

## Leaders

**The Northern Alliance** is a coalition of ethnic groups in [Afghanistan](#) including [Tajiks](#), [Uzbeks](#), [Shiite Muslims](#), and others, formed after being defeated by the [Taliban](#), who became Afghanistan's ruling party. They worked with the [United States](#) and [Great Britain](#) to fight the Taliban government, and are trying to bring a more democratic-style government back to Afghanistan.

### Abdul Rashid Dostum

**Former Afghan defense minister, warlord, leader of the Union of the North**

**Born:** 1954

**Birthplace:** Khowja Dokoh, Juzjan Province, north Afghanistan

An Uzbek, a minority group closely related to the Turks, Dostum joined the mujahideen in 1985. He later joined the communist government, serving as defense minister for President Muhammad Najibullah, until the [mujahideen](#) defeated it in 1992. For the next couple of years, Dostum's forces allied with various other military factions, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Pashtun warriors and the Shi'ite guerrillas. In 1995, Dostum agreed to a United Nations plan for an interim government. After the [Taliban](#) capture of [Kabul](#) in 1996, Dostum then joined his old enemies, former president Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmed Shah Massoud, to fight the Taliban.

### Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

**Warlord, leader of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan**

**Born:** 1940s

**Birthplace:** Baghlan Province, north Afghanistan

Trained as an engineer, Hekmatyar is an ethnic Pashtun. According to some reports, he was a communist in his youth but later became a devout Muslim. Hekmatyar was the most powerful mujahideen until the [Taliban](#), leading a radical Sunni group receiving Saudi Arabian and U.S. aid. Following the fall of the communist regime in 1992, Hekmatyar was named prime minister of an interim government, which was formed with various mujahideen groups. However, continued infighting caused Hekmatyar to withdraw from the government and launch a military assault on Kabul. In 1996 Hekmatyar made peace with President Burhanuddin Rabbani, and was again named prime minister. However, three months later the Taliban captured Kabul, defeating the government. After fleeing to Iran, Hekmatyar returned to Afghanistan to fight the [Taliban](#).

### Ahmed Shah Massoud

**Former Afghan defense minister, warlord, leader of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan**

**Born:** probably 1953

**Birthplace:** Panshir, Parwan Province, north of Kabul

An ethnic Tajik, Massoud studied engineering in Kabul. After the [Soviet invasion of 1979](#), he joined the mujahideen, becoming a major anti-Soviet figure. Following the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992, Massoud served as defense minister in the interim government, but resigned in 1993. As leader of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, Massoud continued to resist the [Taliban](#), which had captured much of the country by 1996. He died when an Algerian posing as a journalist, but believed to be working for [Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda](#) network, detonated a bomb, killing both of them.

**Died:** 2001

### Current Events

#### **An Afghan woman commits self-immolation in Herat**

**This is the third case of self-immolation by Afghan women in Herat which is being reported in the past two weeks.**

A 27 years old Afghan woman committed self-immolation and died in Pushtoon Zarghon district of Herat province in Western Afghanistan on Monday, March 16.



BBC: 81 cases of self-immolation were recorded in Herat burn hospital over the solar year, 59 of them died.

Local officials confirmed the incident and say apparently she had committed self-immolation due to domestic violence. They say an investigation has been started.

Abdul Rauf Ahmadi, spokesperson of the police in the region told reporters that 80 percent of her body was burned so she died in the hospital.

This is the third case of self-immolation by Afghan women in Herat which is being reported in the past two weeks.

On March 7, 2009, an Afghan widow, Jan Bibi, out of poverty and destitution poured gasoline over her body and set herself in fire in Obe district of Herat

#### **Press freedom on decline in Afghanistan: report**

#### **Reporters Without Borders report says Taliban, security forces, local authorities and NATO forces are 'guilty of seriously obstructing the work of journalists'**

Respect for press freedom has fallen sharply in recent weeks in Afghanistan, a fact-finding mission report by international media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders said on Monday. The Paris-based organisation's report said, "The murder of Jawed Ahmad, a reporter for various Canadian news media in Kandahar, the newspaper Payman's closure as a result of pressure from conservatives and the government, and the supreme court's confirmation of Perwiz Kambakhsh's 20-year jail sentence are all evidence that press freedom is in serious crisis."

