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## Internal Displacement in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan has experienced over 30 years of continuous conflict, both at the national and the local levels, linked to a struggle for dominance by different tribes, ethnic groups, and political orientations. Added to this is the difficult terrain, which has made the country prone to drought, earthquakes, and flash floods. To be sure, the cumulative impact of these challenges on civilians has been severe. However, no less profound have been the challenges that Afghan civilians have faced as the result of violence-induced displacement.

Civilian casualties (both deaths and injuries) are documented by the Human Rights (HR) Unit of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) through their Protection of Civilian Reports and also more recently by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.<sup>2</sup> These generally provide a benchmark for the assessment of civilian security in the country. However, civilians are not only impacted by deaths and injuries but also by displacement due to acute fighting or fear thereof, or due to threats, intimidation, and political pressures.

This paper analyzes conflict-induced internal displacement in Afghanistan from 2010 to the first quarter of 2011. The term “conflict-induced IDPs” (IDPs-internally displaced persons) will be employed to refer to civilians fleeing active combat between the Afghan National Army (ANA), international military forces (IM), and a diverse insurgency as well as to those fleeing due to fear of persecution and intimidation by parties to the conflict and other armed groups.

### Comparative Data Analysis

*Displacement data for Afghanistan are estimates and do not include those IDPs scattered in urban/ semi-urban areas as well as locations where the IDP focal agencies (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-UNHCR and the Afghan Government Ministry and Department of Refugees and Repatriation-MoRR and DoRR) do not have access either directly or through networks of the IDP Task Force and the Protection Cluster.*

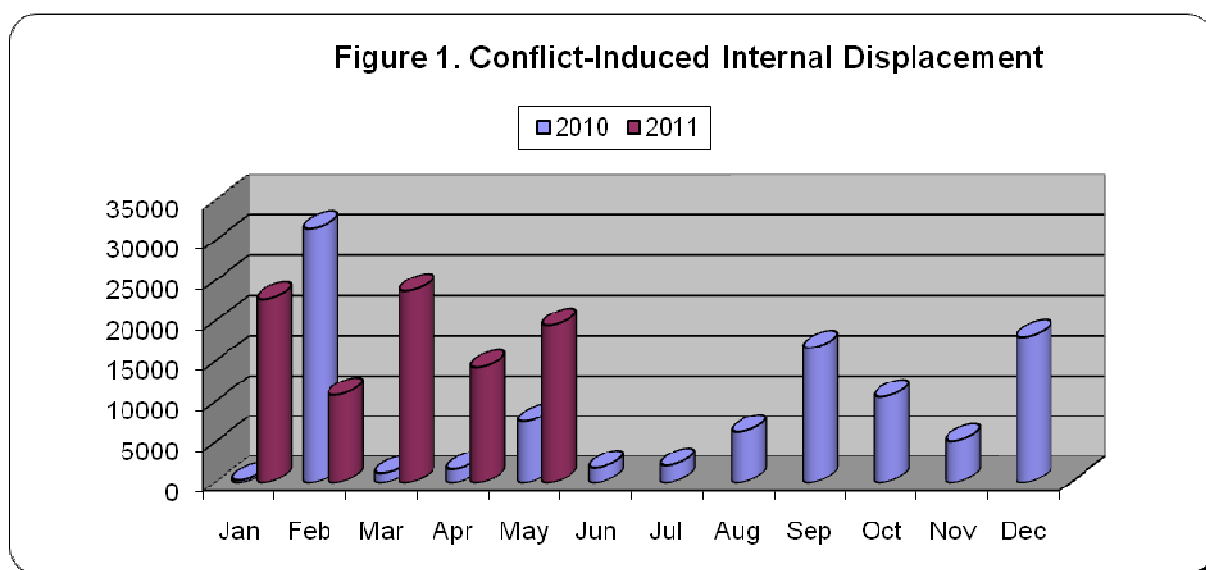
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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

<sup>2</sup> *Afghanistan Mid Year Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2010* by UNAMA Human Rights, Kabul (August 12, 2010). For additional details, see UNAMA HR Website and AIHRC, *Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission Mid Year Report on Civilian Casualties, 2010* (August 8, 2010).

UNHCR IDP data for March 2011 indicates a total of 416,593 persons<sup>3</sup> comprising 68,151 IDP families.<sup>4</sup> Despite the limitations on IDP tracking due to shrinking humanitarian space, a comparison of IDP data estimates clearly indicates a steady rise in the number of IDPs. The first quarter of 2011 (January–March 2011) witnessed a rapid rise in conflict-induced displacements, with a total of 57,290 persons estimated as new IDPs across the country. As Figure 1 below shows, this number is already more than half of the total new conflict-induced displacement reported by UNHCR in 2010 (102,658). When compared to the same period in 2010, there has been a 43% increase in the conflict-induced IDP population. Further, as compared to the period October–December 2010, there has been a 41% increase in the conflict-induced IDP population.



