

Drought Hits Afghan North

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Farmers are selling off their animals and trekking to other areas as the lack of rain makes for a long dry summer.

Many farmers in northern Afghanistan are on the move in a migration caused by the region's worst drought in five years.

On June 29, a first group consisting of 200 families from the northwestern province of Badghis arrived in the north-central Samangan region, more than 200 kilometres away, in what is expected to be a larger flow. Their ultimate destination is Kunduz, further east again, where they hope the nearby river Amu Darya will ensure there is enough water.

The population movement is a symptom of a wider problem affecting a swathe of provinces across northern Afghanistan, which is flatter than the rest of the country, and where agricultural and pasture land has been hard hit by a lack of spring rains this year.

Officials in Samangan say they are struggling to cope with the influx, as their own province too is suffering the effects of drought. Some farmers in Samangan are beginning to move on themselves.

The families from Badghis have lost their livestock and crops because of the drought, and have come to Samangan in hope of finding drinking water for the animals they still have.

One of the migrants, Nazar Gul, lives with his wife and four kids in a sack-made tent, too flimsy to prevent the heat of the sun. They made the trip after their crops withered and animals died.

"There is no water in our province because of the harsh drought," Nazar Gul told IWPR. "I think that if we'd stayed there a few days more, my kids would had died of thirst."

While he moved eastwards, most of his relatives have gone south to Pakistan or west to Iran, he said.

Samangan's provincial governor, Abdul Haq Shafaq, said his administration had no resources to deal with the new arrivals apart from the help offered by local residents.

Shafaq also expressed concern at the risk of drought facing the local population.

"Right now, more than 20,000 families in Samangan are threatened by the lack of water," he said.

The governor said steps were being taken to stop people packing up and leaving. He said water tankers belonging to the provincial branch of the ministry for rural rehabilitation and development were now being used to carry water to villages where natural springs and man-made wells had dried up. But he added that the tankers were few in number and were not able to bring water to livestock that were out to pasture.

Some farmers in the province are already leaving. One man interviewed by IWPR, Zalmay, was on the move with his 11-member family.

"Everything I planted has been destroyed. No one has helped me yet, so I have to move to a place where I can find drinking water," he said. "All our springs and wells have dried up, so we have to move.

"If we don't, we'll have to spend the whole day looking for water and then we won't have time to find something to eat."

Aibak, the capital of Samangan, at first sight looks like a booming market town as it is packed full of the animals farmers have brought in for sale.

But this glut too is a warning signal - farmers are offloading large numbers of their animals while they still can. Once their stock has gone, they face an uncertain future.

"The farmers are selling their livestock at half price because of the lack of water," said Governor Shafaq.

"I have sold 140 sheep at half price. That money won't support me even for one year. I don't know what I'll do after that," said Gulbuddin, a farmer.

People in other northern areas are facing similar problems.

Karim, a farmer in Balkh province just west of Samangan, described how he had lost his agricultural crops to drought and was now figuring out the best strategy to keep his livestock going for as long as possible.

"I've had 200 sheep die since the beginning of the year. The pasturelands are dried up, but we're going to keep our animals until the autumn. Come winter, though, it's going to be completely impossible to keep them," he said.

In Jowzjan, west of Balkh, the head of the provincial agriculture department, Abdul Rashid, said, "The data we have gathered indicates that the drought has dried up more than 90 per cent of land under wheat, and has made life hard for farmers in the province."

Abdul Rashid said the provincial administration had no way of helping those affected, and appealed to the international community for assistance.

"I'm afraid that our farmers will migrate to foreign countries," he said.

In Kabul, the agriculture ministry is aware of the crisis and has responded to pleas for help with an

emergency plan.

"The drought can be felt in all provinces, but in northern Afghanistan it is a matter of concern," Deputy Agriculture Minister Ghulam Mustafa told IWPR.

"The ministries of agriculture and of rural rehabilitation and development have decided to provide foodstuff and drinkable water to people affected by the drought.... Under the plan, the government will soon take all the assistance, which includes wheat and water-carrying equipment, out to the affected people.

"The programme is intended to stop people migrating en masse."

However, an official with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, FAO, cautioned that before effective help can be offered, the extent of the drought and the need must first be surveyed.

Mir Shafiuddin Mirzad, who heads the FAO office in northern Afghanistan, said his organisation was working with the ministry of agriculture and the World Food Programme to carry out an assessment of the situation.

Recalling that the three bodies carried out a similar needs assessment study during the bad drought of 1998-2001, Mirzad said, "We have recently established this coordination [again], and we are working to identify which part of the country we should start the survey from.

"We cannot know the need for food until a survey is conducted. So any kind of assistance given before the survey is done will not be effective. We can neither assist nor can we say anything about the scale of the drought until that survey is completed."

As talk of assessments goes on in the capital, farmers across northern Afghanistan look set to continue making tough choices about survival - selling off their herds for slaughter, and moving out.

Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim is an IWPR staff reporter in Mazar-e-Sharif.

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