

Snows Bring Relief from Drought

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Change in weather bolsters millions of farmers who've been struggling to eke out a living.

The snows have finally come to Afghanistan, bringing partial relief from a crippling four-year drought that has reduced the national livestock total by over half and turned pastures into deserts.

Heavy snowfalls in February came as bad news for thousands of returning Afghan refugees who fled 23 years of war in this country and are now shivering in damp tents and war-damaged buildings in Kabul and other centres across the country.

But for the country's small farmers who make up 85 per cent of the population, and normally provide over 60 per cent of its exports, the snowfalls in the mountains which provide Afghanistan with most of its annual water supply were a blessing.

Sultan Mahmood, head of the hydrology and water control department in the ministry of irrigation, said the recent falls of snow and rain had restored the country's water resources to 75 per cent of their normal levels. "And Inshallah, (God willing), the coming year will see an abundance of water for the people of Afghanistan," he told IWPR.

For many Afghans, particularly the ethnic Kuchi nomads who are thought to make up some 10 per cent of the population of some 24 million, and who provide much of the country's livestock as they cross the country with their sheep and camels looking for grazing land, the snowfalls were not a moment too soon.

President Hamed Karzai mentioned the plight of the Kuchis in a recent speech, saying, "The presence of mines in the mountains, on their traditional routes and on the pastures has become a huge problem for the nomads, and the reason that most of them have lost their herds."

Only a few weeks ago, before the latest snowfalls, officials were reporting that in some parts of the country, particularly in the south-west, livestock losses were as high as 90 per cent. Apart from the drought, they, and others involved in agriculture, have had to contend with war and its aftermath, in the form of millions of land-mines littering the countryside.

Wahida Azizi, of the World Food Programme, said the water level in wells across the country had fallen by between five and 12 metres. "People are not able to dig deep wells, and are having to spend what little money they have on buying drinking water. Many are leaving their villages and coming to cities," she said.

Azizi told IWPR that apart from the critical shortage of food caused by the livestock losses, forcing the desperately poor country to import meat and grain from neighbours such as Pakistan and Iran, the shortage of animals was also affecting the production of handicrafts, particularly articles made out of leather and sheepskin which traditionally make up an important part of Afghanistan's exports.

"In the country overall livestock totals are down 55 per cent, due mainly to the drought between 1999 and the present, and the civil war which forced people to migrate without being able to take their animals with them," Mohammad Hanif, the head of the animal husbandry department in the agriculture ministry, told IWPR earlier this month.

“The meadows were planted with mines. There wasn’t enough food for the animals, and many were killed by the Taleban,” he said.

Other factors he cited were a lack of medical equipment by veterinarians, which, coupled with the poor security situation as fighting raged between rival Islamic groups in the country, meant they were unable to carry out vaccination programmes on animals.

“We cannot make up the damage to the fields over the past four years through natural fertilization, we will have to use artificial fertilizers,” Hanif told IWPR. He said the government was also working on a programme, along with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, FAO, to rebuild national livestock levels with the use of frozen sperm imported from abroad, and is considering introducing genetically modified strains of animals able to resist disease.

Dr Safi, the FAO’s national project officer, told IWPR the organisation was providing support for over 250 clinics across the country - and a vaccination programme that had already covered over one million animals - to eradicate a worm that was further reducing the livestock herd.

One particularly virulent disease affecting Afghanistan’s herd caused the deaths of unborn animals due to lack of food available to their mothers, officials said.

Deputy Agriculture Minister Mohammad Sharif said that a major reconstruction process was required to renovate drains, wells and canals, and to distribute genetically modified crops, agricultural equipment, pesticides and veterinary medicines to farmers at an affordable price.

He said his department had launched the first ever national livestock survey in the country to find out exactly how many animals it has and what problems they face.

Meanwhile, Afghans everywhere, right up to the top levels of government, are being urged to do their bit to ensure that the country gets through the current food crisis. A few weeks ago, Karzai ordered all government office canteens to ban meat from the menu for three days a week, in order to conserve stocks.

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