Yaqub Ibrahimi: Last year there were protests in 15 provinces on a single day, to try to get justice for Pervez. The people who marched were marching for democracy, marching

for justice, and they have been disappointed. These people are the future of Afghanistan, but they have been ignored by the people who are fighting against democracy and against human rights. They are fundamentalists. Some of them are criminals. Some of them are powerful. Some of them are in the government, and they are playing political games with the fate of an innocent man.

**The Independent**, Mar. 12, 2009

The fact-finding team visited Afghanistan in January. "Media diversity is a reality that can be attributed to the policies of President Hamid Karzai and the international community, but at the same time there has been a constant increase in violence against the press and there is little evidence of a government commitment to combating it," it found.

Taliban: The Taliban were to blame for much of the violence, but the security forces, local authorities and international military forces were also "guilty of seriously obstructing the work of journalists," the report added. "As the international community debates the strategy to adopt in Afghanistan, Reporters Without Borders urges the Afghan authorities and all the parties to the conflict to make respect for press freedom a priority." Pressure on the media could increase during the run-up to the presidential election, taking place in August, it feared. The report covered the crucial issues of journalists' safety, the problems faced by women journalists, the media law that has not been implemented, the news "black holes" in the regions where the Taliban have an upper hand and finally manipulation of information about the war's civilian casualties and the subsequent disputes.

**AFGHANISTAN: Limited scope to absorb more refugees**

**Many in these makeshift camps live in difficult circumstances and regret having returned to Afghanistan**

Life for Jamaluddin's family was much better when they lived as refugees in Pakistan in the 1990s; things have got worse since they returned to Afghanistan in 2008. "In Pakistan, there were work opportunities for me and I could earn enough to feed my children," Jamaluddin told IRIN, adding that he could not afford to buy food after they had returned to Afghanistan because he was jobless.

At the height of their exodus, Afghans made up the world's largest refugee population with 8 million people in more than 70 countries. More than 5 million of these people have returned home since 2002, according to the U.N.

**Nov. 18, 2009**

Like millions of other Afghans, war and fear of death forced Jamaluddin to flee to Pakistan.

"We had a house in Jalozai camp [North West Frontier Province, Pakistan] but it was destroyed by Pakistani forces," he said.

Jalozai was the largest Afghan refugee settlement but was demolished in June 2008 and its settlers were told either to go to their home country or move to other locations inside Pakistan.

Insecurity, land disputes and lack of jobs have stopped tens of thousands of returnees from moving to their original areas and rebuilding their houses. Some households, including Jamaluddin's, have set up tents and mud huts in different parts of the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar.

Many in these makeshift camps live in difficult circumstances and regret having returned to Afghanistan.

### **UNHCR to help more refugees return**

The return of about five million refugees from Pakistan and Iran since 2002 has been hailed as a significant achievement of the Hamid Karzai government and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). The UNHCR says the repatriation of Afghan refugees in the past seven years is "the single largest return programme" in the organisation's history.

After a winter pause, UNHCR will resume the voluntary return drive from Pakistan on 15 March and has plans to assist 220,000 refugees until the end of 2009. UNHCR's assistance programme for the voluntary return of refugees from Iran has been functioning all year round, without a winter pause.

Refugees will be helped to return amid a marked deterioration in Afghanistan's overall security, economic and humanitarian situation.

"We do not have the capacity to absorb large numbers of returnees," Shamsuddin Hamid, a spokesman for the Ministry of Refugees and Returnees' Affairs, told IRIN.

"The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly since 2006, particularly on the security front. Afghanistan is also one of the poorest countries in the world and people have very little access to basic services such as health, education and livelihoods," Ingrid MacDonald, protection and advocacy manager of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), told IRIN in Kabul.

