition.

### *Humanitarian and security interests... in many instances converge.*

The same reservations about the military's role surfaced in the Kosovo crisis. By its own admission, the humanitarian community was unprepared to provide adequate shelter for the hundreds of thousands of refugees streaming into Macedonia and Albania. Yet it experienced great discomfort when NATO stepped in to build the refugee camps, set up the needed tents and provide camp security. The relief community argued that NATO's action would undermine UNHCR's claim to impartiality and neutrality, make the camps into military targets and jeopardise relationships with the Belgrade authorities.

These are legitimate concerns but maintaining the complete independence of humanitarian action in all circumstances is probably not possible and in some cases could prove perilous to the populations the international community is trying to protect. A more realistic approach would be to create at the outset of each emergency a framework to foster better communication between humanitarian and military actors. A post-conflict evaluation commissioned by UNHCR acknowledges that the agency might have been better prepared had it engaged in joint contingency planning with NATO.<sup>3</sup> Humanitarian and security interests, after all, in many instances converge. Joint planning and strategising could go a long way toward ensuring that the humanitarian consequences of military strategy are more easily anticipated and better dealt with by both parties; and in particular, that there is coordination between air strikes and food deliveries so that



supply convoys and routes can be protected and the military alerted to famine areas where food must get through.

In Afghanistan, such collaboration did take place, especially when the Taliban began to be routed. Joint air-lifts of food were planned, although in the end they were not needed. Relief agencies, led by WFP, with Western military and political support, aggressively managed to position millions of metric tons of food in the countries surrounding Afghanistan and then to truck it into the country and thereby largely avert the widespread famine predicted.

But the Afghanistan crisis also revealed the dangers of too much cooperation between humanitarian and military actors. The joint pronouncement in January by WFP and the US government that they had averted famine in the country seemed largely designed to prove that the US bombing campaign had not brought on starvation; rather the US and its partner, WFP, had saved the Afghan people.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, WFP's work deserves commendation but the assessment was overly optimistic and pointed up the danger when governments conducting military operations are the main funders of the relief operation. At the time of the announcement, serious food security and protection problems still plagued the country: about 100 internally displaced children and elderly people were reported to be dying each day from starvation and exposure outside Herat;<sup>5</sup> little or no food was reaching the people in and around Kandahar; in Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif, local warlords were stealing the food destined for the hungry; and in other areas pockets of the country remained inaccessible to aid agencies and malnutrition was reported on the rise. For the US Committee for Refugees, Save the Children and other aid agencies, the humanitarian crisis remained quite 'acute'. If famine had been averted, they countered, it was for "two months - no more".<sup>6</sup>

Another area of controversy between the humanitarian community and the military was the bombing campaign itself. Although most accepted the fact that the US had to respond with force to the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, some non-



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governmental groups and UN officials expressed opposition to the daily bombing and called for a 'pause' to enable food to be delivered. Others drew attention to the number of civilian casualties. The US of course had a serious interest in avoiding civilian casualties and tried hard to confine its attacks to military targets. But the casualties nonetheless mounted. Whereas some put the total in the hundreds, others claimed it to be in the thousands. Public and private protests, however, diminished substantially when victory was rapid and it became clear that so many Afghans welcomed the overthrow of the Taliban regime. Nonetheless, subsequent erroneous bombing and land attacks by US forces against innocent civilians pointed up the need for continued monitoring by human rights and humanitarian groups of military actions with a view to pressing the military to investigate the incidents and take greater precautions. The mil-

itary's dropping of cluster bombs, many of which reportedly remain unexploded and pose a threat to the civilian Afghan population, is another sore point being examined by human rights organisations, which consider such weapons to be an illegitimate use of force.

### **Debate over an International Security Force**

The need for a multinational security force to protect relief supplies, relief workers and civilians became apparent when Taliban rule collapsed and large parts of Afghanistan succumbed to banditry and lawlessness. In the absence of a government, army, police force or judicial system, armed groups, sometimes aligned with Northern Alliance warlords or retreating Taliban, took over critical supply routes, attacked aid convoys, sacked and occupied aid offices and warehouses, harassed and beat up relief

*Camp for IDPs near Mazar-e-Sharif, 2002.*

workers and engaged in inter-factional fighting. Indeed, in mid-December, international relief agencies could not safely distribute much of the food they had positioned in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries to feed millions of hungry people.

### *Security and protection of civilians remain the most critical problems confronting post-war Afghanistan.*

If the military and humanitarian goals of the US converged at different times during the Afghan campaign, when it came to creating an international security force to facilitate food deliveries and protect Afghan civilians this convergence came to an end. The Pentagon actively blocked the creation of an effective international force on the grounds that it would distract from its overall military purpose of defeating Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida. Paralysed by the trauma of Somalia, the US also argued that international troops would become targets of attack with US forces compelled to come to their rescue, resulting in casualties.

This fear of becoming bogged down in 'nation building' led Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to downplay the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in the country, likening the "fighting and lawlessness" in Afghanistan to the situation "in some American cities as well".<sup>7</sup> Because the US relied heavily on the Northern Alliance to do most of the fighting, it further minimised the fact that much of the looting and threats to aid workers took place in areas controlled by Alliance forces. For their part, members of the Northern Alliance opposed the stationing of large numbers of foreign troops in Afghanistan, fearing their authority would be undercut. They proposed instead an all-Afghan security force but clearly it could not be assembled in time; nor could the inter-factional rivalries obstructing its formation be overcome quickly enough.

The UN-authorized international force that did come into being in January (the International Security Assistance Force) was neither large enough nor with a broad enough mandate to be effective. Confined to Kabul, the capital, to protect the newly formed government, consideration of any

expansion into other areas was postponed and no more than 4,500 troops could be deployed. The result was continued lack of security throughout large parts of the country, including the roads leading into Kabul. Food and supplies could not reach many

areas, refugees and internally displaced persons were hesitating to return home, and large-scale reconstruction and development could be planned but not carried out.

The deployment of a more effective international force would lend authority to the new central government by enabling it to rule the entire country while a national army and police are created, deter criminal elements now emboldened by the absence of military presence, and show the seriousness of the international community in bringing stability to Afghanistan. Such a force clearly is needed to guard key roads, bridges and warehouses throughout the country; accompany and protect relief convoys and humanitarian workers; defend civilians in major cities from indiscriminate and unwarranted attacks; deter inter-factional fighting; and create the environment necessary for the return of millions of internally displaced persons and refugees.

At the end of January, Afghanistan's new President publicly appealed to the UN for an expanded international security force and indicated that the government and a lot of Afghan people supported the expansion. UN officials and aid agencies expressed similar sentiments. So far, however, the political will does not appear to exist to meet this call, largely because of opposition by senior US Defence Department officials.

### **Conclusion**

Security and protection of civilians remain the most critical problems confronting post-war Afghanistan. No amount of food or supplies can substitute for addressing this basic need. To be sure, during the emergency, international agencies, non-governmental groups and local staff displayed remarkable energy and

courage in their efforts to ensure that starvation and disease did not overcome large numbers of people inside the country. The US military joined in this effort, having a distinct interest in showing that its campaign was not against the Afghan people. But the international focus on providing food, medicine and shelter was not matched by any comparable initiative to provide security and safety to those trapped inside. Even as the war came to an end, the long delay in setting up an international security force and the limited mandate given to it demonstrated once again that the now accepted international responsibility to avert starvation still does not extend to protecting the physical safety and human rights of people inside their national borders. Yet the future direction of Afghanistan will be determined largely by how the international community deals with this protection gap. It remains one of the most serious shortfalls in international efforts to address humanitarian crises.

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