**The largest conflict-induced displacement was visible in the Southern Region (59% of all IDPs in Afghanistan),** where the battle against the Taliban insurgency continues to be most intense. It may be noted that in the same period in 2010, conflict-induced displacement in the South already constituted 81% of all IDPs — caused mainly by Operation *Moshtarak* in Helmand (Marjah and Nad Ali). During the first quarter of 2011, the number of new displacements in the South reached 34,000 — one-third more (22,400) than during the period October–December 2010.<sup>5</sup>

**The second largest increase in conflict induced IDPs was documented in the North and North Eastern Regions,** which tripled over the past year (26% of the total of 57,290 in the first quarter of 2011, as compared to 13% of the total of 33,730 in October–December 2010, and 7% of the total of 32,935 in January–March 2010). This is largely due to an expansion of Anti- Government Element activities in Northern Afghanistan, especially in Faryab, Baghlan, and Kunduz, associated with a growing number of self-formed militia. The rise in the number

<sup>3</sup> All IDP data is presented in number of persons unless where specifically indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Minutes, National IDP Task Force, UNHCR Kabul (April 12, 2011). UNHCR IDP Data sheets were shared with the Minutes

<sup>5</sup> Due to limited access in the South, large populations of IDPs in urban and semi urban areas, as well as those displaced across the non-accessible tracts of Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul provinces remain unaccounted and hence not reflected in estimates.

of IDPs is steady. This trend is expected to continue through 2011, especially for the provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz, and Takhar.<sup>6</sup>

**In contrast, the Eastern Region has witnessed an increase of 10% of the total in the first quarter of 2011**, as compared to 1% in the last quarter of 2010. It is expected, however, that there will be a further increase in the ensuing months due to intensifying armed conflict in Nuristan and Kunar provinces as well as a fall out of the intensifying military operations in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While information is still being collated from other regions, increased conflict and insurgency presence is notable in the West, Southeast, and parts of the Central Region. Incidents of security and protection of civilians have intensified as indicated by UNAMA HR in the Protection of Civilian Report for 2010 and as compared to 2009. It is therefore likely that significant conflict-induced displacements have occurred were underreported. The West and Central regions are also prone to receiving IDPs from other regions.

*There has evidently been no known large military operation in the first quarter of 2011 akin to Operation Moshtarak and others in the Southern Region in 2010, which led to large-scale displacement. However, the number of those displaced is rapidly mounting, as evidenced by the data for the first quarter of 2011.*

### **Causes of Internal Displacement<sup>7</sup>**

The causes of the current wave of internal displacement are a combination of several factors. First and foremost is the intensifying conflict between the Afghan government and its international supporters and the Insurgency. Added to this are intimidation, threats, and targeted persecution (including night raids by international and Afghan National Security Forces); disputes over land and resources, and acts of criminal elements. Reports of human rights violations by various conflict actors are abound, including a rising number of civilian casualties, especially in the North and South.

Methods of Warfare have reportedly led to forced eviction of civilians besides destruction of homes, agricultural lands and properties by parties to the conflict. Aerial bombardments and ground troop operations also remain a key cause of flight. Access to Redress and Compensation procedures to those affected by the IM/ANA armed offensives remains a challenge and is in-accessible to civilians in insurgency ridden areas due to its perceived implications. Urgent need for a transparent and functional mechanism for tracking and investigating claims of civilian casualties and damages is underscored as this will have an impact on the ability of displaced populations to consider return to their places of origin.

According to the 2010 UNAMA Protection of Civilians (PoC) Report, civilians assassinated and executed included teachers, nurses, doctors, tribal elders, community leaders, provincial and district officials, other civilians including children, and civilians working for international organizations. Intimidation tactics have risen rapidly and include abductions, threats (often

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<sup>6</sup> Please see Afghanistan Protection Cluster – Protection Overview for the North and North Eastern Regions (May 11, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> For further details please see Afghanistan Protection Cluster led Protection Overviews for the Southern Region (February 2011) and for the Northern and North East Regions (May 11, 2011)

through night letters) and assassinations. Insurgent check points, which remain rampant across much of Afghanistan are used for extortion and intimidation. All this has caused a drastic deterioration of civilian security and protection, especially the most vulnerable, women, children and the elderly.

In addition to reduced human security, conflict and insecurity has disrupted basic services delivery due to attacks on (or threats to) government buildings, health and educational facilities. This has discouraged civilian access to schools and clinics and the approaching of provincial authorities for redress.

