

## A New Breed of Crisis: War and Warming Collide in Afghanistan

Unrest and climate change are creating an agonizing feedback loop that punishes some of the world's most vulnerable people.



By Somini Sengupta

Somini Sengupta has reported on more than 10 conflicts around the world, including in Afghanistan.

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Parts of Afghanistan have warmed twice as much as the global average. Spring rains have declined, most worryingly in some of the country's most important farmland. Droughts are more frequent in vast swaths of the country, including a punishing dry spell now in the north and west, the second in three years.

Afghanistan embodies a new breed of international crisis, where the hazards of war collide with the hazards of climate change, creating a nightmarish feedback loop that punishes some of the world's most vulnerable people and destroys their countries' ability to cope.

And while it would be facile to attribute the conflict in Afghanistan to climate change, the effects of warming act as what military analysts call threat multipliers, amplifying conflicts over water, putting people out of work in a nation whose people largely live off agriculture, while the conflict itself consumes attention and resources.

"The war has exacerbated climate change impacts. For 10 years, over 50 percent of the national budget goes to the war," Noor Ahmad Akhundzadah, a professor of hydrology at Kabul University, said by phone on Thursday. "Now there is no government, and the future is unclear. Our current situation today is completely hopeless."

A third of all Afghans face what the United Nations calls crisis levels of food insecurity. Because of the fighting, many people haven't been able to plant their crops in time. Because of the drought, the harvest this year is certain to be poor. The World Food Program says 40 percent of crops are lost, the price of wheat has gone up by 25 percent, and the aid agency's own food stock is due to run out by the end of September.



Taliban outside the United States Embassy in Kabul on Aug. 22. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



Afghans displaced by drought drew water from a tanker truck in Herat Province in 2019. Solmaz Daryani

Afghanistan is not the only country to face such compounding misery. Of the world's 25 nations most vulnerable to climate change, more than a dozen are affected by conflict or civil unrest, according to an index developed by the University of Notre Dame.

In Somalia, pummeled by decades of conflict, there's been a threefold increase in extreme weather events since 1990, compared to the previous 20 year-period, making it all but impossible for ordinary people to recover after each shock. In 2020, more than a million Somalis were displaced from their homes, about a third because of drought, according to the United Nations.

In Syria, a prolonged drought, made more likely by man-made climate change, according to researchers, drove people out of the countryside and fed simmering antigovernment grievances that led to an uprising in 2011 and ultimately, a full-blown civil war. This year again, drought looms over Syria, particularly its breadbasket region, the northeastern Hassakeh Province.

In Mali, a violent insurgency has made it harder for farmers and herders to deal with a succession of droughts and flood, according to aid agencies.

"The convergence of climate risks and conflict further worsens food and economic insecurity and health disparities, limits access to essential services, while weakening the capacity of governments, institutions and societies to provide support," the International Committee of the Red Cross warned in a recent report that examined the combined effects of conflict and climate shocks, including in Mali.

Climate change cannot be blamed for any single war, and certainly not the one in Afghanistan. But rising temperatures, and the weather shocks that come with it, act as what Marshall Burke, a Stanford University professor, calls "a finger on the scale that makes underlying conflict worse." That is particularly true, he argued, in places that have undergone a long conflict and where government institutions have all but dissolved.



Somalis displaced by drought waited for rations in Dadaab, Kenya, in 2011. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times



Syrians in Khirbet al-Jouz, on the border with Turkey, demonstrated against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011. Daniel Etter for The New York Times

“None of this means that climate is the only or the most important factor in conflict,” said Dr. Burke, co-author of a 2013 paper looking at the role of climate change in dozens of conflicts across many years. “But based on this evidence, the international community would be foolish to ignore the threat that a warming climate represents.”

The combination of war and warming compound the risks facing some of the world’s most vulnerable people: According to the United Nations children’s agency, Afghanistan is the 15th riskiest country in the world for children, because of climate hazards, like heat and drought, and a lack of essential services, like health care. Two million Afghan children are malnourished.

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That is in sharp contrast to Afghanistan’s part in global warming. An average Afghan produces 0.2 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year, compared to nearly 16 metric tons of the average American.

The collapse of the government has also made Afghanistan’s participation in the next international climate talks entirely uncertain, said one of its members Ahmad Samim Hoshmand. “Now I don’t know. I’m not part of any government. What government I should represent?” he said.

