

Humanitarian impact and trends analysis: Executive summary

The Taliban took control of the Afghan capital Kabul on 15 August and consolidated control over nearly all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces following a rapid military offensive that started at the beginning of May. Fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan government forces escalated after the April announcement that US and NATO troops would withdraw from Afghanistan. Following the partial withdrawal of the troops, the Taliban rapidly overran the majority of Afghanistan's provinces in the first half of August. This report aims to provide an overview of the recent developments related to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan against the key trends in conflict and humanitarian needs reported in 2021.

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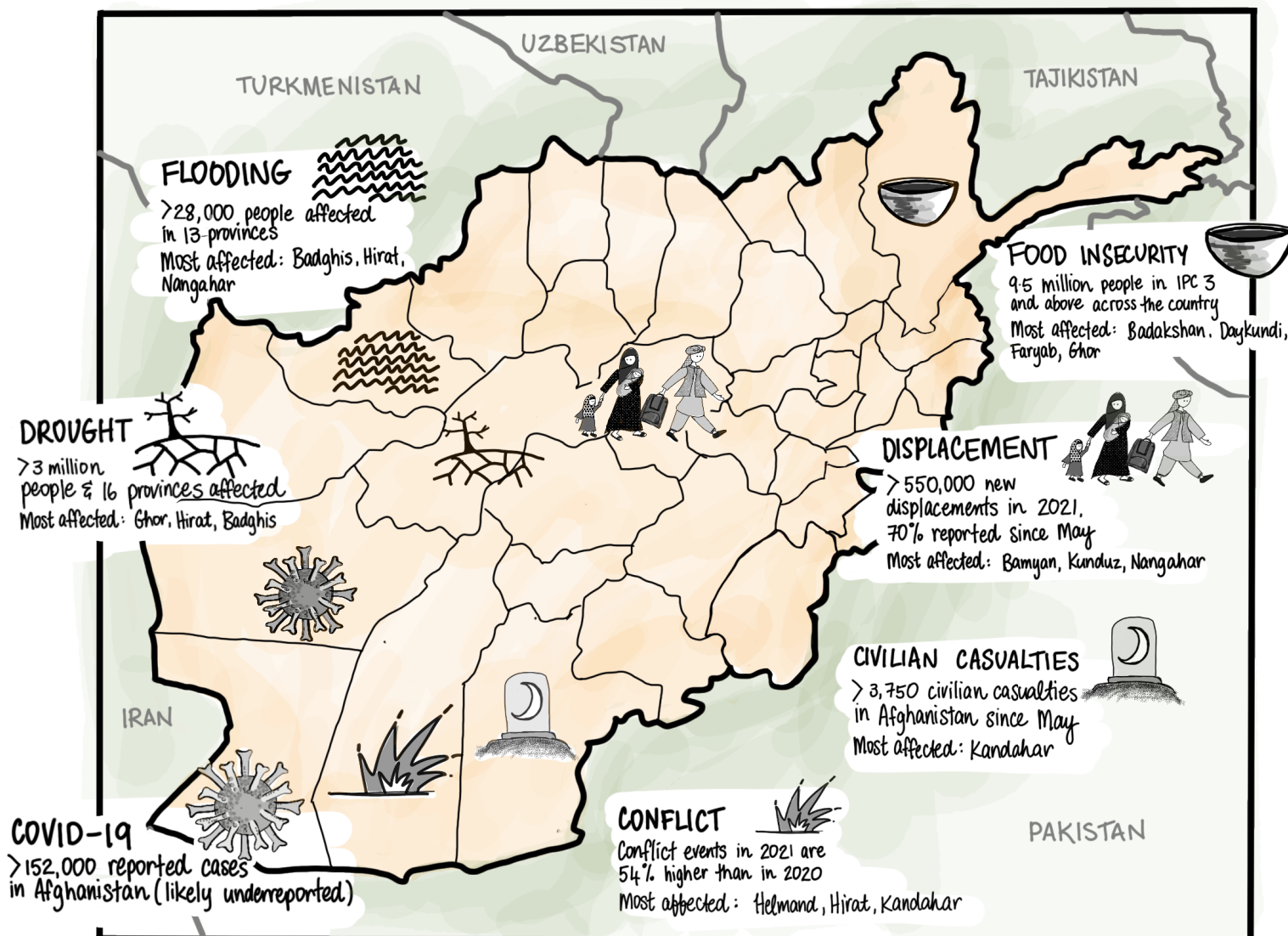


Illustration by Sandie Walton-Ellery

Key findings

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

The full impact of the recent takeover of power by the Taliban on humanitarian needs is not yet clear. Levels of conflict, civilian casualties, and displacement reported in Afghanistan in 2021 have been considerably higher than in recent years, which is likely to drive an increase in humanitarian needs. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan has already increased significantly in the past 18 months, reaching over 18 million people in need and reversing the decreasing trend reported since 2014. The main trends that are expected to drive humanitarian needs in the coming months are:

- The intensification of conflict over the past months and the volatile security situation have resulted in many civilian casualties. Over 3,700 civilian casualties have been reported between the beginning of May and mid-August as a result of rapid conflict escalation between the Taliban and Afghan armed forces.
- Internal displacement has increased significantly. More than 400,000 people were registered as newly displaced since the beginning of May, bringing the total number of people displaced by conflict in Afghanistan in 2021 to over 550,000.

