

# HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

## Introduction

### Focus

In this *News in Review* story we'll look at the growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. We will also explore the dangerous and difficult work being carried out by workers trying to provide aid to Afghan civilians. And we'll see what one Canadian, former cabinet minister Flora MacDonald, is doing to try to help people in some of the most remote parts of Afghanistan.

### Did You Know . . .

According to the Rideau Institute ([www.rideauinstitute.ca](http://www.rideauinstitute.ca)), Canada's participation in the war in Afghanistan will cost the federal treasury over \$20-billion, not the \$8-billion originally estimated by the Conservative government (*Toronto Star*, October 9, 2008).

The news is often filled with stories of military casualties suffered in Afghanistan. But lately, the news has been more about aid workers being killed in the country. Aid workers, journalists, and other civilian personnel are becoming targets of the Taliban—and the situation is expected to get even worse.

Headlines on August 14, 2008, were filled with the news of an attack on an International Rescue Committee (IRC – [www.theirc.org](http://www.theirc.org)) convoy returning to Kabul. The attackers had ambushed the clearly marked IRC vehicle, forcing it into a ditch. The attackers then fired into a vehicle, killing three female aid workers and their Afghan driver. Two of the women were Canadians; the third was a U.S. citizen.

One of the Canadians was Jacqueline Kirk, a 40-year-old woman from Montreal, whose PhD dissertation was on women teachers in Pakistan. She was highly committed to international development work, having already been to Afghanistan a number of times. She had also worked in the Aceh province of Indonesia following the 2004 tsunami and participated in earthquake-relief efforts in Pakistan. She had also spent time in southern Sudan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda. Despite the dangers she would face in Afghanistan, her husband said she

was committed to her work. “She went there for the children, she wanted to help the children and especially the girls who had no other means of getting an education” (*Toronto Star*, August 14, 2008).

This is but one story of the extraordinary individuals who risk their lives to help others. There are almost 200 international aid groups working in Afghanistan. Increasingly, these aid agencies are becoming targets of the Taliban. In past conflicts, aid workers who travelled in clearly marked vehicles were considered to be relatively safe from attack. But the rules of the past do not seem to apply in Afghanistan. In fact, there don't seem to be any rules anymore. Journalists and foreign workers of all kinds are increasingly being targeted.

This new situation has created worry that a full-scale humanitarian crisis is underway in Afghanistan. Afghan civilians, already exhausted from years of war in their country, will have even less access to food, clean water, clothes, and basic medical supplies. It seems reasonable that at some point aid agencies may decide that it is just too dangerous to send their employees into Afghanistan. But if that happens, it will be the Afghan people who will suffer the most.

### To Consider

1. Why do you think aid agencies have become targets of the Taliban?
2. Is there any way that these agencies or foreign governments can convince militants to leave aid convoys alone?
3. At what point is delivering aid in conflict zones simply not worth the risk?

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## Video Review

### Further Research

The Government of Canada has created a Web site to explain all aspects of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. At the site, entitled "Canada's Engagement in Afghanistan," you will find maps, photos, videos, and text information about where Canadian personnel are located within Afghanistan, the various types of work being conducted in the country, and the names of those who have died there. Visit the site at [www.afghanistan.gc.ca](http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca).

Respond to the following questions as you watch the video.

1. What is the "humanitarian crisis" in Afghanistan?

2. Record facts that show that Afghanistan is now more dangerous than ever.

3. Who is Flora MacDonald?

4. How is she being received by the Afghan people?

5. How many times has she been to Afghanistan?

6. What type of work is she doing in Afghanistan? Record specific details and examples.

### Analysis

In small groups, discuss what you have learned from this *News in Review* story and answer the following questions.

1. When you consider how dangerous the situation in Afghanistan has become, why do you think Flora MacDonald continues her work in this country?

2. In what ways is MacDonald an important ambassador for Canada? In other words, what values and principles does she represent to Afghans and the international community?

