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## Hungry Afghanistan faces prospect of drought in 2011

By Missy Ryan *Missy Ryan*  
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Afghanistan could face a serious drought in 2011 that would make millions of poor go hungry and fuel instability as foreign troops seek to reverse surging violence in the battle against the Taliban.

Low rainfall early in the wet season will likely threaten Afghanistan's irrigated harvest, U.S. forecasts show, which with a surge in global grain prices could be devastating for a nation already ranked as having the world's worst food security.

U.S. officials are concerned drought, which could be averted if rain and snow fall heavily in coming weeks, could further destabilize Afghanistan as Washington races to prove it can turn back a tenacious Taliban before an initial withdrawal in July.

"Many Afghans live right on the edge of starvation and without necessary water there will be communities that will be on the move, seeking pasture and agricultural work in other areas," a senior U.S. defense official said on condition of anonymity.

"That has potential to put pressure on society ... While who sends the rain has nothing to do with your politics, the Taliban can say the government is not providing for (them)," he said. Afghanistan's population is about 30 million.

Afghanistan needs about 5.2 million metric tons of wheat, the staple crop, a year. This year, the agriculture minister says the country will need to import, or receive donations, to cover about a fifth of that amount.

Once an important regional producer of raisins and other fruit, Afghanistan watched its vineyards become minefields during years of war between warlords, mujahideen and Soviet invaders.

Last year, consultants Maplecroft listed Afghanistan as the world's most food insecure country. Two thirds of Afghans are considered food insecure, meaning they don't have enough food, or the right kind of food, to eat, or are teetering on the brink.

"A shock to the system like drought, conflict displacement or natural disaster can push those people into food insecurity," said Challiss McDonough, spokeswoman for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in Kabul.

The U.S. forecast said poor early rains had meant less winter wheat, Afghanistan's most reliable, resilient cereal crop, had been planted and that germination was low.

Major food shortages can be avoided, the report said, "if regional trade flows function normally and higher than normal food assistance can be coordinated and implemented."

That is a big if for a nation now in its tenth year of conflict since the Taliban were ousted in 2001. Roads and other infrastructure needed to transport crops and food, shattered by decades of conflict, are also plagued by homemade bombs.

## VULNERABLE

While a surge in U.S. troops last year helped drive Taliban fighters out of parts of southern Afghanistan, violence in 2010 hit its highest level since the Taliban government was toppled and militants are taking the fight to once-quiet areas.

The bloodshed has turned Afghans like Khayatullah, a father of seven who abandoned his tiny farm in Ghazni province over a year ago, into refugees even less able to feed themselves.

Khayatullah, who earns \$3-\$4 a day when he can find work as a day laborer in the capital Kabul, stands in the freezing mud along with dozens of others queuing for a 50-kg bag of wheat WFP provides him once a month during winter and early spring.

"I'd go back to Ghazni if there was work and security," said Khayatullah, wrapped in a worn blanket against the winter cold. "But I don't think that's going to happen any time soon."

Fresh in the memory of many Afghans is the crisis of 2008, when a surge in global prices combined with local drought to push an additional 5 million people into hunger.

That year, aid groups say, many Afghans were forced to spend more than three-quarters of their meager incomes on food.

Now global wheat prices have shot up to their highest levels since 2008 after key producer Russia suffered a disastrous harvest in 2010 and banned grain exports. Global grains prices have risen further in early 2011 because of concerns about weather damage to crops in Australia and Argentina.

Such crises tend to last longer in nations such as Afghanistan, land-locked and lacking proper roads. Local wheat prices that peaked during 2008 have not returned to pre-crisis levels and have been trending upwards again since last summer.

Food prices here can also spike locally due to the violence, which makes transport more risky and more expensive.

#### HOPING FOR BEST, BRACING FOR WORST

Yet there is time for things to turn around. Mohammad Asif Rahimi, Afghanistan's agriculture minister, said it was too early to say what the impact of poor early rains would be on harvests.

"If we get regular rainfall between now and the end of March, rain-fed and irrigated cereals will be fine," he said.

After strong harvests in 2009 and 2010 -- around 4.5 million metric tons -- Afghanistan could face a wheat shortfall of up to 1.2 million metric tons this year, Rahimi said.

"We are watching this, but not predicting any catastrophic scenario," a U.S. agriculture expert said.

The Afghan government is planning to buy 200,000 metric tons of wheat on world markets, which it can sell or dole out if needed.

Yet drought would also make donations even more important. WFP, backed by donors such as the United States and Canada, is monitoring the situation and Afghan officials are also expecting India to donate 250,000 metric tons of wheat.

But aid shipments, trucked to Kabul from distant ports on poor, dangerous roads, are slow to arrive at best. Last year, the WFP lost about 22,000 metric tons of Afghanistan food aid that were being trucked in during Pakistan's historic floods.

Neither does aid reach many Afghans in need, like those who are unable to get registration cards for monthly handouts.

As Afghanistan tries to look beyond the current fighting, officials say donor help to improve irrigation and water management will be key to boosting food security in the long run.

"Nothing is more important in Afghanistan than water. If we can do one thing in Afghanistan, it should be water, water, water," the U.S. agriculture expert said.