

Afghans stave off starvation in the face of economic sanctions

by Abdulkader Sinno

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Nearly twenty million Afghans — half the population — are experiencing hunger and the country may face outright famine this coming winter. The only way to avert mass starvation is for the Taliban, the country's de facto rulers, and the Western powers that control the flow of aid to Afghanistan to cooperate. This is how disaster was averted last winter.

Yet the two sides are in a logjam — Western powers want the Taliban to rescind restrictions on women's rights and the Taliban wants Western powers to lift crippling sanctions and [accept its legitimacy](#).

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, much of the [irrigation infrastructure](#) in rural areas was destroyed. This made it more economical to grow drought-resistant and monetisable poppies — the plant that produces opium paste — than food staples. Afghanistan's booming population slowly became more dependent on imported foodstuffs as a result.

The collapse of Afghanistan's economy after the US withdrawal in 2021 has led to the current food shortage. The shortage partly stems from the end of [Western funding support](#), severe [drought](#) and the rise in wheat prices due to the Ukraine war. But damaging policies pursued by the Taliban on the one hand and the United States and its European allies on the other have also played a part.

The most damaging Taliban policies are those [restricting women's education](#) and participation in the labour force. These restrictions are inhumane but also damaging to the economy. Taliban misogyny, in part a response to Western [hostility and pressure](#), is aggravating poverty and undermining economic recovery.

At the same time, the Taliban have taken measures to remedy the effects of food shortages. They [reduced taxes](#) on food imports by 50 per cent. Their largely successful [campaign to reduce opium production](#) in Afghanistan has had the immediate benefit of forcing farmers to grow food crops instead. They have also

implemented a program to **pay civil servants with wheat** purchased from India and Pakistan.

Whether intentionally or not, the United States and its allies are in part responsible for bringing Afghanistan to the **point of starvation**.

Western countries have tried to **justify** retroactively their failed, costly and destructive twenty-year involvement in Afghanistan by cushioning it in the language of defending women's rights. Western politicians find it politically unpalatable to cooperate with a government they see as irredeemably misogynistic and brutal. This reductionist understanding of the Taliban, and perhaps the bitterness of defeat at their hands, has led Western countries to treat the Taliban as an enemy they can afford to have. In addition, Western powers fear that allowing the Taliban to engage in trade and to build wealth could embolden it against its own minorities, Afghan women, and neighbouring states. The US-led alliance has in consequence subjected Afghanistan to harsh sanctions that have hampered its economy and aggravated food insecurity.

The West's biggest contribution to Afghanistan's food insecurity is the US sanctions on **Afghan banks**. Sanctions **prevent Afghans** from having a normal working economy, hamper remittances and dramatically increase the cost of importing food.

The West justifies these sanctions by claiming that they target the Taliban, money-laundering drug dealers and terrorists. Afghan banks that were established during the US-led occupation were corrupt and **involved in money laundering** on a massive scale and yet were tolerated by Western powers. It is hypocritical of Western policymakers to justify driving the Afghan economy into a hole in the hope that shutting down the banking sector will hamper money laundering. The Taliban have not engaged in money laundering yet, so it is a stretch to impose damaging sanctions on forty million Afghans because of so far unsubstantiated fears. Putting pressure on the Taliban to accept an auditing system managed by a third party would be a more humane policy than outright sanctions.

One lesson from the United States' long history of imposing sweeping sanctions is that such sanctions hurt civilians, more than their targeted leaders. Those in power have control over the allocation of resources and can prioritise their own needs over civilians'. Afghanistan is **no exception**. Taliban diversion of resources in an environment of scarcity is hurting the most vulnerable and least connected Afghans, including, ironically, the educated urban women whose rights the West claims to defend. Western countries should lift the sanctions and allow Afghanistan's **economy to recover** to protect **Afghan women** and other vulnerable Afghans effectively.

As food security in Afghanistan worsens, pressure will build on Western governments and the Taliban. The Afghan population's most basic food needs should not be held hostage to policies made in Qandahar, Washington or Brussels. The most logical route would be to manage the United States' relationship with the Taliban by building upon the [2020 Doha Agreement](#). Sanctions, official recognition, removing the Taliban from lists of terrorist organisations, aid distribution, gender and minority rights, and security should all be up for discussion.

Both the Taliban and Western governments believe that the other side has reneged on the agreements laid out in the Doha document. The Taliban point out that the United States has wilfully ignored former US president Donald Trump's administration's commitment to help rebuild Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, and the United States considers the presence of members of anti-Western organisations in Afghanistan, such as Al Qaeda, a key violation. It will take courage and a long-term strategic vision to get back to the negotiating table.

The road forward will be challenging. It is likely that Western short-sightedness and Taliban rigidity may prevail and that Afghan civilians will pay the price with their lives. Western countries may continue to cover up the effects of their policies through emergency food aid and the Taliban may continue to retaliate against Western hostility by clamping down on women and supporters of groups once allied with the United States. In the process, the Taliban may allow al-Qaeda, a rare ally, more autonomy and resume the production of narcotics to provide it with a dependable stream of income.

The last time this happened was in the late 1990s, a situation that produced the 9/11 attacks and a global American-led 'War on Terror' that has yet to end.

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