SECTORAL PRIORITIES

With the country under fragmented Taliban authority, it is likely that the provision of basic services will be disrupted and prices of basic commodities will increase. Key priorities for the response are likely to be:

- **Health:** months of violence resulted in disruptions to health services and increased health needs among injured and displaced people. 14.5 million people (about 33% of the population) were in need of health assistance before the recent escalation.
- **Food:** the combined effects of drought, the coronavirus pandemic, conflict escalation, and humanitarian access constraints after the change of power may further worsen the food security situation in the country. 9.1 million people were already projected to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or higher levels of acute food insecurity between June–November 2021.
- **Protection:** increasing protection concerns have been emerging since May, including targeted killings, enforced disappearances, violence against women and children, forced marriages, access and mobility constraints, and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools, and health clinics. 12.8 million people were estimated to be in need of protection assistance at the beginning of 2021.

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS CONSTRAINTS

After the rapid takeover of power by the Taliban, humanitarian access constraints are extremely high, and gaps in assistance may lead to further deterioration of humanitarian needs. Humanitarian organisations are likely to pause or delay operations to ensure staff safety, obtain access approvals from the Taliban, and reassess priorities. While the Taliban have made official statements about welcoming humanitarian presence and operations, several factors are likely to hamper humanitarian activities, including uncertain access conditions, existing risks around violence against humanitarians, lack of available information, concerns around data collection, and interference in humanitarian operations.

PRE-EXISTING CRISES

Recent developments add to a number of pre-existing crises, including drought, flooding, and COVID-19. Coupled with an economic downturn in the country, this pushed the health system to the brink and severely depleted people's mechanisms to cope with increasing needs.

Overview of recent developments

The Taliban took control of the Afghan capital Kabul on 15 August and consolidated control over nearly all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces following a rapid military offensive that started at the beginning of May. Fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan government forces escalated after the April announcement that US and NATO troops would withdraw from Afghanistan. Following the partial withdrawal of the troops, the Taliban rapidly overran the majority of Afghanistan's provinces in the first half of August (Long War Journal accessed 20/08/2021, GCRP 19/08/2021, ISPI 17/08/2021). The escalation of conflict between the Taliban and Afghan government forces since May resulted in a rapid increase in civilian casualties, displacement, and protection concerns.

CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

Over 3,750 civilian casualties have been reported between 1 May and mid-August, compared to less than 2,800 civilian casualties reported in the first four months of 2021. Increased armed conflict resulted in over 23,000 conflict-related fatalities between May–July – almost double what was reported between January–April (GCR2P 17/08/2021; ACLED accessed 20/08/2021; UNAMA 26/07/2021).

The highest impact of the conflict on civilians was reported in Kandahar, where most civilian casualties were verified by humanitarian actors, as well as Bayman province and Kunduz, which registered the highest conflict-related displacement rates. Kandahar and Helmand provinces were most affected by violent conflict between May–July (ACLED accessed 21/08/2021; OCHA accessed 20/08/2021; OCHA Situation Reports 05–08/2021).

DISPLACEMENT

More than 400,000 people were registered as newly displaced by conflict since the beginning of May, bringing the total number of people displaced by conflict in Afghanistan

in 2021 to 550,000 (OCHA accessed 20/08/2021). People often fled to Kabul and other cities, seeking safety from conflict and other threats. A displacement movement towards Kabul has been reported since July, but exact numbers cannot be verified (OCHA 19/08/2021). Displacement patterns are likely to be fluid, with some people deciding to return following the Taliban taking control of most of the country and others fleeing to neighbouring countries.

PROTECTION

Reports of increasing protection concerns have been emerging since May, despite Taliban leadership statements pledging inclusiveness and respect towards human rights. Targeted killings, enforced disappearances, violence against women and children, forced marriages, increasing access constraints, and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools, and health clinics, have been reported in areas seized by the Taliban (GCR2P 18/08/2021). Excessive use of force on people protesting against the Taliban or attempting to flee Afghanistan is a growing concern (HRW 18/08/2021). The Taliban have imposed strict controls outside the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, blocking many included in the lists of those who can be evacuated. Gunshots have been reported around the airport, with at least 12 people killed as at 19 August (Reuters 19/08/2021). Protection concerns are great, especially for women, minorities, people in rural areas, and those affiliated with foreign entities (OHCHR 17/08/2021; UN Women 18/08/2021).

