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AFGHANISTAN SUFFERING AND MISERY OF STARVATION

READ AND DIGEST THE FOLLOWING STORY OF MISERY

Selling children to survive: Afghan fathers forced to make impossible choices

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As dawn breaks, hundreds of men gather at a dusty square in Chaghcharan, the capital of Ghor province in Afghanistan. They line the roadside with weary faces, hoping someone will come along offering any work. It will determine whether their families eat that day. The likelihood of success, however, is low.

Juma Khan, 45, has found just three days of work in the past six weeks that paid between 150 to 200 Afghani (\$2.35-\$3.13; £1.76-£2.34) per day.

"My children went to bed hungry three nights in a row. My wife was crying, so were my children. So I begged a neighbour for some money to buy flour," he says.

"I live in fear that my children will die of hunger."

His story is in no way unique.

In Afghanistan today, a staggering three in four people cannot meet their basic needs, according to the United Nations. Unemployment is rife, healthcare struggling and the aid that once provided the basics for millions has dwindled to a fraction of what it once was.

The BBC's Yogita Limaye speaks to Afghan fathers forced to make impossible choices

The country is now facing record levels of hunger, with 4.7 million - more than a tenth of Afghanistan's population - estimated to be one step away from famine.

Ghor is one of the worst-affected provinces. The men here are desperate.

"I got a call saying my children hadn't eaten for two days," says Rabani, his voice choking up.

"I felt like I should kill myself. But then I thought how will that help my family? So here I am looking for work."

Khwaja Ahmad barely gets out a few words before he starts sobbing.

"We are starving. My older children died, so I need to work to feed my family. But I'm old, so no one wants to give me work," he says.

When a local bakery near the square opens up, the owner distributes stale bread among the crowd. Within seconds, the loaves have been pulled apart, half a dozen men clutching onto precious pieces. Suddenly another scrum occurs. A man on a motorcycle comes by wanting to hire one labourer to carry bricks. Dozens of men throw themselves at him. In the two hours we were there, only three men got hired.

In the communities nearby - bare homes scattered over barren, brown hills, set against the snowy peaks of the Siah Koh mountain range - the devastating impact of unemployment is clear.

Abdul Rashid Azimi takes us into his home and brings out two of his children – seven-year-old twins Roqia and Rohila. He holds them close, eager to explain why he's making unbearable choices.

"I'm willing to sell my daughters," he weeps. "I'm poor, in debt and helpless."

"I come home from work with parched lips, hungry, thirsty, distressed and confused. My children come to me saying 'Baba, give us some bread'. But what can I give? Where is the work?"

Abdul tells us he is willing to sell his girls for marriage, or for domestic work. "If I sell one daughter, I could feed the rest of my children for at least four years," he says.

He hugs Rohila, kissing her as he cries. "It breaks my heart, but it's the only way."

"All we have to eat is bread and hot water, not even tea," says their mother, Kayhan.

Two of Abdul and Kayhan's teenage sons work polishing shoes in the town centre. Another collects rubbish, which Kayhan uses as fuel for cooking.

Saeed Ahmad tells us he has already been forced to sell his five-year-old daughter, Shaiqa, after she got appendicitis and a cyst in her liver.

"I had no money to pay the medical expenses. So I sold my daughter to a relative," he says.

....."Giving away your child at such a young age, carries a lot of anxiety. Underage [marriages] have their problems; however, because I couldn't pay for her treatment, I was thinking, at least she will be alive."

.....But massive cuts in aid over the past few years have deprived a large majority of this life-saving assistance.

"My child died of hunger and a lack of medicine... When a child is sick and hungry, it is obvious they will die," he says.

A local elder says that child mortality, mainly due to malnutrition, has "really gone up" in the last two years.

Here, though, there are no formal records of deaths. The graveyard is the only place to find evidence of a surge in child deaths. And so, like we've done in the past, we counted the small and big graves separately. There were roughly twice as many small graves as big ones – suggesting twice as many children as adults.

There was more evidence at the main provincial hospital in Chaghcharan. The neonatal, or newborn, unit is the busiest. Every bed is full, some with two babies in them. Most of them are underweight and a majority are struggling to breathe on their own.

A nurse wheels in a small cot with newborn twin girls. They're two months premature. One weighs 2kg, the other just 1kg. They're in a critical condition and were immediately put on oxygen.

Their mother, 22-year-old Shakila, is recovering in the maternity ward. "She is weak because she had barely anything to eat when she was carrying them, just bread and tea," the twins' grandmother Gulbadan explains. "That's why the babies are in such a condition." A few hours after we left the hospital that day, the heavier baby died before she could even be named.

"The doctors tried to help her but she died," her stricken grandmother says the next day. "I wrapped her tiny body up and took her home. When her mother found out, she fainted."

Gulbadan points to the surviving baby, adding: "I hope she at least survives."

Nurse Fatima Husseini says there are days when as many as three babies die.

"In the beginning, I found it very hard when I saw children dying. But now it has almost become normal for us," she says. Dr Muhammad Mosa Oldat, who runs the neonatal unit, says the mortality rate climbs as high as 10%, which is "not acceptable". "But because of poverty, the patient load is increasing every day," he says. "And here we also don't have the resources to treat the babies properly." In the paediatric intensive care unit, six-week-old Zameer is suffering from meningitis and pneumonia. Both are curable, but doctors would need to conduct an MRI scan and they don't have the right equipment. But perhaps the most shocking thing the medics tell us is that the public hospital doesn't have medicine for most patients, with families having to buy their medication from pharmacies outside. "Sometimes, if medicines are left over from the baby of a better-off family, we use it for the babies whose families cannot afford it," Fatima says.

A lack of money is forcing many families to make tough decisions. Gulbadan's surviving granddaughter put on a little weight and her breathing stabilised. But a few days later, her family took her home. They simply couldn't afford to keep her in hospital. Baby Zameer was also taken home by his parents for the same reason.

Their tiny bodies will now have to fight the battle to survive all on their own.

Additional reporting by Imogen Anderson, Mahfouz Zubaide and Sanjay Ganguly

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