

“Move or die”: a strained people face the prospect of yet more war

A full-scale attack on war- and drought-ravaged Afghanistan will result in “devastation of biblical proportions,” says a Canadian Médecins sans Frontières /Doctors without Borders worker who recently fled Afghanistan.

“They’re going to have to move [to another country] or they’re going to die,” Dave Michalski, a MSF logistician told *CMAJ*. “They’re tough and resilient but worn down. It will be a difficult winter.”

The fear of war comes after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. The US government has linked these attacks to Osama bin Laden, an exiled Saudi Arabian living in Afghanistan.

All international aid organizations in Afghanistan, which is about the size of Texas, have already shut down or are operating with a skeleton staff of Afghani residents. Foreign-born workers were evacuated in fear of local reprisals should the US attack. Michalski, 32, spoke to *CMAJ* from Turkmenistan, where he arrived just 2 days after the terrorist attacks in the US.

MSF had 70 expatriates and over 400 local staff running or helping out at 32 clinics and 6 hospitals, as well as mobile

clinics, vitamin outreach programs and more. The programs will continue to be run by local staff.

But food aid programs, which 3 million of Afghanistan’s 25 million citizens were depending on, have stopped.

The UN now estimates that a fifth of the population — 5 million Afghans — face famine this winter. MSF was already coping with epidemics of scurvy in 5 provinces, and widespread malnutrition.

“They are barely surviving,” said Michalski, a Toronto resident who began working in Afghanistan in March. The country has been at war for 22 years, initially with the former Soviet Union and now in a civil war. There has also been a drought for the past 3 years, and since 85% of Afghans depend on agriculture for their livelihood, the results have been devastating. It is estimated that there are now about 750 000 internally displaced Afghans. The life expectancy for men is 45 years, for women, 47.

Michalski, who worked at a refugee camp for 150 000 displaced people near Mazar-e-Sharif (population 131 000) in Northeast Afghanistan, says there was a surge of cholera cases this year with up to 100 new cases daily, though “not too many deaths.”

If the US and its allies attack, Michalski says there will be massive movements internally and across the border. “There will be a huge, huge problem in a short time,” he said.

The majority of refugees will likely try to get into Pakistan or Iran, the most geographically accessible countries. MSF estimates there are already 1.5 million Afghani refugees in Iran and some 2 million in Pakistan.

Aid officials in Pakistan were preparing for the deluge of refugees, moving tents, food supplies and staff to border areas. The US recently gave \$2 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to help Pakistan cope.

“I’m very fearful for the ordinary Afghani,” said Michalski. “The newspapers make it look like Afghanistan has declared war. Nothing could be further from the truth. The average person is just trying to provide for their family.”

— *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Quebec doctors rally to protect Middle Eastern medical residents after attack

The Federation of Medical Residents of Quebec has offered to help residents of Middle Eastern descent following an attack on a Saudi physician at the McGill University Hospital Centre. The Sept. 15 attack may have been a reprisal for terrorist acts in the US on Sept. 11.

The fourth-year obstetrics and gynecology resident was in an elevator at 6:30 pm in the Royal Victoria Hospital when a man grabbed her by the throat from behind. He threw her against the elevator wall, choked her, spit in her face and threatened her before running off. She never saw his face.

In a letter to all residents of Middle Eastern descent, the federation offered to be the first point of contact in helping concerned residents to cope with their fears, or to file complaints with the university or police.

“Many of these people don’t know how the system works,” explained federation president Dr. Jean-Sébastien Delisle, a third-year internal medicine resident at McGill. He called the apparent retaliation “clearly unacceptable” and “hard to understand.”

Delisle praised McGill’s quick action following the attack. Security patrols at teaching hospitals were immediately increased, escorts are now offered and more surveillance cameras are being installed. Female residents of Middle Eastern descent have stopped doing on-call work at night.

Dr. Abraham Fuks, McGill’s dean of medicine, called the attack “wanton and senseless.” He said that “we must remain vigilant so that our institutions and those who work in them can meet the highest standards of professional and human behaviour.” — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Already underserved refugee camps, such as this one near Peshawar, Pakistan, are faced with a new influx of fleeing Afghans.