Concerns over continued targeted killings and terrorist attacks in Kabul

KABUL: Targeted assassinations and terrorist attacks have recently increased in Kabul and a number of provinces.

Unfortunately no group has so far taken responsibsity for the deadly incidents.

Afghan citizens ask the security institutions for identifying the perpetrators and bringing them to justice.

Although the assassinations in Afghanistan have been going on for several years, but the difference in the type of assassinations is that in the past, government officials have been targeted, but unfortunately now they are assassinated from different walks of life.

However, the security agencies blame the increase in assassinations on the failure of the government armed oppositions in the battlefields.

In the most recent cases, director of planning and policy for the Ministry of Urban Development Atiqullah Khosti, the Interior Ministry's anti-crime official, and several retired officers have been shot and dead by unknown armed individuals in Kabul, prompting a wave of public concern among the citizens.

A number of members of the House of People also expressed concern about the escalation of targeted assassinations, with Ahmad Javad Jaihoon as saying:

"The continuation of violence and targeted killings of members of parliament is a matter of grave concern." Deputy-Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga says that every day, people lose their loved ones, people are very worried about their future and no one is safe in Kabul."

But the Interior Ministry has said that government forces are also constantly trying to contain terrorist incidents adding that the incidents have decreased in Kabul compared to previous months.

"Dozens of individuals have been arrested and convicted in connection with terrorist attacks, and efforts are ongoing on to arrest others," said the ministry's spokesman Tariq Arian.

"Terrorist crimes have dropped significantly compared to the past and efforts continue to crack down on those who disrupt security," he said.

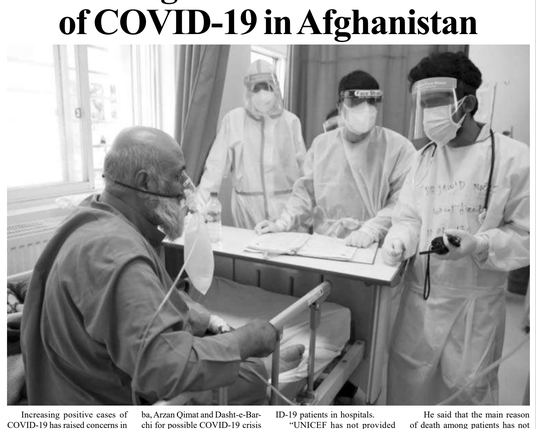
Kabul police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz also said that five assassinations had been recorded in Kabul between June 1 and 10, and that efforts to prevent targeted killings in the country were continuing.

However, a number of human rights advocates and civil society activists say that the armed opposition were targeting democracy, the rule of law, elections, freedom of expression and human rights, and judges, prosecutors, journalists, women, election activists, members of parliament and the provincial council as well as human rights supporters.

They believe that terrorists shouldn't be allowed to succeed in achieving their sinister goals by killing people and right activists as they believe the aim of their tracks is to destabilize the entire system, the values ??of the last twenty years and to create fear, panic, despair, division, gap between the government and the people, to win credit at the ongoing peace process or to stop the process. "Therefore, in addition to maintaining unity, we need to seriously deal with terrorist incidents in such a way that the main enemy, who constantly creates disaster, is not forgotten."

Political experts say that under the current critical situation, it is imperative that the people, the media, civil society organizations, politicians and political parties all speak out against the terrorist enemies and put pressure on the supporters of terrorism and call on the international community to assist the government of Afghanistan in fighting terrorism. "Chain murders have increased in the past year in the country and terrorists can influence even into the green area of ??the capital and achieve their goal," he said. In the past, most people were worried about suicide attacks and explosions, but now targeted killings have increased and no one is taking responsibility for it. Meanwhile, the Kabul city has witnessed a number of targeted killings in recent months. Religious scholars, members of civil society, university lecturers, journalists and political activists have been targeted. **Suraya Raiszada**

Increasing concerns over 3rd wave of COVID-19 in Afghanistan



Increasing positive cases of COVID-19 has raised concerns in Afghanistan. Sources in Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) have warned of crisis in connection with increasing coronavirus patients in COVID-19 hospitals particularly the Afghan-Japan hospital in Kabul.

With indifference of the people in connection with the pandemic, the third wave of the virus will face the health sector with increasing challenges. Currently, nearly results of 30 percent of individuals testing for COVID-19 are positive. Besides, more Afghans without referring to COVID-19 hospitals have been infected to the virus.

According to officials the ministry of public health, 80 percent of those infected to COVID-19 have not symptoms and those who have spent the disease can also transmit the virus to others. Although the Afghan-Japan with having 150 beds is full, MoPH has created new COVID-19 hospitals in various parts of Kabul as Qussaba, Arzan Qimat and Dasht-e-Barchi for possible COVID-19 crisis ahead.