VOLATILE SECURITY AND POLITICAL SITUATION

Anti-Taliban protests reported in Kabul and other cities were met with violence (The New York Times 19/08/2021; Al Jazeera 18/08/2021). Localised conflict is likely to continue as anti-Taliban opposition and armed groups attempt to retake areas seized by the Taliban (VOA 20/08/2021).

The security and political situation in the country is rapidly evolving. A Coordination Council was formed as a transitional government consisting of Afghanistan's former president Hamid Karzai, a government official from Kabul, and a former militant leader (Gandhara 15/08/2021; The New York Times 15/08/2021). Senior officials of the Taliban Political Commission arrived in Kandahar on 17 August and are expected to start negotiations soon on behalf of the Taliban with the members of the Coordination Council (IOM 19/08/2021). It is unclear whether the Taliban will recognise any transitional government.

On 15 August, the US administration froze Afghan government's reserves held in US bank accounts to prevent the Taliban from accessing billions of dollars. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and is heavily dependent on American aid, which is now in jeopardy (The Washington Post 17/08/2021).

Lack of a central authority and country fragmentation: The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and power takeover by the Taliban has left the country fragmented, with an unstable administration and civil servants fearing retribution. Taliban authority is likely to lack the technical capacity to successfully deliver basic services; their ability to govern will depend on the collaboration of existing civil servants. The Taliban extended statements of amnesty in many areas in an attempt to convince local government employees to continue working. On the other hand, reports of abuses, detention, and targeted executions have emerged from some areas seized by the Taliban, showing that there is no unified approach in areas governed by different leaders. To date, the Taliban have not presented a common political vision for the entire country. Different approaches towards governance and politics seem to be emerging within the movement, and multiple other militias and tribal groups are still retaining control over their respective areas (ICG 14/08/2021; CFR 19/08/2021).

Key concerns for the affected population

Lack of access to basic services

By the start of 2021, the UN estimated 18 million people in need in Afghanistan. Almost half of the Afghan population is in need of humanitarian assistance, while about 80% needs social assistance to prevent the development of worse humanitarian needs (OCHA 19/12/2020, 09/01/2021, and 9/05/2021). The increased displacement and the impact of COVID-19, drought, and flash floods have all aggravated needs. It is likely that the delivery of basic services will fall even more on humanitarian organisations, as the Taliban authority may lack technical capacities to successfully deliver them.

Availability & accessibility of basic commodities

Commodities remained available as at mid-August, but prices of food and diesel fuel have increased following insecurity and access constraints reported since May (WFP 29/06/2021, 31/07/2021, and 10/08/2021). Shops and markets that had closed temporarily because of insecurity have reopened in some areas as the security situation has improved (OCHA 19/08/2021). The Taliban are in control of border crossings. Import activities are likely to continue but with disruptions, affecting the availability of basic commodities and increasing prices (Reuters 19/08/2021; Institute of Export and International Trade 16/08/2021). People's access to basic commodities is likely to be limited by the lack of operating banks and ATMs, which prevents them from accessing their savings, as well as insecurity and mobility restrictions (KII 20/08/2021).

Insecurity

It is difficult to anticipate the levels of insecurity and conflict following the Taliban takeover. As at mid-August, the Taliban controlled the majority of provincial capitals, but the extent of their control over vast rural territories is unknown. Exerting control over the entire country will require significant resources. While the US administration has frozen Afghan government's reserves held in US bank accounts, the Taliban are likely to access resources through other channels (The New York Times 18/08/2021; Financial Times 20/08/2021; The Wall Street Journal 05/07/2021). Hotspots of resistance such as Panjshir province and protests against Taliban rule are highly likely to occur. Localised conflict is likely to continue, as anti-Taliban opposition and armed groups are trying to capture areas that were seized by the Taliban (VOA 20/08/2021). This is likely to prompt violent retributions against resistance, triggering more civilian casualties, displacement, and protection concerns. The sense of insecurity, fear, and uncertainty will prevail among the Afghan population even in the absence of active conflict (Long War Journal 18/08/2021; National Geographic 15/08/2021).

Position and protection of women

Despite statements guaranteeing women's ability to work and study, there are reports that the Taliban have started to reimpose patterns of restrictions on women in some areas, including forced marriages (especially concerning young girls) and severe limitations on freedom of movement (The Wall Street Journal 12/08/2021; GCR2P 17/08/2021). Women are at risk of facing severe mobility restrictions and lack of access

to services, livelihoods, and education. In some districts under Taliban control, women are not allowed to leave their homes without a male escort (mahram) and are required to wear the hijab outside their homes. There are fears that refusal to abide by such rules might imply severe consequences, including death (OHCHR 10/08/2021; India Today 09/08/2021). Lack of protection and gender-based violence services is pervasive in Afghanistan and is likely to be limited further under Taliban rule (The New Humanitarian 16/12/2020).

