

## **Snows Bring Mixed Blessings**

**Author:** [the.iwpr](#)

While the heaviest accumulation in at least five years may help ease the current drought, some suffer from the inclement weather.

The record snowfall that wreaked havoc on parts of Afghanistan last week is proving to be a mixed blessing in a country that has had more than its share of natural and man-made disasters in recent years.

While the snows will help restore water supplies, ravaged by years of drought, and even eventually increase the supply of electricity available in major cities, the frozen precipitation only added to the misery of those seeking shelter in the country's numerous refugee camps.

Underground and surface water supplies have increased from 50 to 80 per cent of normal, said Sultan Mahmood Mahmoodi, head of hydrology for the ministry of irrigation. Normal supplies for the country are about 75 billion cubic meters.

This will help farmers, who make up the vast majority of the population, and city dwellers alike, said Mahmoodi. As many as 40,000 wells providing water to both urban and rural areas have run dry during the years of drought, he said.

And the runoff from the snow will eventually help provide more electricity, produced by hydro-turbines, as well.

Younis Nawandish, deputy of the ministry of water and power, told IWPR, "The two days of snowfall does not have immediate effects on the reservoir, but [after March 21, Afghanistan's New Year] when the weather warms and the snow melts it will have a great effect."

He hopes that the ministry will be able to supply electrical service on a 24-hour basis for the rest of the year. In 2003, round-the-clock power was available for only two months of the year.

But for some people, the snowfall - the heaviest in at least five years - was yet another disaster in their lives.

Refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan were left without shelter, as their tents collapsed under the weight of the snow. Children and elderly people fell ill from the cold because their families were too poor to buy heating fuel.

Maah Gul lives in a tent city of 200 families in western Kabul with her widowed daughter-in-law and five grandchildren. "At midnight our tent fell down, and from the cold my grandchildren have got severe pneumonia, and I got sick too," she said. "We don't have any place to live safely."

Weeping, she asked why the government didn't do anything. "No one cares if you live or die," she said. "There is no help."

Her neighbours around the tent city came to her aid and helped put the tent back up. A taxi driver gave her and her family a free ride to the hospital.

Nawid, a second-grader whose father supports a family of 10 on only 1300 afghanis (26 US dollars) a month, told IWPR, "I don't like the snow because I get cold. You can see, as I'm poor and my father's salary is low, I have thin clothes and I'm sick, and we don't have money to buy medicine."

Pneumonia, flu, grippe and other respiratory illnesses increased by about 30 per cent during the snowstorm, said Professor Hanan Barai, a lecturer in internal medicine at the Kabul University medical faculty, who also works in a public hospital and a private clinic. He said he was sure some had died from illnesses related to the cold and snow.

Because most people are poor, they don't have heaters to warm their rooms, so they are prone to respiratory illness - especially children and old people, Barai said.

But even Barai concedes that, in the long term, the snow will be good for his country. "The snowfall gives hope for agriculture - life depends on water," he said.

Bari noted that the years of drought have devastated many of the country's trees, which normally would help reduce air pollution, especially in the major cities. And the hot, dry weather has also increased the amount of dust in the air, which can damage lungs and even cause diseases such as emphysema. So if the snows help to restore the country's environment, they will help solve more problems than they create, he said.

In Kabul alone, some 400 trees - many already weakened by years of war and drought - collapsed under the weight of the snow. Local residents quickly used the fallen trees as ready-made sources of firewood. City officials are urging residents to plant a tree this spring in gratitude for the snowfall.

And, as always, there are those who managed to profit from any form of misfortune.

Hamayoon sells coats along the fence of Zarnigar park in central Kabul. He told IWPR that he sold 200 winter jackets in two days. Jackets that he was previously selling for 150 afghanis (about 3 US dollars) were now fetching more than 250 afghanis.

Boot-seller Mohammed Ayab said he'd sold 20 pairs of boots in a single day, "In my shop keeping life it was one of the happiest days for me."

The snow did cause some temporary problems for thousands, especially in the cities.

Admission exams to the state universities, a major event for students across the country, were delayed several days because the tests could not be delivered to the regions. Kabul airport was closed for two days to incoming flights. Swarms of travelers returning from the Haj pilgrimage and Eid festival trips were left stranded.

The country's major highways, to Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif, were closed temporarily. Hundreds of vehicles were stuck along both sides of the narrow road to Jalalabad.

Many offices shut down when employees were unable to get to work. Still, some were able to find humour in the situation.

“When I got out of the car, after a few steps I fell down,” said Nazifa, a government worker. “Right in front of me there was a tea-seller who saw me fall. He said to me, ‘Dear sister, green or black tea?’”

At the time, she didn't find it very funny. But she said, “ After an hour when I calmed down and recalled his words, I laughed a lot.”.

A team of independent journalists participating in IWPR's Daily News Coverage training programme contributed to this report.

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