

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/world/asia/deadly-bite-of-winter-returns-to-ill-prepared-refugee-camps-of-kabul.html?pagewanted=print>

Winter's Deadly Bite Returns to Refugee Camps of Kabul

By ROD NORDLAND
December 29, 2012

KABUL, Afghanistan — The snow that fell on a refugee camp in Kabul last week left thick powder piled voluptuously on the sagging roofs of huts and skinny tree branches, turning the squalor into a winter wonderland. The mistake of a toddler named Janan was to play in it.

By nightfall Thursday, Janan, 3, was sick. On Friday, he never woke up.

He became the first known victim to freeze to death this winter in the mud and tarpaulin warrens of Kabul's 44 refugee camps, where more than 100 children died of cold last winter.

His father, Taj Mohammad, 32, fears Janan may not be the last. "I am worried that more of my children will die," he said.

When the children died here last winter, the question was, how could this happen in the capital city, home to 2,000 aid groups, recipient of \$58 billion in development aid and at least \$3.5 billion in humanitarian aid over the past 10 years?

The question this winter is, how could it happen again?

The answer appears to be a combination of stubbornness, by the Afghan government and the refugees themselves; inadequate deliveries of aid as winter sets in; and, in some cases, desperate families who sold their winter clothes and blankets in the summer to get food.

Last winter, after news reports drew attention to the deaths, aid groups, individuals and the American military rushed in with blankets and warm clothing, charcoal and firewood.

The United Nations organized the aid to try to get supplies where they were needed most.

In a report in November, the organization's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said that distribution of fuel, cold-weather clothing, blankets and tarpaulins would begin Dec. 9 and continue through January, although the agency warned that firewood supplies for February had not yet been financed by donor countries.

Despite the preparations, matters rapidly took a turn for the worse the first time that protracted subfreezing temperatures set in with a snowstorm on Thursday and Friday.

In visits on Saturday to two camps that were the worst hit last January and February, Charahi Qambar and Nasaji Bagrami, residents were clearly ill prepared for the conditions around them now.

Small boys and girls ran through the muddy ice and snow in open sandals, flip-flops and even just barefoot. While here and there a child had a donated coat or sweater, they were the exception. Some adult men were better clothed, often with donated warm clothing, but few had hats, gloves or warm boots.

"I fear for the future," said Mohammad Yousef, the manager of Aschiana, one of the few refugee groups working in the Kabul camps. "This is only the start of the cold weather."

Abdul Wakil, 8, recounted what had happened to his little brother Janan at the Charahi Qambar camp on the western side of the capital. "He was playing in the cold and snow," Abdul Wakil said, shivering in a thin cotton shirt and trousers, a pair of toeless socks poking out of the front of his sandals, his only footwear. "Then he got sick and got a fever and died."

His father, Mr. Mohammad, filled in the blanks. They brought the 3-year-old into their mud hut, but its roof was leaking and they were out of fuel. "We couldn't get him warm again," he said. "We were just wrapping ourselves in our blankets, it was all we could do." They had received an aid distribution of charcoal 15 days earlier, but it had run out by then, he said.

Now the family, with six other young children, has a bit more fuel, donated by friends after Janan's death: a sack of sawdust donated by a carpenter, some roof poles and pieces of dried shrubs. Their only food is some bread and potatoes. Only a couple of his children have warm clothing; the rest are in rags. "That's all they have," he said, "they have nothing else to wear."

"There are 900 families here, and every family has 10 to 15 children," said Najibullah, an Aschiana worker at the Charahi Qambar camp, the biggest in Kabul. Distributions of clothing mostly came after the worst of last year's winter weather. "When the NGOs came, they gave out one jacket per house."

United Nations officials could not immediately be reached to discuss why supplies are apparently still so short in the camps.

In the past, though, officials have said the 35,000 refugees in the Kabul camps are caught in a Catch-22. Their camps are unregistered and the government wants the residents to return to their homes, so they do not qualify for many forms of emergency aid. But most of them come from war zones, particularly Helmand Province in these two large camps, and say it is not safe to return.

Even after losing one of his sons, Mr. Mohammad said he had no intention of returning south. “I would rather freeze to death than get bombed again,” he said.

In an interview last February during the height of last winter’s crisis, the head of the United Nations’ humanitarian coordination agency, Aidan O’Leary, said emergency aid was not a long-term answer. “It will keep them alive, but we can’t afford to lose sight that there has to be a better solution going forward, not to be dealing with this situation every time winter comes about,” he said.

Afghan government officials and international agencies held a meeting last summer with camp leaders to try to persuade them to take offers of allotments of farmland if the refugees would return to Helmand, but nearly all of them refused. Instead, many new refugees from the fighting arrived in the past year; nationwide, 33,000 people were newly displaced by the fighting in November, according to United Nations figures.

Camp representatives counter-proposed that they would be willing to settle on farmland in Kabul Province instead. Mohammad Ibrahim, the leader of the Nasaji Bagrami camp, said they were promised that efforts would be made to find international donors to finance that, but nothing came of it.

During the summer, Mr. Ibrahim said, camp residents still had chronic problems finding work and buying food, and many of them sold the blankets and warm clothing they had received.

“It’s true, that is what happened,” he said. “People do what they have to do to get food to eat.”

Islamuldin Jurat, spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, had not yet heard of the death of 3-year-old Janan, but was unsurprised. “We are expecting casualties,” he said. “They needed more help from the beginning of the year. From spring until now, these people did not have enough food, enough calories and fat, so in the winter they need much more food, so we are expecting the cold weather might take the lives of some children.”

So far, no children have died in the Nasaji Bagrami camp this winter, but Mr. Ibrahim said he believed it was only a matter of time.

In one hut live two widows, Rahima, 24, and Shahid, 45. They had married brothers in Marja, in Helmand, and both men were killed in an aerial bombardment six months ago; so they fled here. Between them they have 14 children, ranging in age from 8 months to 13 years. They were all crammed into a one-room mud hut with a wet floor, a ceiling that dripped from snow melt, and no stove or heater. Instead there was a small pile of embers, and over it a pot of rice. The heat was so sparse that the rice had been cooking for hours and was still not ready.

There was no other food or fuel in sight.

All of the children appeared to have colds, eyes and noses streaming. Rahima said she was painfully aware of the risk of cold to her infant son, 8-month-old Niaz Mohammad. “And I’m not only worried about him but the rest of the children, too,” she said. “They all cry at night because of the cold. We try to cover them with whatever we have but they still do.”

And then there was the hut of Baidullah, 55, whose 6-year-old son Pardeen was among the 17 children in this camp who died last winter from the cold. Mr. Baidullah, who fled with his family of seven from Helmand, said he feared his 3-year-old son Ismail will be next; he has been sick with a cold and fever for 10 days.

Mr. Baidullah’s hut has new United Nations-donated tarps on the roof, so for now it is dry. But inside there is only a metal dish of embers for heat. They place the dish inside a sandalee, a square wooden frame covered with a blanket under which they sit or lie with their legs inside. On Saturday, Ismail and his mother were huddled under the sandalee, but the embers were dwindling, and with nightfall still five hours away, the family supply of fuel was down to scraps of cardboard and plastic bottles.

“I’m worried,” Mr. Baidullah said. Not so much about another death in the family, to which he seems to have resigned himself, but about the costs of the funeral. “I don’t even have enough money for the burial shroud.”