3. Do you think you would ever be interested in development work in a foreign country? Explain in depth.

4. Would you ever consider such work at MacDonald's age? Why? Why not?

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## *The Crisis on the Ground*

### Did You Know . . .

The average age of widows in Afghanistan is 35 years (CARE Canada).

### Quote

"In the village where one of my co-operative members was born, Taliban are using what was the school as the gallows. In the past two weeks, one suspected anti-Taliban spy was hanged. A second was beaten till he cried out a confession, then also hanged, dollar bills stuffed in his mouth. When the Taliban wished to strip the body so it would hang shamefully naked for the two days during which they forbade relatives to cut it down and bury it, the villagers protested. 'Sit down and shut up,' came the answer. 'Your turn is coming.'" — Sarah Chayes, founder of a soap-making co-operative in Kandahar (*The Globe and Mail*, August 15, 2008)

In Afghanistan, a major human tragedy is gathering momentum. Hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps millions, are on the move, fearful for their lives and suffering the twin scourges of conflict and starvation. Afghanistan has suffered nearly 30 years of conflict, and recent problems with floods and drought have compounded the grim conditions facing Afghan civilians.

This winter, it is expected that the death toll for civilians will rise dramatically, as the population is exhausted and malnourished after years of war. Afghanistan is a difficult country in which to live at the best of times. Survival is not at all guaranteed here.

In fact, the odds are stacked against Afghans right from birth. In Afghanistan, for every 1 000 children born, 154 will die at birth. In Canada, for every 1 000 children born, only five will die. This is an appalling statistic, but one that is an everyday reality for mothers in Afghanistan.

In the documentary *Flora's Mission*, which aired on *CBC News: Sunday Report* in November 2008, Flora MacDonald interviews a number of village women in a region called the

Shydon Valley in the Bamyan province. One woman named Fatima explains to MacDonald that she had a lot of children, but only five lived. Colsom, another woman in the group, gave birth to 12 children; only seven survived. And Nickbot gave birth to six children, but only one survived.

These deaths would be devastating in any situation, but the women report that the deaths are even harder to take because they don't know why their children died. They don't know why because there has never been a doctor or community health worker in their village or stationed within reach of their village.

Add to this the fact that Afghan civilians live in fear of becoming targets of the Taliban themselves. On a daily basis, Afghan civilians are tortured and killed for any perceived slight against the Taliban. This includes speaking to an aid worker for one minute to provide driving directions, daring to go to school (if you are a girl), daring to teach girls, or refusing to pick up arms and join the Taliban. Life in Afghanistan is wretched and brutal for most of its citizens. It is hard to imagine how it could get much worse.

### Analysis

1. Why do you think some observers refer to the humanitarian crisis as "the other war" in Afghanistan?
2. Why do you think we tend to pay more attention to the deaths of soldiers in military conflicts than to those of civilians?
3. Some people argue that if women were in charge of governments, there would be no more war. This is said because of women's roles as mothers and caregivers. Do you agree with this statement or not? Why?

# HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

## Providing Aid

### Did You Know . . .

The UN estimates that fighting in Afghanistan between international forces and Taliban and Al Qaeda killed 8 000 people in 2007. Of the dead, 1 500 were Afghan civilians.

### Quote

"We haven't accepted the international community so our lives would get worse. We accepted them so our lives would get better." — Afghan President Hamid Karzai reacting to increased civilian casualties at the hands of international forces (*Toronto Star*, November 27)

### Quote

". . . organizations such as Britain's well-known Oxfam ([www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)), or the highly regarded Doctors Without Borders, or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ([www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)) unquestionably fill vital roles, providing health care, educating children, and distributing food." At the same time, though, these organizations "deepen the dependency of these states on outsiders." — Richard Gwyn (*Toronto Star*, July 11, 2008)

While vast amounts of money have been spent by foreign countries to fight the military conflict in Afghanistan, a mere fraction of this amount has been dedicated to providing aid on the ground to those most affected by the conflict. But even when aid in the form of food, clothes, supplies, and medicine is provided, it is difficult to get it to civilians in the country because of the worsening security situation.

