Conflict-induced Internal Displacement in Afghanistan

Briefing note to the Joint NGO-ISAF Civilian Casualty Mitigation Working Group
8 December 2011

A. Background

1. Displacement is not a new phenomenon for Afghans (see Box 1). Over the past three decades, the impact of armed conflict, human rights violations, and recurrent natural disasters has taken its toll on the Afghan population; flight has become a familiar coping strategy for many. With over 76% of Afghans having experienced some form of displacement during their lives,[1] it is not surprising that one of the biggest fears of Afghans is to be displaced (34%), ranking third behind economic hardship (37%) and overall "uncertainty" in life (36%), and shortly ahead of losing a loved one (25%) or property (22%).[2]

2. Despite Afghanistan's displacement history, the sheer scale of the growing displacement crisis currently underway in Afghanistan has caught most actors, including the Afghan Government, the humanitarian community, but also military actors by surprise. As a result, international response is failing to adequately meet the needs of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) across the country.

> **Box 1: Key Displacement Phases in Afghanistan**
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> **Phase 1 (1978–88):** War of Mujahidin against Soviet-backed communist government; predominantly refugee displacement with some internal displacement post 1983.
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> **Phase 2 (1989–95):** Soviet Withdrawal and Civil War; initial vast return followed renewed (refugee) displacement.
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> **Phase 3 (1996–2001):** The Taliban rule; hesitant return and renewed refugee displacement; internal displacement due to drought.
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> **Phase 4 (2001–2):** Post - 9/11 invasion and renewed displacement (external/internal).
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> **Phase 5 (2002–4):** Rapid and vast return under new government and the rise of secondary displacement.
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> **Phase 6 (2004-9):** Deterioration of security and growing internal displacement; rapid growth post 2007 especially in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan.
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> **Phase 7 (2009-present):** The ISAF/NATO surge and spreading of conflict further spreads displacement to the Western, Northern and Central Regions of Afghanistan.

3. The exponential rise in IDPs, particularly over the past 18 months, closely mirrors the geographical spread of the conflict into the Western, Central, and Northern regions of the country, as increasing numbers of communities flee insecurity in these areas.

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[1] Our World: Views from Afghanistan, Opinion Survey 2009, International Committee of the Red Cross, June 2009
[2] Ibid, 16–17.

- As of 31 October 2011, the IDP population was listed by UNHCR and the Government of Afghanistan at 443,635 persons (or 68,878 families), with 317,065 alone displaced due to conflict between June 2009 and October 2011, an average of 11,000 per month.
- There has been a 51% increase in conflict-induced displacement during the first ten months of 2011 as compared to same period in 2010.[3]

4. Past research has demonstrated that these figures only provide a partial account of current displacement levels,[4] given the limited access UNHCR, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), and their associated Provincial Departments have in many conflict affected areas, particularly in the South and South East. These figures also exclude the increasing numbers of IDP families and groups blending into urban areas with economic migrants and the urban poor. **Thus, the actual IDP population throughout Afghanistan is likely significantly higher than official figures.**

B. Taking stock of the displacement crisis

5. IDPs now represent the most visible impact of the conflict in Afghanistan. Those affected are amongst the most vulnerable in society and a majority remains beyond the reach of humanitarian agencies and other formal assistance structures. While people flee the direct impact of the conflict between a complex insurgency and the Afghan government supported by international actors, there are many facets of displacement:

- Many are unable to meet their basic needs after their property, agricultural land, or other productive assets had been destroyed.
- Associated aspects of the conflict, such as the breakdown of law and order, loss of livelihoods, and a lack of access to critical social services, can reduce the resilience of populations and trigger further displacement.
- Many flee out of fear of being caught between the insurgency and the Afghan government supported by IMF, neither allowing the option of neutrality (see Box 2).
- Night raids are especially damaging in this respect, frequently compromising the safety of communities as visits by Taliban are often

> **Box 2: IDP Voices**
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> "The internationals asked us to stop the Taliban. But the Taliban is not somebody we can control; they do not listen to us, just as little as it is in our power to tell the foreigners to stop killing civilians either. **We are a people without defense and cannot stop military people from fighting**" (Chora Elder, 2009).

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[3] UNHCR/MoRR National IDP Task Force November 2011
[4] See Susanne Schmeidl, Alexander D. Mundt and Nick Miszak, Beyond the Blanket: Towards more Effective Protection for Internally Displaced Persons in Southern Afghanistan, a Joint Report of the Brookings/Bern Project on Internal Displacement and The Liaison Office, Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2010; www.brookings.edu/reports/.../05_idp_protection_afghanistan.aspx, which estimates that 322,000 persons were internally displaced in Kandahar alone during the summer of 2009, p.33-34.

followed by a raid, making it difficult for families to continue to live in an area where they may receive continuous visits from either warring party.

- General insecurity and the cumulative impact of conflict has hindered local development and depressed local economies in many rural areas, meaning displacement is frequently employed as a coping strategy by communities.

