
AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT FUELS DESPERATE JOURNEYS

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As planting season started in the northern Afghan province of Baghlan this spring, so did the fighting. One farmer, Ibrahim (he uses only one name), and his family had barely tilled their land when they had to leave. Fighting had been close by for most of the past year, but now it was in their village. With mortar shells falling on their fields. Ibrahim told me he and his family abandoned everything and fled for their lives.

For many Afghans, personal safety and livelihoods are intimately connected as the conflict expands. Australian immigration officials might be tempted to dismiss families like Ibrahim's as 'just economic migrants' but that would be a poor read of the complex situation in Afghanistan.

Most of Ibrahim's harvest last year went to waste. Buyers never came because of the security threat. And although Ibrahim and his father didn't sell a single melon, they still had to give a portion of their harvest as tax to the Taliban.

This year, they borrowed Afn50,000 (US\$730) to plant again, gambling that the conflict would leave them alone. His father has returned to their village, braving the intermittent fighting to save their crop. 'Harvest time is approaching again,' Ibrahim said. 'If the fighting continues, only God can help us. We have nothing left'.

Some Afghans, desperate like Ibrahim, have set out for Australia and Europe. When they reach their destination, they are often classified as economic migrants and get a hostile reception. But if they are forced to return to Afghanistan, they can face both danger and destitution.

More than 300 of Afghanistan's 384 districts are no longer secure, according to the Afghan government. Increased fighting has led to massive displacement. From January to March, about 90,000 people were displaced from 23 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces due to conflict. By July, the year's tally had grown to 182,000 people from 29 provinces across the country. There are now 1.2 million internally displaced people across Afghanistan and this will increase.

The Taliban and other insurgent groups have demonstrated that they can destabilise, if not take over, any area in Afghanistan. The conflict has spread to areas once considered safe, such as Ibrahim's home province of Baghlan. In 10 districts of the country the security is so bad, there is no local governance infrastructure. Three of these districts are in the north, once considered safe as conflict raged in the south.

In 2015, the conflict resulted in 11,000 civilian casualties, according to the UN. The civilian casualties have increased in six of the seven years since the UN started keeping records in 2009. Insurgents are killing minorities and kidnapping civilians not affiliated with the warring sides □ civilians whom insurgents didn't consider targets until recently.

The thousands of Afghans who arrive in Europe and Australia are just a trickle of those uprooted from their communities, deprived of personal safety and livelihoods. But, even though civilians are now less safe than they have been at any point since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, governments in Australia and Europe appear even more willing than to send Afghans back.

The Australian government warns would-be travellers that no part of Afghanistan the country can be considered free from conflict-related violence,' but it has been returning Hazara minority asylum seekers and producing multimillion dollar films to deter others from seeking asylum in Australia.

Afghans who are forced to return may face significant and growing risk of serious harm, including indiscriminate violence and destitution. Australia has tried to address this by offering generous return packages, but money can't buy safety, jobs or social support.

The Afghan governments already limited capacity to assist returnees has been stretched even thinner by the increasing crisis of internal displacement, lack of funds, and corruption. Some returnees may become displaced if their homes remain unsafe. Returning after seeking asylum is a traumatic process to begin with. There is also evidence that even if those forced to return home are not immediately in the way of violence, they can suffer unreasonable hardships because of high unemployment, social isolation, poverty, homelessness, and separation from relatives.

When conflict is as widespread as it has become in Afghanistan, just doing ones job can be dangerous, involving a level of risk that forces people to abandon their livelihoods. This applies to many jobs, from aid workers, to journalists, teachers, judges and farmers like Ibrahim.

Countries that seek to decouple the economic from the security motives of people seeking refuge will find this can be difficult and that applying such an approach to highly insecure countries like Afghanistan could deprive refugees of the protection provided for by international law.

Ibrahim and his family escaped from their village before anyone got hurt but now they live in limbo. A few kilometres away, a teacher turned farmer, Mallem Farouq, who worked the land after the girls school where he taught closed because of fighting, was less lucky. He was in the fields when a mortar shell landed nearby, injuring him and his two sons, Emal, 10, and Shebar, 5.

Uzbekistan proposes green corridor to Russia

Officials from Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation are discussing the possibility of simplifying the procedure of customs and phytosanitary clearance for fruits and vegetables.

To this end, Uzbekistan has proposed the creation of a "green corridor," as reported by the press service of the Ministry of Agriculture. The proposal was made by the First Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Rustam Azimov, on 14 September during a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture of Russia, Alexander Tkachev.

This year, a Russian-Uzbek working group has been set up to facilitate the supply of fruit and vegetables from Uzbekistan to Russia. The first meeting of the group took place in late July and was attended by representatives of the largest Uzbek suppliers of fruits and vegetables, Russian retail chains, as well as relevant departments of the two countries.

"By working together, this year's supply of Uzbeki agricultural products to the Russian market has been increased by more than 200%," said Alexander Tkachev; however, despite the good performance in trade, there are a number of difficulties that prevent an increase in the volume of shipments of Uzbeki fruit and vegetables to Russia. In this regard, the Uzbek side proposed to consider the possibility of signing agreements with the FCS of Russia and the Rosselkhoz nadzor, in order to simplify the procedure of customs and phytosanitary clearance, with the creation of the so-called "green corridor."

Kaynak/Source: