



United Nations Children's Fund

*Children and Armed Conflict in
Afghanistan*

Very Important — Please Read

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Policy Dilemma

Any child raised in Afghanistan has lived through the devastation that comes with conflict. These conflicts include the Soviet military invasion, the rise of the Taliban, the subsequent war that followed the United States invasion, and the Taliban takeover in 2021 once US troops were withdrawn. The killing or maiming of children; the enlistment or use of child soldiers; forms of sexual violence; the kidnapping of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and the denial of humanitarian access to children are the six grave violations against children that the UN has identified during these armed conflicts in Afghanistan. These infractions provide a snapshot of the destruction that children's lives have experienced due to the many conflicts in Afghanistan.¹

The Soviet Union sent tens of thousands of soldiers to Afghanistan at the end of December 1979. They promptly took full military and political control of Kabul and much of the nation. This marked the start of the Soviet Union's ruthless ten-year campaign to end the civil war in Afghanistan and maintain a friendly, socialist regime along its border. Almost 5 million Afghan refugees left their country during this military war, while another 2 million were internally displaced. Fear of the Soviet army, the pro-Soviet government, and the widespread devastation of houses and livelihoods were factors in this large migration. Ballistic or landmine injuries were the direct causes of most civilian fatalities. Soviets even deployed mines modeled after bright toys expressly to target children. Despite efforts to demine Afghanistan, there were still over 10–15 million mines in 1993.³

Several madrasas in Pakistan, which are religious institutions that double as seminaries and are supported by private groups, eventually indoctrinated those Afghan refugee and orphan children who were uprooted during the Soviet invasion. Even though

only a small percentage of madrasas teach jihad (religious war) and provide militant

training, those that do have produced a generation of enraged, anti-Western young men. These brainwashed kids gave birth to the Taliban movement, whose ascent and growth resulted in the installation of harsh laws that restricted the rights of women and people of color. Afghanistan experienced continuous aid shortages during this time, making it impossible for humanitarian organizations to function. The fact that multiple warring factions, including both anti- and pro-government troops, continued to recruit minors is one of the most damaging effects of the emergence of the Taliban. Some child soldiers have served as scouts, while others have acted as suicide bombers and human barriers. According to research, locations with less family/community support and protection, areas with lower levels of education, and areas where children live in poverty had higher recruitment rates for children. In Afghanistan, recruiting efforts focus on internally displaced children and the refugee camps.⁴

Legislation, such as the 2003 Presidential Decree raising the minimum age of recruitment into the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police to 18 years of age, has been used in some instances to prevent Afghan children from being enlisted. However, once the edict was passed, evidence suggests that minors joined both forces. Since 2001, the UN Security Council has also adopted five resolutions that directly address the problem of Afghan children affected by the fighting.⁵ Together, these resolutions condemn all harm done to children in conflict, demand that those responsible be held accountable, and support methods for assisting in the exodus of kids from conflict-ridden areas. The Taliban's recent conquest of Afghanistan in 2021, however, has once more resulted in thousands of civilian deaths. The Taliban were responsible for 68% of the fatalities of women and children, while the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were responsible for about 25% of those deaths.⁴ The deliberate bombing of Sayed-ul-Shuhada High School, which resulted in more than 230 girls being murdered or injured, is one instance of child casualties.⁶ Afghan children are often forgotten or overlooked compared to the focus on anti terrorism. The children of Afghanistan must be protected by rebuilding

infrastructure like schools, demining the country, and maintaining law and order. Reviving the current education and primary healthcare systems and implementing mental health services should also be top priorities.

Chronology

1979: Soviet Invasion

Before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, relations between the two governments were always friendly. The amount of economic assistance from the Soviet Union rose to \$150 million annually during Mohammad Daud's second government. By 1975, however, Daud started to pursue a more nonaligned approach, rid the army of its leftists who had received Soviet training, and seek assistance from other nations. With the help of the Soviet KGB, the two pro-Moscow political groups merged to form the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in April 1978, overthrowing the Daud government. Nur M. Taraki, the head of the PDPA party, was elected president, and Hafizullah Amin, a more radical choice, was named prime minister.⁷ The two leaders first understated their communist sympathies to maintain the influx of Western funding. They also attempted to increase their hold on power by implementing a failed land reform plan meant to win over rural areas. In its place, a massive uprising was sparked by mountain tribes who felt the Taraki government was anti-Islamic and a Soviet puppet. As a result, the Taraki government looked to Moscow more regularly for assistance, and the two nations signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation in December 1978. In addition, the Soviet-advised Afghan police raided the Kabul hotel where the American ambassador, Adolph Dubs, was being kept captive, killing him and effectively ending Western aid in February 1979.