UNHCR said the nature of the repatriation had been voluntary and refugees had the freedom of choice to return to Afghanistan or stay in host countries.

"It is our view that giving refugees the freedom and opportunity to make an informed choice is critical to the sustainability of return," Ewen MacLeod, UNHCR representative, told IRIN, adding that the return programme was influenced by a range of political, security, economic and social factors.

About 2.7 million Afghan refugees are currently registered in Pakistan and Iran. There are also many Afghan labour migrants in both neighbouring countries but their precise number is unknown.

### **Tougher refugee policies**

Millions of Afghan refugees were hosted in Pakistan and Iran in the 1980s and 1990s when the country was first invaded by the former Soviet Union and subsequently plunged into internecine armed conflicts.

However, over the past few years both countries have toughened refugee policies and agreed to host only registered Afghans in foreseeable future.

Iran has been renewing Afghan refugees' residence permits every six months, and those in Pakistan will have to renew theirs in December 2009, according to UNHCR.

Discussions facilitated by the UNHCR were scheduled in March between the Afghan and Pakistani authorities to discuss the fate of over 1.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan beyond December 2009 when their existing residence permits expire, a source who preferred anonymity told IRIN.

The Pakistani government - which is under pressure from the Afghan government, the USA and other countries to tackle extremists on its territory - has indicated it wants to put an end to the presence of Afghan refugees in its North West Frontier and Baluchistan provinces.

Iran ordered all Afghan refugees to leave Sistan and Baluchistan provinces in 2008, apparently for security reasons

Asia Times, March 14, 2009

### **Afghanistan: A surge towards disaster**

**RAWA stated, "The very first outcome of the surge for Afghan people will be increase in the number of civilian casualties ..."**

By Anthony Fenton

As United States President Barack Obama simultaneously escalates and crafts a new strategy for the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led counter-insurgency war and occupation in Afghanistan, critics say that the "surge" will send the country toward an "unmitigated disaster", the brunt of which will be borne by the civilian population.

Since Obama announced an increase in the US footprint by 17,000 soldiers on February 17, the debate over the escalation of the war in Afghanistan has reached a fever pitch.

The topic now garners more headlines than the ongoing war in Iraq.

During his presidential campaign, Obama repeatedly pledged to escalate the war.

In a speech last July, Obama called for "at least two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan", and said that "we need more troops, more helicopters, more satellites, more Predator drones". <sup>(1)</sup>

Although unreported at the time, Obama's campaign pledges were already beginning to be fulfilled by the outgoing Bush administration. While Obama has made frequent references to the US's having "taken [its] eye off the ball" in Afghanistan, and that his administration will correct the course, he has omitted mentioning that a "quiet surge" had already begun under his predecessor, George W Bush.

(2)

### Dating the surge

While the presence of foreign occupation forces have risen steadily in Afghanistan since at least 2004, when an anti-occupation resurgence became increasingly evident, the first signs of a more concerted escalation emerged in January 2008 when it was announced that 3,200 members of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit would deploy to bolster NATO's efforts in the south of the country. (3)



An Afghan woman on Sept. 9, 2008 holds a poster with photos of her family members, who were among 91 civilians killed on August 22, 2008 during a US led raid in Azizabad village of Shindand district of Herat province. (AP Photo)

### [Photo Gallery of US victims in Afghanistan](#)

#### [The Afghan Victim Memorial Project by Prof. Marc](#)

By April 2008, Bush announced that an additional 7,500 to 10,000 soldiers would be added in 2009. According to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the time, it was owing to "very broad bipartisan support" for a surge in Afghanistan that "this was a very safe thing for [Bush] to say". (4)

Several bipartisan reports, beginning with the report of the Iraq Study Group, of which Gates was a member, began to emerge by late 2006. In late 2007 and early 2008, several other reports, including two co-chaired by Obama's eventual National Security Advisor (retired) General James L Jones, were published. All advocated more soldiers, a better counterinsurgency strategy, and "unity of effort" among allies. (5)

