

Written evidence submitted by the International Rescue Committee (AFG0055)

Women and children. They are really suffering from the hunger... The food prices go higher day by day and people are no longer able to buy food... The biggest challenge for women and children is the hunger now. Survival is their biggest challenge. - IRC Emergency Support Officer working in Kabul

SUMMARY

24.4 million Afghans, more than half the population, are in humanitarian need. Afghanistan is now home to the highest number of food-insecure people in the world. Nearly [four times](#) the number of people are in need of lifesaving humanitarian assistance compared to just three years ago. Two decades of development gains are unravelling and the current crisis could kill far more Afghans than the past 20 years of war.

We welcome the UK's efforts so far to support the humanitarian response. The allocation of £286 million for both the 2021 Flash Appeal and subsequently for the 2022 Humanitarian Response, as well as the hosting of the 2022 High-Level Pledging Conference, have been vital towards addressing immediate needs. However, humanitarian aid will not address the causes of this crisis.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been operational in Afghanistan for three decades, working today in 11 governorates. We see first-hand that while **humanitarian aid saves lives, it cannot replace a functioning economy and state**. The UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator warned that if insufficient action is taken now to treat the causes, not just the symptoms of the crisis, next year humanitarian funding needs - already record-setting - could double to USD\$10 billion.

The decision to suspend girls above the age of 13 from attending school is deplorable and a catastrophic step backwards for Afghan society. However, the human costs of holding the Afghan population to ransom over the positions of the Taliban is increasingly indefensible. Girls need and deserve to go to school - but they and their families also need and deserve access to clean water, food, and health care. **The UK and other donors can and should do more to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of Afghans.**

CURRENT SITUATION IN COUNTRY

Afghanistan's economic collapse is driving record humanitarian needs and extreme hunger. The sudden and almost total economic isolation Afghanistan experienced after August 2021, has driven a major fiscal contraction. This trend has had knock-on impacts across the economy, reducing public spending from around 55 per cent of GDP in 2020 to around 11 per cent post-Taliban takeover, drastically undermining public service provision. The sudden loss of civil servant incomes has heavily impacted aggregate income (a loss of approximately US\$154.4m per month) putting pressure on sectors dependent on consumer spending. Now a vicious cycle is playing out across the country. Rising poverty is further reducing demand for goods forcing Afghan companies out of business, contributing to further unemployment. The impact has been swift and catastrophic for Afghanistan as demonstrated by levels of unemployment and hunger.

Women and girls are among the most affected by the crisis, with levels of gender-based violence exacerbated as a result of widespread male unemployment. Even before August, more than 7.4 million women and girls needed gender-based violence services. The Foreign Secretary [committed](#) to empower women and girls globally, yet without further action, we will fail achieving this in Afghanistan. Afghans who could support themselves and their families six months ago are now entirely dependent on aid to survive. Every week, more families are forced to make unimaginable choices to survive, including selling young daughters into marriage and sending children to work.

A new approach is needed. The policy approaches needed to slow and ultimately halt the humanitarian and economic freefall are challenging. Yet the chilling effect the decision on girls' education is having on international engagement, including funding from the World Bank's Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) planned to support essential services, is only working to ensure all Afghans, but particularly women and girls, pay twice for the Taliban's actions. The UK, with its partners, should advance a range of actions to lay the groundwork for engagement with the de-facto authorities on the economy, which do not prejudice efforts to exert pressure on the Taliban, and can be expanded as political conditions allow. Without this intervention, the economic crisis and humanitarian needs will continue to deteriorate, outpacing the humanitarian response.

WHAT CAN THE UK GOVERNMENT DO?

- **Encourage the full funding of the humanitarian response:** The UK should identify moments such as UNGA to secure more funding for the response. Without sufficient funding, humanitarians will not be able to scale up to the levels needed to match the severity of the crisis.
- **Push for the dispersal of ARTF funds immediately to support critical service delivery, especially health services.** The World Bank has put all funding on hold until progress is made on girls' access to education. Given the severity of the crisis, the UK should push for ARTF funding for non-education programs to resume. Funding for the health system is of particular concern - women and girls will be, once again, disproportionately affected as clinics shut. The UK should similarly ensure mechanisms are ready for the disbursement of stipends for teachers once girls' access to education is ensured.
- **Convene key stakeholders to establish a clear picture of the current economic situation:** Donors, international financial institutions (IFIs), the UN and relevant regional actors should establish a shared understanding of the current status and functioning of the economy, including revenue collection and taxation, the role of the illicit and informal economies, and drivers of the humanitarian crisis. Such analysis will be vital to direct development assistance and agree the responsible point at which the Afghan economy can function without high levels of donor assistance.
- **Offering guidance and reassurance to the private and banking sector:** The UK and other UN Member States should provide more public, proactive, forward leaning legal guidance to encourage financial institutions to engage with Afghanistan.
- **Provide technical assistance to Afghanistan's Central Bank (DAB):** With the US clarification of sanctions, and the recognition that DAB is not a sanctioned entity, space for technical engagement with the Bank has increased. The UK should advocate (when political conditions allow) for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan to coordinate dialogue and facilitate technical assistance between IFIs, Afghan financial institutions and the Taliban, without inferring recognition of the authorities. Such assistance is essential to maintain macroeconomic stability, implement important structural reforms, restore confidence in the banking system and mitigate money laundering and terrorist financing risks to enable the resumption of international transactions.
- **Once the above measures have been taken, the beginning of a phased and needs-based release of Afghanistan's frozen foreign assets should take place.** Released assets should be used to capitalise the central bank in order to settle international payments, provide public services and manage the supply and demand of afghanis and US dollars to manage inflation, maintain liquidity and stabilise market prices.

The IRC in Afghanistan

The IRC has operated in Afghanistan for over three decades throughout waves of conflict, including during Taliban rule in the 1990s. Today we work across 11 governorates, reaching over one million people each year through programmes spanning emergency response, education, protection, water and sanitation, and economic recovery programs.

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