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In Grip of Cold, Afghan Family Buries 8th Child

By ROD NORDLAND

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The war refugee Sayid Mohammad lost his last son on Wednesday, 3-month-old Khan, who became the [24th child to die of exposure](#) in camps here in the past month.

“After we had dinner he was crying all night of the cold,” Mr. Mohammad said. The family had no wood and was husbanding a small portion of paper and plastic that his daughter had scavenged that day. He said the boy had seemed healthy and was breast-feeding normally, though the family’s dinner consisted only of tea and bread. But he kept crying. “Finally we started a fire, but it wasn’t enough,” Mr. Mohammad said. By 1 a.m. the boy was stiff and lifeless, he said.

Even by the standards of destitution in these camps, Mr. Mohammad’s story is a hard-luck one; Khan was the eighth of his nine children to die. Back home in the Gereshk district of Helmand Province, six died of disease, he said. Three years ago they fled the fighting in that area for the Nasaji Bagrami Camp here, where a 3-year-old son froze to death last winter, he said. Like most of Kabul’s 35,000 internal refugees, he fled the country’s war zones only to find a life of squalor sometimes as deadly, even in the capital of a country that has received more than \$60 billion in nonmilitary aid over 10 years.

Later Wednesday morning, Mr. Mohammad's sole surviving child, his daughter, Feroza, 10, stared saucer-eyed at her brother's tiny body as it lay in the middle of the family's hybrid dwelling, part mud hut, part tent, with United Nations-branded canvas for a roof.

Leaders of this camp say that 16 children aged 5 or younger have died here in the [unseasonably cold weather and heavy snow](#) that set in about a month ago, keeping nighttime temperatures in the mid-teens. Eight other children have died similarly in another Kabul camp, Charahi Qambar, according to camp representatives, religious leaders and families.

Government officials have [expressed skepticism](#) that the children could all have died of cold, saying the deaths were unregistered and not reviewed by medical personnel, while at the same time blaming the international aid providers for not sending more supplies.

Private Afghan companies and businessmen and some charitable groups have begun to distribute food, fuel, winter clothing, blankets, tents and cash support in the camps, but so far the effort has been sporadic and incomplete.

Other relief groups and Afghan government ministries are still in the process of surveying needs in the camp. As one relief worker said, "Starting an aid program even in a month would be fast work, and by then winter will be mostly over."

The Nasaji Bagrami camp counts 315 families who fled from war-torn southern provinces like Kandahar and Helmand. Some of their rough shelters had wood to burn in stoves, while others, like Mr. Mohammad's, had no substantial heat sources at all.

Mohammad Ibrahim, chosen by camp residents as their representative, held up his hand in a visual parable of the realities of inequitable resources. "See my fingers?" he said. "They are five, but none are equal."

The Mohammad family had two large blankets to share, plus the baby boy's blanket, a velveteen comforter with designs of teddy bears and bunny rabbits on it. "We didn't even have enough wood to make breakfast today," Mr. Mohammad said. A neighbor gave a small packet of potato chips to Feroza, whose name means turquoise, the gemstone.

In the bitter cold, relatives and friends gathered and meticulously followed the prescribed rituals for the dead. Hot water was brought in pitchers from neighbors' huts. The boy's body was laid on a plank in the hut's mud-walled yard, and washed five times with the hot water and soap, a pink bar of Safeguard. A ditch was dug so that the wash water would drain away and no one

would step in it accidentally, which they viewed as potential sacrilege. Khan was so small that the hand of the man who washed him covered half of his body.

His mother, Lailuma, peeked from the door of the hut to watch, but otherwise the women stayed inside and apart. But Feroza, in a purple head scarf, slipped unnoticed past the men close to Khan's washing place, pressed into a crevice in the wall and watched wordlessly.

A clean white cotton sheet served as his burial shroud. The available scissors were too dull to cut it, so the men ripped it into pieces with their gloveless hands. After tying the sheet around Khan, they sprayed his shrouded form with perfume, and then they wrapped him again in his teddy and bunny blanket.

For prayers, performed on mats outside, the men removed their shoes; many had no socks. Then they carried Khan, bundled in one man's arms, in a silent procession to a graveyard.

The camp mullah, Walid Khan, pronounced the final prayers. Khan was laid in the grave with his face toward Mecca, and each of the mourners dropped in three handfuls of the hard earth.

Mr. Mohammad had not slept. His eyes were bloodshot. The septum of his nose had cracked from the cold, bleeding a little, and leaving a small red icicle. Feroza stood just to his side and behind him a little, clutching his coat. She coughed deeply and her father started. "Now she is sick, too," he said.