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Afghanistan's 36 years of turmoil

In Detail

- Afghanistan has experienced more than three decades of conflict, and fighting is still raging in much of the country.
- The country is the source of nearly a quarter of the world's refugees and, although millions have returned home since 2002, about 2.5 million are still living as refugees, most of them in Pakistan or Iran. Another 620,000 people are displaced within Afghanistan.
- U.S.-led troops ousted the Taliban in 2001 after they refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the al Qaeda leader behind the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington.
- But violence has surged since 2006, with the Taliban fighting a guerrilla war in the south and east and carrying out high-profile suicide and car bombings across the country.
- The Taliban regrouped with the help of safe havens across the border in [Pakistan](#) and money from drug lords.
- Billions of dollars have been poured into rebuilding the country since 2001, but corruption and the lack of security have hampered development and been a source of frustration to many Afghans.
- Aid agencies struggle to access most of the country, especially rural areas where the needs are greatest.
- Although nominally women have recovered many of the rights lost under the Taliban, a combination of tribalism, poverty and conflict make the exercising of those rights a significant challenge.

Soviet invasion

- At the crossroads of regions and empires, Afghanistan has been subject to periodic intense foreign interest for centuries.
- In more recent history, a Soviet-backed communist government seized power in 1978, sparking a number of uprisings around the country as it tried to impose radical social reforms. Deteriorating security and a coup by another communist faction precipitated the Soviet invasion at the end of 1979.
- Villages were bombed and thousands of civilians arrested and tortured during the occupation.
- Religious fighters, or mujahideen - covertly funded by the United States and Saudi Arabia - formed the backbone of the resistance to the occupation.
- The Afghan jihad, or holy war, became a cause for Muslim warriors from around the Islamic world. The future al Qaeda leader bin Laden was among them.
- The Soviets withdrew in 1989, leaving behind the communist government of President Mohammad Najibullah. Stricken by defections, Najibullah's government collapsed in 1992, and he eventually took sanctuary at a U.N. compound in Kabul, where he was hanged by Taliban forces four years later.
- A mujahideen government was established in April 1992, but it was riven with factional rivalry, and the country disintegrated into civil war during which at least 40,000 people were killed in Kabul alone.

The Taliban

- The power vacuum allowed the Taliban, a militant student movement that grew out of hardline religious schools in Pakistan, to take the southern city of Kandahar in 1994 and Kabul in 1996.
- The regime, which adhered to a strict interpretation of Islam, barred women from most activities outside the home and ruled they must wear a head-to-foot burqa in public and be accompanied by a male relative. Many women still wear the burqa.
- Bin Laden and al Qaeda relocated to Afghanistan in the mid-1990s after being forced to leave Sudan. They based themselves around Kandahar.
- The Taliban provoked international condemnation, particularly over their treatment of women. Only three countries - Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - recognised them as the legitimate government.
- In 1999, the United Nations imposed sanctions to force the Taliban to turn over bin Laden, who was wanted in connection with the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in the Kenyan capital Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania.

The Northern Alliance

- Throughout the Taliban's rule, fighting continued between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. The Alliance was made up of ethnic Tajik-dominated groups who had united to fight the Taliban.
- Two days before al Qaeda launched its Sept. 11 attacks in the U.S., a leading member of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, was killed by suicide bombers posing as journalists. Al Qaeda members were believed to have carried out the assassination to curry favour with the Taliban.
- The United States launched bombing raids on Afghanistan in October 2001 after the Taliban refused to hand over bin Laden.
- With U.S. help, the Northern Alliance took the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, then Kabul. The rest of the country swiftly followed.
- It is believed bin Laden fled to Pakistan when U.S. and Afghan forces captured his main base in the Tora Bora mountains of eastern Afghanistan in late 2001. Many other al Qaeda militants also fled to Pakistan.