In July of 2008, according to the March 2009 issue of Freedom Builder Magazine, a publication of the US Army Corps of Engineers in Afghanistan, a small group of soldiers arrived in Afghanistan "to do the base camp master planning and infrastructure design ... for an estimated 17,000 to 30,000 soldiers and marines, and their equipment". [\(6\)](#)

With all of this already underway, president Bush boasted to a National Defense University audience in September 2008 that the increased foreign presence from 2006 to 2007 from 41,000 to 62,000 "represent[s] a 'quiet surge' in Afghanistan". [\(7\)](#)

By late 2008, during the transition from Bush to Obama, reports indicated that the escalation was "already so detailed that the Pentagon has plans down to the last latrine and bullet". [\(8\)](#)

All told, the 17,000 additional US forces combined with additional forces pledged by US allies - the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Australia - will raise the foreign troop presence to 90,000 by 2010.

[\(9\)](#)

### **Obama owns Bush's legacy**

Some critics of the war have decried the continuity that Obama has shown with the policies of his predecessor. In a statement e-mailed to Asia Times Online, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) stated that "we can clearly see that there is no difference between Obama and Bush for our country".

According to RAWA, Bush and subsequently Obama's "wrong and devastated strategy ... has pushed Afghanistan and the region towards disaster and deeper conflicts". [\(10\)](#)

While the Obama administration will surely try and put its own mark on the prosecution of the war, following the completion of a series of strategic reviews that are currently underway, one analyst is skeptical of the outcome.

As'ad AbuKhalil, a professor in the Department of Politics at California State University, Stanislaus, feels that Obama is repeating the same practice as the Bush administration by re-defining the parameters of the purported success of the "surge" in Iraq.

During a telephone interview, AbuKhalil, who also runs the popular Angry Arab blog, told ATol that "the ability of these governments to deceive on these types of decisions is so easy because they redefine the goals and then claim success" after the fact. [\(11\)](#)

Contrary to the elite, bipartisan consensus inside North America that supports the war's escalation, and echoing fears that are common among Afghans, RAWA argues that "We think the 30,000 extra troops will only serve the US regional strategy in changing Afghanistan to its military base, it will have nothing to do with fighting the terrorist groups, as they claim".

### **Asia Times, March 14, 2009**

Indeed, one of the first things the Obama administration did was publicly redefine the goals of the war. In testimony to Congress at the end of January, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said that "our primary goal is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a

base for terrorists and extremists to attack the United States and our allies, and whatever else we need to do flows from that objective". [\(12\)](#)

In an interview with Canada's CBC prior to his first official visit to one of America's closest allies in the war on terror, Obama reiterated that the war is "winnable, in the sense of our ability to ensure that it is not a launching pad for attacks against North America". [\(13\)](#)

As with the case of Iraq, the purported goal of implanting Western-style democracy has been abandoned.

Despite the perception that Obama is scaling down the war in Iraq, AbuKhalil also cautioned that an end to that war is still not in sight, "The language [Obama] has used about Iraq and about the so-called withdrawal is so vague and flexible that it gives him room for leeway in order to back out of it."

If he's not careful, Obama could find himself with two quagmires on his hands. Thomas E Ricks, author of the recently released book about the US surge in Iraq, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*, writes, "I don't think the Iraq war is over, and I worry that there is much more to come than any of us suspect." [\(14\)](#)

### **Greater risk for civilians**

Drawing from the lessons learned from the Iraq surge, US generals have acknowledged that the expansion of the war in Afghanistan will result in higher levels of violence.

During a February 18 press briefing at the Pentagon, the top US general in Afghanistan, David McKiernan said, "I would expect to see a temporary time where the level of violence might go up until we transition into holding and setting conditions to build." [\(15\)](#)

Any increase in violence will add to the already skyrocketing levels of civilian casualties in recent years. According to a report released last January by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, the 2,118 civilians killed in 2008 was an increase of 40% over 2007. [\(16\)](#)

Highlighting the anticipated effect of the war's expansion on Afghans, RAWA stated, "The very first outcome of the surge for Afghan people will be increase in the number of civilian casualties ... In the past seven years, thousands of innocent people have been killed or wounded by the US/NATO bombardments. In the past weeks under Obama's rule, around 100 Afghan civilians have been killed."