John Holmes, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, states that because of the Taliban resurgence in late 2007 and early 2008, it has become much harder to provide aid to those who need it. People leave their homes and flee to the country to protect their children from the violence. It then becomes very difficult for them to get back to their homes or into areas where aid is being distributed.

The UN World Food Program distributed 220 000 tonnes of food to Afghanistan in 2007. It is estimated that this food fed an estimated 5.5 million people, out of an estimated 31 million. But 55 aid convoys were attacked during 2007, resulting in the loss of about 1 000 tonnes of food and the death of 40 humanitarian workers. A further 89 aid workers were abducted, and seven of those were later killed by their kidnappers. So it is dangerous and difficult to deliver aid to those who need it.

### Analysis

1. Is there a point at which humanitarian agencies should refuse to distribute aid in conflict zones? Explain clearly.
2. If development workers have now become targets of the Taliban, is there really any way that they can be protected from harm?
3. If aid workers are pulled out of Afghanistan will the Taliban see this as a victory? Who will suffer most if this occurs?
4. How can governments protect aid workers?

Humanitarian groups have been criticizing their own governments for linking the delivery of aid to the military mission in Afghanistan. This politicizes the humanitarian work they are doing and turns them into Taliban targets. James Orbinski, former president of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning humanitarian organization Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders – [www.doctorswithoutborders.org](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org)), has become a vocal critic of the way the Canadian government is operating in Afghanistan. He believes that the best thing Ottawa could do for Afghanistan would be to "decouple" humanitarian programs from military objectives. "That would dramatically affect the lives of Afghans" (*Toronto Star*, April 22, 2008).

Another complication is that the Afghan government only administers one-third of the aid flowing into the country. The rest is managed by development agencies, humanitarian groups, and private contractors. This means that the Afghan government remains dependent on outside agencies and foreign governments to provide the basic necessities for its citizens. As a result, it then becomes almost impossible for the country not to slide into further chaos once those foreign countries and agencies withdraw from the area for good.

# HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

## *The Assistance of Flora MacDonald*

### Quote

"Flora is a magnificent human being. Flora has got a heart of gold. She's gone to places where even I haven't gone to. And the energy that she's got, she's got very, very sincere intentions for Afghanistan, especially for Bamyan and for the long-suffering people, the Hazara people of Bamyan." — Mustafa Zahir, Head of Afghan Environmental Protection Agency

### Did you know . . .

In 2001, the Taliban blew up the world-famous Bamyan Buddhas, the largest and oldest statues of Buddha in the world. The two monumental statues of standing Buddhas were carved directly into the side of a cliff in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Taliban blew up the statues after imposing a strict form of Islam that forbade the worship of idols. The Buddhas were declared "un-Islamic" before they were destroyed.

Only some of the aid provided in Afghanistan comes from governments or government-sponsored agencies. Some of the aid being provided in the country comes from private donors. One example of this is the humanitarian organization Future Generations Canada. Future Generations ([www.futuregen.ca](http://www.futuregen.ca)) helps to provide remote villages with light, clean water, health care, and the chance for an education.

Future Generations Canada is a private organization run by Flora MacDonald, a former Canadian politician and cabinet minister. MacDonald raises all the money for the organization herself; she has only one employee, Abdullah, an Afghan local who finds out where the biggest needs are among the many poor Afghan villages. He then works with MacDonald to try to provide aid in that area.

In one project, Future Generations paid to send a couple from a remote Afghan village in Bamyan province to India to be trained as solar engineers. After their training, the husband-and-wife team returned to their village where they were able to successfully install, operate, and fix the solar energy machines provided by Future Generations. For the first time in their lives, the villagers have light and energy.

