

AFGHANISTAN

children in crisis

None of the children growing up today in Afghanistan has ever known peace, and most live in poverty. Three continuous years of drought in the northwest provinces have led to extreme hunger and mass migration of families in search of food and new livelihoods. Disease and lack of proper medicines have raised child mortality rates to emergency levels. Much of the infrastructure of the country has been devastated, and access to education and health care for women and children remains extremely limited.

In Afghanistan today,

- One of every four children dies before his or her fifth birthday
- There are an estimated 10 million land mines – the equivalent of roughly one for every child
- Only 10 percent of pregnant women receive maternal health care
- One in five children is born in a refugee camp
- Only 3 percent of girls, and 39 percent of boys, are enrolled in school
- 50,000 children are working on the streets of the capital, Kabul

How is **Save the Children** helping the children of Afghanistan?

Over the years **Save the Children** has successfully continued its many programs for Afghan children and families in spite of extraordinary challenges posed by a combination of physical hardship and an unstable political environment. With a long history and extensive experience in the region, as well as dedicated Afghan staff and partners, **Save the Children** provides both emergency relief and long-term development programs.

Providing Food for Families in Afghanistan

An estimated 7.5 million children and adults are currently at risk of hunger and malnutrition.

According to a nutritional assessment conducted by **Save the Children** in the Kohistan district of northwest Afghanistan, the rapidly diminishing supply of grains and fresh produce, caused by three years of continuous drought and near-total crop failure, was found to have caused significant malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies, particularly in children under age three. Half the children under age five were found to be suffering from chronic malnutrition. The recent political instability and loss of personal security, following more than 20 years of war, has made an already dire food situation much worse.

In response, **Save the Children** developed an emergency food-distribution program and has recently expanded it by nearly 400 percent, delivering wheat, beans, sugar, iodized salt and vegetable oil to 700,000 people where the drought has been most severe. **Save the Children** staff in Afghanistan are familiar with community members and the local organizations and operating environment, and are therefore well positioned to see that the food gets to those who need it most. These efforts are particularly critical during the harsh Afghanistan winter, when transportation and access to some of the remote areas become all but impossible.

Save the Children also has been implementing comprehensive programs to ensure long-term food security and self-sufficiency for the local population. These include cash- and food-for-work programs, drought coping loans, the construction of wells and water storage facilities and increased stocks of improved and certified wheat seed.



Improving the Health of Mothers and Children

Afghanistan has the second highest maternal death rate in the world, and the highest rates of infant and child mortality in Asia.

One of the greatest health risks for women in Afghanistan is just having children. For every 100,000 live births, about 1,400 Afghan women die each year from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, compared with only 12 in the United States. And when mothers die, very often so do their newborns. Infants whose mothers die in childbirth are 3 to 10 times more likely to die before their second birthday.

Independent of the connection to their mothers' well-being, Afghan children are also facing health risks from infectious diseases, many of which are preventable by vaccine. In a recent **Save the Children** study, for example, measles was found to be the most common cause of death for children in the Kohistan district, followed by pneumonia and other acute respiratory infections in winter and diarrheal diseases in summer. Yet fewer than half the children nationwide currently receive standard immunizations for measles, diphtheria and polio.

To reduce maternal and infant mortality and illness, **Save the Children's** health programs in Afghanistan are designed to increase women's access to basic and reproductive health care and to protect children from life-threatening diseases. For example, **Safe Motherhood Initiative** programs educate women on birth spacing

and planning, pregnancy-related health care such as tetanus toxoid immunization, and the importance of having trained birth attendants at delivery. In Kabul, Save the Children works with Afghan public sector health staff in four hospital pediatric wards providing training, essential medicines, vaccines as well as heating oil to improve the overall care of sick children. In both urban and rural areas, Afghan volunteers are being trained to serve as health-care providers for their communities, learning how to identify and treat common ailments such as respiratory illness, diarrhea and scurvy.

Educating Children: Afghanistan's Hope for the Future

The literacy rate for men is 47 percent; for women it is 15 percent.

Long before the current crisis, Afghanistan's resources for education were extremely limited. In recent decades the situation deteriorated seriously, as tens of thousands of teachers fled, school buildings were neglected or destroyed, and teachers received little or no training. With so little investment in these essential resources, an entire generation of Afghan children has been deprived of education and the opportunity for a better life.

The importance of investing in education, particularly for girls in Afghanistan, cannot be overstated. It is one of the best strategies for long-term social and economic development — an educated girl develops the skills and self-confidence as a woman to participate in society, to help financially support herself and her family and to encourage educational goals for all her children. She is also more likely to postpone marriage and have a smaller family, which improves the survival and well-being of her children, and to provide better health care and nutrition for herself and her family.