One US-based analyst of the war in Afghanistan, Marc Herold, who has been compiling a database of Afghan civilian casualties since 2001, agrees with RAWA's assessment.

Herold, a professor of Economic Development and Women's Studies at the University of New Hampshire, told ATol that the surge will prove to be "an unmitigated disaster" that is likely to "make the situation much, much worse for everybody". [\(17\)](#)

Herold has calculated that the "lethality ratio" of Afghan civilians under Obama, measured as averaging 2.2-2.3 civilians killed per day, is slightly higher than the ratio in the final days of the Bush administration. [\(18\)](#)

Adding that the "basic rule of thumb is for every civilian killed you get three or four resistance fighters", Herold estimates that under Obama "we've created 3-500 Taliban and resistance. This is absolutely a losing proposition".

RAWA added that "The surge in level of troops will also result in a surge in protests against the US/NATO in Afghanistan and it will also push more people towards the Taliban and other terrorist groups as a reaction against occupation forces and their mistreatment against people."

Others, such as neo-conservative academic Max Boot, charge that those who focus only on the number of civilians killed are "naysayers", and encourages Obama to "ignore" them and not "lose his nerve" in the face of mounting criticisms. [\(19\)](#)

By contrast, commenting on the Western media's banal treatment of the war's toll on Afghan civilians, AbuKhalil said, "it can only be explained in terms of utter racism ... that the country or the media of a country can tolerate such high levels of civilian casualties on a regular basis".

For AbuKhalil, the persistent loss of Afghan life which tends to get swept away by the "propagandistic term of collateral damage", indicates that policy-makers and the media "decided this is something we can live with, this very high toll of the civilian casualties of the country we are supposedly liberating".

Washington-backed President Hamid Karzi has repeatedly decried the air strikes and other incidents, often carried out by secretive special forces units, that have led to civilian casualties. A poll conducted by the BBC and ABC News in February indicated rapidly declining support for both Karzai and the presence of foreign soldiers among the civilian population. [\(20\)](#)

### **No end in sight**

As McKiernan has stated repeatedly, it is actually wrong to characterize the occupation's escalation as a "surge", which connotes a temporary influx in the military footprint, as was the case in Iraq.

Recently, McKiernan said "this is not a temporary force uplift ... it's going to need to be sustained for some period of time ... I'm trying to look out for the next three to four or five years". [\(21\)](#)

Three to five years may itself be an underestimation of the anticipated duration of the US's stay in Afghanistan. In recent testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, (retired) Lieutenant General David Barno, a former commander in Afghanistan, said the counter-insurgency campaign that he and other experts are advocating could last until at least 2025. [\(22\)](#)

### **Ignored option: Ending the occupation**

Contrary to the elite, bipartisan consensus inside North America that supports the war's escalation, and echoing fears that are common among Afghans, RAWA argues that "We think the 30,000 extra troops will only serve the US regional strategy in changing Afghanistan to its military base, it will have nothing to do with fighting the terrorist groups, as they claim".

AbuKhalil adds that poor coverage of the conflict, combined with the "cloak of the United Nations", whose sanctioning of and presence in Afghanistan helps provide legitimacy to the war, means that "the president of the United States can do anything that he really wants, and that's what I think may allow for the worsening plight of the conditions of the civilian people of Afghanistan."

For AbuKhalil, "anything short of complete withdrawal and allowing [Afghans] to determine their future totally and independently of the United States is going to be a compromise with the principle of self-determination".

Herold feels that mapping out a way to withdraw from Afghanistan should be Obama's top priority: "I think that is what we really should be talking about here, rather than entering into a much greater degree".

While all signs indicate at least a temporary escalation of the war under Obama and General David Petraeus, who oversees the war as head of US Central Command, an immediate exit strategy appears, for now, to be off the table.

Regardless, RAWA feels that "Today many people in Afghanistan ask for withdrawal of the troops and regard them as useless to do anything good for Afghanistan."

