

Climate Famine in Afghanistan

The famine in Afghanistan could claim the lives of a million children. It is driven by climate breakdown - and Western foreign policy.

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A terrible wrong is happening in Afghanistan. Climate breakdown is one cause of the famine beginning there. The other cause is the deliberate policy of the government of the United States.

Last week Christina Goldbaum of the *New York Times* reported from Shah Wali Kot in Kandahar province. “One by one, women poured into a mud brick clinic, the frames of famished children peeking out beneath the fold of their pale gray, blue and pink burqas.

“[They] were desperate for medicine to pump life back into their children’s shrunken veins. For months, their once-daily meals had grown more sparse as harvests failed, wells ran dry and credit for flour from shopkeepers ran out.”

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Starvation

She added: “Reality was setting in. Their children might not survive the winter. ‘I’m very afraid, this winter will be even worse than we can imagine,’ said Laltak, 40.”

The Red Cross and other aid groups are warning that the unfolding famine could kill more than a million children this winter. This would be more than the total number of adults and children who died in twenty years since the American and NATO invasion in 2001.

Let us hope that they are exaggerating. Let us hope that it will only be hundreds of thousands of children.

First, climate breakdown. The rains first failed in Afghanistan in 1965. When they failed again in 1970-72, there was famine across the northwest and center of the country.

The rains and the harvests have failed many times since. Many went hungry or lost their

land or flocks. But each time some form of international aid prevented generalised starvation. Not this time.

Crop

There is little doubt that this is climate breakdown. The rains have not simply failed. When they do come, they fall at the wrong time of the year. The downpours are heavy, so the soil cannot absorb the water.

But Afghan farmers do not mainly rely on rainfall. Snowfall in the mountains matters more. In the spring and summer the snow and ice melt, and rivers and irrigation channels carry the water down to the crops.

As climate breakdown raises temperatures, there is more rain and less snow.

Globally, temperatures have risen by one degree centigrade in the last fifty years. In Afghanistan they have risen by two degrees.

The droughts grow worse. The drought this year is worse than the last one, in 2018. Nationally, between 25 percent and 40 percent of the wheat crop, the main staple, has been lost.

Rains

But the crop failure is not even across the country. In some parts of the country, especially in the northwest, west and south, most of the harvest has failed.

About half of the total population, roughly 23 million people, are at risk of malnutrition and starvation. This does not mean that 23 million will die. But many will.

The problem is not just one year's crops, however. In droughts, farmers have to eat the whole crop, and save nothing for planting in the spring.

There are perhaps as many as two million pastoral nomads in Afghanistan as well, most of them with flocks of sheep. When there is no pasture and little water, the flocks die. And in the next year, the pastoral nomads have very few, or no animals.

There were hopes that the snow would come this winter, and the rains would come afterwards. The early indications are that this is not happening. It now looks probable that the winter of 2022-23 will be therefore be much worse than this winter.

Bankers

The drought in Afghanistan is part of a much wider climate disaster that is affecting all of Central Asia, and as in Afghanistan, has been growing across the region for decades.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Nine-tenths of the land is so arid it cannot be farmed. The Afghans have done nothing - *nothing* - to bring the climate crisis down upon humanity.

Yet the Afghans are among those who will suffer most from the climate crisis.

Pause and think for a moment. Imagine what it is like to live through 43 years of war. Then to hope for peace and to find yourself plunging into famine.

Climate breakdown is one of the two causes of this unfolding famine. The other is the deliberate policy of the US government. Or to be more precise, of American politicians, generals, diplomats and bankers.

Sanctions

The Taliban victory in Afghanistan was a major humiliation for the US government and military. Desperately poor people in sandals had defeated the greatest military power in the world.

The United States has form in how they react to such losses. After their defeat in the Vietnam War, the US introduced sanctions that isolated the country and hurt the economy for a quarter of a century.

They have done the same to Iran, and did the same to Iraq after the First Gulf War. They have done it to Cuba for 60 years. And now they are doing it to Afghanistan.

As soon as the Taliban won in Afghanistan, the Federal Reserve Bank in the US confiscated the entire reserves of the Afghan government.

And the US cut off all aid. The World Bank did the same. Washington announced that there would be sanctions against any bank which moved money into or out of Afghanistan.

Epidemic

The Afghan financial system collapsed. The government could not pay doctors, nurses, teachers, civil servants or police.

During the occupation, foreign aid had paid 75 percent of the government budget. Now that was gone, and the economy collapsed.

In previous droughts, international charities and NGOs played the central role in distributing food. Now they cannot get money into or out of the country. That means they cannot pay people to distribute or move the food.

Moreover, hospitals and clinics are running out of supplies and nurses and doctors are not being paid. This matters because in many famines the main killer is not direct starvation, but the effect of disease on weakened and malnourished bodies.

And of course there is also a covid epidemic raging in Afghanistan.

Humanitarian

None of this is a secret. It is happening in plain sight. The *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Al-Jazeera* and much of the rest of the media are reporting this.

Indeed, the point of sanctions is always to make a show of power after a defeat, so that people in other countries are afraid to defy a super-power.

Senior staff in many international aid agencies and the Red Cross and Red Crescent have

gone to the media, protesting desperately about US government policy.

This has had an impact. Many countries have pledged substantial sums in aid.

The US government announced that they would contribute to humanitarian aid. They would also make specific exceptions, case by case, for banks to be allowed to move money in or out of Afghanistan for humanitarian reasons.

Punish

But the food and medical supplies are not appearing on the ground. The economy remains in free fall.

The staff at the aid agencies say that the banks still won't allow them to move money. The bankers tell the agencies that they dare not. In spite of the more recent statements by Washington, they fear the US government will punish them.

The bankers are probably right. As far as the aid workers can tell, the US government is saying one thing in public, and is implacable in private.

This terrible wrong is being committed in the full view of the world. Like me, many readers of *The Ecologist* care passionately about climate breakdown. We have marched for the climate, protested and feared the future.

That future is upon us. The Afghans are at the cutting edge of something that is beginning all over the world. We should help them, not punish them.

Bones

It is time to raise our voices. If enough people protest, in enough countries, some charities, some banks and some governments will have the courage to break the sanctions. Even Washington and Biden can be shamed if the outbreak is loud enough.

The Ecologist is published in Britain, my home too. Let us not forget that our government, and the banks in the City of London, are utterly complicit too in a policy to punish the Afghan population for ridding themselves of foreign occupation.

The United States and Britain and other governments, say that they don't want to recognize or aid the Taliban because their policies are opposed to the rights of women.

The majority of the dead, though, will be women and children, because the majority of Afghans are women and children. Those who now carry the small coffins and wail beside the small graves are mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.

Christina Goldbaum in the *New York Times* again: "At Mirwais Regional Hospital in Kandahar this fall, children suffering from malnutrition and disease crowded onto the pediatric ward's worn metal beds.

"In the intensive care unit, an eerie silence filled the large room as children too weak to cry visibly wasted away, their breath labored and skin sagging off protruding bones."

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