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Driven away by a War, Now Stalked by Winter's Cold

By Rod Nordland

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Frigid Temperatures Claim Lives of Children in Kabul

The following children froze to death in Kabul over the past three weeks after their families had fled war zones in Afghanistan for refugee camps here:

- Mirwais, son of Hayatullah Haideri. He was 1 ½ years old and had just started to learn how to walk, holding unsteadily to the poles of the family tent before flopping onto the frozen razorbacks of the muddy floor.
- Abdul Hadi, son of Abdul Ghani. He was not even a year old and was already trying to stand, although his father said that during those last few days he seemed more shaky than normal.
- Naghma and Nazia, the twin daughters of Musa Jan. They were only 3 months old and just starting to roll over.
- Ismail, the son of Juma Gul. “He was never warm in his entire life,” Mr. Gul said. “Not once.”

It was a short life, 30 days long.



At least 22 children have died in camps in Kabul in the past month, including 14 at the Nasaji Bagrami camp, above. This winter has been especially cold in Afghanistan, with several snowstorms.

These children are among at least 22 who have died in the past month, a time of unseasonably fierce cold and snowstorms. The latest two victims died on Thursday.

The deaths, which government officials have sought to suppress or play down, have prompted some soul-searching among aid workers here.

After 10 years of a large international presence, comprising about 2,000 aid groups, at least \$3.5 billion of humanitarian aid and \$58 billion of development assistance, how could children be dying of something as predictable — and manageable — as the cold?

“The fact that every year there’s winter shouldn’t come as a surprise,” said Federico Motka, whose German aid group, Welthungerhilfe, is one of the few at work in these camps, which aid workers call the Kabul informal settlements — since describing what they actually are, camps for displaced persons or war refugees, is politically sensitive. The Afghan government insists that the residents should and could return to their original homes; the residents say it is too dangerous for them to do so.

The deaths occurred at two of the largest camps, Charahi Qambar (8 cold-related deaths), and Nasaji Bagrami (14 such deaths). Both camps are populated largely with refugees who fled the fighting in areas like Helmand Province in the south. Some people have been in the camps for as long as seven years; others arrived in the past year.

“There are 35,000 people in those camps in the middle of Kabul, with no heat or electricity in the middle of winter; that’s a humanitarian crisis,” said Michael Keating, the United Nations

humanitarian coordinator in Afghanistan. “I just don’t think the humanitarian story is sufficiently understood here. You’ve got a lot of people who really are in dire straits.”

The United Nations and major relief groups last Saturday started what is called the Consolidated Humanitarian Appeal, asking donor groups and governments for \$452 million in aid for the coming year, a 22 percent decrease from last year’s appeal of \$582 million.

Far larger funds are separately available for development aid — nonemergency assistance to do things like build schools and infrastructure.

For many of the displaced people in Kabul’s camps, however, international humanitarian policy subjects them to a pitiless Catch-22.

The camps do not qualify for development aid because they are viewed as temporary facilities — and many Afghan officials oppose their presence. On a practical level, pouring aid into the camps would encourage people to stay in them, and perhaps draw more people there as well.

On the other hand, because the camps have been in a state of “chronic emergency,” most aid donors view that as, by definition, no longer a humanitarian crisis. “People seem to think you can’t call it an emergency if it’s going on for 10 years,” said Julie Bara of Solidarités International, a French group that has had a limited program of emergency food aid and sanitation in the camps, “but in fact it is.”

Her organization surveyed mortality rates in the camps in recent months. Among children under 5, Ms. Bara said, the camps’ death rate is 144 per 1,000 children, stunningly high even for Afghanistan, which already has the world’s third highest infant mortality rate. That means that one out of every seven children in the Kabul camps will not survive until his or her sixth birthday.

All of the 22 children known to have died were under 5.

Normally, Kabul’s winters are mild for a city in a mountainous country, but not this year. It was the coldest January in 20 years, according to Mohammad Aslam Fazaz, deputy director of the national disaster office. Most nights, temperatures have been dropping below 20 degrees. “There is no clear strategy to help these people,” said Mohammad Yousef, the director general of Aschiana, a well-respected Afghan aid group that provides education and other services in 13 of the camps. “They don’t have access to anything — health, education, food, sanitation, water. They don’t even have an opportunity for survival.”

Aschiana provides four teachers to the Charahi Qambar camp, where they are the only regular humanitarian presence. Residents say there used to be food distributions by the World Food Program in the camp, but that stopped last year. A food program spokeswoman, Silke Buhr, said the agency currently provided food deliveries in Kabul only to vulnerable groups like widows and the disabled.

In the worst-hit camps, even if the men can find work as day laborers or street peddlers, the pay is so scant that they have to choose between buying food or fuel, usually firewood. “You won’t die of hunger, but you will die of cold,” as one father put it.

When it comes to children, however, that is not strictly true. Poorly fed children are much more likely to succumb to hypothermia and disease.

Last month, Kabul suffered two heavy snowstorms, on Jan. 15 and 22, which added wet conditions to the miseries of the camps’ residents, since their dwellings are tents or mud-wall shanties with canvas or plastic roofs.

The combination of damp and cold proved deadly.

Mirwais’s father, Mr. Haideri, was awoken by the 5 a.m. call to prayer at the Charahi Qambar camp on Jan. 15 and found his son stiff as a board. “His color was dark, like when a leaf is frozen; you know it is frozen just by looking at it,” he said.

His wife and he have five surviving young children. “My wife keeps telling me, ‘You have to do something to save our other children, who will die in this cold,’ ” he said. “What can I do?”

That same day in the same camp, Mr. Ghani found his son Abdul Hadi with a fever; when they called for an ambulance, the rescue workers refused to come. “They told me it was too cold,” he said. Abdul Hadi bedded down under a blanket with his mother, but there was no heat in their hut, and the mud under them was wet. When his parents tried to rouse him late that night, Mr. Ghani said, “He was frozen stiff.”

In the Nasaji Bagrami camp, where 14 deaths from cold were reported, according to a camp representative, Mohammad Ibrahim, there were two families that each lost two children.

Born on the same day, the identical twins Naghma and Nazia died on the same night, Jan. 15-16.

The children who died had been tucked up under blankets, sleeping with family members. But camp residents explained that what happens is that very small children are often physically unable to keep blankets pulled tightly around them, and are too young to ask for help. So if there is no fire and they fall asleep, they die.

“Adults know how to keep warm, but the little ones do not,” said Mualavi Musesfer, a mullah at the Charahi Qambar camp. His nephew was one of the children who died from the cold, he said.

Mohammad Ismail, a refugee from the Sangin district, one of the worst places in Helmand Province, also lost two children, one to the first snowstorm — his daughter Fawzia, 3 — and one to the second — his son, Janan, 5. Now he and his wife have two surviving children, a baby and their eldest child, 7-year-old Tila.

“The whole night they cry because of the cold,” Mr. Ismail said. “Tila misses her brother especially.” Her brother and sister are buried without formal headstones in a patch of wasteland

that has become the Nasaji Bagrami camp cemetery. Tila knows the place. “She goes there every day to see her brother,” her father said.