

AFGHANISTAN

FAMINE ON AN IMMENSE SCALE

Aid workers are used to the unpredictable. But the events that took place in Afghanistan in the latter part of 2001 took everyone by surprise. The anticipated mass exodus of people fleeing drought and conflict did not happen. Instead, the humanitarian crisis affecting millions within Afghanistan deepened. Australian aid specialist Pat Duggan was employed to help coordinate a complex emergency relief program from the UN office in Islamabad, in neighbouring Pakistan. Here she recalls her impressions as she monitored developments.

I arrived at a time when no-one really imagined the war against the Taliban would finish so quickly ... [but] the towns in Afghanistan fell one after the other in a 10-day period and it was like a house of cards....

'I had thought when I came here I would be looking at extensive refugee flows out of the country. As it happened, before we knew it much of the country changed hands and it was then time to move everyone back into the country and get programs geared up again.'

Following the events of 11 September and the start of US air strikes in Afghanistan, international aid workers were no longer welcomed by the ruling Taliban. They were forced to work from neighbouring countries, fearful for the safety of their Afghan counterparts who were left to try to avert famine on an immense scale.

A PAGE IN AFGHANISTAN'S HISTORY HAS BEEN TURNED

'This was no easy task ... [but] the Afghan staff did a brilliant job really to keep programs ticking over and to keep food being delivered.'

As security gradually improved it became safer for international aid workers to start delivering aid again. And although there were difficulties, the emergency aid was delivered where it was needed.

'While we were able to return to the regional centres and the towns, we were not always able to access all communities in need because of instability and lawlessness.

'A particular concern has been for internally displaced people. When the Taliban fell, the UN estimated there were about one million internally displaced people in Afghanistan. Large numbers moved to stay with communities in other parts of the country ... Others moved to large refugee camps such as Maslakh near Herat in the west.'

With the Bonn Agreement in place and an Interim Authority installed, the international community must focus on assisting the new authorities to hold the peace. Efforts are focused on building stability and meeting humanitarian needs, as well as kick-starting the recovery process while longer-term reconstruction programs are formulated.

A key priority is to ensure the

what they need to go back and re-establish themselves quickly...'

The challenges facing the new Afghanistan are immense. Women in particular have to re-establish themselves in Afghan society. 'Certainly the legislative bans that came with the Taliban have gone and the Interim Authority has made very positive indications about the role of women in the new regime. However, what a woman in the capital Kabul might face could be completely different to the experiences of a woman in a remote area.

'A page in Afghanistan's history has been turned and things are moving in a completely new and much more positive direction than they have been for decades, but different warlords and factions have figured heavily in Afghanistan's past. The challenge is to overcome that and build a united country.' EJ

Pat Duggan was the Senior Humanitarian Affairs Officer for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Pakistan. She is a former officer with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia and a former officer with the Australian Government's overseas aid agency, AusAID.

For the latest information on Afghanistan go to the AusAID website www.ausaid.gov.au

AFGHANISTAN EARTHQUAKES

Compounding the already devastating effects of war, a severe earthquake which hit the Nahrin district of Afghanistan, north of Kabul, on 25 March, killed more than 800 people and left thousands more injured. An estimated 10,000 people were left homeless.

Australia provided \$1 million in emergency aid for earthquake victims. This aid was divided between the International Committee of the Red Cross to assist with emergency shelter and medical needs, and the World Food Programme to provide food aid. The funding is in addition to the \$40.3 million previously provided to Afghanistan for humanitarian assistance (\$23.3 million) and to assist in reconstruction efforts (\$17 million).

AusAID will continue to monitor needs in the area.

In Ghor, Afghanistan's largest and most inaccessible province, women travelled for up to five days on foot and donkey to reach emergency food aid. More than 70,000 vulnerable families were part of an ICRC emergency relief program suspended by the events of 11 September.

Photo: Nick Danziger