6. Particular attention must be paid to the invisible or hidden urban IDPs – the increasing group of displaced persons who flee to urban areas because of the perceived availability and better access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. The status of this extremely vulnerable population (and their subsequent access to protection and humanitarian assistance) is the subject of intense debate as the line between voluntary migration and forced displacement blurs.

C. IDP Profiling and Humanitarian Response

7. Profiling and monitoring of IDPs represents one the greatest challenges for the humanitarian community in Afghanistan. The verification of data collected is often unfeasible due to the fluidity of IDP movements and the pervasive insecurity in areas where displacement is occurring.

8. Without this information, it is almost impossible to capture necessary baseline data and apply requisite analysis to understand protection gaps and humanitarian assistance needs. This, in turn, impacts on the ability of humanitarian actors such as NGOs and UNHCR to advocate for effective protection response and contributes to a poor donor understanding of displacement and reluctance to make humanitarian funding available. The absence of reliable and timely information about displacement in conflict zones in particular has critically impaired the humanitarian response in Afghanistan.

9. The Government of Afghanistan's response to IDPs has also been inadequate. Insufficient funding, capacity, and lack of expertise on the part of central and local authorities means conditions for IDPs, both during displacement and after return, have fallen well below international standards outlined in the UN *Guiding Principles* on Internal Displacement.[5]

10. Reporting on issues relating to protection needs of IDPs is also highly politicized owing to the ongoing conflict environment. Both the Afghan Government and international governments have downplayed the displacement crisis, particularly in the context of transition planning, given the fact that it runs counter to the transition narrative and accompanying objectives of security, development, and state-building.

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[5] See *Realizing National Responsibility for the Protection of IDPs in Afghanistan*, NRC/Brookings (2010)

D. Role of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)/International Military Forces (IMF/ISAF)

11. The role of the ANSF and IMF/ISAF in the rise in (forced) displacement numbers is not yet fully grasped, especially by military actors. It is certainly the case that the IMF/ISAF/ANSF military surge over the past year has been a major contributing factor to conflict escalation and renewed displacement waves.

    - Communities are increasingly squeezed between the parties to the conflict—the insurgency on the one hand and ANSF/IMF on the other (see Box 3).
    - IDPs are both fleeing preventatively and post-military incursions.
    - There remains no systematic means of highlighting the wider displacement impact and humanitarian fall-out to which the humanitarian community is largely unable to respond owing to access constraints.

> **Box 3: IDP Voices**
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> "From one side Taliban is killing us, and says we are government employees, from the other side foreign forces (ISAF/NATO) kill us and say 'You are Taliban'" (Khost elder, 2011).
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> "If you side with the government, then the Taliban will kill you. If you side with the Taliban, the government will take you or the bombs will fall. The fighting was getting worse, so we left. **There is no choice**" (Khas Uruzgan Elder, 2009).

12. **While there have been efforts since 2010 by ISAF to minimize civilian casualties and loss of life, equivalent efforts to reduce the scale of forced internal displacement have not been forthcoming. In fact, new operating procedures for military planners such as the current ISAF country-insurgency model of shape/clear/hold/build, are possibly exacerbating the protracted nature of displaceme**nt for many conflict-affected IDPs as growing numbers of Afghans are unable or unwilling to return to their pre-conflict place of origin following military incursions. The increasing use of air-strikes and night raids by U.S. Special Forces add additional threats and push factors for thousands of Afghans who view the escalation in the military campaign to be a longer-term threat and who are unwilling to return home when the conflict environment remains so fluid.

13. The Afghan Local Police (ALP) initiative (by US Special Forces), now a year into implementation and premised around the notion of supporting local village defence efforts, is also increasingly recognized as a growing driver of displacement in many rural areas.

    - As of July 2011, there are almost 7,000 ALP members active in 43 districts of 16 provinces across the country.[6] At the same time, interim reports on the quality of ALP coverage has brought a number of protection of civilian concerns into focus owing to fact that they have often been poorly vetted, ill-trained, and work unsupervised.[7]

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[6] http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1980
[7] Afghan Local Police (ALP) Note, UNHCR RA Protection Section, July 2011

- To date, ALP units have been allegedly committing a number of abuses at the village level, including murder, theft, harassment, extortion, illegal taxation, coercion, intimation of community members, and forced recruitment.[8]
- Most worrying is the impunity with which ALPs are able to operate, owing to lack of formal means of addressing these issues at provincial and district authority level. The scale of the ALP abuses are also thought to be far wider than current reports indicate, as many local communities are wary of exposing themselves to additional security risks attached to reporting public complaints against ALPs.