In another project, the organization was able to reduce disease in one village by providing clean drinking water. In this project, a pipe carries clean water from the mountain spring to the village taps. The new system has significantly lowered the incidence of very serious diarrhea, resulting in less chance of death for those most affected by severe diarrhea—the children and the elderly.

And through Abdullah, Future

Generations Canada was able to show a group of villagers that water could also bring them electricity. With Future Generations funding, Abdullah and the community built a micro hydro project by harnessing the village water. This allowed the community to have light for several hours during the day. Another first.

In some ways these are simple projects. They do not involve complicated mechanics, a lot of parts, or even a lot of money. Simplicity is the key to all of MacDonald's projects. She knows that for this aid to be truly successful the people must be able to set the project up themselves and keep it going long after she and Abdullah are gone.

MacDonald makes sure that both men and women receive training in Afghanistan. This is unusual in a country where most women do not enjoy basic human rights. But MacDonald knows that if women receive training and skills, they will be more respected in their villages and be able to help provide a better life for their children. This is important to her, as she was a trailblazer for Canadian women herself.

### The Life of Flora MacDonald

MacDonald is used to hard work. Her grit and determination, as well as her intelligence, got her elected to the House of Commons in 1972. She was one of only five women elected at the time and the only female member of the Conservative Party in Parliament. MacDonald later became Canada's first female foreign affairs minister, in the Joe Clark government. She also held high-profile cabinet seats in the Mulroney government.

**Quote**

I think any woman candidate has to be prepared to work harder than most male candidates." — Flora MacDonald, 1972

MacDonald lost her seat in 1988, and since then she has dedicated herself to humanitarian work around the world. She served as president of the World Federalist Movement – Canada, and

has been involved with organizations such as CARE Canada. At the age of 80, MacDonald founded her own humanitarian organization, Future Generations Canada.

**Analysis**

1. What might have motivated MacDonald to found Future Generations Canada at the age of 80?

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2. What does MacDonald's current and past work tell you about her as a person?

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3. Can small organizations like MacDonald's actually make a difference? Or are they too small to be effective?

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4. What advantages might small organizations have over larger aid organizations?

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# HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

## *Dangers Facing Journalists*

### **Did you know . . .**

Kidnapped foreigners in Afghanistan have previously been ransomed for up to \$3-million, sometimes with an exchange of prisoners. Canadian authorities have denied that any ransom was paid for Fung.

You know from this *News in Review* story that foreign aid workers and other civilians have become the targets of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Journalists have become targets as well. In October 2008, CBC journalist Mellissa Fung was kidnapped while she was reporting on a refugee camp in Afghanistan. She was eventually freed after being held for 28 days. The following is an excerpt from Fung's interview with the CBC's Anna Maria Tremonti on November 12, 2008 ([www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/11/12/fung-intvu.html](http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/11/12/fung-intvu.html)).

Mellissa Fung repeatedly told herself, "I am not dying here" during her 28-day captivity in Afghanistan, despite being stabbed in the shoulder during her abduction, the CBC journalist said Wednesday. In an exclusive interview with the CBC's Anna Maria Tremonti from an undisclosed location—her first since being released Saturday—Fung said she struck one of the armed men as she was forced into a vehicle at a refugee camp in Afghanistan on Oct. 12.

"Two guys with big guns came out of the car and grabbed me," she said. "I think I hit one, and he stabbed me in the shoulder. They stabbed me as I was getting in the car. "Next thing I knew, I was inside the car on the floor."

Fung, who is from Vancouver and is normally based in Regina, was on her second tour reporting from Afghanistan and had been in Kabul almost a month. She described the criminal gang who held her as a "family business" eager to "finish her case" and get paid a ransom.

The lead kidnapper, Khaled, was

about 19 years old, and told her his father ran the operation from Pakistan. He told her he would have preferred to take a man, because it wouldn't be "as much trouble."