As 1979 progressed, the situation only worsened. By September, the Soviets began to pressure Taraki to dismiss Amin, who was becoming too ambitious and previously had resisted changes to the government's draconian policies. However, Amin did not go

peacefully when informed of his dismissal. Taraki and his bodyguards were killed in a gun battle that broke out, leaving Amin in charge of the government. Amin refused to expand the support for the governing party or implement more moderate policies while he was in power. He also turned down Soviet proposals to send soldiers, and one of his government officials openly denounced the Soviets for meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs, violating the previously signed friendship pact. The Soviets were particularly alarmed by Amin's unwillingness to permit the gradual deployment of Soviet forces to Afghanistan to assist in tamping down the uprising, especially because Amin had, at that point, effectively lost political authority over 75 percent of Afghanistan.

A highly trained Soviet squad stormed Amin's mansion on the night of December 27, 1979, after Soviet military cargo had landed on Afghan airfields. Then, Amin and his guards were killed. Babrak Karmal was elected president after the Soviets assassinated Amin and took control of Kabul.⁸ Karmal tried to defuse the Afghan uprisings by respecting Islam and freeing political prisoners. These efforts, however, were unsuccessful, and the Soviet troops started to lose patience as they realized how powerful Afghan guerilla attacks could be and how well-liked resistance organizations were among the Afghan people. As a result, the Soviet Union gave up on "winning the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people and instead started terrorizing the populace into submission.⁹

1.8 million Afghans died during the ten years of fighting that followed the Soviet invasion, and 1.5 million suffered disabilities (among whom were more than 300,000 children). The Soviet Union concentrated on evicting rural residents, focusing on children. Soviet forces abducted an estimated 50,000 Afghan children from villages, orphanages, and city streets to brainwash them with Communist ideals and then use them to create child militias. Additionally, a variety of "toy" bombs were dropped on Afghan villages by Soviet planes, maiming several children. Soviets also focused on mining Afghanistan, and there were still close to 15 million mines in 1993.¹⁰

1989: 1994: The Growth of Madrasas and Religious Fanaticism

Over 5 million Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan and Iran during the Soviet military operation, and an additional 2 million were internally displaced. Fear of the Soviet army, the pro-Soviet government, and the widespread devastation of houses and livelihoods were factors in this large migration. While Pakistan was being ruled by General Zia ul Haq's military dictatorship, which brought about a large infusion of aid and economic prosperity, a significant portion of the Soviet campaign occurred. Unfortunately, corruption and ineffective government leadership led to most of this development being lost. In 1994, the US drastically reduced Pakistani development assistance initiatives. Implemented sanctions by Western nations in 1998 only worsened the situation. The most adversely affected programs were those in education and health. The rise of madrasas, which are religious schools that double as private organizations supported by seminaries, was spurred by a lack of public investment in education. Free education, clothes, and board for students have been the key advantages for low-income families. Most madrasas continue to instruct students using a combination of Islamic and antiquated theological principles. Local children and Afghan refugees were educated in the madrasas. By 1990, only one-third of pre-conflict enrollment remained in Afghanistan's state-sponsored schools. Only a small percentage of madrasas teach jihad (religious war) and provide military training, but those that do thrive on a mix of militarism, sectarian politics, and willful ignorance. The Afghan immigrants found discipline and significance in this rigid atmosphere and had a place to express the disputes that Afghanistan's social issues had brought about. A generation of anti-Western young men has resulted from these schools.¹¹

1994-2001: The Rise of the Taliban

Children from Afghan orphanages or refugee camps who attended madrassahs in Baluchistan and Pakistan's Northwest Frontier region eventually became the Taliban

organization. The fact that the Taliban's core members were primarily young people and that few Taliban officials were born before 1960 is a significant component of the group. Many of the recruits and the original militant core were between 14 and 24. They never experienced true peace, and the post-communist civil wars and the promise of the rigid Islam doctrine promoted by the madrasas helped to shape their perspectives and worldview.¹²

