

# **Behind the news: Visions for peace – Voices of faith**

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## **Special Issue: Aid Cannot Wait**

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### **1. Introduction: A special issue of *Behind the News: Visions for Peace - Voices of Faith***

Over the past month, Action by Churches Together (ACT), the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) have shared a selection of statements, useful information, reflections, and worship resources through this bulletin and through the web to assist churches in responding to the current threatening situation in the wake of the 11 September attacks. The working group has also monitored ongoing events and issues from a global perspective to identify areas in urgent need of common ecumenical action and response. Such an urgent need is the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

As long as military actions continue in Afghanistan, civilians will suffer. They suffer as bombs fall on their cities, killing innocent bystanders and destroying infrastructure. They suffer as humanitarian agencies are unable to distribute food and medicine throughout most of the country. The World Food Programme estimates that 7 million Afghans are at risk unless relief can be provided soon. Winter is coming in Afghanistan and with it, many roads will be impassible, people will be cut off, and hunger will increase. With the borders of neighbouring countries closed, people inside land-locked Afghanistan are trapped. Most cannot seek safety and food outside the country. Most cannot receive it inside. For many, Afghanistan is a death trap. *Aid cannot wait.*

This special issue of Behind the News: Visions of Peace – Voices of Hope focuses on the humanitarian dimensions of the military actions currently underway against Afghanistan. The humanitarian issues are many:

- the mixing of military and humanitarian operations by the US government,
- the food crisis within Afghanistan,
- questions of access and security of humanitarian workers,
- the long-term impact of cluster bombs,
- the implications of closed borders,

- difficulties in planning for a refugee influx,
- funding shortfalls for humanitarian work, and
- the broader implications of this crisis for humanitarian response.

These are not new issues. For example, churches have been raising concerns about military involvement in humanitarian operations since long before the 1999 Kosovo crisis. Churches have a long tradition of working on issues of landmines and unexploded ordnance and of advocating for adequate financial support for emergencies.

One of the implications of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan – like previous crises in Kosovo, Rwanda, and Somalia which were highly visible in the media – is that other on-going emergencies drop even further away from the world's attention. The war in Angola has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and dragged on for 30 years. Oxfam estimates that 3,000 people a day died as a result of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While western governments have pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to support humanitarian work in Afghanistan and its neighbours, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is closing 11 offices in Africa this year, largely because of lack of funding. Before 11 September, Afghanistan, too, was a forgotten emergency, with UN programmes there funded at about 40% of their targets and the ACT appeal for victims of the Afghan drought funded at only 18%. The concern of governments in the region is that once this emergency has passed, Afghanistan and its neighbours will once again be forgotten.

The following brief descriptions of specific humanitarian concerns are excerpts from a longer background document available on the website at <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews/humanitarian.html>. For comprehensive updates from UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, governments and the press on the humanitarian emergency, see <http://www.reliefweb.int>, which has links with UN agencies and others involved in humanitarian response. For a map of Afghanistan and surrounding countries, see [http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/+PwwBmeo8hU\\_wwwwwwwwwwwwmFqhT0yfEnFqnp1xcoFqhT0yfEzFqcEhtrwDo5BwDAzmjwwwwwwwwwcwmwwwwwwwpFqmRbZ/opensdoc.pdf](http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/+PwwBmeo8hU_wwwwwwwwwwwwmFqhT0yfEnFqnp1xcoFqhT0yfEzFqcEhtrwDo5BwDAzmjwwwwwwwwwcwmwwwwwwwpFqmRbZ/opensdoc.pdf)

## **2. Lives at stake: the humanitarian issues**

### a) Mixing humanitarian and military operations

The US government has emphasized that its military actions are not directed at the Afghan people but rather at the Taliban government for its harbouring of terrorists; thus, the US military began distributing food assistance when it began its bombing raids. As of 26 October, the US military had dropped some 850,000 individual food packets inside Afghanistan. Questions have been raised about the airdrops, but the larger questions concern the relationship of military to humanitarian operations. See for example:

"Puzzle and profits in the food drops" by David Filipov and Elizabeth Neuffer, of the BostonGlobe5/2001:

[http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/298/nation/Puzzle\\_and\\_profits\\_in\\_the\\_food\\_drop\\_s+.shtml](http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/298/nation/Puzzle_and_profits_in_the_food_drop_s+.shtml);

"Radio warns Afghans over food parcels" by BBC News:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/monitoring/media\\_reports/newsid\\_1624000/1624787.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/monitoring/media_reports/newsid_1624000/1624787.stm);

"USCR (U.S. Committee for Refugees) Offers Qualified Support for U.S. Air Drops of Food":

[http://www.refugees.org/news/press\\_releases/2001/Afghan101001.cfm](http://www.refugees.org/news/press_releases/2001/Afghan101001.cfm);

While military operations have military objectives, humanitarian organizations have a fundamentally different objective: helping people in need. The consequences for humanitarian organizations of being associated with the military, even when carrying out humanitarian work, are many.

