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Acute child malnutrition has doubled in Afghanistan Since 2012

By Mark Church

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A recent *New York Times* report on child malnutrition in Afghanistan further exposes the ongoing social catastrophe produced by the US-led invasion of the country in 2001. According to the United Nations, chronic or long-term children malnutrition cases have increased by 50 percent in the past year.

While the *Times* attempts to mystify the reasons for this escalating disaster—the January 4 article is titled “Afghanistan’s Worsening, and Baffling, Hunger Crisis”—its origins lie in the destruction of the nation’s infrastructure and economy.

The article and accompanying photo essay paints a dreadful picture of the lives of thousands of Afghan children. In hospitals across the country reporters found children suffering from diseases such as kwashiorkor and marasmus. Both diseases are the result of insufficient protein.

Kwashiorkor causes a distended belly, changes in skin and hair colour, swelling, lack of growth and a weakened immune system. Marasmus is brought about by the lack of normal growth and

the wasting away of fat and muscle tissue. This leaves children with saggy skin and aged-looking faces and bodies. Afghan children as young as eight months are reported to be suffering from marasmus.

While doctors cite major increases in these diseases in the Kandahar, Farah, Kunar, Paktia and Paktika provinces, a rapid rise of cases has been reported in Kabul, the Afghan capital.

According to the *Times*, the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul is recording 100 new cases of severe child malnutrition and five to ten deaths per month. This is double the number recorded at the hospital in 2012.

The hospital's paediatric ward, considered one of the best in Afghanistan, is now so overcrowded that two or three children are being accommodated on each bed. The centre is also critically under resourced with one non-operational incubator, one suction pump and a handful of oxygen bottles.

Even more poorly equipped regional hospitals are taking the brunt of the upsurge. The Bost hospital in Helmand Province, for example, is reporting 200 new cases a month.

Despite this, UNICEF and Afghanistan's ministry of health have refused to declare an official emergency, claiming that Afghanistan's official rate is only 7 percent of the child population and therefore below the 10 percent threshold for the crisis to be made official.

The Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey for 2010-11, conducted by UNICEF and Afghanistan's Central Statistics Organisation, found that the worst affected regions were the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. Both have been at the centre of ongoing US-led military operations against the Taliban.

The survey placed the number of children suffering from malnutrition in these provinces at 29.5 percent with about one million children under 5 malnourished. It is also estimated that 1 in 10 children die before they are five and that 59 percent of children grow up stunted because of malnutrition.

The *Times* notes the devastation and displacement brought produced by US-led occupation but then cites Médecins Sans Frontières officials who claim that the increase could be because more people were now trying to obtain medical assistance after hearing about new facilities.

Afghan women were also blamed for not breast-feeding their babies and using milk-powder and dirty water. In fact, only a quarter of the population has access to clean drinking water while many women are malnourished, impairing their ability to breastfeed.

The principal cause of this social catastrophe is the impoverished and ruined state of the Afghan nation, brought about by US-led invasion in 2001. Touted as a “war against terror”, Washington claimed the military occupation would not only remove the Taliban and Al Qaeda but bring democracy and prosperity to Afghanistan. All subsequent experience has confirmed that its principal and ongoing aim was to secure a key strategic position for US imperialism in Central Asia.

Most of the Afghan population remains mired in poverty, forced to survive on minimal wages with the average income just one dollar a day. At least 36 percent of the population lives under the official poverty line.

An International Labor Organisation (ILO) report in 2012 found that half the population did not have enough to eat and 18 percent of children were working. Those Afghans with jobs were in precarious positions. Sixty percent of hired workers are in the agriculture sector, which is still mostly subsistence based with casual employment. The next most important is the service sector which is expected to be gutted once the planned partial US-NATO withdrawal from the country is carried out.

While billions of aid dollars have been poured into the country—\$15.7 billion in 2012—most of this has been siphoned off by elements in and around the corrupt puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai—all under the oversight of the US and NATO. According to some estimates, 90 cents in the dollar is lost to corruption. Large amounts of this “aid” can only be used to purchase goods from the donating country or on specific items or to pay the high salaries of foreign staff administering various programs.

The result is that ordinary Afghans receive virtually no support or aid and what exists is incredibly fragile. That millions of Afghan children are suffering from a lack of food, clean water and medical support is a social catastrophe created by Washington and its allies.