A rigid application of Sharia law that considered regional cultural beliefs and a fantasy of a perfect, cohesive Islamic society is the only reason the Taliban could expand so swiftly and organize militarily. This philosophy was particularly successful because it catered to people who were weary of war and had a strong desire for order. This is best illustrated by the Taliban's well-known birth narrative, in which a group of Muslim religious teachers sat around analyzing how the communists' defeat failed to improve things in the terrible conditions after the Najibullah regime fell in 1992. The following day, a report that two young girls had been transported to a nearby army base and sexually assaulted was brought to one of the teachers, Mullah Omar. Omar assembled about 30 Talibs (religious students) and assaulted the base, freeing the females and taking substantial weapons. Tens of thousands joined the ranks of the Taliban due to this widely circulated tale. As a result, the Taliban asserted that it would continue to respond to pleas for justice while accepting following Sharia law as payment.¹³

The Taliban utilized brutality to intimidate the Afghan people into submission, despite their claims that they would bring justice and restore order. As a result, Afghanistan was basically under Taliban control. To continue their expansion, the Taliban commanders have long relied on madrasas to train and provide minors as fighters. Boys as young as six were brainwashed; by age 13, they knew how to handle a gun. In addition, the Taliban have recruited kids through lies and false promises to commit suicide and other deadly attacks. A Taliban commander allegedly encouraged a 15-year-old boy to set off bombs close to the Afghan police and promised him enormous prizes in exchange; the

child told United Nations investigators. The commander threatened to kill him and his family when he expressed hesitation. The Taliban regime also coincided with one of the worst droughts to hit Afghanistan this century, which destroyed a significant portion of the country's predominantly agrarian economy. Additionally, Afghanistan constantly received less aid than it needed, making it difficult for humanitarian organizations to function. Due to the illegal recruitment of children as soldiers, Afghan women and children also experienced psychological trauma, emotional discomfort, and other effects.¹⁴

2009: Afghanistan Election Year

The number of child fatalities has fluctuated during the war with the political climate. To sabotage the 2009 election, the Taliban unleashed violence nationwide, targeting voters and polling places. Two Taliban fighters were killed on election day in a gunfight after they took control of a deserted building close to the capitol. This occurred the day after Afghan police killed three Taliban fighters wearing suicide vests with explosives in a bank building close to the presidential palace. An explosion at a Kabul high school serving as a polling place injured an election worker and ended voting there. Taliban gunmen executed two people in the southern city of Kandahar because their fingers were inked to indicate they had cast ballots. According to a voting official in the same city, voter turnout appeared to be 40% lower than during the nation's presidential election in 2004.¹⁵ 2009 was also subsequently cited as being the deadliest year for Afghan children since 2001. According to the Afghanistan Rights Monitor, at least three children were killed in acts of terrorism daily. This is equivalent to roughly 1050 Afghan children being killed in crossfire, suicide assaults, airstrikes, IEDs, landmines, and explosive remnants from conflict.¹⁶

2021: Government Collapse

After the US soldiers left Afghanistan, the Taliban launched a military operation that overran the provinces and reached Kabul, the capital, bringing down the government

and forcing President Ghani to flee the nation. The Taliban announced an interim administration at the start of September. President Ghani's government forces and non state actors carried out indiscriminate airstrikes and IED attacks in the first half of 2021, resulting in thousands of deaths. While just about 25% of deaths of women and children were traced to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, 68% were attributed to the Taliban. A US drone strike in Kabul on August 29 resulted in the deaths of 10 family members, including seven children. Non-state actors targeted citizens purposefully throughout the year. One such incident involved a bombing at Sayed-ul-Shuhada High School, which resulted in the deaths or injuries of around 230 young girls. An estimated 682,031 individuals were reportedly forced to flee their homes due to violence, adding to the 4 million people who had previously been uprooted due to conflict and natural catastrophes. Thousands of people were forcibly removed from their houses by the Taliban, who mainly targeted anyone connected to the previous administration. Taliban-imposed limitations that made it considerably more challenging to get passports and visas had an impact on Afghans' right to seek asylum as well.¹⁷

Actors and Interests

Afghan Children

Due to social, cultural, and health difficulties, Afghan children have suffered for decades. Children in Afghanistan today lack basic human rights and needs due to the country's current status, and it can be seen that Afghan children have been deprived of these rights on a large scale since the 1979 Soviet Union invasion. Not only have they been deprived of freedom and basic needs due to poverty and an unstable government, but they have also been continuously displaced to neighboring countries such as Pakistan and living under constant fear that either they or their families could be killed at a moment's notice.¹⁸

