



Memo to President Obama: Ten Point Plan to Change Course in Afghanistan

January 2009

As an aid agency implementing rural livelihood programs and supporting partner organizations for close to 20 years in 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, Oxfam has grave concerns that the current course of events is leaving Afghans less safe and placing extraordinary pressure on their livelihoods.

Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world; life expectancy is just 45 years and one of every five Afghan children dies before the age of five. Corruption is endemic, including among the police and judiciary, and the government lacks capacity at the local level, especially in key sectors such as agriculture, which forms the bedrock of Afghan livelihoods.

Security conditions are at their worst levels since 2001 and the number of insurgent attacks in 2008 was 50% higher than in 2007. Civilian casualties, caused by all sides, have continued to increase, with over 2,000 civilian deaths in 2008. Of these, nearly 800 were caused by international and Afghan government forces, yet there is still no unified or systematic mechanism for compensating victims and their families.

Insecurity has spread to previously stable areas and attacks on aid workers have increased. This is hampering development and humanitarian activities by the Afghan government and aid agencies. As of now, the United Nations cannot access half of the country.

A humanitarian crisis, affecting large parts of Afghanistan, is emerging due to an accumulation of factors, including widespread insecurity, a severe 2007-08 winter, high food prices, drought, and a high volume of Afghan returnees - in 2008 some 275,000 refugees returned from Pakistan and over 360,000 Afghans were deported from Iran. As a result of these factors, many Afghans are facing some of the worst conditions they have experienced in twenty years.

In Khers Khana village in Ashterlai, Dakundi province, located in central Afghanistan, farming land was flooded in the spring, fruit trees were damaged and animals killed by the harsh winter, and drought significantly reduced the wheat yield. With no nearby health clinic and widespread malnutrition, eight children from the village died over the last year from preventable diseases. Families in Dakundi and all over Afghanistan are being forced to take exceptional measures to support their families such as selling their animals, even though livestock prices have significantly fallen, or sending family members to Pakistan or Iran to find work.

Today, up to five million people face food shortages and the health of over a million young children and half a million women is at serious risk due to malnutrition. In 2009 there are likely to be significant food shortages that could adversely affect public health and even spark displacement or civil unrest.

There have been improvements in the effectiveness of foreign aid, but a significant proportion of assistance is still uncoordinated, inefficient or has limited impact at the local level. A large volume of aid money goes to private, profit-making companies or pays costly expatriate consultants. Assistance is over-centralized and unevenly spread throughout the country, with a disproportionate share allocated to the southern provinces in which international forces are operating. Too much aid seeks to achieve rapid material results, without sufficiently promoting local ownership, sustainable poverty reduction or longer-term capacity building.

The widespread use of military actors and contractors to implement assistance programs has contributed to a blurring of the distinction between security forces and aid agencies. This has undermined the perceived independence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), increased the risk for aid workers, and reduced humanitarian operating space and access in Afghanistan and in neighbouring Pakistan. Although Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan have undertaken significant assistance activities, they have absorbed resources that otherwise could have been devoted to civilian development activities, and so, have hindered the emergence of effective Afghan civilian and community-led development processes.

It is now widely accepted that there is no military solution to the problems facing Afghanistan, and many have called for a change in the strategy of the international community. However, the rapid deterioration of conditions in the country has prompted consideration of quick fixes, rather than long-term, comprehensive efforts.

The United States is the largest and most influential donor in Afghanistan, and as such, has the ability to directly address the deteriorating situation. Based on our research, experience and perspectives from the field, Oxfam has come up with ten steps to help change the course of events in Afghanistan. We believe if adopted in sufficient time, with sufficient political will and resources, these steps can be instrumental to establishing lasting peace and development in Afghanistan.