#### b) Food crisis inside Afghanistan

Afghanistan was gripped, before 11 September, by a grave food crisis as a result of three consecutive years of drought and intensifying economic problems due to continuing civil conflict. Over one million Afghans were internally displaced before 11 September.

(See [http://www.idpproject.org/country\\_in\\_focus/country\\_focus\\_afgh.htm](http://www.idpproject.org/country_in_focus/country_focus_afgh.htm) for the latest, though still incomplete, figures.)

UN assessment missions present a grim picture of both the long-term situation and the immediate needs. While the majority of the 23 million Afghans face severe food supply difficulties, some 7.5 million most affected people are in desperate need of food aid. The World Food Programme calculates that 52,000 tons of wheat must be distributed in Afghanistan each month for the next six months to stave off mass starvation. Since the aid programme was restarted – on 25 September – only 20,000 tons have been supplied. Humanitarian agencies estimate that they have less than a month to get food into Afghanistan; the onset of winter will make many roads impassible.

The countries neighbouring Afghanistan have also all experienced the consequences of drought.

#### c) Access and Security

By 16 September, all international staff of humanitarian and other agencies had been evacuated from Afghanistan. Contact between international staff evacuated to Pakistan and elsewhere and local Afghan staff who remained behind has become extremely difficult. Access to affected populations is limited because of the military actions. Even when civilians are not ostensibly being targeted, travel inside Afghanistan, particularly in areas controlled by the Taliban, is impossible for international staff and very risky for local staff. Perhaps the main impediment to delivery of relief goods is the difficulty in finding lorry drivers willing to risk the long trip into Afghanistan when already treacherous roads may become military targets.

In addition to problems of transport, a major concern is the breakdown of law and order inside Afghanistan which hinders relief efforts. Attacks on humanitarian relief agencies in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan are increasing.

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/10/aid1018.htm>

Security of humanitarian staff – both international staff and staff of Afghan organizations – is a major issue on many levels.

#### d) Cluster bombs

Afghanistan is littered with landmines. The use of cluster bombs – fist-sized, armour-penetrating, anti-personnel explosives that scatter over a wide area – are being used by US forces in Afghanistan. The United Nations and many humanitarian agencies have

called on the US to stop using the weapon which, like landmines, can have devastating long-term effects; ordnance that fails to explode on impact can continue to kill and maim long after the conflict has ended.

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/10/cluster1031.htm>.

[http://www.icbl.org/lm/factsheets/afghanistan\\_sep\\_2001.php](http://www.icbl.org/lm/factsheets/afghanistan_sep_2001.php)

See also articles available at <http://www.reliefweb.int>

#### e) Closed borders

Afghanistan is bordered by six countries: Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China. All six of these countries have closed their borders to the arrival of Afghan refugees. As Afghanistan is a land-locked country, this means that there is no legal, safe way to escape the country. In fact, Afghans have been fleeing their country since the Soviet invasion of 1979 and constitute the single largest refugee population on earth. The governments of countries hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees, particularly Pakistan and Iran, have paid a heavy price for hosting these refugees for the past two decades. In spite of international promises to support the host countries, this support has declined over the years and the host governments have been left with the burden. Their decision to keep their borders closed to potential refugee flows from Afghanistan is rooted in these broken promises.

Negotiations with both the Pakistani and Iranian governments have been intense. While some 80,000 Afghan refugees have reportedly entered Pakistan, the border remains officially closed. The Iranian government has said that it is prepared to accept camps on the Afghan side of its border, raising serious protection concerns about displaced people who seek shelter there.

One story of the despair and anguish refugees from Afghanistan are experiencing is *No food, no money -- the despair of being a refugee*: ACT Dateline Pakistan, October 26, 2001 by Aloysius Milon Khan and Rainer Lang <http://www.wcc-coe.org/photo/act-news/actnews.html>

#### f) Preparing for a refugee influx

Since the 11 September attacks, the international community has been preparing contingency plans for a major refugee influx. A regional contingency plan drawn up by UNHCR in late September predicted a refugee influx of 1.5 million people, a million of whom were expected to seek safety in Pakistan, 400,000 in Iran and 100,000 in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Planning has been complicated, of course, by the closed borders as well as by the difficulties in finding suitable locations for refugee camps. UNHCR reports difficulties in trying to assist those Afghan refugees who have entered Pakistan by irregular means as they fear being deported by the Pakistani government.

Preparing for a refugee influx is difficult when there is little accurate information about how many people will come, when the arrivals might take place, and whether or not the border will permit the entry of refugees. These dilemmas are accentuated by a shortage of funding.