"He said, 'I saw you. We were in a hurry. We needed to get out of there so we grabbed you.'" Her driver and her translator, or "fixer," were overpowered, but not taken. They were later detained by government authorities for questioning and have yet to be released.

Wounded, bleeding, and hampered by the loss of a contact lens in the abduction, Fung was then driven for about 20 minutes with one of her captors stepping on her leg to restrain her. "One of the first things they said was, 'We're not going to kill you,'" she said. "They said it in English."

She was then taken out of the car and forced to walk for three hours to her eventual prison—a damp, cold underground chamber southwest of Kabul, where she would be held until the last week before her release on Saturday. "I thought maybe I could run, but they had guns, so I didn't think that was a very good idea," she said.

Fung said her captors, who had searched her bags under the suspicion she had a GPS device with her, initially were not aware she had a cellphone in her pocket. The kidnappers soon discovered the phone when it beeped with a message. They were furious, she said, and accused her of lying, but she told them she had forgotten about it being there.

Inside the closet-sized pit at the end of the tunnel, she said, she could see daylight emerging through cracks in

### Further Research

Listen to an audio clip of Mellisa Fung describing her experience ([www.cbc.ca/sunday/2008/11/110908\\_0.html](http://www.cbc.ca/sunday/2008/11/110908_0.html)). How does listening to a verbal description differ from reading a description? Is it easier to understand the emotions Fung experienced as a prisoner when you listen to her?

the makeshift beams of the ceiling. "I was so worried about everybody, all my friends, my family," she said. "That was the hardest, most frustrating thing: I couldn't tell anybody. I just thought, 'Nobody's ever going to find me. I'm in a hole. I'm in the middle of nowhere.'"

Fung said she soon forced herself to keep positive and focus on "making plans" for when she was released, including moving to Toronto and organizing a "picnic day" with friends and family. "I know myself pretty well—that helped me," she said. "I just didn't let myself go to those places I couldn't go. . . . It's funny how your mind and body can adapt."

She said she was watched by a guard at all times and treated well by her captors, subsisting on cookies and juice given to her, and going to the bathroom in a bucket while the guard turned away. "I would maybe sleep a couple of hours at a time, and never during the day," she said. "I think I have two cavities."

Her captors allowed her to write in her notebook, which she said she used to write letters and make a detailed account of the time spent in the cave. The notebook, her bags, and camera equipment were all taken from her by her captors upon her release. "I wish I had that diary now." She said her shoulder wound turned into a "huge, ugly scab" that eventually fell off in the third week of her captivity.

She said only the lead kidnapper spoke English well enough, but she soon developed a rapport with him. "I interviewed him, because there's not much else to do," she said. She also had him swear several times on the Qur'an that he wouldn't kill her. Seeing that he appeared sincerely worried about her health, she said she faked feeling ill in the hope of

speeding up her release.

At one point, and only once during a moment of anger, she cried, only to have the lead kidnapper hold her hand and plead with her to stop, insisting she would soon be freed. "He said, 'Please don't cry, you're leaving. It will be soon. Don't cry. Don't cry.'"

She also described the night she was released and how the lead captor complained to her that he wasn't getting any ransom. "He told me, 'I am not happy. I am letting you go for no money.'" she said.

She described approaching a car parked on a road that she would soon learn belonged to Afghan intelligence officers. "We walked up to the car and my kidnapper said, 'Goodbye,'" she said. "I didn't know what was going on until a man said, 'Hello, how are you?' and put me in the back of the car."

Fung was then driven to the Kabul offices of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), where a camera was set up for her debriefing. "The last thing I wanted after 28 days was to have my picture taken," she said.

NDS chief Amrullah Saleh, she said, seemed to know all the names of the people involved. "Obviously it was not the first time they dealt with these people," she said.