In short, we believe your Administration should:

- 1. Support an enhanced response to the humanitarian situation and the expansion of United Nations humanitarian personnel.**
- 2. Support a robust expansion of rural development, especially agricultural development.**
- 3. Actively promote regional cooperation to address humanitarian challenges.**
- 4. Spearhead bold measures to enhance aid effectiveness.**
- 5. Develop conditions under which Provincial Reconstruction Teams can shift their focus to achieving local security.**
- 6. Press for major governance reforms to generate an effective and accountable Afghan government.**
- 7. Take further substantive measures to prevent harm to civilians.**
- 8. Ensure the establishment of a unified system of monitoring, accountability and compensation for harm to civilians and damage to their property as a result of military operations.**
- 9. Press for the establishment of a United Nations-backed regional peace process, involving Afghanistan's neighbors and all relevant powers.**
- 10. Support an effective national and community level peace-building strategy.**

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

1 Support an enhanced response to the humanitarian situation and the expansion of United Nations humanitarian personnel.

The current humanitarian situation is jeopardizing the health and livelihoods of millions of Afghans, yet the response so far has been slow, fragmented and insufficient. The US and other major donors should provide further support for the humanitarian response by fully funding the Joint Emergency Appeal launched in July 2008, which is currently only 50% funded. In addition, the international community should support and expedite the expansion of the United Nations humanitarian leadership, coordination and monitoring capacity.

The US Ambassador to the UN should support the expansion of the UN's humanitarian leadership capacity, and the US Secretary of State should press other donors to join the US in fully funding emergency appeals for Afghanistan.

2 Support a robust expansion of rural development, especially agricultural development.

A large proportion of Afghans are food insecure, which is due to a range of factors, but has been exacerbated by insufficient support for agriculture and rural development. Even though 80% of Afghans depend largely on agriculture to feed their families or make a living, this sector receives only a fraction of international funding. With the exception of alternative livelihood programs, support for agriculture comprises less than 5% of USAID's budget for Afghanistan since 2002; in 2007, agriculture funding comprised less than 1% of US assistance for the security sector.

As food has become increasingly unaffordable for millions of poor Afghans, malnourishment and micronutrient deficiencies are fast becoming major health threats for children under five, and pregnant and lactating women. An estimated 54% of children under five are stunted and 39% are underweight, while 21% of women of reproductive age are malnourished. Lack of access to adequate food is also one of the major factors contributing to high mortality rates. The Afghan government's capacity to respond to food insecurity and other humanitarian crises is extremely limited, and therefore it remains reliant on the efforts of the international community. More effective measures must be taken now to improve short- and long-term food security, reduce vulnerability to future disasters, and provide legitimate and viable alternatives to opium poppy cultivation.

The Administrator of USAID should increase the scale and effectiveness of US agricultural assistance at the local level and work to reform the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. The US should also press for an expansion of UN activities that support and enhance agriculture and rural development.

3 Actively promote regional cooperation to address humanitarian challenges.

At the regional level, steps should be taken to ensure that sufficient commercial and emergency supplies of grain from Pakistan and other countries are reaching Afghanistan. Refugee returns should be voluntary and gradual, and the deportation of Afghan economic migrants from Iran should not be excessive or disproportionate.

Along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, clashes between Pakistani government forces and anti-government fighters have displaced at least 350,000 Pakistanis in the northwest region, including over 200,000 from the Bajaur tribal area alone. These people have lost their homes and livelihoods and are in need of clean water, food, and health assistance. Approximately

80% of those displaced are living with host families who likewise are impoverished and have limited space and resources.

The vast majority of those affected by conflict were already living in abject poverty and have been deprived of essential services due to years of government neglect, highlighted by the pervasive denial of fundamental civil and political rights.

Spreading insecurity is also preventing thousands of children and students, including 60,000 in Swat district alone, from attending school. As a result, they face increased risk of exploitation by criminal and extremist groups.

Any strategies to promote peace and development in Afghanistan will be undermined if the people living in Pakistan's northwest border regions continue to be neglected and denied their basic rights, and if there is no effective response to the large-scale displacement.

The US Secretary of State should engage with all countries in the region to ensure that they play an active and constructive role in addressing the humanitarian challenges in Afghanistan as well as northwest Pakistan.

AID EFFECTIVENESS

4 Spearhead bold measures to enhance aid effectiveness.

The US must be commended for its generous and long-standing support for Afghanistan – but that support can achieve greater results on the ground. The US as well as other donors should take bold action to enhance aid effectiveness by increasing local ownership, channeling less aid through private contractors, enhancing aid coordination, and addressing geographical disparities in donor assistance.

