

Memorandum Submitted to the House of Commons
by
Catherine A. Bertini
Executive Director of the World Food Programme

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AFGHANISTAN: THE STRUGGLE TO REACH THE HUNGRY

The World Food Programme is pleased to provide to the House of Commons with a summary of the measures it has taken to overcome hunger among Afghans both before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11th upon the United States.

Today, for the first time, WFP surpassed its monthly goal of delivering 52,000 metric tonnes of food into Afghanistan and we are now confident that we will be able to maintain this pace. But this achievement is not the same as winning the struggle to end hunger among Afghans. Maintaining law and order on supply routes is critical to continued success in moving food into Afghanistan. The non-government organizations with which we work are working hard to distribute food stocks within the country, as shifting lines of battle have created security hazards that may well reduce food movements over the near term. But even with sufficient food stocks inside the country, it is always difficult to ensure that the most vulnerable, rather than the strongest, are receiving food aid.

The Government of the United Kingdom has a strong record of generosity to the Afghan people both on its own and through the aid programmes of the European Union. At the same time, it has a keen appreciation of the political and social complexities of Afghanistan. The UK is now heavily engaged both on the humanitarian front and in seeking long-term diplomatic solutions to the chronic conflict that has scarred the lives of generations of Afghans. Minister Short and the staff of DFID were the first to contact the World Food Programme offering assistance in moving food aid into the region. We recently received an emergency contribution of £3 million (totalling \$4.4 million) on top of two earlier donations for drought victims and Afghan refugees of £2.7 million (\$3.8 million).

The Setting for a Humanitarian Crisis

Even before September 11th, the World Food Programme was sounding the alarm on Afghanistan. Last summer we were feeding 3.8 million Afghans in our emergency operation, but we had already raised the target to 5.5 million people in a new emergency operation that would have begun November 1. Chronic poverty and civil war, the destruction of crops and farmland, and a three-year long drought which has stripped many of their assets had already brought extreme hunger to certain areas. Today our goal is to feed 6 million Afghans, plus potentially up to 1.5 million refugees.

The lives of countless Afghans have been scarred by chronic instability. Many have been repeatedly uprooted by the civil war between the Taliban and the Northern

Alliance. Farmers have seen their fields and orchards torched. What the soldiers missed was often lost to the relentless drought that has gripped the country for more than three years.

Our colleagues at UNICEF tell us that Afghan families have among the highest rates of infant mortality in the world. Women die in pregnancy and childbirth at alarming rates. In much of the country, women cannot work to help support their families and girls cannot attend school. Large families are viewed as investments and a source of pride -- but there is not enough food and one out of every 4 children dies before reaching the age of 5. Often the women -- even pregnant women -- eat last, damaging not only their own health but the prospects of future generations of Afghans. The malnourished population is especially susceptible to diarrheal diseases, particularly the children, and to tuberculosis. Diseases like leprosy and haemorrhagic fever that are far less common elsewhere in the region continue to plague Afghans.

What have we at WFP done to help? We have invested heavily in women's bakeries which provide a steady source of bread in the larger cities and a source of employment for women. We have also been supplying wheat to commercial bakeries. Outside the cities we have supported, in conjunction with a number of NGOs, a whole range of food aid activities --

- ◆ food-for-work -- especially aimed at rehabilitating farmland and irrigation to lessen the impact of drought
- ◆ food for education -- We have used food to encourage school attendance and have met with success, especially in encouraging more girls to go to school (where girls' education is not banned).
- ◆ free relief distributions to selected drought victims
- ◆ institutional feeding in hospitals and orphanages, and
- ◆ rations for the internally displaced and, when conditions have permitted, repatriation food packages for families returning home after being dislocated by war.

The Current Crisis: What We Have Done Thus Far

Since mid-September, the World Food Programme has tried to put out one simple message to anyone and everyone who will listen: What we are facing today in Afghanistan is a food crisis for at least 6 million people. That message remains largely valid today. The challenge is food -- how to deliver it into Afghanistan, how to see it is distributed properly inside the country and how to build stocks to help Afghans survive the winter. The often-predicted surge of refugees across the border has not materialized.

What have we done to deal with the current crisis? With dramatic reports that Afghans in rural areas have resorted to eating animal fodder and malnutrition is on the rise, we have moved as quickly as security conditions have permitted. We have taken the following initiatives:

1. In mid-September we began our drive to replenish stocks inside Afghanistan, move food to our NGO partners at distribution points and build reserves for winter. In recent days we have averaged more than 2000 trucks on the road in the effort to deliver food.
2. We have continued support to bakeries and IDPs, food-for-work, food-for-education and supplementary feeding programmes.
3. We have successfully pre-positioned food stocks for any potential flow of refugees and continued feeding hundreds of thousands of Afghans already in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran.
4. We have appealed to donors to help us reinforce our operations in adjacent countries, such as in drought ravaged Tajikistan, an extremely poor country emerging from a harsh civil conflict where roughly 1 million people may run out of food.
5. Finally, we have launched a regional logistics operation to help move all UN humanitarian aid quickly.