2001 and beyond

- At the end of 2001, members of the opposition and international organisations gathered in Germany and drew up the Bonn Agreement, which provided a political roadmap for Afghanistan and a timetable for reconstruction.
- Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun born to the Popalzai clan – a sub-group of the royal Durrani tribe – was chosen to head an Interim Authority. He was later installed as president and won an outright majority in the first presidential election in 2004. Parliamentary elections were held the following year.
- Presidential elections in 2009 – a key milestone for peace – were plagued by violence, widespread fraud and low turnout. Karzai won, after his main challenger Abdullah Abdullah pulled out saying a planned runoff vote was not going to be free and fair.
- Parliamentary elections in 2010 were calmer.
- Presidential elections were held in April 2014, the same year all foreign combat troops are due to leave the country. The Taliban stepped up attacks ahead of the polls and threatened to disrupt the elections. But, on the day, there were fewer attacks than feared, and less fraud than in 2009.

- A run-off vote between two candidates – Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani – will be held in June. Under the constitution, Karzai was not allowed to stand in 2014.
- Tribal leaders in Kandahar – the birthplace of the Taliban insurgency – say the insurgency has been stoked by the growing wealth and power of Karzai's family during his 12 years in office.
- The government's authority remains fragile and violence has soared. Militants have crossed the border from Pakistan to join the ranks of the Taliban fighters, who are staging increasingly sophisticated attacks, including multiple roadside bombings and complex ambushes.
- Taliban numbers swelled from 7,000 in 2006 to roughly 25,000 in 2009, according to a 2009 U.S. intelligence assessment. More recent estimates vary from between 20,000 and 35,000.
- U.S. President Barack Obama decided to send additional troops to Afghanistan in 2009, boosting the total number of foreign troops to about 150,000. Most of the new U.S. troops headed south to the heart of the Taliban insurgency, where British, Canadian and Dutch soldiers did not have enough strength to keep hold of ground they captured.
- NATO leaders began transferring responsibility for security to Afghans in 2011. The Afghan army took command of all military and security operations in June 2013.
- Foreign troops work with the [Afghan National Army](#), which was about 183,000 strong in June 2013. The Afghan national police force numbered about 150,000.
- More than 13,000 Afghan soldiers and police officers have been killed in the past 13 years, according to Afghan government statistics. Although there is no year-by-year breakdown in the figures, most are likely to have been killed in the past three years when Afghan forces grew in number.
- Since 2009, when the United Nations established an electronic database to record civilian casualties, more than 14,000 civilians have been killed in the conflict.
- The high number of civilian casualties angered Karzai and weakened public support for the continued presence of foreign troops.
- Relations between Kabul and Washington were also strained over a string of incidents involving U.S. forces in 2012, including the massacre of Afghan villagers for which a U.S. soldier was jailed for life in 2013, and the inadvertent burning of copies of the Koran.
- Some of the most daring, complex attacks in Afghanistan have been blamed on a militant group called the Haqqani network, which operates in both Pakistan and Afghanistan and is allied with the Taliban.
- The Haqqani network fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, with support from Pakistani, Saudi and U.S. officials. The Haqqanis view part of southeast Afghanistan known as "Loya Paktia" as their rightful homeland.
- Since early 2011, the U.S. government has been seeking to hold peace talks with the Taliban, but it is unclear whether the militants are cohesive enough to agree on a joint diplomatic approach to the talks.
- In May 2011, bin Laden was killed by U.S. special forces in northwestern Pakistan. By then, al Qaeda's influence on the Taliban had greatly diminished.

- NATO plans to keep a small military training and support mission in Afghanistan after the end of 2014, which the Taliban says is an encroachment on the country's independence.
- Western officials say that the exit of most foreign troops will remove one of the Taliban's main recruiting tools.

Going home

- Millions of Afghans fled to neighbouring countries during the years of conflict, and the Taliban's fall triggered one of the largest and swiftest refugee repatriations in the world.
- Since 2002, Afghans have been streaming home, mostly from Iran and Pakistan. More than [5.7 million Afghans](#) have returned to their country, according to the U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR). Another 2.5 million refugees and many [undocumented Afghans](#) were still in Pakistan and Iran in 2013, and further afield.
- Pakistan and Iran have said they want the remaining Afghans on their soil to go home.
- The number of people displaced inside Afghanistan is about [620,000](#), according to UNHCR. However, this is a conservative estimate because it is impossible to access and collect information in many areas.
- The majority have fled their homes because of clashes between NATO-led troops and Taliban-led insurgent groups in the south, southeast and west of the country, IDMC said. Natural disasters and local conflicts, such as land disputes, have also displaced people.
- Rural areas are increasingly insecure, forcing many returning Afghans to migrate to towns and cities.
- Many also face the risk of landmines and unexploded ordnance left behind from years of war. Hundreds of civilians are killed or injured each year, most of them children, according to [Landmine Monitor](#). Many of the [mines](#) are near roads, health facilities, camps for the displaced, airports, bridges and irrigation systems, U.N. Mine Action Service says.
- The contamination poses a formidable challenge to the country's social and economic reconstruction.

