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Afghan drought conditions could spell disaster

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The current dry spell sweeping across Afghanistan's northern, northeastern and western provinces could lead to a large-scale food crisis and the humanitarian community should act quickly to ensure this does not degenerate into a disaster, government and aid officials warn.

"The issue is very serious. Every other year drought or other natural disaster puts millions of

people into food insecurity," Abdul Majeed Qarar, spokesman for the Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock Ministry, said.

According to Oxfam, nearly three million people are facing severe food shortages as a result of drought in 14 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Eighty percent of the non-irrigated wheat crop, which people rely on for food and income, has been lost.

"Governments need to wake up to the gravity of this crisis and ensure they are ready to respond before the situation gets worse," Asuntha Charles, head of Oxfam in Afghanistan, said on 20 September. "Delays will just make things harder for families already struggling to cope... People are reducing the amount of food they are eating and selling what little they have. We still have time to stop this becoming a disaster, but only if we act now."

Earlier this month, the Agriculture Ministry quoted a much lower figure for those affected, but started distributing assistance to 200,000 families in Sheberghan and Jowzjan provinces.

"Drought has caused a significantly lower cereal harvest this year which, according to initial surveys, will affect the lives and livelihoods of 1.3-1.5 million farmers and livestock owners all over the country," Mohammad Asif Rahimi, minister for agriculture, irrigation and livestock, said.

Pastures in affected areas, according to Oxfam, have been completely destroyed and the price of animal fodder in the market has quadrupled forcing people to sell livestock because they cannot feed them and need money to buy food for themselves.

Preliminary assessments

In July, Oxfam conducted a rapid assessment in the provinces of Badakhshan, Daykundi and Kandahar, and found that about 50 percent of pasture land had little or no grass or other vegetation.

A separate rapid assessment in early July by World Vision in the northwestern provinces of Badghis and Ghor found that lack of rain had seriously undermined the livelihoods of farmers and pastoralists, triggered stress and resulted in negative coping mechanisms like selling available food.

"Interventions around the introduction of improved varieties of seeds and livestock, diversification of funding sources and improved irrigation infrastructure are highly recommended to mitigate these recurring problems," the assessment noted. "These will empower communities and thus reinforce the sustainability and resilience of households' livelihoods."

A more detailed assessment is being done by humanitarian actors across Afghanistan, and a clearer picture should emerge soon, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Afghanistan's average wheat yield on irrigated land ranges from about 2.7 tons per hectare to 3.5, versus only 1.1 tons on rain-fed land. In a normal year, the country produces 4.5 million tons of wheat and imports around one million, according to the Agriculture Ministry. The shortfall of 1.9 million tons of wheat this year means more will either have to be imported or secured from other sources.

Crop production across the country fluctuates because of seasonal natural disasters as well as surges of violence and insecurity.

But chronic emergencies, according to the UN humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan, Michael Keating, could be avoided if addressed in a timely and sustainable way. In most cases, durable solutions such as drilling water holes, reinforcing existing dams or constructing embankments could ensure adverse situations were mitigated in future.

"Reducing the risk of these disasters is... a development issue requiring urgent attention," Keating said in a speech on World Humanitarian Day.

Conflict - a key factor

But in the face of continuing conflict, it becomes difficult to effectively operate, say observers in Kabul. "Billions of dollars have been sunk into Afghanistan in search of durable long-term solutions, but until the security question is solved, little can be achieved," an international aid worker told IRIN.

A Food Security Risk Index of 196 countries released on 31 August by Maplecroft, rates Afghanistan number nine. It says the country faces extreme food insecurity and that a major driver of this is conflict and displacement.

Aid workers in Kabul say insecurity has also hindered access to those in need in various provinces of Afghanistan, killed farmers and livestock owners, and disrupted communities that used to be agriculturally productive.

In 2010, 2,777 civilians were killed, a 15 percent increase on 2009. The first six months of this year have been even more deadly, according to the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), with 1,462 civilians killed by mid-July. Some 80 percent of these deaths were attributed to anti-government elements.

"Afghan children, women and men continue to be killed and injured at an alarming rate," said Staffan de Mistura, special representative of the UN Secretary-General. Improvised explosives and suicide attacks account for nearly half of all the civilian deaths and injuries.

"Even collecting data from some areas can be difficult," said one NGO field worker in Kabul. "There are places that are so difficult to reach that the only information we get is second or third hand. The situation can be very unpredictable."

New thinking needed

The complexities of the situation call for new thinking on the part of humanitarians, donors and government, observers say. This fact is not lost on the aid community.

"Afghans throughout the northern part of the country are facing a possible humanitarian crisis as they cope with drought conditions that have resulted in a 100 percent failure of the rain-fed crop in many areas," Keating said on 21 August. "Many households have lost 50 percent of their livestock due to a lack of animal feed and water."

"Humanitarian organizations must do a better job of assessing humanitarian needs, of organizing coordinated responses, of telling the Afghan humanitarian story," he added. "We also seek a continued commitment from donors to provide adequate support for the needs identified, including those related to the current drought situation."

According to NGOs ActionAid, Afghanaid, Concern Worldwide, Oxfam, Tearfund and ZOA Refugee Care, the priority responses should not just focus on immediate humanitarian needs, but also strengthen existing coping mechanisms and build community resilience.

"The international response to this crisis has been slow to get off the ground," the six NGOs said in a joint statement on 31 August. Planned interventions, they argue, should strengthen existing coping and local market structures - or risk exacerbating dependency on humanitarian aid and undermining local businesses.

"There has been limited support for the introduction of drought-resistant crops, for non-agriculture based livelihoods such as livestock, and for off-farm livelihoods," the NGOs noted.

Inadequate attention, they argue, had been paid to natural resource management, resulting in a situation whereby in many of the drought-affected areas, river water was available but not being used for irrigation because the necessary systems were not in place.

"Lessons must be learnt," they added, "if communities are to be assisted not only to recover from this current crisis but to increase their resilience to future shocks and in the long term reduce their dependency on humanitarian aid."