14. Both NRC and TLO have heard reports from displaced populations documenting instances where some local ALP switch allegiance to local criminal fractions at different points of the day in order to maximize local influence. In addition they are reports that they exacerbate local ethnic cleavages, and encourage defections to the insurgency. **Far from providing protection, ALPs in their villages compound existing threats from Taliban and other anti-government groups, and provide an additional incentive to flee.**

15. Where ISAF maintains operational presence, ALPs tend to be more effective owing to the monitoring and mentoring support provided by ISAF. The challenge during the transition period is achieving adequate monitoring coverage in a context of shrinking ISAF presence. This is especially important given the limited capacity of the Ministry of Interior to even monitor the Afghan Uniformed Police, and the ability of ALP commanders to intimidate local communities and prevent them from using established mechanisms to register complaints. As such, opening complaint mechanisms to displaced communities may provide a more effective measure of monitoring the ALP, as displaced persons may face less risk from commanders in their area of origin.

E. Needs of Displaced Populations and Protection Concerns

16. IDPs are at greatest risk of physical harm during the initial phase of their displacement, as they try to avoid being caught in the crossfire, flee the scene of a bombing, or avoid landmines. In 2010, the UN Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan found that many landmine victims were male returnees or IDPs.[9] Children and youth are particularly vulnerable, as they may become deprived of protective community or family structures.

17. IDPs who are unable to receive protection by the Afghan government or international actors are experiencing extreme vulnerability are at risk of being exploited by local strongmen and powerholders, or even the insurgency if they can offer protection in exchange for allegiance.[10]

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[8] Ibid
[9] Watchlist, June 2010
[10] Beyond the Blanket, 2010

Research after military operations in Helmand Province in early 2010 showed that insurgent groups increased their recruitment efforts, particularly among IDPs in Lashkar Gah camp.[11]

18. The return process for IDPs can also be dangerous as IDPs either encounter damage to property and livestock or face conflicts over land and resources when trying to reclaim their property. **The protection concerns faced by IDPs who attempt to return to their place of origin are in many cases as severe as those encountered during the stay in displacement and frequently prompt secondary displacement.**

- Those in direct association or contact with pro-government forces may be targeted by the insurgency, illustrating the dangers civilians face when military forces are directly involved in humanitarian assistance. IDPs who received aid and employment opportunities from pro-government forces in Helmand were threatened by the Taliban when they returned, causing secondary displacement.[12]

- The nature of the conflict in many parts of the country has limited IDPs' ability to return quickly to their places of origin if fighting ends. IDPs cite fears of roadside bombs, landmines around civilian infrastructure, forced recruitment, further battles between armed opposition groups, and pro-government forces.

Box 4: Overview of typical IDP protection concerns:

- Loss of property and need of shelter (associated protection risks with shelter arrangements, crowded camps, settlements and private accommodation).

- Loss of access to land and normal livelihoods/sources of income (associate protection risks with poverty, marginalization, exploitation, and abuse).

- Inadequate access to food, safe water supplies, and public services such as education and health (associated protection risks with hunger, malnutrition and disease).

- Collapse of family and social structures, including separation of family members (associated protection risks with unaccompanied children, older people, and persons with disabilities being at risk of abuse, including sexual exploitation, forced labour or forced recruitment into armed forces or groups).

- Loss or destruction of identity documents (associated protection risks with difficulties in accessing public services, such as education and health care, limits on freedom of movement and harassment, exploitation or arbitrary arrest and detention).

- Displacement location (associated protection risks where IDPs are displaced into areas where they face marginalization, discrimination, are exposed to landmines, or are targeted for abuse and attack).

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[11] ICOS, May 2010
[12] BBC, 26 October 2010

F. Recommendations

International forces should minimize new displacements caused by their forces on the ground by undertaking the following measures:

➢ **Pre-emptively consider and include displaced populations as part of the protection of civilian population in Afghanistan (not just civilian casualties).**

➢ Improve sensitization of (military) personnel, especially those involved in COIN planning and operations, to protection issues of displaced communities throughout each phase of Clear-Hold-Build-Transfer.

      o Ensure that training of military personnel and police prior to deployment includes information on IDP rights and the *Guiding Principles* on Internal Displacement.

➢ Amend any population-centric counter-insurgency strategies that carry great risk of civilian population population movement.

      o Review counter-insurgency tactics, rules of engagement, and their relationship to displacement such as culturally insensitive house-searching, arbitrary arrests and detention, and aerial bombings.

      o Adopt a Standard Operating Procedure on minimising new displacement that obliges troops to take concrete action to protect civilians and their needs before, during, and after military activities.

➢ Delay the further expansion of ALP until the relevant department in the Ministry of Interior has the capacity to monitor ALP-induced displacement and improve existing vetting mechanisms.

➢ Improve pre and post-operational information collection to ensure that displacement is adequately monitored. Improve information sharing with relavent organizations (UNHCR, OCHA, MoRR) immediately upon learning of a significant influx or outflow of IDPs to a given area, especially in remote areas where resources may not accommodate influx.

➢ Implement working monitoring and reporting mechanisms on forced displacement and incorporate acknowledgement of this practice into strategic communications and engagement with the local populations.

➢ Ensure functional complaint systems and accessible compensation mechanisms for IDPs and returnee communities **as well as awareness of these programs in areas of first and secondary displacement.**