### **AFGHANISTAN: Food still unaffordable for millions**

**About 42 percent of the country's estimated 27 million people live on less than a day, according to the US Agency for International Development (USAID).**

Wheat flour, rice and cooking oil prices have dropped by over 15 percent in the past three months but adequate food is still unaffordable for millions of Afghans living on less than US\$1 a day, according to officials.

Food prices, particularly for wheat flour, rose by up to 150 percent in 2008 because of drought, which left a domestic cereal production shortfall of about 35 percent. Export restrictions by Pakistan and other wheat exporting countries exacerbated the problem. Throughout 2008 spiralling food prices proved disastrous for millions of Afghans who were pushed into high-risk food insecurity.

**IRIN, Mar. 12, 2009**

The average price of a 50kg bag of wheat flour was 1,100 Afghanis (about US\$21) on 10 March in Kabul, down from \$36 in December 2008. A 24.5kg sack of rice has gone down to \$25 from \$37, and the cost of a 16kg canister of ghee is now \$20 instead of \$31.

"Prices have fallen considerably compared to six months ago," Abdul Matin, a shopkeeper in Kabul's main food market, told IRIN, citing food aid deliveries by aid agencies and the government, and imports from abroad as the main reasons for the fall in prices.

Food prices, particularly for wheat flour, rose by up to 150 percent in 2008 because of drought, which left a domestic cereal production shortfall of about 35 percent. Export restrictions by Pakistan and other wheat exporting countries exacerbated the problem. Throughout 2008 spiralling food prices proved disastrous for millions of Afghans who were pushed into high-risk food insecurity.

In a bid to provide a temporary safety net for about five million most vulnerable Afghans, UN agencies and the government launched a joint emergency appeal in April 2008 for over \$404 million to procure and distribute 230,000 tonnes of food aid and provide other life-saving assistance.

About 70 percent of the requested funds had been received from donors by February and food aid had reached some of the targeted population, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) said [seen an IRIN report on winter wheat aid].

### **Government action**

The government says it responded promptly to the price hikes in early 2008 by launching two joint emergency appeals, earmarked \$100 million to procure wheat from regional markets, and waived taxes on food imports.

"Food items are adequately available in the country thanks to a number of measures taken by the government and also owing to donations from countries like India, China and Russia," Saddudin Safi, head of MAIL's food security department, told IRIN.

India has pledged 250,000 tonnes of wheat aid and Russia has reported the delivery of 18,000 tonnes of wheat flour to the country.

"We hope the importation of wheat from India will further decrease prices," said Safi, adding that negotiations were still under way on how to get the wheat through Pakistan. The Indian government has reportedly decided to lift its ban on wheat exports in May 2009, a move expected to exert further downward pressure on food prices.

Much will also depend on Afghanistan's domestic agricultural production in 2009. After an impressive harvest in 2007, there was a shortfall of over two million tonnes of cereals in 2008 largely because of drought, according to MAIL.

### **No respite for the poorest**

About 42 percent of the country's estimated 27 million people live on less than \$1 a day, according to the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

A marginal reduction in food prices is good news for many but it will not ensure access to adequate food for about eight million Afghans, say experts.

Households who live just above the poverty line could benefit most from falling food prices. Spending less on food will also help middle class families to save money for other essential needs such as healthcare and the education of their children.

The **Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahideen** (also known as the **Seven Party Mujahideen Alliance** or **Peshawar Seven**) was an [Afghan](#) organization formed in 1985 by the seven Afghan [mujahideen](#) parties fighting against the [Soviet](#) and [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan](#) forces in the [Soviet-Afghan War](#). The alliance sought to function as a united diplomatic front towards the world opinion, and sought representation in the [United Nations](#) and [Organisation of the Islamic Conference](#).<sup>[1]</sup>

The constituents of the alliance fell into two categories, the political Islamists: [Islamic Party \(Khalis\)](#), [Islamic Party \(Hekmatyar\)](#), [Islamic Society \(Rabbani\)](#), and [Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan \(Sayyaf\)](#), and the traditionalists: [National Islamic Front for Afghanistan \(Gailani\)](#), [Afghanistan National Liberation Front \(Mojaddedi\)](#), and [Revolutionary Islamic Movement \(Mohammadi\)](#).