She also said there was "no way" her fixer was involved in her abduction, and she pleaded for his release. "I know he didn't do it," she said. "I know he couldn't have been involved."

The Canadian and Afghan governments have insisted no ransom was paid in order to have Fung released. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has also said no political prisoners have been freed in exchange for the journalist.

News of the abduction had been

kept secret over concerns about her safety before Afghanistan's intelligence agency secured her release. Fung said she was surprised by the blackout surrounding her abduction and thanked media outlets for their co-operation. She also said she understood the current debate surrounding the decision not to report her story. "As a journalist, I'd want to report on it, but if you're talking about a life, that supercedes a good story," she said. "If it helped, then it worked, right?"

Since her release, Fung said she has had trouble sleeping, but otherwise

feels in good shape. "I am trying to erase the faces of my kidnapers in my mind," she said. "As time passes, it will fade. I want to get back to my normal life." She said she would go back to Afghanistan, but doesn't want to put her family through the pain of worrying about her.

Her biggest regret, she said, was not being able to tell the story she went to tell in the first place about the refugee camps. "Those are the people whose stories need to get out there. Those are the real casualties of this war," she said. "I still wish I could tell that story."

## Analysis

In a small group discuss Mellissa Fung's story and record responses to the following questions:

1. Why are journalists like Fung targets for kidnapers?
2. Were you surprised by the treatment she received while she was held hostage? Do you think she was treated with care or not?
3. Who should be responsible for providing protection for journalists in conflict zones: local governments, foreign governments, the news agencies themselves?
4. Since the time Fung was released, there has been some criticism over the fact that a news blackout had been in effect to protect her safety. Critics have argued that news agencies do not keep other kidnappings quiet, and that their silence in this case shows a double standard, and almost demonstrates that the life of a journalist is more important than the life of others who are taken hostage. Do you agree or disagree with these critics? Explain fully.

# HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

## *Activity: Handling a Hostage-taking Incident*

### **Update**

As this story was being prepared, another Canadian journalist, Beverley Giesbrecht, was seized in Pakistan by suspected Taliban militants while researching a story.

In November 2008, Canadians were shocked to learn that CBC reporter Mellissa Fung had been held hostage for 28 days in Afghanistan. They were shocked to hear the news because no one knew she had been kidnapped because the international media had agreed to honour a news blackout about her kidnapping. This meant that no story about her kidnapping was printed during the 28 days she was held hostage.

Upon her release, a debate ensued about whether or not news blackouts should be used when a kidnapping has occurred. Those in favour of blackouts argue that publicity can damage the sensitive negotiations that take place after a kidnapping. Publicity can make a kidnap victim more valuable, which can lead to a longer period of captivity, or worse. As well, kidnappers have been known to offer their detainees to the highest bidder. That means they will turn the hostage over to yet another hostile group who wants to try and negotiate an even higher price for the hostage. Those against blackouts argue that freedom of the press needs to be protected in all situations—even those involving a hostage-taking incident.

Another issue raised by Fung's case is whether or not the Canadian government, or any government, should pay a ransom for the return of a hostage. Paying a fee could potentially result in the fast release of a prisoner, but it could also mean that kidnappers would be encouraged to kidnap additional targets. As well, there is no guarantee that the paying of a ransom will result in the release of a prisoner.

In Fung's case, the Canadian government was able to secure her release in return for a prisoner exchange. Although all of the details have not been released publicly, it appears that Afghan security officials were able to kidnap family members of those who were holding Fung. The security service was willing to release those family members in exchange for the release of Fung.

### **Your Task**

You have been hired by the Canadian government to draft a kidnapping policy. In a small group, you will have to devise a policy that addresses:

- whether or not news blackouts should be mandatory
- whether a ransom should be paid to free a hostage and if so, under what conditions
- whether prisoner exchanges should be used to free a hostage, and if so, under what conditions

Be prepared to compare your policy with another group, or present your policy to the entire class.