Until recently, he had been the government official in charge of enforcing the country’s ban on ozone-depleting substances, like refrigerants used in old air-conditioners and that are banned by the Montreal Protocol, an international agreement that Afghanistan had ratified. Just days before the Taliban seized Kabul, he fled to Tajikistan. The traders of illegal substances whom he helped arrest are now out of prison, keen to exact revenge. He says they will kill him if he returns.

Mr. Hoshmand is now scrambling to emigrate elsewhere. His visa in Tajikistan expires in a matter of weeks. “My only hope is the ozone community, the Montreal Protocol community, if they can support me,” he said.

Afghanistan's geography is a study of extreme hazard, from the glacier-peaked Hindu Kush mountains in the north to its melon farms in the west to the arid south, stung by dust storms.

Climate data is sparse for Afghanistan. But a recent analysis based on what little data exists suggests that a decline in spring rains has already afflicted much of the country, but most acutely in the country's north, where farmers and herders rely almost entirely on the rains to grow crops and water their flocks.

Over the past 60 years, average temperatures have risen sharply, by 1.8 degrees Celsius since 1950 in the country as a whole and by more than 2 degrees Celsius in the south.

### **Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan**

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

"Climate change will make it extremely challenging to maintain — let alone increase — any economic and development gains achieved so far in Afghanistan," the United Nations warned in a 2016 report. "Increasingly frequent and severe droughts and floods, accelerated desertification, and decreasing water flows in the country's glacier-dependent rivers will all directly affect rural livelihoods — and therefore the national economy and the country's ability to feed itself."

This is the country's biggest risk, Dr. Akhundzadah argued. Three-fourths of his compatriots work in agriculture, and any unpredictable weather can be calamitous, all the more so in a country where there hasn't been a stable government and no safety net to speak of.

The Taliban, for their part, appear more exercised by the need to scrub women's pictures from billboards than addressing climate hazards.



Taliban commandos on the streets of Kabul on Aug. 20. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times



A camp for displaced people on the outskirts of Herat, Afghanistan, in 2019. Solmaz Daryani

But climate change is a threat multiplier for the Taliban, too. Analysts say water management will be critical to its legitimacy with Afghan citizens, and it is likely to be one of the most important issues in the Taliban's relations with its neighbors as well.

Already on the Afghan battlefield, as in many battlefields throughout history, water has been an important currency. The Taliban, in their bid for Herat, a strategic city in the west, repeatedly attacked a dam that is critical for drinking water, agriculture and electricity for the people of the region. Likewise, in Kandahar Province in the south, one of the Taliban's most critical victories was to seize control of a dam that holds water for drinking and irrigation.

Climate change also stands to complicate the Taliban's ability to fulfill a key promise: the elimination of opium poppy cultivation. Poppies require far less water than, say, wheat or melons, and they are far more profitable. Poppy farming employs an estimated 120,000 Afghans and brings in an estimated \$300-400 million a year, according to the United Nations, and has in turn enriched the Taliban.

Areas under poppy cultivation grew sharply in 2020.

Analysts said the Taliban would seek to use a poppy ban to gain legitimacy from foreign powers, like Qatar and China. But it is likely to face pushback from growers who have few alternatives as the rains become less reliable.

"It's going to be a gigantic political flash point," said Vanda Felbab-Brown, who studies the region at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

The last drought, in 2018, left four million Afghans in need of food aid and forced 371,000 people to leave their homes, many of whom haven't returned.

"The effects of the severe drought are compounded by conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic in a context where half the population were already in need of aid," the United Nations humanitarian coordinator, Ramiz Alakbarov, said by email from Kabul on Thursday. "With little financial reserves, people are forced to resort to child labor, child marriage, risky irregular migration exposing them to trafficking and other protection risks. Many are taking on catastrophic levels of debt and selling their assets."

Dr. Akhundzadah, a father of four, is hoping to emigrate, too. But like his fellow academics, he said he has not worked for foreign governments and has no way to be evacuated from the country. The university is closed. Banks are closed. He is looking for research jobs abroad. For now, there are no commercial flights out of the country.

“Till now I’m OK,” he said on the phone. “The future is unclear. It will be difficult to live here.”