Save the Children is committed to helping Afghanistan revitalize primary education and, with UNICEF, has led the Education for Afghans Initiative to improve the quality of education, access to schooling and the capacity of the Afghan education system. In addition, since 1995 Save the Children has implemented creative strategies that enable girls to attend school in the Afghan refugee villages in Pakistan, establishing new primary schools, developing curricula, building playgrounds, delivering boxed libraries and training teachers. As a result of these efforts, overall enrollment increased by 27 percent in the Balochistan refugee villages since the program began, and the number of girls as a percentage of all the children enrolled has increased from 12 percent to 34 percent. For older girls who live in *purdah* (seclusion) and are prohibited from going to formal school with boys, Save the Children has devised an interim solution: a series of home-based schools for girls where female teachers parallel the curriculum of conventional schools.



Keeping Children out of Harm's Way

More than 130,000 Afghans under the age of 18 have been killed by land mines; an estimated 10 million land mines are still active in the country.

Afghanistan is one of the three most mine-affected countries in the world. The landscape is also littered with other unexploded ordnance (UXOs) – rockets, mortars, grenades and fuses that have the potential to maim or kill. As a result, large areas of land have been rendered inaccessible to the Afghan people, further complicating efforts to rehabilitate the war-ravaged country and to cultivate the land.

Children are especially vulnerable to injury from contact with these weapons. By nature curious and adventurous, they can easily mistake a UXO for a toy or a strange object too interesting to ignore. Many children are at risk for land mine injury just by performing everyday chores such as gathering wood, tending livestock and collecting water for their families.

In a 1995 Save the Children study in the Afghan capital, Kabul, roughly 85 percent of all UXO victims were children. When Kabul was declared a land mine



emergency that same year by the UN Mine Clearance Programme, Save the Children began its Land Mine Education Project in the city's schools, the first and only child-focused land mine awareness program in the country. It uses games and group activities to teach children how to recognize land mines and UXOs, why they need to avoid risky areas, and what to do in the event of a land mine or UXO accident. Since moving the program into hospitals, mosques and playgrounds, Save the Children has also begun training other organizations in child-focused land mine education.

Helping Children Cope Emotionally

60 percent of Afghan children surveyed have lost a family member, and 39 percent have lost their home, as a result of their country's civil war.

Twenty years of war have taken a severe emotional and social toll on the children of Afghanistan. They live in daily fear of death and injury, and have suffered displacement, deprivation and a disruption of their normal routines. Material assistance alone cannot meet their need for security, affection and stability.

Save the Children has designed special programs to help children and their families cope with the upheaval and loss caused by war. Working in Kabul with displaced families, for example, Save the Children has established educational and recreational activities that allow children to learn, make friends and have fun in safe settings while also ensuring stability and routine in an unfamiliar environment. In Pakistan's Balochistan province, Save the Children has established a similar support program for newly arrived Afghan refugees that includes activities such as craft groups for girls, support groups for mothers, sports activities for boys, land mine awareness and informal education opportunities.

In spite of their extreme and prolonged duress, the Afghan people have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Save the Children plans to continue working in Afghan communities to further understand, support and strengthen their successful coping strategies.

Increasing Economic Self-Sufficiency

In a 1998 survey of women in Kabul, the median household monthly income was \$6.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. With decades of war and several years of drought, the coping mechanisms of thousands of people, especially in the northern provinces, have been stretched to the limit. Many have been forced to sell their livestock and eat the seeds they would have used for next year's crop. In a country where carpet weaving is a major source of income, some women have even sold their looms to get money for food.

The burden of poverty falls heaviest on the children, who are frequently kept out of school — even at a young age — to help support the family. They work on their families' farms, collect water and firewood, and scavenge for scrap metal to sell for spare change. In Kabul alone, 50,000 children work on the streets polishing shoes, selling fruit for shopkeepers or just begging.

In 1995, Save the Children began a Group Guaranteed Lending and Savings program because it found that women's home-based enterprises were a major, and at times the only, source of household income. These operations help provide small loans to disadvantaged rural Afghan women, enabling them to operate small businesses such as carpet weaving and animal husbandry. The program has grown rapidly and now serves nearly 2,000 families, despite the extraordinarily difficult and complicated economic and political situation in the country, as well as over 2,200 Afghan refugee women in the Balochistan province of Pakistan.



Mothers are the Key

Seventy years of field experience have taught Save the Children that the inextricable link between mothers' and children's health begins even before birth, and that to create real and lasting change in the quality of children's lives, we need to invest in the health, security and well-being of their mothers. As a result, a major focus of Save the Children's programming is to provide mothers with access to education, economic opportunities and maternal and child health care, including family planning, so that they and their children can survive and thrive.