Reconstruction hurdles

- Billions of aid dollars have poured into Afghanistan to help rebuild the shattered infrastructure and economy. Afghanistan depends on aid for most of its spending.
- International donors provided \$35 billion in aid to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2010.
- And, in 2012, major donors pledged another \$16 billion in development aid through 2015, in an attempt to prevent it from deteriorating further when foreign troops leave in 2014, but demanded reforms to fight widespread corruption. The aid was tied to a new monitoring process to help prevent money from being diverted by corrupt officials or mismanaged.
- While strides have been made in improving access to education and health care, less than a third of the population of 33 million is literate and the average person earns only about a \$1,000 a year, according to the [U.N. Development Programme](#).
- Much of the donor money went back to donor countries, the [Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development \(ACBAR\)](#) alliance of aid agencies said in a March 2008 report. An estimated 40 percent of the \$15 billion spent in aid between 2001 and 2008 was returned to donors in corporate profits and consultant salaries, the report said.

- And whereas spending on aid by all donors between 2001 and 2008 amounted to about \$7 billion a day, the U.S. military spent some \$100 million a day fighting Taliban insurgents, ACBAR said.
- The United Nations launched a \$4 billion development plan in October 2009, to run from 2010 to 2013. This [U.N. Development Assistance Framework](#) covered governance, peace, agriculture, food security, health, education, water and sanitation.
- Afghans rank insecurity, corruption and unemployment as their top concerns, according to a 2013 survey by the [Asia Foundation](#).

Corruption

- Reconstruction efforts have been dogged by allegations of corruption and waste on the part of the government, aid agencies and contractors.
- Public sector corruption is rife and Afghanistan, along with Somalia and North Korea, are considered to be the most corrupt countries in the world in Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#).
- Government officials and international aid workers have been accused of stealing money or taking bribes. Some companies that won contracts to rebuild the country have been accused of delivering shoddy roads, hospitals and schools or even nothing at all.
- Corruption and cronyism are among the main [gripes](#) of ordinary Afghans.
- Many also complain that parliament, which is supposed to voice their grievances and keep the government in check, is made up mainly of ex-warlords and powerbrokers who use their position to serve their own interests.
- Karzai has accused the international community of helping to fuel corruption and has asked foreign donors to stop awarding massive reconstruction projects to contractors linked to senior officials in his government.
- Donors spend most aid money outside state channels to avoid it being siphoned off by corrupt officials. But they have done so without telling the Afghan government how and where the funds were being spent. Critics say this undermines the government's authority, and complicates planning and coordination between donors and provinces.
- In July 2012, donors agreed to channel more through the Afghan government, if the government made progress in fighting corruption and improving governance.
- That same month Karzai issued a decree to begin implementing the reforms. He ordered all ministries to take steps to cut down on nepotism and corruption, and directed the Supreme Court to accelerate investigations already under way. In September, he dismissed five governors and changed leading positions in nearly a third of the country's provinces.
- Real and suspected waste and misspending turned parts of the Afghan population against aid workers, with their relatively large salaries and expensive cars, according to local independent watchdog Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

Humanitarian crisis

- Civilians have borne the brunt of years of conflict and underdevelopment. Thousands are killed every year and millions have been displaced. An estimated [36 percent](#) of the population lives below the national poverty line, and nearly [60 percent](#) is chronically malnourished.
- The Taliban insurgency has forced many schools and health clinics to close.