Although the alliance took its formal shape in the 1980s, it had *de facto* existed as a political bloc since May 1979, when the [Pakistani](#) government decided to limit the flow of foreign financial aid, mainly from [USA](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), to the said seven organizations, thus cutting of monetary supply to nationalist and leftwing resistance groups.<sup>[2]</sup>

KABUL, [Afghanistan](#), March 4 (UPI) -- Afghanistan is experiencing its worst drought in a decade and its food crisis is deepening as a result, experts said.

The relief agency Oxfam said that as a result of the water shortage, 5 million Afghans would face severe food shortages and possible starvation, AccuWeather.com reported Wednesday.

The Web site said the hardest hit provinces of Nangarhar, Takhar and Laghman. Experts say that tens of thousands of displaced Afghans and returning refugees from Pakistan and Iran are increasing the demand for food in the drought-ridden country. Meteorologists say that the overall [weather pattern](#) will continue to keep Afghanistan drier than normal in the coming weeks, and a weak front may bring spotty rain and snow showers to northern areas this weekend.

## **Deforestation**

*by Abdullah Qazi / September 21, 2008*

*Last updated: March 17, 2009*

Scientific studies have shown that a large part of ancient Afghanistan was covered with forests. However, today, deforestation is occurring at an alarming rate, and currently, only about 2% of Afghanistan is covered with forests. Generally, environmental experts recommend that 15 percent of a country like Afghanistan should be forested in order to prevent topsoil erosion and sustain good air quality. The largest areas of forests are located in the provinces of Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan. In fact, environmentalist have stated that if the current trend is not reversed, all forests in Afghanistan will disappear in the next 30 years. As the forests go, so will lots of wildlife species, further damaging Afghanistan's biodiversity. Moreover, not only will Afghanistan suffer

economically, but there will also be an increase in fatalities and damages as a result of flooding and even avalanches.

### Causes of deforestation in Afghanistan

1. Smuggling/illegal activities: Truck loads of timber leave Afghanistan every day, and are taken to Pakistan. The government needs to crack down on illegal logging, unfortunately, there may be some people in the government secretly involved in the timber smuggling business.
2. War: Afghanistan has been at war ever since the Soviet Invasion. The Soviet army inflicted lots of damage by uprooting numerous pistachio trees, and the various battles caused numerous uncontrolled forest fires which destroyed thousands of trees. The Taliban were also known for their "scorched earth" tactics.
3. Fuel use: Afghans have very little options in terms of the energy needed to keep warm and cook their foods. Since what little power plants and electrical lines Afghanistan did have were mostly destroyed during the many years of war, Afghans have resorted to cutting down trees and burning the wood to meet their energy needs.
4. Proper reforestation is not occurring as there is little or no incentives offered by the government.
5. Forests lands are being used for agriculture.
6. Urban encroachment: As living resources get less and less, people are moving in and settling in forest areas.

AFGHANISTAN: Deforestation marches on

17 Mar 2009 09:22:39 GMT

Source: IRIN

*Reuters and AlertNet are not responsible for the content of this article or for any external internet sites. The views expressed are the author's alone.*

JALALABAD, 17 March 2009 ([IRIN](#)) - The eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar has lost about 90 percent of its forests since 1989 - a major contributory factor to aridity, air pollution, loss of habitat and vulnerability to flash floods, according to experts and provincial officials.

Millions of trees have been lost in Nangarhar and the neighbouring provinces of Kunar and Nooristan and the ecosystem has been severely damaged because of deforestation, in part induced by drought, officials say.

In 2006 Afghan President Hamid Karzai banned tree-felling, but deforestation has continued with large-scale illegal timber exports.

Trees have also been cut down by people in need of firewood for heating and cooking.

