

Healthcare in Crisis: Factors Afflicting Afghanistan's Healthcare

William Healzer and Ravi Patel

Prior to Soviet intervention, Afghanistan was a promising market in the booming South Asian economy. The nation was also popular with western travelers, who savored its rich cultural heritage along the well-traversed Hippie Trail. In 1977, Afghanistan had zero refugees; today, Afghanistan has the second largest population of refugees. Afghanistan in the late twentieth century was evolving into a modernized nation and a leading economic power in South Asia. Despite its relative poverty, Afghanistan's foreign policy, agricultural production, and health care system were self-sufficient. Less than forty years later, Afghanistan's foreign policy loses its autonomy to Pakistan, its agricultural industry is nearly nonexistent, healthcare is parlous, and ethnic divides limit the nation's growth. Afghanistan has become addicted to foreign aid, and although no country in history has improved its economy long-term with foreign aid, Kabul insists for more support and money. Whereas Cold War escapades targeted Moscow and Washington D.C., they struck Kabul.

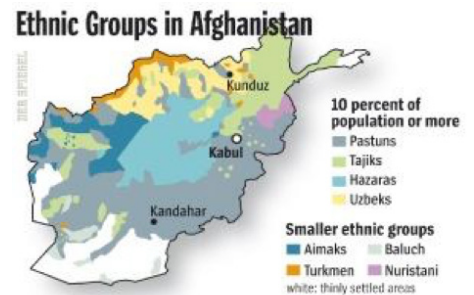
In a 2002 interview with the *New York Times*, former US Secretary of Health Tommy Thompson was awestruck at the obstacles of rebuilding Afghanistan: "It's hard to appreciate, unless you've seen for yourself, the extent to which war and the Taliban have devastated this land and its medical infrastructure ... The Afghans have nothing; they need virtually everything." Earlier that year, while talking with the United States' Secretary of Health, Afghanistan's ex-President Hamid Karzai pleaded, "We need to rebuild our health system entirely after 20 years of neglect ... [but] most of all, we need you to stay concerned about Afghanistan." Fourteen years later, as chaos and strife continuously plagued Afghanistan, health-care systems have further denigrated. Western powers have left the region in conflict and distress, yet Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis has been forsaken. According to a 2015 report by the World Bank, Afghanistan has the worst average life expectancy in all of Asia: approximately sixty years. During his visit to the na-

tion in 2002, Thompson observed that "the Afghans [still] have nothing; they need virtually everything."

Exactly how has Afghanistan's health care system become the worst in Asia?

Ethnic Divides and War

In Afghanistan, war has raged for centuries, from the conquests of the Mongols to contemporary struggles between ethnic factions. Al-



though fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in the Afghan Civil War destabilized the region in the late twentieth century, ethnic groups have long struggled against each other for land, resources, and ways of life. Afghanistan is home to fourteen distinct ethnic groups, with an ethnically Pashtun majority. Other influential groups include the Tajiks, who represent almost a quarter of the population, as well as the Hazaras and the Uzbeks, each accounting for just under ten percent of Afghanistan's population. The Pashtun people have long maintained an ethnic control over the Afghan government. Pashtuns are native to Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan, and include Afghan ex-President Hamid Karzai, current president Ashraf Ghani, disproportionate number of government officials, and members of the war-mongering Taliban.

Pashtuns have worked actively since Indo-Pakistani independence in 1947 to gain their own sovereign state, "Pashtunistan," which may be recognized in the coming future. Bilqees Roshan, a Pashtun senator born near Afghanistan's border with the Islamic State of Iran, told NPR: "In the past 30 years, ethnicity has been misused by people, [particularly ethnic Pashtuns,] trying

to gain more power in the government.” Throughout the 1990s, civil war divided the Afghan government along ethnic lines. While the Pashtun Taliban waged war against the Tajik and Uzbek-backed Northern Alliance, thousands of civilians were massacred and key medical facilities were destroyed on both sides.