To strengthen local ownership, the US should (1) make its aid funding as transparent, predictable and long-term as possible, including providing an indication of overall US assistance to Afghanistan for the next three to five years – as per the Accra Agenda for Action (September 2008), (2) take steps to ensure that Afghans are fully involved in the design and implementation of programs, such as the Afghan National Solidarity Program, and (3) increase the proportion of aid that supports Program Based Approaches, such as those facilitated by the World Bank-managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund.

Less US assistance should be channeled through private contractors. USAID allocates nearly half of its funds to five large US contractors, and while contractors are needed in the reconstruction process, excessive amounts of aid continue to be absorbed in corporate profits, especially within the layers of sub-contracts. The work of these contractors is of variable quality, and many are constrained in their ability to promote capacity building and ownership, which are vital factors for sustainability. As an example of extraordinary costs, one research organization has chronicled that, in 2005, USAID contracted the Louis Berger Group to construct a short stretch of road between Kabul center and the international airport. The Louis Berger Group then sub-contracted the project to the Afghan Reconstruction Company, and the road was constructed at a cost of over \$2.4 million per kilometer, at least four times the average cost of road construction in Afghanistan.

The US should support and fund a full assessment of the levels of need across Afghanistan in order to address regional disparities in donor assistance. Currently, the majority of aid is going to the southern provinces, which receive, per capita, three or four times what certain other provinces are receiving. For instance, in 2007 USAID was allocating over half of its budget to just four insecure provinces in the south.

The Administrator of USAID should enhance the agency's coordination with the Afghan government and other donors, review its use of contracting firms, ensure that aid has a clear focus on poverty reduction, and agree with the Afghan government and UN on priority action plans in key sectors that are coordinated, time-bound and focused on achieving local level impact.

5 Develop conditions under which the Provincial Reconstruction Teams can shift their focus to achieving local security.

PRTs can play a key role in security sector reform and can assist with the construction of major infrastructure, but because they are led by foreign militaries, their involvement in development work is unsustainable and in some instances exacerbates insecurity.

In some cases PRTs have diverted resources away from civilian development activities and institution building. For example, the US Commander's Emergency Response Program for 2008 was close to half a billion dollars, which exceeds the total amount the Afghan government spent on health and education in 2007. In addition, PRTs are limited in their capacity to promote effective development, which is based on Afghan ownership and medium- to long-term capacity building of Afghan institutions.

In the short term it is essential that all military and civilian PRT staff take further steps to ensure full conformity with the newly agreed Civil-Military Guidelines for Afghanistan. In the medium-to-long term, PRTs should transition out of assistance activities and donors should increasingly allocate funds to Afghan civilian and community-led development processes. It is only through Afghan institutions, organizations and communities that we can achieve truly sustainable development in Afghanistan, which will ultimately allow foreign militaries to leave.

The US Secretaries of Defense and State should develop a transition strategy for PRTs, through which they incrementally shift their focus to achieving local security, while over the medium-to-long-term, the development sphere is increasingly occupied by Afghan and civilian actors.

6 Press for major governance reforms to generate an effective and accountable Afghan government.

Corruption is undermining public trust in the Afghan government and hindering its effectiveness. The US should press the Afghan government to achieve greater transparency, increase financial scrutiny and oversight, and take concrete action against high-level corruption. Measures must be taken to remove incompetent or ineffective officials from positions of authority.

Despite some improvements, the institutional and technical capacity of government ministries remains weak, and there are profound deficiencies in human resources. At a sub-national level, state entities have minimal capacity and resources, and there is widespread uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities.

The US and other donors should give strong support to building the capacity of the Afghan government to deliver essential services at the provincial and district level, and should give stronger support to public administration reform at all levels of government.

Initiatives that are based on political patronage or perceived military advantage are no substitute for genuine reforms that seek to achieve effective and accountable governance. Given the fragile and complex security environment, priority should be given to achieving local security by enhancing and professionalizing the Afghan national police and security

forces. In addition, proposals to empower tribes to create community defense forces or to establish new district councils with a security-related function carry a high risk of drawing civilians further into the conflict and if mishandled could prove counter-productive.