Refugees, according to the United Nations, are those who have crossed an

international border in search of protection after fleeing persecution, war, or other atrocities.¹⁹ After over 40 years, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' mandate declared Afghan refugees one of the largest displacement situations. The fact that this has been a crisis for a long period has sparked efforts to intensify support for the Afghanistan people and the communities in Iran and Pakistan that have accommodated them.²⁰ In order to escape Afghanistan, families turned to smugglers out of desperation, and many children had to face a harrowing journey. A 12-year-old Afghan child described their journey, describing how they initially went to Iran and then utilized a smuggler to get to Turkey. The boy recalled that the two-day trip to Turkey was extremely perilous and that, at one point, he fell off his horse because his father was too exhausted to carry him any longer. After arriving, his family crossed Turkey to the Aegean Sea, where they boarded a boat designed to hold five people along with 25 other refugees. When they eventually reached Norway, they were able to build their new lives and lived there for four years. However, the Norwegian government denied their request for asylum, and this family was sent back to Afghanistan with little to no money shortly after that.²¹ This family's story echoes the plights that many Afghanistan refugees deal with. Many children can build their new lives only to have it ripped away from them.

Due to the violence that has been intensifying, tens of thousands of Afghan children have left their homes. In August 2021, under the deteriorating political climate, the UN Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict in Afghanistan was made public. Between January 2019 and December 2020, 5,770 boys and girls are said to have been killed or seriously injured. The number of children killed or injured during the first half of 2021 was also the greatest ever for this period, as reported by the UN. During this period, the report also highlighted one of every three civilian casualties was a child. Boys specifically have been targeted for Taliban recruitment ever since the Taliban established an interim government. The Taliban employed 260 boys in combat positions. While most were enlisted against their will under the threat of death, the country's dire

economic conditions also led to some boys enlisting voluntarily under pressure to provide for their family's basic needs. Afghan children have been the main casualties of the ongoing conflict and socioeconomic situation in Afghanistan when they should be the ones protected.²²

The Taliban

The Taliban is a predominantly Pashtun, Islamic, extremist group that established an interim government in 2021 once United States troops were withdrawn. After the U.S.-led invasion overthrew the original Taliban regime in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the

Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and began occupying specific Afghanistan territory. Despite promises to respect women's and children's rights, they have imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law. They have also struggled to provide Afghans with adequate food and economic growth. Girls specifically have been banned from attending secondary school and even prohibited women from working at local and non-government organizations. It has been estimated that restricting employment could cost up to 5 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, which worsens the already weak economy. Additionally, despite pledging that Afghanistan's soil will not be used as a haven for other terrorist groups, the United Nations has stated in their April 2022 report that the Taliban group remains close with Al-Qaeda operatives, even stating that Al-Qaeda has "increased freedom of action." In August, a United States drone strike killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. UN reports demonstrated that Zawahiri was living in the home of a Taliban house. The UN report also suggested that it is believed that Al-Qaeda is likely using Afghanistan as a "friendly environment" to recruit soldiers and train them.²³

A state's capacity and efforts to prevent and end human trafficking and the use of child soldiers are identified in the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report. Afghanistan has been classified as a Tier 3 country by the Department of State, which indicates a pattern of human trafficking in Afghanistan that the government somehow

supports.²⁴

The use of child soldiers is not anything new. The Taliban takeover and the COVID 19 pandemic have hindered Afghanistan's ability to protect its children. Aside from planting and detonating IEDs, using child soldiers in suicide attacks, moving weapons, and spying, the Taliban has used them illegally in its militias. The Taliban has also stopped looking into, prosecuting, or preventing cases of trafficking or recruitment. Afghan children cannot rely on aid from non-governmental organizations because the Taliban has severely restricted aid and even threatened relief workers.²⁵

Pro-Government Forces

The Afghan National Police, Afghan National Army, Afghan Local Police, and National Directorate of Security have all recruited and employed children in warfare as soldiers, according to the US State Department. Pro-government independent militias also used child recruitment; some of these militias even received monetary support from the Afghan government.²⁶ However, the Afghan government started to take more measures to safeguard children, such as creating a National Child Protection Committee to combat the practice known as bacha bazi, which involves sexually abusing young boys. The Afghan government has also strengthened child protection services at Afghan National Army recruitment centers and hired additional social workers. Even though some non governmental organizations claimed that these agencies lacked sufficient staff, they achieved great progress in halting the recruitment of children as soldiers. Afghan authorities discovered 20 minors serving in its military and prevented recruiting more than 5,000 children into armed groups between April 2020 and March 2021 through Child Protection Units. The government was also identifying and prosecuting security service personnel for perpetrating bacha bazi crimes. However, despite certain allegations of child soldier recruitment or use by military personnel being looked into by the Afghan government, no actual prosecutions or penalties came from the investigations.

