



Refugee Studies Centre

THE AFGHAN CRISIS: THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE *Refugee Studies Centre- Emergency Roundtable.*

On the 2nd November 2001 the Refugee Studies Centre held a 1-day emergency round table to provide an opportunity for over 60 experts on forced migration, humanitarian aid and Afghanistan to discuss the causes and consequences of the humanitarian crisis in the region. Rather than focus on the September 11th terrorist attacks and the consequent military action, the round table addressed the challenges for and the barriers to effective solutions. This constructive exchange of experience and expertise was aimed raising issues of importance and areas for further consideration for actors involved in the provision of assistance.

This document summarises the main points raised in the discussions under five broad and raises a number of key areas for consideration when approaching the humanitarian response to the crisis.

Context:

- A multitude of factors make it almost impossible to generalise about Afghanistan, examples of such factors include: inside versus outside perspectives; disparity between Western political, military and humanitarian viewpoints; Afghan ethnic, cultural and religious diversity; regional political and economic perspectives; and approaches to gender issues.
- Afghanistan can not be seen as a nation state in the Western model, systems are too much ingrained in tribal networks, trading routes and local powers.
- There is a lack of wider analysis or a critique of Western motives behind military intervention and a need for greater clarification of longer terms U.S. interests in the region.
- The Northern Alliance are united by a common enemy and not a common goal and as such are extremely vulnerable and fragile.
- The historic colonial division of Afghanistan and the more recent legacy of 20 years of external intervention and neglect need to be studied to ensure that the pattern of neglect and conflict is not repeated.
- Analysis of a lack of willingness of Pakistan and Iran to take in additional refugees has to consider the large numbers of refugees they are already supporting and the past experience of broken promises of support for these refugees from Western governments.
- It is important to remember that the majority of people in Afghanistan do not know the meaning of terrorism and are not keen supporters of either the Taliban or the Northern Alliance forces.
- The importance of the drug economy should not be underestimated and the amounts of money involved will always compete with aid and reconstruction funding. There are powerful vested interests (many of which are involved with the Taliban and Northern Alliance) in keeping the drug economy going. These interests may have little to gain from a stable ordered society.

Delivery of Humanitarian Assistance:

- The current situation characterised by high levels of need, caused by three years of drought, widespread economic impoverishment and difficulty of access caused by military intervention and economic sanctions.
- There is a need to open up trade and economic activity to avert some aspects of famine and to foster development. Traded foodstuffs may be able to help the majority of those affected by food shortages but they do not reach the poorest without physical / economic access to markets. These people are in need of direct humanitarian assistance.
- When addressing how aid can best be delivered under conditions of war, agencies could be warned against condemning military action without giving due consideration to whether this could lead to transport routes being opened more quickly, improving access to food distribution networks and encouraging the return of refugees.
- Given the prevailing security situation it was suggested that civilians or military organisations could be considered as a better route for the delivery of aid than humanitarian organisations.
- The usefulness of food drops in targeting the most needy was widely criticised. The packaging and the food itself is inappropriate and the drops often end up in the hands of the military and or traders who then sell the food for profit.

Gender:

- Women representing a numerical majority in Afghanistan after generations of fighting and flight.
- The Soviet era is seen by some as a period of gender modernisation with a strong emphasis on education for women. There is a legacy of a class of educated women in Afghanistan, though many of these have now left the country. The reaction against this 'modernisation' by the US backed Mujahudin is partly to blame for the strength of the military backlash to the 1979 invasion.
- The status of women in Afghanistan can be seen to be used as a political tool to justify western military action.
- It can be argued that the strengths and roles of Afghan women are not properly addressed in media coverage and that there is an need to listen more acutely to these women.
- Disparities in gender should not be portrayed as a result of Taliban influence. Pre-Taliban Afghanistan was already at the bottom of the gender disparity ladder with poor health care, high infant mortality, and no female representation in the local authorities.
- There is an argument that women have been adversely effected by an 'Arabisation' of Islam which has lead to greater suppression. This notion can be criticised for not considering the heterogeneous nature of Arabic culture and the particular context in Afghanistan.
- There was a call for considered attempts to get a real understanding of the culture, issues and power of women at the local level prior to any imposition of US feminist views on gender.