A Logistical Challenge

Operating in the dangerous climate of Afghanistan is not new to WFP. We have been there for decades and are all too familiar with the many obstacles -- good paved roads are few and unpaved roads are often impassable in winter. As the battle lines have shifted back and forth between the Taliban and Northern Alliance, and earlier between a coalition of Afghan fighters and the Russians, the landscape has become littered with land mines that present a constant peril. Difficult terrain has led us to use every type of transport imaginable to deliver food, from truck convoys to airlifts to caravans of mules.

We are continuing to meet the logistical challenge Afghanistan presents to us. In fact, the United Nations has asked us to set up operations on behalf of the whole system to provide logistical support and a UN-wide communications system. This Special Operation will provide air service in the region for both humanitarian cargo and passengers for UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR and UNDP and operational NGOs. The Operation has also set up a Joint UN Logistics Cell to coordinate humanitarian shipments to avoid competitive bidding and bottlenecks in Pakistan and other neighboring countries. We are purchasing 150 trucks and we are bringing in an additional 200 from other regions -- to complement the local commercial trucking capacity. We are also providing bulldozers and snow plows for deliveries through the high mountain passes. DFID has stepped in to assist on the difficult Osh-Faizabad corridor by funding the movement of 9000 mt of WFP food through an agreement with the Russian aid agency EMERCOM. Two convoys are now on their way.

One of our greatest worries is keeping our food secure. This problem may become more severe in the coming weeks until the situation stabilizes. There were reports of some UN offices being looted in Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar. While there has been significant looting as the Taliban forces have withdrawn from Mazar e Sharif and Kabul the Northern Alliance has moved in, the situation has remained orderly in Herat. The situation is not clear in other cities. Three weeks ago we began moving food directly to the district level rather than warehousing it in larger urban centers which helped with this security issue and expedited delivery to distribution points in areas where we have a narrowing window of opportunity before the onset of winter. Roughly 14 percent of the vulnerable population, or about 1 million people, will be very hard to reach in winter. The pace of deliveries has picked up markedly and since October 15 we have actually exceeded our delivery goals. While some difficulties with fuel supplies and some deterioration in local authority cloud the picture, we remain confident we can maintain and even build on this pace once the security of major roads, especially from Quetta and Peshawar is assured.

Our local staff and those of our valued partners, such as the British NGOs Oxfam, Islamic Relief (UK) and Ockenden International, remain courageously at work on the ground, but they have not been able to distribute food locally at the pace required. International staff, who have been subject to threats and harassment, were withdrawn earlier. Distributions for October inside Afghanistan were only on the order of about 23,000 metric tons. But we have now signed about 50 contracts with NGOs to distribute 300,000 mt in nearly all the vulnerable regions and urban centers in the country over the next 3 to 6 months, and the pace of distribution by NGO partners is reported to have picked up accordingly.

The principal logistical issues seem to be under control. Mr. Kenzo Oshima, Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, recently negotiated with the Uzbek authorities and the Northern Alliance on opening up a new corridor to ship food down to Mazar e Sharif. We also plan airlifts of food into Faizabad as soon as United Nations security officials agree to the return of international staff there because winter will limit deliveries by road. Reports now indicate that the area is relatively secure. This would greatly enhance our capacity to stockpile for the winter. Additional airdrops of wheat may be needed in certain locations, depending on the unfolding law and order situation in various remote parts of the country.

Communications, or the lack of them, present a major challenge. As the use of HF radios has been restricted and satellite communications prohibited by the Taliban in parts of the country under their control, it is extremely difficult for us and our NGO partners to make plans with our staff inside Afghanistan. With the shift in control in the north, we have already seen some improvements as our email and phone links to Kabul have been restored.

Finally, security for staff has been and will be one of the biggest obstacles we face. We need international staff back in Afghanistan to ensure effective monitoring of food distribution and to assess the food situation on an ongoing basis. It is especially critical to keep our vulnerability mapping capacity up to date so we can target food distribution most efficiently. While many of our national staff remained in Afghanistan and worked

under dangerous conditions, many more will need to return to work for us to be fully effective.

The Need for Coordination

Our NGO partners are crucial to the success of this operation since they handle most local distributions once WFP has moved food into Afghanistan. But sound coordination will be critical -- we cannot afford the inefficiency caused by competition among aid providers for trucks or warehouse space or duplicate rations. Our staff in Islamabad is working with DFID representatives and other donor agencies, our UN colleagues and NGOs to ensure that we have maximum impact and it is not diluted by duplicate food pipelines or uncoordinated distributions.

Looking Ahead

The food crisis in Afghanistan will not go away. There was a massive food emergency in Afghanistan before the terrorist attacks of September 11. Ironically, we probably have more food now to deal with the impact of decades of war and a severe drought than we might have had otherwise. But the emergency will last quite some time and demands will be high.

The United Nations and its member states have already begun to envision longer term reconstruction plans for Afghanistan. But we are confronted with some of the most depressing social indicators in the world -- one child in three is an orphan; literacy is low and among girls it is only 3 percent; and medical care is appalling with average life expectancy of only 40 years and strict religious prohibitions have left many Afghan women with no access to medical care at all.

The Role of the United Kingdom

The role of the United Kingdom in this humanitarian crisis is important. The cooperation of all our major donors is crucial, especially with regard to flexible cash contributions. We are beginning a long-term struggle and more aid will be needed. Once the military campaign is ended and political stability restored, we will face a major rehabilitation and development challenge. The World Food Programme hopes it can count on the continued generosity of the United Kingdom.