Fear of ethnic retribution

There are 14 ethnic groups in Afghanistan, with the majority of Afghans belonging to the Pashtun ethnicity. The Hazara ethnic group accounts for 10–12% of the country's population, down from 65% in the past as a result of violence, oppression, and targeted massacres. They live mostly in central Afghanistan, particularly in the Bamiyan province (DH 18/08/2021; The Indian Express 20/08/2021). During the Taliban rule in the 1990s, thousands of Hazara people were massacred because of different ethnicity and practising Shia Islam. Despite initial declarations of no discrimination against Shia Muslims, Taliban fighters brutally killed nine Hazara men after taking control of Ghazni province in July (Amnesty International 19/08/2021).

Key concerns for humanitarian operations

Impact on operations

The risk of a total suspension of humanitarian operations in Afghanistan remained low as at mid-August, with most operations resuming after a temporary suspension caused by the conflict. Humanitarian agencies are likely to pause or delay operations to ensure staff safety, obtain access approvals from the Taliban, and reassess priorities (OCHA 19/08/2021; BBC 16/08/2021). Taliban representatives have visited humanitarian organisations in some areas to ask about their operations and request continuous aid delivery, but the risk of violence against humanitarians remains high, with reports of armed men seizing some NGO offices in areas where clashes with Afghan government forces were more severe (The New Humanitarian 16/08/2021; KII 17/08/2021).

Staff safety

Many NGOs were not operating at full capacity as at mid-August to ensure the safety of their staff. The safety of female aid workers and their ability to move safely and work under Taliban rule is a concern for humanitarian organisations (Devex 16/08/2021). While several humanitarian organisations implemented plans to evacuate international workers, national staff (who make up the majority of humanitarian workers) face the most severe risks. Many Afghan aid workers chose to flee provinces that fell under control of the Taliban out of fear for their personal safety – not necessarily because of their work with humanitarian organisations but for being associated with the international military or belonging to a tribe targeted by the Taliban (The New Humanitarian 16/08/2021).

Logistical constraints

Neighbouring countries' response to the Taliban taking over and potential border closures are likely to increase logistical challenges and lead to the disruption of supply chains (KII 17/08/2021). Emergency services (such as food, shelter, and health assistance) will likely be delayed or suspended if supply chains are disrupted. Some NGOs are taking pre-emptive measures by storing supplies in warehouses across the country or at border points in Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Other NGOs are identifying alternative corridors and establishing logistical hubs at border posts with neighbouring countries to avoid supply chain disruptions (UNHCR 16/08/2021, WFP 17/08/2021). However, movement restrictions inside the country might hinder supply for NGOs' warehouses and increase the risk of aid diversion. The Taliban established checkpoints throughout Kabul, and NGOs need to sign agreements with them to facilitate access, transportation, and safe passage (The Wall Street Journal 16/08/2021; KII 17/08/2021).

Declining resources

Some donors are likely to impose comprehensive control over aid resources to manage the risk of aid diversion. In late July, funding was already low, with a \$1.3 billion appeal less than 40% funded (UN News 15/07/2021). On 12 August, Germany – one of the country's biggest donors – announced it would stop providing financial aid to Afghanistan if the Taliban started implementing Sharia law (Devex 16/08/2021; Politico 12/08/2021).

Levy requests

Levy requests are likely to increase under Taliban control and affect the delivery of aid. Limited data indicates that Taliban levy requests may be shifting from in-cash to in-kind requests. Instead of asking for an in-cash percentage of a certain operation's budget, the Taliban have requested a percentage of distributed items from people after they receive aid from NGOs. Such a shift makes it harder for humanitarian organisations to prevent post-distribution taxation despite monitoring policies implemented in some locations. Most aid recipients are reluctant to share such information with aid providers, concerned they could lose the assistance altogether (OCHA 22/07/2021). The Taliban continue to be the source of most levy demands, even though Taliban leaders confirm that levies on humanitarian goods and services are not part of their official policy (OCHA 08/06/2020).

Information management

In the past, humanitarian responders in Taliban-controlled areas had raised challenges regarding data collection, lists of aid recipients, and use of technology. The current Taliban position on data collection is not yet clear, but disruptions to assessments and assistance delivery are expected to occur (KII 20/08/2021). Loss of baseline information about the population's needs and whereabouts is likely during the process of power transfer. NGOs should pay attention to the need for coordination processes, information sharing, and continuous monitoring between organisations and active government ministries (KII 17/08/2021).