Iran and Pakistan

As of 2018, according to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, over 90% of Afghan refugees live in Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan's two neighboring countries. For displaced people, leaving is usually abrupt and fast, so they need more time or resources to plan on escaping to a different country, such as in Europe. In 2003, the Iranian Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs launched Amayesh cards, which serve as temporary identification. The formal legal documents for refugees residing in Iran continue to be these Amayesh cards. Holders of an Amayesh card must pay money to renew them when a new round of registration is announced. Failure to renew them changes the status of a refugee to an undocumented immigrant, which means that they can be subject to deportation.²⁷

The initial group of emigrated Afghans who were issued Amayesh cards had access to most governmental services, including the public education system in Iran. Afghan children without documentation, however, were expressly prohibited from attending school and were not allowed to do so. In response, Afghan refugee groups in Iran established independent schools to give them a chance at an education. In addition to having meager tuition fees to fund running costs, these schools employed teachers on a volunteer basis rather than paying them. On the other hand, Iran outlawed these institutions because their instruction was deficient. Before the Iranian Supreme Leader's announcement in 2015 that all Afghan children would now have access to public education, regardless of whether they are documented, undocumented Afghan refugees faced difficulty acquiring access to education.²⁸ Iran has consistently made contributions throughout the past ten years to aid in reconstructing Afghan lives. Since the Iranian government's 2015 decision, Afghan children's access to elementary education has progressively increased despite the country's limited resources. For one year in 2014, tuition was free for Afghan refugees. More recently, in 2020, the Iranian government approved a law granting automatic Iranian citizenship to children of Iranian mothers and

Afghan fathers, giving all of those children immediate access to Iran's public education system. For Afghan children, university entry has proven to be significantly more challenging. All Iraqi and Afghan students would be entitled to enroll in Iranian colleges to further their education, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution emphasized in a 2011 amendment to its 2009 initial directive. The following year, in 2012, a new law was passed that mandated that Afghan refugees who wanted to enroll in higher education institutions in Iran had to renounce their refugee status, travel back to Afghanistan to get an Afghan passport, and then return to Iran as immigrants with a temporary student visa. Although there has been a tremendous improvement in Afghan children's education, many still struggle to attend school because of the high rates of economic poverty among Afghan refugees. In addition, many Afghan families must send their kids to work to pay for the necessities.²⁹

In the past, Afghan child refugees in Pakistan have primarily attended madrasas, the religious and educational institutions that form the Taliban's core. Approximately 250,000 Afghans have sought safety in Pakistan since August 2021. As of January 10, 2023, more than 600 Afghans had already been evicted from Pakistan, and hundreds more were in danger of doing the same. Pakistani officials have held nearly 1,400 Afghans in only the two cities of Karachi and Hyderabad. Pakistan has also not ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which obliges nations to protect persons fleeing severe danger and suffering.³⁰

United Nations Children's Fund

Since 1949, the United Nations Children's Fund has been in Afghanistan. Per the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF Afghanistan fulfills all girls' and boys' rights to survival, development, protection, and participation through the Country Programme of Cooperation, supporting national frameworks and the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UNICEF's strategy in Afghanistan is characterized by prudence, realism, and adaptability. UNICEF is aware that the environment in Afghanistan

is volatile and susceptible to natural disasters and armed conflict. UNICEF also strongly emphasizes ensuring that systems and communities are more resilient to future humanitarian crises due to development.³¹ By involving religious leaders in local communities to safeguard children from dangerous behaviors, UNICEF aims to strengthen the country's child protection institutions in Afghanistan. The Child Protection Action Network, a partnership of government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and religious authorities working together to safeguard children's rights, was established with the assistance of UNICEF and the Afghan government. Moreover, UNICEF has teamed up with the Ministry of Interior's Vital Statistics Division to increase birth registration, reduce child recruitment and unauthorized detention, and ensure access to child protection measures.³²

