

NATO summit's forgotten people: Afghan civilians

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More Afghan civilians died in 2011 than the total number of NATO troops killed in the past 10 years, with numbers of internal refugees hitting half a million. Amnesty International has called the plight of the Afghan people a "largely hidden but horrific humanitarian and human rights crisis"

Far from the bright lights of Chicago where world leaders met to shape NATO's exit from Afghanistan, one of the war's victims, 12-year-old Aleema, sums up her life in three words: "It's the worst."

Aleema, who has lived in a mud hovel in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Kabul for four years since her family fled fighting in southern Afghanistan, is one of the forgotten people of the NATO summit, which ended on Monday.

There the focus was on the soldiers who fight the war: getting 130,000 NATO combat troops out by a fixed deadline of 2014 and finding funds to pay Afghan forces to continue the decade-long battle against Taliban insurgents.

But civilians have borne the brunt of the war. More died in 2011 alone than the total number of NATO troops killed in 10 years.

Last year's 3,021 civilian deaths marked the fifth straight year that the toll has risen, UN figures show, while 3,007 NATO soldiers have died since the 2001 US-led invasion, according to icasualties.org.

Meanwhile the number of internal refugees last year hit nearly half a million, the highest for about a decade, part of what Amnesty International has called "a largely hidden but horrific humanitarian and human rights crisis".

And more than 30,000 Afghans sought asylum abroad last year -- another 10-year high. Thousands of others make their way abroad illegally.

Aleema, a sad-eyed girl in ragged clothes, is one of the 447,547 "internally displaced persons" who have fled their homes, mainly in the war-torn south.

Explaining why her life is "the worst", she says simply: "We don't have proper food and we don't have a proper house."

She wants to go home to Helmand province, but knows that won't happen while the fighting continues.

The Taliban are far from defeated on the battleground, a tentative peace process is in tatters and the fighting is expected to persist, if not intensify, once the foreign troops leave.

Ask Aleema's neighbors in the Charahi Qambar refugee camp, a maze of narrow dirt alleys and open drains on the western outskirts of Kabul, whom they blame for driving them from their homes and they tend to spread the net wide.

"All of them, they are all killing innocent people -- the Taliban, the foreign forces and the government forces," said Said Gul, 35, also from Helmand.

He has lived with his extended family of 18 in Charahi Qambar for four years and has lost hope of returning home, putting his future "in the hands of God".

As children play in the dirt and garbage, he sits stoically beside bowls of potatoes and onions for sale, trying to supplement what he calls "a little bit" of aid from charities.

Nigel Jenkins, country director for the US-based International Rescue Committee, said many in the aid community in Afghanistan felt the NATO withdrawal was being "rushed".

"NATO is portraying a situation in Afghanistan that is suitable for transition," he told AFP.

"That does not really stand up to scrutiny with the facts on the ground. The figures -- on internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, the civilian casualties -- speak for themselves."

Acknowledging that NATO is determined to stick to its deadline, Jenkins added: "We can't change it now. The train has left the station. But what we can do is better provide for Afghans in the most need."

Funding for aid projects is already drying up, he said, looking to a development conference on Afghanistan in Tokyo in July to help fund education and other services for Afghans when NATO troops have gone.

"There have been gains over the past 10 years and we would love to see those gains continue, but I think there is a danger they could be lost if there is a big drop in funding."

In Tokyo, governments and international organizations will discuss financial commitments for a 10-year period after 2014.

Billions of dollars of Western aid have already poured into Afghanistan since 2001. Donor nations and the UN have pledged some \$500,000 dollars this year for purely humanitarian assistance, Jenkins said.

The UN refugee agency is overhauling its approach to Afghanistan after Peter Nicolaus, UNHCR's representative in Afghanistan, in December described the strategy as the "biggest mistake UNHCR ever made".

He said the international community had failed to help returnees find a means of earning a living and so reintegrating into society.

In Aleema's squalid camp, they are not holding their breath for a dramatic change in their fortunes. None of those interviewed by AFP had heard of the NATO summit, and the Tokyo conference is likely to go equally unnoticed.

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