The United Nations brought charges against the Taliban at the dawn of the millennia for the mass murder of Hazaras and Tajik civilians. As Hazaras are practicing Shia Muslims, and Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims, the United Nations drew parallels between these violent attacks to the mass murders of Bosnian Muslims during the Yugoslavian Civil War, in which Bosnian Muslims were slaughtered by Slavic Christians due to similar religious differences. Afghanistan has evolved to become one of many playing fields for the Saudi-Iranian conflict, as Sunnis and Shias struggle for control of the Muslim Umma. The Tajik Senator of Northern Afghanistan, Mohammad Alam Ezedayar, shares his birthplace with Mujahedin leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed leading an anti-Taliban resistance movement. During an NPR interview, Ezedayar discussed his close ties with his fellow Tajiks, claiming that it was their right to have their ethnicity on their identification cards. The Tajiks are a close-knit group of ethnically Persian people. Interestingly, there are more Tajiks in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan. The Tajik people have historically battled the Pashtuns militarily, economically and politically for influence in Afghanistan.

During the nation’s Civil War, ethnic divides spurred world powers to also divide—with the United States, Russia, Iran, and India siding with the Northern Alliance while Pakistan and Saudi Arabia allied with the Mullah Omar-led Taliban. Following the September 11 attacks in the BBC film *Putin, Russia, and the West*, Russian government official Sergei Ivanov claimed, “The Taliban contacted [Russian] frontier guards on the Tajik-Afghan border. They said they had been sent by Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar to propose that the Taliban and Russia unite against the United States.” Russia vehemently denied this alliance, however the proposal demonstrates the deep ethnic divides endangering international forces within Afghanistan.

In present day, over sixty percent of Afghans do not have access to electricity, and proposed energy

routes look to pass through the Hazara stronghold of Bamiyan or through the Salang pass. The proposed T.U.T.A.P. pipeline (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan) was a multi-million dollar pipeline plan, originally routed through the province of Bamiyan. Melissa Kerr Chioventa, a Hazara expert at the University of Connecticut commented:

Each time something like this happens, the Hazaras see it as another stone on their backs, they relate it back to a long history of oppression. Bamiyan is seen as the homeland, the seat of the Hazaras. Although the population of the province is relatively small, it’s a symbolic place. This unrest stems from a sense among the Hazaras that the state is not providing for them.

This division in energy consumption and economic interests further divides the nation, spilling onto the global biosphere.

Afghanistan’s Popular Culture: An Ethnic Schism

In late 2014, Afghan popular culture also divided along ethnic lines, as Afghan Pashtun General Abdul Wahid Taqat brazenly declared to the Afghan media that “Pashtuns are the rulers and owners of Afghanistan; they are the real inhabitants of Afghanistan ... Afghanistan means ‘where Pashtuns live.’” General Taqat’s comments faced strong opposition by leading figures in Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara-dominated areas of Afghanistan—further entrenching ethnic divisions. General Taqat’s nativist attitudes towards minorities in the nation has been used to justify the persecution of Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks.



One of Afghan’s few woman doctors attends to a young girl injured in a bus crash in Kandahar.

Ethnic Divides and Health Care

Ethnic divides rattle Afghan health care. During its oppressive regime, the Afghan Taliban destroyed innumerable health clinics, raging chaos on the Afghan health care system. As part of their strict legal code, the Taliban banned portrayals of the human body, including medical textbooks. In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, which held a major health care center for Afghans, 29% of health facilities were destroyed by the Taliban, undermining national health care. The Taliban continues to show disregard for health care facilities, as seen in the skinning of a Fazl Ahmad, a young Afghan man accused of being the distant relative of another man who allegedly killed a Taliban commander last June. Admittedly, Afghanistan has long been an area of turbulence, spanning from the conquests of Tamerlane and Babur to the Soviet Invasion of the mid-twentieth century and into the present day. As invaders thwart each other in Afghanistan, health care facilities will continue to crumble.

Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis has been compounded by ethnic tensions. The United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs shows that 700,000 Afghans are without emergency shelter; 1.7 million lack food security; 2.9 million nutrition; 1.7 million protection; 1.5 million water, sanitation, and hygiene; and 3.1 million health. The UNOCHA further shows that 1,900 civilians were killed and 137 thousand civilians displaced in 2016 during the standoff between the Taliban and its adversaries. The Afghan people suffer from the most horrific health care system in Asia. Seemingly insurmountable poverty, decaying infrastructure, and a landmine crisis plague the nation. Life expectancy is approximately 60 years-- eighteen years shorter than the United States--and a quarter of children die before reaching their fifth birthdays. Diseases such as chronic malnutrition, cholera, Congo-Crimea Fever, diarrhea, and measles have been eradicated in the West, but kill scores of Afghans daily. Landmines from the time of the Mujahedin, laid by Taliban militants, kill more people than in any other country. Physicians are at a premium in Afghanistan. There is 1 doctor for roughly every 50,000 people in Afghanistan, while the United States has approximately 1 doctor for every 350 people. When WHO representatives visited Afghanistan in 2002, only three out of 133

hospitals surveyed were designated as acceptable.



Men outside the Boost Hospital in Lashkar Gah guard the complex from potential attacks. Fighting is prevalent in the surrounding districts of Nad Ali, Marja, Geremshir, and Nawa.

Due to its frequent ethnic-centric warfare, Afghanistan is one of the world's most mined nations. Only two of Afghanistan's twenty-nine provinces are mine-free. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, children compose the majority of landmine casualties in Afghanistan. In a PHR study in 2001, representatives surveying Afghan women noted poor mental health and suicidal thoughts: "The majority of respondents (63-87%) described their physical health as 'fair' or 'poor.'" While numerous health care advocacy groups have entered Afghanistan, locals scarred by invaders of centuries past are hesitant to accept foreign intervention. However, Afghanistan continues to improve its health infrastructure. Although public health care coverage is only 70%, it has increased by over 20% since the turn of the century, according to a recent WHO report. Foreign resistance to the Taliban has also decimated Afghanistan's infrastructure. In later 2015, a coalition led by the United States bombed a hospital in Kunduz. In the attack 44 patients, including women and children, were killed. Although the United States military has accredited mechanical and communication failures as causes to this humanitarian catastrophe, journalist Matthieu Aikins of New York Times Magazine postulates that Afghan forces led the Americans into the attack on the hospital because it was believed to be harboring Taliban fighters.

Afghanistan has placed a high priority on improving health infrastructure. Afghanistan works to restore its health care facilities, expand coverage into

rural areas, increase the amount of medical treatments available to Afghans, facilitate an increase in health care workers, and improve Afghanistan's resilience for natural disasters. In his book, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, Afghan President Ghani looks to rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure to remedy its collapsing health care system. However, Afghanistan spends over half of its annual 1.8 Billion USD government budget on national security, giving Afghan health care systems little financial hope for recovery.

While Afghanistan's health care system is in disarray, the Afghan people continue to work towards a brighter future. Current efforts to repatriate Afghan refugees as well as to reconstruct medical facilities and schools will help the nation resolve its ethnic schism and rebuild from the devastation of recent warfare. Although Afghanistan currently possesses Asia's worst health care system, Afghanistan can po-

tentially become a leader in South Asian health care once again through cooperation between ethnic groups and foreign aid. Despite ethnic divisions and conflict that divide the nation culturally, politically, and socially, Afghanistan's health care system could recover to its twentieth-century zenith, when Afghan foreign policy, agricultural production, and health care system will all once again be self-sufficient. The Afghan people may need "to rebuild [their] health system entirely after 20 years of neglect ... [but] most of all, [they] need you to stay concerned about Afghanistan" to improve their outlook for a better future.

William Healzer is currently a junior at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose, California. He is an intern at the Preventive Defense Project at Stanford University.

Ravi Patel is currently a graduate student in the Department of Biology at Stanford University. He serves as a research assistant to Secretary William J. Perry. Ravi is also the executive director of the Stanford U.S.-Russia Forum. liance, thousands of civilians were massacred and key medical facilities were destroyed on both sides.

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