As President, press for comprehensive governance reforms, especially at the sub-national level, stressing the need for a greater level of public sector capacity building, the removal of incompetent officials, and concrete action against high-level corruption.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

7 Take further substantive measures to prevent harm to civilians.

Civilian casualties caused by international military forces have continued to escalate, up in 2008 by some 30% over the previous year's record-high figures, and are undermining support for the wider international presence in Afghanistan. Far greater caution and restraint must be exercised in the execution of air strikes, which were up in 2008 by 40% from 2007, and are a major cause of civilian casualties.

As President, issue an executive order creating a high-level position at the Pentagon that will assess the potential human cost of war, promote new and proven techniques to avoid civilian casualties when the US is engaged in battle, maintain proper investigative and statistical data on civilian harm in combat zones, and ensure prompt assistance to any civilians unintentionally harmed by US combat operations.

8 Ensure the establishment of a unified system of monitoring, accountability and compensation for harm to civilians and damage to their property as a result of military operations.

Monitoring and investigation of abuses by military forces has been fragmented, accountability is limited and compensation is inconsistent and not systematic. International military forces should institute measures to enhance transparency with respect to their obligations and commitments to the Afghan people as well as standards of conduct. Troop-contributing states should unify or closely align their mechanisms for monitoring, investigation and compensation. In addition, further measures are required to expand and professionalize Afghan national security forces, and to put an end to abuses against civilians.

The US should fortify its compensation mechanisms by thoroughly investigating all incidents; increasing levels of assistance; processing claims within two years of the filing date; and creating a central record of all claims filed, decisions made and payments dispersed.

The US Secretaries of Defense and State should seek to expand and strengthen existing mechanisms that provide assistance to Afghans who have suffered as a result of US military operations. They should also seek to unify or align all mechanisms for monitoring, accountability and compensation of troop-contributing forces.

PEACE AND SECURITY INITIATIVES

9 Press for the establishment of a United Nations-backed regional peace process, involving Afghanistan's neighbors and all relevant powers.

Despite the varied regional interconnections, interests and challenges throughout a range of sectors, including security, population movements, trade, trafficking, and energy supply, there has been no attempt to forge a comprehensive regional approach to Afghanistan,

especially on security issues. Therefore, a process needs to be developed that is backed by the United Nations and supported by the US. It should involve all relevant countries and directly address their major political, security and economic concerns. Ultimately, it should strive for resolution of the region's conflicts, address underlying causes of insecurity, and achieve regional support for Afghanistan with respect to its security, political independence, territorial integrity, and economic development.

As President, initiate a dialogue on broad-based regional cooperation, and explore the possibilities for establishing a framework for a regional peace process.

10 The US should support an effective national and community-level peace-building strategy.

Peace-building is rarely mentioned in the Afghan National Development Strategy, and there has been little progress on the Afghan government's Action Plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation. The US should lend its political and financial support to an effective and inclusive peace-process that is active at both the national and local level. As highlighted by Oxfam in earlier reports, insecurity in Afghanistan often has multiple, local causes and consequences, and local violence and insecurity not only impede development, but are exploited by militants, warlords and criminal groups to strengthen their positions in the wider conflict. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a national strategy for ground-level peace-building and conflict resolution: progress achieved at the national level by power-holders can only be sustainable if it has the support of the Afghan people and rests on the foundation of local-level security.

The Administrator of USAID should provide financial support and necessary technical assistance to NGOs involved in local peace-building, and should give support to the development of a national strategy for community peace-building that is led by Afghan civil society.

CONCLUSION

With increasing and expanding insecurity, weak governance, and an impending humanitarian crisis, events in Afghanistan have reached a critical juncture. While Oxfam commends the significant aid contributions of the US and other major donors, development and stability can only be achieved by concerted, determined and effective action. This requires a substantive, long-term international commitment to the Afghan people, both in resources and political will. Such action, in which the US has a central role to play, has never been more essential, as the lives and livelihoods of millions of Afghans and the future stability of Afghanistan and the wider region are at stake.