As Afghanistan looks toward building a better future, a critical first step will be ensuring that women and girls have equitable access to community-based health services, education and economic opportunities. This is not only the right thing to do, it will have a lasting, positive impact on present and future generations of Afghans.

For more information on Save the Children's programs and how you can help, visit Save the Children's website at www.savethechildren.org or call 1-800-728-3843.

What must be done NOW to help the children of Afghanistan?

In testimony before the House International Relations Committee of the U.S. Congress, Save the Children identified these key issues with respect to the urgent health and safety needs of children in Afghanistan:

- Lack of food and safe drinking water, which is causing malnutrition and sickness
- Insufficient health care and inadequate supply of vaccines and antibiotics
- Disrupted family life caused by migration and unstable conditions
- Risk of injury and death from land mines and other unexploded ordnance
- Need for shelter, clothing, warm blankets and heating fuel during the winter
- Minimal access to basic primary education
- Continued political and social instability that threatens the security of the population and relief workers alike

The U.S. government has responded generously to the urgent humanitarian needs of children and families in Afghanistan. However, reestablishing health and education services and economic self-sufficiency, and providing a better future for Afghan children, will also require a long-term commitment.

The protection, survival and future development of the children and society in Afghanistan depend on the following:

1. Establishment of Nationwide Stability and Safety

The international community, including the United States, should support efforts to stabilize and maintain the security of Afghan society, and work with the Afghan government to ensure the continued safe and efficient delivery of humanitarian aid.

2. Continued Prioritization of Humanitarian Assistance

The lives and health of more than 7 million people will continue to be at risk, even as planning for reconstruction and rehabilitation begins, unless there is an immediate increase in the delivery and distribution of food, shelter, fuel and health care services.

3. Expanded Long-Term Development

As we focus on the immediate crisis in Afghanistan, it is critical that resources also be allocated for the long-term reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghan society. Work must begin today to establish self-sustaining community health services, a basic system for universal primary education, opportunities for increasing family income, and the rebuilding of the country's infrastructure.

4. Heightened Focus on Children and Women

Women play a crucial role in the stability and development of society and the care of their children – the next generation. They must be guaranteed equitable access to the tools necessary to improve their lives: basic and reproductive health care, including family planning, education and economic opportunity.

5. Keeping Our Worldwide Commitments

Federal appropriations for the Afghanistan crisis should be in addition to, and *not detract from*, humanitarian and development support for other developing countries where there are also millions of children and families in need. Moreover, in a world where more than 1.2 billion people, 70 percent of whom are women, still live on less than \$1 a day, a substantial increase in funds is needed to support social and economic development programs that offer families a way out of poverty and despair.

Hope for the future of the children in Afghanistan, and for a better, safer world for all, rests with the actions taken today by concerned citizens and governments around the world. For more information, visit Save the Children's website at www.savethechildren.org or call 1-800-728-3843.



With a rugged, striking terrain of extremely high mountains and arid plains, Afghanistan is among the countries with the poorest human development indicators in the world. Roughly 24 million people, 10.7 million of whom are children under 18, live in an area smaller than the state of Texas. They have been at war, both with foreign countries and amongst their own ethnic groups, for the past 20 years – wars that have killed over 1.5 million people, including more than 300,000 children.



Save the Children in Afghanistan

Save the Children's first field office in the region was established in 1985 to respond to the needs of the 3.2 million Afghan refugees who fled to Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Today, it continues to assist large numbers of refugees from offices in Quetta, Haripur and Islamabad in Pakistan. Since 1988, Save the Children has also been implementing projects inside Afghanistan, first through cross-border operations managed from its Pakistan-based offices, and more recently from additional offices in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Andkhoy and Maimana in the northwest.

With a current staff of more than 400 in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Save the Children now operates one of the largest humanitarian relief efforts in the region, serving over 1.2 million people. In addition to delivering emergency supplies of food, shelter, fuel and medicine and ensuring children's safety and well-being through land mine awareness and health education, Save the Children implements programs that address long-term development needs such as literacy, nutrition, health and economic security. Recognizing the close relationship between the well-being of mothers and the healthy development of children, Save the Children prioritizes mothers as well as children in the planning and implementation of these programs.

Save the Children is a leading non-profit children's relief and development organization working in more than 40 countries worldwide, including the United States. Our mission is to make real and lasting change in the lives of children in need.

Save the Children is also a member of the Save the Children Alliance, a worldwide network of over 30 independent Save the Children organizations working in more than 100 countries to ensure the well-being of children everywhere.



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