Possible Causes

Refugee Crisis after Soviet Invasion

Numerous human rights crimes occurred during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Despite being a devoted communist, Hafizullah Amin used his position of authority to terrorize the Afghan people. By making tens of thousands of arrests and using terror, he hoped to establish a communist economy almost immediately. The Afghan people started to revolt against communist beliefs due to Amin's strategy, which reversed the expected results. As a result, the Soviets immediately killed Hafizullah Amin and installed Babrak Karmal as president because they needed someone to carry out their orders without resistance. Afghans had already organized a broad, well-developed uprising when Amin was removed from power. The insurgents included former Afghan military leaders and soldiers, exiled Muslims living in Pakistan and Iran, and militias comprising several other frustrated political organizations. These insurgents later became known as the "mujahideen," they shared the broad goal of preserving Afghan and Islamic values from Soviet domination and ideology.³³ They waged a violent and successful

guerrilla campaign against Soviet forces for most of the 1980s. This had a catastrophic and immediate impact on Afghan civilian life.³⁴ Both parties frequently engage in heinous violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. In reaction to the guerilla strikes, the Soviets frequently targeted civilians on purpose because they were frustrated mainly by how successful these attacks were.³⁵

The Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan resulted in several human rights breaches, described in detail in a report produced by the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1985. The report lists other abuses, including torture, mass deaths of civilians, the eviction of people from rural regions, and the detention of thousands of Afghans without charge or trial. The report also details the Soviets' deliberate bombing of hospitals and the maiming of children by booby-trapped toys. Additionally, the study gave instances backed up by Afghan witnesses. Three hundred sixty people were put to death on October 12, 1983, in a tiny town in the Kandahar province, including about 20 young girls.³⁶

The Soviet invasion of 1979 was a direct cause of the human rights violations that happened afterward. However, to fully grasp the implications of this invasion and what it caused long-term, it is crucial to analyze what happened to the Afghan people who fled the country during this time. Many Afghan families chose to leave in response to human rights violations and abuses and destroyed infrastructure throughout the country. There were 6.2 million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan alone from 1985 to 1990. After the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1997, some families did return, but there were still 2.7 million refugees in Pakistan and Iran.³⁷

Many Afghan children were relocated to Pakistan and forced to attend madrasas since there was no other option. Madrasas are religious schools, as mentioned in the chronology section, and they attract students because of their extremely inexpensive tuition rates. These madrasas had a strongly anti-communist curriculum and much religious material in the 1980s. These institutions of higher learning fostered the rise of

Islamist extremism, and many of the Taliban's founding members attended these madrasas.³⁸ These schools have essentially indoctrinated Afghan refugee children to be more extremist, contributing to the rise of the Taliban. The rise of the Taliban has caused more children to be targeted, such as being used as child soldiers in militias, leading to some children being indoctrinated to believe in the Taliban. These madrasas have created a cycle where each generation has kept targeting children, which is why Afghan children are their country's most prominent victims.³⁹

Economic Instability

Years of damage and economic issues have resulted from Afghanistan's political turmoil. In the ten years that the US was involved, Afghanistan did experience some economic growth and success. Still, in August 2021, after US soldiers left and the Taliban retook power, that growth and progress ended abruptly. Due to the August 2021 catastrophe, there is more widespread poverty and food insecurity. The GDP statistics indicate a 20.7 percent decline in the economy in 2021. Due to the freeze of overseas assets and its inability to produce new Afghani currency notes, the Central Bank of Afghanistan has also lost its capacity to control the payment systems and implement monetary policy. A lack of confidence has emerged in the financial industry due to decreased US dollars and Afghani currency. In addition, the banking relationships between foreign banks and Afghanistan have been hampered by worries about financing terrorist organizations. Building relationships with Afghan banks is difficult for many foreign banks. Although the influx of extra-budgetary aid from the international community during the year mitigated some of the negative effects of the severe humanitarian crisis, it was still a major decrease from when US soldiers were still stationed in Afghanistan. Until August 2021, international aid accounted for 75% of Afghanistan's economic output. The US authorized the World Bank to stop receiving around \$2 billion in outside international assistance after the Taliban took over.⁴⁰ The UN also estimates that excluding women from working may cost the nation \$1 billion, up to

5% of its GDP.⁴¹

This economic instability has only exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. 90% of households cannot afford enough food, and acute malnutrition is pervasive nationwide. According to the World Food Programme's assessment system, over 20 million people, or half the population, are experiencing level 3 crisis- or level 4 emergency-level food insecurity. The World Health Organization has further claimed that tens of thousands of children are admitted for emergency medical care for acute malnutrition each month. Many more in isolated places have starved to death because they could not reach aid. More than a million young children under five are chronically undernourished, putting them at risk for serious health issues if they do not obtain the required nourishment.⁴²