**In 2010, a 43% increase in civilian deaths were reported in the South** which witnessed over 50% of all assassinations and executions nation-wide, killing over 100 Afghan civilians. The number of war casualties at the ICRC supported Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar hit record highs in fall of 2010 which registered close to 1,000 victims with weapon-related injuries in August and September 2010, almost double that in the same months last year.<sup>8</sup>

**Forced taxation (*oshr*) by the insurgency; confiscation of vehicles, weapons and food; forced recruitment of men; as well as aerial attacks and special forces operations are cited as the main causes of displacement in the North and North East.** IDPs fled to comparatively safer areas fearing further deterioration in security which remains a hindrance for speedy return. Most of the IDPs were unable to escape with belongings, thus making their displacement experience more challenging. Reports continue of IDPs facing human rights abuse during flight, while also struggling with challenging routes both geographically (e.g., inaccessible rivers, bad roads) and due to the profusion of land mines. Families with relatives in the government claimed persecution from the insurgency while others allege atrocities from local irregular militias.

### Conditions of Displacement

Due to the intensity of the conflict and often entrenched positions of the warring parties, displacement is becoming increasingly prolonged. Land mines/ UXOs (Unexploded Ordnance) and the destruction of crops, fields, homes, and properties during fighting have a direct impact on the ability of displaced populations to consider voluntary return to places of origin and to resume livelihoods. Deterioration of the protection situation in places of displacement can be expected in the medium term, especially due to severe winters in the north and summers in the south and the east; the absence of critical services/facilities available in places of displacement, and the lack of livelihoods. The likelihood of secondary displacement within and outside the region is high. Vulnerable IDPs face heightened risks in the absence of an expedited return to normalcy. Instances of displacement from the South to the East and Central regions are cases in point. It has not been possible to consistently track secondary displacements which usually occurs in small numbers (individuals, families or small groups). In this changing context, mid-term needs assessments by humanitarian actors become more relevant, especially for responses to those with heightened vulnerability.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Physical Rehabilitation Centre run by Handicap International, Mirwais Hospital, Kandahar City, 2009–2010.

<sup>9</sup> In April 2011, the Afghanistan National IDP TF established a Working Group to Review Emergency Response to IDPs. The minutes of the Working Group (WG) were shared by UNHCR with the IDP TF on May 12, 2011. The objective of the WG was to develop a harmonized and needs-based response to IDPs by concerned actors.

Uprooted from their homes, IDPs face an urgent need for shelter. Predominantly, displaced families arriving in rural settings seek refuge with host families. On the other hand, in urban areas IDP families who can afford do so, rent houses, often jointly with others. For the poorest families, renting accommodation leads to further impoverishment due to the absence of regular income. While evictions are not predominant in areas of displacement and IDPs generally maintain decent relations with host communities, the situation tends to become untenable for both the IDPs and the host family with delay in the ability of the IDPs to return.

As a consequence of conflict and displacement, the loss of livelihoods and income-generating activities is a critical concern, as livestock and crops are either left behind or confiscated. IDPs are forced to rely on the generosity of host families, sporadic humanitarian assistance, low-income daily labor (including child labor), and loans that further impoverish them but are necessary for access to food and potable water, fuel to heat and cook, plastic sheets, and clothing. This situation has a trickle-down effect on host families, as it severely stretches their capacity to cater to the combined needs of their guests and their own members.

The absence of timely information on IDPs displaced within conflict zones has a critical impact on any possible humanitarian redress of material assistance and other protection needs. The vast majority of Afghans, including pastoralists (Kuchi) tend to flee with their cattle and seek protection from the conflict in rural areas, where access by humanitarian actors is limited. Community outreach methods increasingly adopted by the IDP Task Force have attempted to fill some of the information gap although there is a continuing need to expedite information sharing. The resultant limitation of delivery of humanitarian aid to such non-accessible zones is fraught with risks to humanitarian workers, as evidenced in the North in February 2011.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The flight of civilians affected by conflict leading to increased internal displacement across Afghanistan is expected to continue, as the conflict is poised to intensify. The following key concerns are highlighted in addition to those raised earlier in this paper:

- While prevention of displacement in the current context remains beyond the control of humanitarian actors, intensive advocacy with parties to the conflict is a priority;
- Freedom of movement in safety for civilians wanting to move out of insecure zones must be facilitated by all parties to the conflict;
- Conditions of displacement require continued assessment and creative responses as opposed to the standard one-time emergency assistance, especially due to prolonged stay in displacement;
- Safety of humanitarian workers and respect for independent humanitarian action is imperative;
- Active participation of stakeholders at the regional IDP Task Force and Protection Clusters is essential to enable the timely coordination of responses.

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<sup>10</sup> Afghanistan Protection Cluster — Protection Overview of the NR and NER (May 11, 2011). See Annexe 1.