#### g) Funding

In late September, the UN agencies began issuing appeals to the donor community for funds to support both contingency planning and large-scale programmes for refugees and internally displaced Afghans. Given the stated desire of western countries to support the Afghan people, it was widely expected that the necessary funds would be

made quickly available. In fact the arrival of cash donations has been slower than expected. By 23 October, UNHCR had received more than US\$31 million for the emergency which represents less than two-thirds of the needs (US\$50 million) for the first phase of the operation. (UNHCR Update, no. 23, 23 October 2001 at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/afghan?page=news&id=EMERGENCY>)

Action by Churches Together (ACT) is reporting that food is available for transport into Afghanistan, but that there is no money to buy it. Thor-Arne Prois, director of the ACT international co-ordinating office, said he had witnessed the UN donor meeting in early October in Geneva where donor governments pledged about US\$600 million for humanitarian aid to be implemented by the UN and NGOs. “Now, three weeks later,” he said “we find ourselves in a situation where in spite of our long-term Afghan partners’ capacity to access vulnerable areas with relief, we simply lack the funds to do so.” (ACT News Release, 24 October 2001 at [http://act-intl.org/act\\_news\\_title.html](http://act-intl.org/act_news_title.html))

#### h) Broader issues

As with all humanitarian crises, Afghanistan’s future is inextricably linked to the emergence of a durable political solution which will enable the provision of needed assistance in the short term and the development of a sustainable economic and political system in the longer term.

The situation of Afghan refugees over these last 20 years illustrates the weakness of the international refugee system in fulfilling its commitment to responsibility-sharing. Over the years, the governments of Pakistan and Iran have repeatedly demanded increased assistance from the international community to care for the millions of refugees in their countries; the fact that the assistance they have received has not been adequate has led to the current impasse at the borders.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries is urgent, but the consequences go far beyond the region. There are fears in other regions that assistance to Afghanistan will divert resources from other countries in need. There are also concerns that governmental efforts to prevent the entry of terrorists across their borders will have consequences for refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers.

Questions of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan are inextricably linked to the need for peace and for a long-term political solution in the country. Humanitarian assistance is no substitute for political solutions. But the immediate needs are so great and the time to provide assistance is so limited, that humanitarian relief must be distributed in the next few weeks if it is to have an impact on the lives of millions of Afghans. *Aid cannot wait.*

### **3. Some suggestions for action on humanitarian dimensions of the crisis**

- ***Pray*** for peace and in solidarity with all people affected by the military actions taking place in Afghanistan.
- ***Raise awareness*** within your church, organization or community group about the humanitarian consequences of military actions in Afghanistan. A gallery of photos of the people of Afghanistan can be found at: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/photo/act-news/actnews.html>. These photos can be used for information and fundraising purposes and can be saved as JPG files for use on the web. The section on Pakistan link directly to stories of people who have fled Afghanistan. These articles are filed

by ACT International journalists who have been working with ACT members Norwegian Church Aid and Church World Service in Pakistan.

- Generously **support** emergency response efforts by your church to feed hungry people, provide shelter, and emergency medical assistance and deliver essential resources such as water and sanitation equipment to the people of Afghanistan [http://act-intl.org/appeals/appeals\\_2001/ASAF11Rev1-sum.html](http://act-intl.org/appeals/appeals_2001/ASAF11Rev1-sum.html)
- **Learn** as much as you can about the situation through <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews/> and the other resources mentioned in this bulletin. Follow the news from a variety of sources.
- **Advocate** with your government to urge them to support humanitarian action. As political contexts differ greatly, you might want to consider the following: **Write** letters as an individual, a parish or congregation, a national church or council of churches. **Send** these letters to your Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, Prime Minister and/or President. **Adapt** the letter to be most appropriate for your context. Send a copy of the letter to your **local newspapers**, radio or television stations. **Print** the letter in your church newsletter or magazine and put it on a website. **Encourage others** to write. (Sample letter at <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews/humanitarian.html>.) **Speak** to your government, political or party...call them, meet with them, write or e-mail. **Invite** relevant government officials to your church or organization to talk about the issues.
- **Use the media** by writing articles, appearing on TV and radio programs, or taking a group of religious leaders to meet with news editors.
- **Issue official statements** of your church or organization.
- **Demonstrate** public support for these points through community meetings, peace vigils and other public gatherings.

Other resources, statements and reflections on the ongoing global situation continue to be posted on the Behind the News web site at <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews/index.html>

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**Behind the news: Visions for Peace – Voices of Faith** is a joint initiative of:

**World Council of Churches (WCC)** - a fellowship of 342 churches, in more than 100 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC. The highest governing body is the Assembly, which meets approximately every seven years. The WCC was formally inaugurated in 1948 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA)** is a global action network of 62 churches and church-related organizations who have pledged themselves to change unjust policies and practices related to global trade and HIV/AIDS, and to take up as a special concern work on peace and conflict resolution by forging strategic partnership. Alliance participants come from every corner of the globe and varied traditions within the

ecumenical family – Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican, as well as church-related organizations who themselves represent and serve many Christian faith traditions. Alliance participants are committed to speak out with one voice against injustice and structures which deprive human beings of dignity, and for alternative visions based on the Gospel.

**Action by Churches Together (ACT)** - an international alliance of churches and relief agencies assisting thousands of people recovering from emergencies in more than 50 countries worldwide.

*This bulletin/website is intended to provide an ecumenical space for visions for peace and voices of faith; these materials do not necessarily reflect official policy of WCC, ACT, or EAA.*

Please circulate the Bulletin to friends, colleagues and people who are looking for alternative perspectives on the current situation.

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