Unstable Governments

The government's incapacity to uphold child protection laws is a major factor in why child soldiers and other child rights abuses have continued over the past few years. Despite the United States' involvement in Afghanistan's democratic reconstruction from 2001 to 2021, the Afghan government was still unable to provide widespread child protection. Afghanistan's government and the international community came together in 2006 to create the Afghanistan Compact, a plan for reestablishing Afghanistan's social order.⁴³ There were 50,000 international troops left to finish this mission. However, the established Afghan government and its Compact came under attack from a resurgence of Taliban forces, resulting in a weaker administration, a rise in resistance, and an increase in civilian fatalities. Armed rebel groups, many of whom used child soldiers, were involved in the battle. The international community was inundated with reports of minors being

forced and voluntarily recruited by the Taliban in southern Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. Additionally, by the end of 2014, a united national government had been installed in Afghanistan due to elections, and NATO's military operation was terminated

due to the perceived stability.⁴⁴ The tenuous security in Afghanistan was turned over to the Afghan National Security Forces. Nevertheless, the problem of young soldiers has persisted, despite their attempts.⁴⁵

Comparison of Causes

Overall, each of these causes are linked to one another, some in multiple ways. Multiple causes within these broad subtopics have also influenced each other. The Afghan refugee crisis was caused by the Soviet invasion because there was widespread economic instability within the country. Since the Soviet invasion debilitated Afghanistan, this caused millions of Afghans to flee to neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran. This refugee crisis sparked the use of madrasas in Pakistan, creating a generation of young men who believed in extremist Islam ideals. These young men then formed the Taliban, which created numerous human rights violations, specifically for children, since the Taliban were known for using child soldiers as suicide bombers or even as spies. One of the reasons why children resort to being recruited as a Taliban soldier is because of impoverished living conditions, which has in recent years been directly caused by the Taliban taking over Afghanistan in August 2021. The Taliban's recent government takeover is tanking the economy, which leads to millions of Afghan children living in poverty. Because of these impoverished living conditions have caused a cycle where children feel that they have to support themselves and their families, which means that sometimes they have no other choice but to join the Taliban. Unstable governments are another huge factor because the whole reason why the Taliban was able to take over so quickly in August 2021 is because of the unstable Afghanistan government that was left behind. Additionally, the Taliban can currently qualify as an unstable government and has caused impoverished living conditions that cause children to be targeted. It is significant to consider how each of these causes exacerbates each other and are all connected when looking for solutions.

Projections and Implications

The projections concerning how the conflicts in Afghanistan affect children predict that things will only worsen with the Taliban acting as Afghanistan's official government. The World Bank predicts that the economy will grow slowly over the next two years due to the rapid population expansion, with essentially no gain in per capita income. It is also predicted that the outlook for poverty or food insecurity will not change significantly. Due to rising commodity prices globally and supply shortages, inflation is also anticipated to continue rising, reducing how much people can buy with their household incomes.⁴⁶ The Taliban administration's draconian laws regarding women's employment and education will also hinder Afghanistan's economic development.⁴⁷

Although the Taliban regime has claimed that they would make changes and be more progressive than the Taliban was in the 1990s, it has been demonstrated that this is not the case. When the Taliban first came to power in the 1990s, they promised to keep women at home until the "conditions were suitable" for them to leave for work. Nevertheless, throughout the five years, the Taliban ruled Kabul, women were confined to their homes, and these "conditions" never materialized. If a woman left the house, a male guardian—a brother, son, or husband—had to go with her. The Taliban continues to refuse to permit young girls to attend school using the same argument: "unsuitable conditions." To maintain credibility with their more extreme sections, today's group cannot abandon too much of its antiquated doctrine. In other words, the Taliban would appear to have compromised on its essential principles if they became too progressive.⁴⁸

According to the Global Peace Index (GPI), Afghanistan had the greatest overall number of fatalities from an internal conflict of any country in 2021. The index also stated that 40% of Afghanistan's GDP was lost to violence due to it. Several officials believe that unless anything is done, this violent trend will only continue. It has also been projected

that 15.2 million children in 2023 will need humanitarian assistance to survive.⁴⁹

Violence will continue even if the Taliban is wholly victorious and forms a single administration. Recent strikes by the Islamic State, which will now lead an independent insurgency against the Taliban, provide evidence for this. Additionally, because ecological pressures have aggravated the level of malnutrition in the nation, the destruction and devastation brought on by conflicts in Afghanistan have also exacerbated the food instability situation.⁵⁰