"People still cut [down] trees on a large scale because we lack adequate means to stop

them," Hamidullah Nazir, forestry management officer at the department of agriculture in Nangarhar, told IRIN.

"In the past, over 134,000 hectares of land in the 11 districts of Nangarhar Province were forest, but now tree cover is down to less than 15,000 hectares," Nazir said. Large tracts of forest have also been lost to what were initially small fires. These often get out of control as Nangarhar only has two fire engines and very limited fire-fighting resources.

Afghan cities such as Kabul and Jalalabad (the capital of Nangarhar Province) are facing a serious crisis of air pollution which threatens public health, the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) has warned, and it linked current pollution levels to rapid deforestation: Forests are effective in soaking up carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. Deforestation has also made the country more prone to flash floods and landslides. Every year floods cause human deaths and loss of property in Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman provinces, according to the Afghanistan National Disasters Management Authority.

"Deforestation has contributed to the longstanding drought in the country," Ahmad Bakhtyar, an expert at the Ministry of Agriculture, told IRIN.

The country has also lost much of its wildlife such as snow leopard, Marco Polo sheep and Asiatic black bear because of deforestation, climate change and other environmental impacts.

Ranked the fifth least developed country in the world by the UN Development Programme, Afghanistan does not have sufficient institutional means to ensure better forest management, which has received little, if any, support from the government and its international backers in the past seven years.

## Timeline: The Taliban

## Key dates in the history of the Taliban and Contemporary Afghanistan

by Laura Hayes and Borgna Brunner

1979	<a href="#">Soviet Union invades Afghanistan.</a>
1980	Soviet troops install a puppet regime in Kabul. The U.S., Pakistan, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia offer support to <i>mujahideen</i> "freedom fighters" as they begin a guerrilla war against the Soviets. <a href="#">Top</a>
1988-1989	Soviet troops withdraw.
1992	<i>Mujahideen</i> forces, led by <a href="#">Ahmed Shah Massoud</a> , remove the Soviet-backed government of <a href="#">Mohammad Najibullah</a> . Rival militias vie for influence. <a href="#">Top</a>
1993	The factions agree on the formation of a government with <a href="#">Burhanuddin Rabbani</a> as president, but infighting continues. Lawlessness is rampant.
1994	<b>September</b> The Taliban are appointed by Pakistan to protect a trade convoy and quickly emerge as one of the strongest factions. <a href="#">Top</a>
1996	<b>September</b> The Taliban, under the leadership of <a href="#">Mullah Muhammad Omar</a> , seize control of Kabul and implement a strict interpretation of Islamic law. They exile President Rabbani and execute Najibullah.  The Taliban offer <a href="#">Osama bin Laden</a> refuge.
1997	<b>Sept.-Oct.</b> The Taliban fail to capture and hold the city of <a href="#">Mazar-i-Sharif</a> (held sacred by <a href="#">Shiites</a> as the site of <a href="#">Ali</a> 's grave). Pakistani religious schools send reinforcements to the Taliban. <a href="#">Top</a>
1998	<b>Aug. 20</b>

	<p>The U.S. launches missiles at suspected bin Laden bases in <a href="#">retaliation for the bombing of embassies</a> in Africa.</p> <p><b>Sept. 13</b> The Taliban take over the city of <a href="#">Bamian</a>.</p>
1999	<p><b>March</b> A UN-brokered peace agreement is reached between the Taliban and their main remaining foe, the Northern Alliance under Ahmed Shah Massoud. Fighting breaks out again in July.</p> <p><b>October</b> The Taliban take <a href="#">Mazar-i-Sharif</a>. There are unconfirmed reports of mass arrests and executions (numbering in the thousands) of Shiites, especially of the Hazara ethnic group.</p> <p><b>November</b> The U.N. imposes an air embargo and freezes Taliban assets in an attempt to force them to hand over bin Laden for trial.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><a href="#">Top</a></p>
2000	<p>Record cold, drought, and civil war push an estimated 200,000 <i>more</i> Afghans into <a href="#">refugee camps</a>.</p>