- Natural disasters also affect tens of thousands of people every year, including earthquakes, frequent floods and drought.
- Humanitarian needs increased in 2013, mainly because of the worsening conflict, and U.N. experts say the needs are likely to rise even further as a result of the withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014.
- At the same time access to the most vulnerable has fallen because of a rising number of attacks on aid workers and offices.
- Aid agencies rely on air services to reach people in remote or insecure areas. More than 160 organisations use the U.N. Humanitarian Air Service, which has two airplanes and a helicopter, to transport aid workers and supplies.
- Some Afghan non-governmental organisations and movements, including the Afghan Red Crescent Society, have greater access than international NGOs.
- There are reports of growing numbers of people displaced and some 5.4 million people have extremely limited access to health care. The number of civilians wounded rose 77 percent in 2013 compared with 2012, most of them in the south.
- Aid agencies are particularly concerned about people in the country's Hilmand, Kunar, Badghis, Nangarhar and Ghor provinces, where the needs are greatest and access is limited.
- Some aid has been channelled through Provincial Reconstruction Teams run by foreign troops, and many aid agencies have used armed convoys to move around. As a result, aid workers are seen by the Taliban and other armed groups as being an extension of NATO forces and therefore seen as legitimate targets. Scores of aid workers have been wounded, kidnapped or killed.
- Violence is not the only threat to life. Children die of easily preventable diseases, and malnutrition. Afghanistan is one of three "polio endemic" countries with most cases in the turbulent south, according to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.
- Tuberculosis is another major public health challenge. Experts say women in particular suffer high rates because they tend to spend most of their time indoors and have less access to medical care than men do.
- The results of the Afghanistan Mortality Survey 2010, released in 2011, raised major questions among health experts about the reliability of data both past and present for maternal and infant death rates, and average life expectancy.
- For example, the survey concluded that average life expectancy is about 60 years, compared with previous estimates of 49 years.
- The survey was carried out by the Afghan government and U.N. World Health Organization.

Drugs

- Afghanistan produces 74 percent of the world's opium, the United Nations says. The Taliban, which banned cultivation during their rule, are now exploiting the trade to fund their insurgency. The majority of poppy fields are in the country's south and southwest where the Taliban are most active.
- One of the main tools in combating the narcotics trade involves fostering alternative livelihoods. The idea is to wean farmers away from poppy cultivation by offering them fertilisers and seeds for legal crops.

- For many years, the United States focused its efforts on destroying poppy fields. This infuriated farmers who said they would be destitute without their crops. Many farmers depend on loans provided by drug traders as a down payment for the subsequent drug harvest.
- Former U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke and other experts have said that attempts to destroy crops penalise the farmers and have no impact on the Taliban's earnings from the trade – rather it helps them recruit.
- With the withdrawal of U.S. troops, counternarcotics operations are increasingly in the hands of Afghan authorities.
- Drug addiction does not just affect those beyond Afghanistan's borders – there are more than one million addicts in the country, according to UNODC. Drug use is high among refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan.

Women

- During the Taliban years, the regime prohibited women from attending universities and shut girls' schools in Kabul and other cities, although primary schooling did go on in many other areas of the country. Earning a living was also very difficult, a tragedy in a country with tens of thousands of war widows – in Kabul alone there are estimated to be up to 50,000.
- Today, women have the right to vote and are elected to parliament. Millions of girls go to school and women are allowed to work outside the home. Several women ran in the 2014 presidential elections, despite death threats and assassination attempts.
- Other female leaders have been killed. In Laghman province, the local director of women's affairs, Najja Sediqi, was assassinated in December 2012. She had been in the role for five months, following the assassination of her female predecessor Hanifa Safi. Although their murders were attributed to the Taliban, women's groups have complained that there were no thorough investigations carried out.
- The daily life of many women is still dominated by the threat of violence and backbreaking toil, and women generally are kept from public roles especially in rural areas in what is one of the most conservative countries in the world.
- Many girls are married off as children or young teenagers, and the vast majority never learn to read or write.
- Human Rights Watch says violence against women and girls remains rampant, including domestic violence, sexual violence, and forced marriage.
- In many cases, women who are raped are charged with immorality and imprisoned. Women can also be jailed for running away from their husband.
- In May 2013, Afghanistan's parliament failed to ratify a bill banning underage and forced marriage, domestic violence, rape and forced prostitution.