"The price of one oxygen's capsule has recently jumped from 400 – 1,400 AFG During to increasing positive cases of COVID-19, all education and higher education centers have been ordered to be closed for two weeks, while wedding salons, sports clubs, public pools which are considered as main places for spreading the virus are operating," said Osman Tahiri, a spokesperson to the ministry of public health.

He said that no particular measures have been taken against complete lockdown in the country.

Related to shortage of oxygen, the MoPH spokesperson said that UNICEF and Aga Khan Foundation have taken responsibility for providing oxygen to COVID-19 hospitals.

Meanwhile, acting minister of public health has said that UNICEF has not been able to abide by the commitment it has made towards providing oxygen to COVID-19 patients in hospitals.

"UNICEF has not provided oxygen to COVID-19 hospitals, but the organization has once again promised to do provide oxygen in coming months," said Waheed Majroh, acting minister of public health.

He added that United Arab Emirates by assisting a system producing oxygen to the Afghan-Japan hospital has filled the gap, saying that the ministry of public health has not faced with continued shortage of oxygen so far. He further said that currently the private sector was providing oxygen for COVID-19 hospitals.

With getting the COVID-19 situation worse in the country, Afghan health experts believe that public awareness in connection with coronavirus in the Afghanistan needs to be assessed.

"The Indian variant of COVID-19 is concerning and that the personal issues should be considered to control the situation," said Nawroz Haqmal, a public health expert.

He said that the main reason of death among patients has not been corona, stressing that some other chronic diseases as cardiovascular-related diseases, sugar and cancer have caused increasing mortalities among COVID-19 patients. Based on prediction of the ministry of public health, the third wave of the coronavirus outbreak will reach its peak in two weeks in case the people observe preventive and health instructions, or the period will get longer. Wearing mask, observing distance, avoid going to crowdy places and washing hands are considered as the main instruction for prevention of the coronavirus outbreak.

It is worth mentioning that the current cumulative total of known COVID-19 cases is 75,144, the total number of reported deaths is 3,034, and the total number of recoveries is 57,963. So far, 480,621 samples have been tested in government centers and there are 14,079 known active COVID-19 cases in the country.

Lailuma Noori

Drought: Afghanistan faces another migration crisis

After a winter of scant snowfall, a looming drought is forcing Afghanistan to try to prevent another migration crisis before it erupts.

Snow and rainfall were nearly half their normal levels in parts of the country during a warm winter triggered by La Niña conditions. Farmers worry there's not enough water from the winter melt to sustain their harvests, raising fears of crop failures and food shortages that could push people to abandon their lands.

The last major drought to hit Afghanistan offers a blueprint of the dangers ahead – and of the pitfalls of an inadequate aid response. In 2018, some 250,000 people fled their homes as waters ran dry. Farmers left behind parched fields, and herders sold off livestock at a fraction of their costs. In western Afghanistan, families fled to bare-bone tent camps on the edges of places like Herat city, where tens of thousands remain today, unwilling or unable to return home.

At one point during the year, the drought displaced more people than Afghanistan's enduring conflict. Aid groups were criticized for a slow response that did little to stem the displacement. It came only after the government declared a drought, and after tens of thousands of people had already left their homes.

Three years later, the government and aid groups are trying to head off another displacement crisis by helping families to stay on their land.

"We are running against time," said Rajendra Aryal, country representative for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

The warning signs are already dire. Afghanistan needs about six million metric tons of wheat each year, but this year's deficit is estimated to be about 2.6 million metric tons, according to the FAO. More than a third of the population face crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity caused by conflict, COVID-19, soaring food prices, and unemployment.

Aid groups and the government say they're better prepared this year. Humanitarian groups have a $390 million drought contingency plan, which includes plans for food and cash aid, and programs to support livestock and rehabilitate water wells.

But donor funds are stretched throughout the globe. The drought budget was carved from a $1.3 billion yearly response plan for Afghanistan, but only five percent of food security programs were funded by mid-May.

And some worry there's not enough focus on the drought's longer-term consequences for displacement – for example, how to handle dynamics between different waves of migrants, or how to help people return home.

"If there is displacement of any sizeable proportions, I can see it becoming protracted displacement in informal settlements – having a huge number of IDPs who will have no ability to return home in the foreseeable future," said Evan Jones, coordinator for the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP), a group established by several international NGOs.

The warnings come amid an already volatile period for Afghanistan. Conflict and attacks on civilians are escalating ahead of the planned September withdrawal of US and NATO forces. Hundreds of thousands of people are uprooted by violence or forced home from abroad each year, and the country faces another coronavirus surge with a battered health system and vaccine shortfalls.