Regional Implications:

- In order to understand the issues and the implications of the current conflict and humanitarian crisis there is a need to look wider than Afghanistan.
- This wider context should take into account the India / Pakistan conflict; the potential for wider fundamentalist conflict in Pakistan and collapse of that state; and the potential for trouble from the Islamic minority in India.
- The drug economy is a regional issue. The crop is demand led and if removed from one area will be grown in another. This can be seen from the example of the Northern Alliance increasing its production following the Taliban's efforts to reduce poppy cultivation. If production is removed from Afghanistan entirely and is likely to spread to Central Asian states bringing with it further destabilising effects.

Roles of the UN agencies and NGOs:

- There is an argument that NGO involvement in the past has destroyed rather than fostered Afghan self-sufficiency due to an emphasis on food-aid in preference to development programmes.
- Leaving Afghans to find solutions to their own problems is widely seen as an abrogation of the current responsibility of the international community.
- A potential conflict between NGOs as recipients of government aid funding and their ability to advocate on behalf of refugees and criticise government foreign policy was noted and NGOs criticised for lacking a dissident voice. Aid policy adheres increasingly to Government foreign policy with the UN and NGOs being more involved in implementing this policy instrument in what can be seen as a 'Crisis of Conformity.'
- UN agencies and NGOs are often in direct competition with each other for government and public funds. This contributes to an emphasis on 'presence rather than programmes' and competing rather than co-ordinated media responses.
- The extent to which humanitarian organisations can and should work with military organisations was raised. NGOs and UN agencies 'walking hand in hand with the military' can result in them becoming legitimate military targets.

Reconstruction:

- For any reconstruction process to be successful in Afghanistan the long-term commitment and involvement of the international community needs to be assured.
- There is a need to avoid the possibility of a major inflow of aid and oil money actually fuelling further inequality and instability. A slow, evenly paced, reconstruction programme with appropriate controls on release of funds is required. Institutions with an adequate capacity need to be in place before funds can be distributed.
- There is a need for a delicate touch in dealing with the future politics of Afghanistan. A regional approach which incorporates programmes of action research to develop a methodical and proven reconstruction agenda is preferable to any 'off the shelf' reconstruction packages.
- Reconstruction and development projects need to ensure that they engage with and do not undermine old and traditional ethnic systems of civil society. Any model for reconstruction

should be built by Afghans and take into account the history and diversity of local experience.

- Examples of ‘micro-level solutions’ already exist and these should be used as models to ensure local accountability and to strengthen the social fabric of Afghanistan.
- The need for a temporary broad-based civil administration to include influential local ‘war-lords’ was emphasised. This would give more time to develop political solutions and to organise a move towards democratic elections. It was suggested that this administration could find / develop a cadre of people who can help create home grown legitimacy and rebuild Afghanistan in the long-term.
- Efforts at reconstruction should be focussed within a framework of social inclusion which incorporates the key roles of both women and elders as social actors and forces for mobilisation.
- Reconstruction processes should address the roles, wishes and the likely futures the 5 million plus Afghan refugees outside of Afghanistan.
- NGOs could have practical a role in monitoring the extent participation of all social groups in the reconstruction process.
- Currently western NGOs are often directly providing public services. In some instances this activity abrogates state responsibility as these take up the ‘public-sector’ activities of most western states. Programmes need to address the capacity building needs of local organisations and assist the government with the provision of services for long-term sustainability and stability.
- Role for foreign NGOs in the reconstruction process should be as a source of expertise for the strengthening of local organisations rather than deliverers of aid.
- There is some argument that the notion of reconstruction misleading as this assumes that there was a model in place to reconstruct. Conflict is an accelerant to social change and in practice it is difficult to ‘reconstruct’ such a rapidly moving target. The rural development focus of past decades may no longer be appropriate.
- Reconstruction is currently framed as a post-conflict ideal however given the complex and volatile regional situation an extended period of political instability lasting up to ten years could be considered as a likely scenario.
- Careful consideration needs to be given to issues of impunity and dealing with the past. Issues of peace building and reconciliation need to be incorporated into a reconstruction process.