Committee Jurisdiction

The United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF, was established in 1946 to provide children and mothers in post-World War II countries with emergency food and healthcare.⁵¹ Governments must assess local requirements, raise sustainable money, and allocate resources effectively to guarantee that children have fair access to health care and services. UNICEF assists nations with the funding of healthcare and associated initiatives. UNICEF also assists governments in developing and implementing national policies and directing and supervising decentralized levels of authority. To help nations link health funding with national objectives, UNICEF harnesses contributions from domestic, bilateral, and multilateral sources like the World Bank, the Global Financing Facility, and the Global Fund.⁵²

With a special collaboration program created with the host government, UNICEF depends on national offices to assist with carrying out its activities. The programs work to create efficient plans for upholding and defending the rights of women and children. Regional offices oversee this activity and, where necessary, give country offices technical support. In its headquarters in New York City, the organization is managed and administered overall. Its executive board of 36 government officials directs and oversees all of UNICEF's activities. The board makes decisions about organizational and financial strategies and budgets, establishes policies, and approves initiatives. The bureau, which

consists of a president and four vice presidents representing one of the five regional organizations, oversees its operations.⁵³

Conclusion

Afghanistan has consistently been plagued by conflict and destruction, contributing to the fact that millions of children have suffered and known nothing but war. UNICEF has labeled Afghanistan "the worst place to be born in the world." Although Afghanistan's government has changed multiple times, children have been targeted and taken advantage of. Both the Taliban and pro-governmental Afghan groups have used children as child soldiers in armed conflicts, ranging from positions such as messenger to being forced to be a suicide bomber.⁵⁴ Health issues such as lack of food or water have led to severe malnutrition among children. This problem has only been exacerbated by the Taliban's takeover because of its long-term consequences, such as less humanitarian aid being provided. Even some non-governmental organizations have been forced to leave the country because of the Taliban's rules concerning women.⁵⁵ Thousands of children have been internally displaced and forced to flee Afghanistan to nearby countries such as Pakistan and Iran. In some cases, even if a family saves enough money to become refugees, they sometimes get deported back to Afghanistan and must start all over again.⁵⁶ Healthcare and education facilities must be funded and resourced to provide millions of children with the necessary supplies and support. All these things considered, that is why the work in this committee is so significant because it will affect not only the children now but the children of future generations.

Discussion Questions

- How can human rights violations be different for children than for adults?

- How can taking advantage of children in Afghanistan be advantageous for certain actors in times of conflict?
- What are some reasons why human rights violations such as malnutrition and lack of healthcare are exacerbated by conflict?
- Why have previous legislation or attempts by the UN yet been successful?
- What are some ways to protect UN officials and improve child protection services' efficiency during a conflict?

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For Further Reading

Collins, Joseph J. “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Methods, Motives, and

Ramifications.” *Naval War College Review* 33, no. 6 (1980): 53–62.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44642132>.

Joseph J. Collins from the US Army wrote this book chapter from the Naval War College Review textbook. In this chapter, he details the methods, motives, and ramifications of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He goes into Afghanistan's geographical, political, and social background during the 1970s and how this contributed to the Afghanistan government developing close ties with the Soviet Union. He chronologically goes through each event that led to Afghanistan being under Soviet occupation and how the relationship developed from being friendly to being the enemy. This chapter does a great job of outlining how Afghanistan's government failed to protect its people and why this caused massive internal displacement as well as a refugee crisis. All of these factors have contributed to Afghanistan's current political climate.

Sullivan, Daniel P. “Tinder, Spark, Oxygen, and Fuel: The Mysterious Rise of the Taliban.” *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 1 (2007): 93–108.
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This journal analyzes the many factors that contributed to the rise of the Taliban. The Taliban is an integral part of Afghanistan's history and current situation. Many of the children's hardships are caused by the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, and this journal provides essential context for why and how the Taliban formed in the first place. It also explains why the Taliban was able to amass so much power by focusing on the factors of government failure, poor socio economic conditions, archaic religious ideology teachings in madrasas, and the overall disappointment that young Afghan males harbored.

“Children of War: The Real Casualties of the Afghan Conflict.” *BMJ* 324, no. 7338 (2002): 647c–647. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.324.7338.647/c>.

This article explores how Afghan children have been targeted explicitly during Afghanistan's many different conflicts and how this has dramatically impacted children's physical and mental health. It provides context about the impact of the 1979 Soviet invasion and how those effects are even seen today in Afghan children. It also outlines how the Taliban and even pro-Afghan government groups have used children in their conflict and how this has continuously harmed Afghan children and threatened their lives.

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