Uncertain harvests

The fallout from a warm winter is clear to farmers like Mohammed Harun, a 60-year-old in eastern Afghanistan's Laghman Province.

"Look at the mountains. There is no snow," he said, pointing to the bare slopes of the Hindu Kush range in the distance.

When The New Humanitarian met Harun in March, the farmer's crops – winter vegetables planted in greenhouses or wrapped under plastic – were still green, but the nearby stream that irrigates his harvest was already dry.

In a normal year, Harun can count on about 280 kilograms of vegetables each harvest. This year, he wasn't sure if there would be enough water to last through the growing months.

Farmers want to plant, he said, but fear their seeds would be wasted if the crops fail mid-growth.

"I don't remember a season as terrible as this one," he said. "I worry. Farming is my only income, and I have 10 children at home."

If their crops fail, farmers like Harun would be thrust into a cycle of loans and debt that pushes them closer to instability.

There's no single reason behind the tough decision to leave home. Conflict displaces hundreds of thousands of people every year in Afghanistan, and the promise of safety, aid, or better resources elsewhere can also act as a draw.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has sapped livelihoods and drained Afghanistan's economy, stripping away a layer of resilience that might have helped families withstand new threats, said Thomas ten Boer, who heads the NGO Welthungerhilfe in Afghanistan.

"There were many people who had family members working abroad that were sending money; they cannot send money anymore," he said. "The purchasing power to buy proper food, it's now depleted."

In 2018, the drought triggered lost harvests, empty fields, and depleted groundwater. Many livestock herders were forced to sell their animals – normally a walking bank account, ten Boer said – at lesser prices to salvage what they could.

In western Afghanistan, where the drought was most severe, families left their homes for what became sprawling tent camps on the outskirts of cities like Herat and Qala-i-Naw.

It took until September that year for a full emergency response to begin, by which time nearly a quarter of a million people had already fled. Many of the displaced had gone two months without any aid, according to an ADSP report evaluating the response.

Several aid groups said the response came too late – grappling with an emergency rather than preventing one in the first place. Some NGOs feared the massive aid operation also inadvertently added to displacement by pulling people away from their homes with the promise of help.

"We are now facing a drought situation which could have been mitigated with better coordination," the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development, a coalition of local and international NGOs, said in a statement at the time that was particularly critical of the UN's humanitarian aid arm, OCHA.

Three years later, some of these urban settlements have become semi-permanent, with many of the tents replaced by mud-brick homes. At least 80,000 drought-displaced are still in Herat, according to the ADSP report.

This year, the humanitarian community has acted early, an OCHA spokesperson said.

"Based on lessons learned from 2018 to 2019, the plan was developed with the government, development actors, and affected people themselves," said the spokesperson, who asked not to be identified by name. "The plan includes support in places of origin to prevent displacement, support for those who may be forced to move due to drought stress, and a new tool to identify potential displacement hotspots."

Humanitarian aid as a last resort

The 2018 drought offers a lesson on what went wrong, but it also suggests a path forward.

For example, in a village in northern Badghis Province, simple water pumps and a solar-powered irrigation system helped farming families stay home. When The New Humanitarian visited in 2018, the village was a green oasis amid a sparse landscape; none of the families had left.

Aid groups operating in other areas found similar results: In some communities, a safe source of drinking water was enough to keep people home – even through failed harvests, lost income, and a flaring conflict.

The 2018 drought made clear that the kinds of programs that help people stay must begin early, ten Boer said.

"Nobody likes to move somewhere else," he said. "You only do it when your family is under threat. Otherwise, you will not leave."

But this also means having the foresight to focus on what's typically seen as development work – longer-term support for agriculture and irrigation, for example – well before a drought becomes an emergency.

Yet the wider aid sector has long struggled with linking up its humanitarian and development arms.

"In a country like Afghanistan, there's always going to be, at least for the foreseeable future, a need and a place for humanitarian support. That is absolutely essential," said Jones of the ADSP. "But it should not be solely framed as the most important need."

Climate change could force the aid sector to examine these questions more frequently. Climate projections suggest Afghanistan will face more heat waves and frequent drought as global temperatures rise.

As dry spells become more regular, aid interventions will need to adjust, said the FAO's Aryal: "Are we going to respond to a drought every year?"

For now, farmers like Roqia Qasqari are preparing for the uncertain months ahead.

Her wheat crops in the remote village of Gero, in Bamyan Province, are irrigated solely by rains or water from nearby rivers. But after the warm winter, she said her crops don't stand a chance if the rains stay away.

"What we can control are the potatoes," the 47-year-old said, pointing toward a nearby cluster of fields.

After last year's harvest, villagers made sure to store their potatoes and seeds by digging ventilated, underground potato pits.

"We've had difficult times, but we have survived," Qasqari said. "We will do the same this year."

Monitoring Desk