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Afghanistan – Preventing an Approaching Crisis

Despite current interest in the insurgency in southern Afghanistan, a greater threat to the well-being of the Afghan nation is fast approaching. Following a particularly severe winter in 2007-08, which killed an estimated 1,300-1,700 Afghans, a combination of light spring rain, a summer drought, poor irrigation, low crop yields, rising global food prices and restricted regional wheat exports have created the conditions for a famine in Afghanistan this coming winter.

While the eyes of the world have focused on violence which is increasingly terrorist in character, an estimated 8.4 million Afghans, perhaps a third of the nation, are now suffering from 'chronic and transitory food insecurity'. Whatever the effect of insurgent violence on the UN-mandated mission in Afghanistan, it is widespread hunger and malnutrition that will place a greater obstacle in its progress.

When temperatures plummet and snow cloaks the Hindu Kush, millions of desperate Afghans will look to the UN, ISAF and their own government for help or survival. If the international community is found wanting, we can expect increasing frustration

and anger from a population which once saw the international intervention in Afghanistan as a source of hope. The fact that many areas vulnerable to famine have reduced or rejected poppy farming is an added irony.

The coming crisis is no surprise. In July, the UN and the Afghan government appealed for \$400 million to alleviate the growing food shortage across Afghanistan and reports already indicate that Afghans are migrating in search of food, some are eating grass and a tiny number have died of starvation. To maintain its credibility and moral authority to act in Afghanistan the international community must take timely, concerted and effective action.

Exactly sixty years ago, the Berlin Airlift was underway. It brought food to millions and prevented a strategic defeat. Today, a much smaller, yet strategically significant operation could have similar effect in Afghanistan. In August, the UN World Food programme estimated Afghanistan has an emergency need for 25,000 tonnes of mixed commodities before the coming winter, and a requirement for an additional 70,000 tonnes before February 2009. Ahead of the deterioration in winter weather lays

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a window of opportunity for the international community to mount an intensive air operation to deliver life-saving aid to Afghanistan – to its capital, provincial cities and many of its isolated communities. Such a humanitarian endeavour offers many opportunities for participation:

- Nations across the world with no previous military engagement in Afghanistan can contribute financially, with food donations, or by transporting globally sourced aid to regional hubs from where it can be flown into Afghanistan by other participants
- ISAF members who do not wish to operate in insurgent areas can transport aid to Kabul or cities in the north and west of the country. Others will be content, and tactically able, to deliver aid to less benign areas in the south and east
- Advanced tactical airlift capabilities would be able to deliver aid to isolated rural communities where overland access is impractical or considered inappropriate for security reasons.

Afghanistan may be on the brink of a calamity which has the potential to undermine much of the progress which has been achieved there, especially in areas ostensibly free of insurgent activity. Regional restrictions on the export of wheat compound Afghanistan's difficulty, as do security threats to road convoys and the extremely limited access to many Afghan rural communities. Help must come from farther afield, swiftly, and to any part of the country. An airlift meets these demands.

Time is of the essence, and it is imperative that action is taken that is concerted and of the right magnitude. Rapidly transporting 25,000 tonnes of foodstuffs into Afghanistan should be well within the international community's military capacity – if it has the will. A surge is necessary, but one that is palatable to all concerned. Afghans need feeding. They may also learn that Air Power delivers more than collateral damage, while the publics in ISAF nations will also see that their engagement in Afghanistan does an awful lot of good.

Of course, many other states face famines which deserve attention, and emergency aid should not be a substitute for long-term investment in Afghan agriculture; but the added significance of acting decisively in Afghanistan is that for all the focus on insurgency, a more serious blow will be dealt to the Afghan government and the UN/ISAF mission if the international community does not prevent a predictable humanitarian disaster.

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