

The Russian General Staff, he reported, is concerned lest the Taliban forces reach the border with Tajikistan. This is the border that the Russian military help defend. Potapov argued that Russia could provide crucial help to repel the insurgents, because it has "border troops, aircraft, and military equipment in Tajikistan." And he expressed the hope, that such Russian help would be solicited by Uzbekistan.

At the same time, signal pieces have appeared in major Western press, touting the line, that U.S. ambitions to dominate the region have failed, and that Washington has decided that it might be better to "let Moscow handle affairs." In light of the unfolding warfare, one is tempted to ask: Could this be a polite way of saying, let Russia get embroiled in a regional conflict, a new Afghanistan, this time encompassing all of Central Asia?

## Drought Is Devastating Central and South Asia

by Mary Burdman

The worst drought in 30 years is now devastating parts of Central and South Asia, with the worst-hit nation being Afghanistan. Tajikistan is also badly affected, as are parts of Iran. Drought struck northwestern India and adjoining areas of Pakistan in the Spring, but this has been somewhat relieved by the arrival of the monsoon.

Around 60 million people are already affected by the drought, and the overall economic impact will strike many more. Lack of water is a critical problem in many regions of Eurasia. To the east, drought has been taking a heavy toll in China this Spring and Summer, and now, drought is spreading west, into the Caucasus.

The worst, and potentially most dangerous situation is in Afghanistan, a nation already devastated by 20 years of civil war. Three years of inadequate rainfall, on top of the collapse of what water management had existed in the country, could cause full-scale famine.

Reports during the Spring and Summer by the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), warn of the dangers of famine and mass migration. Crops have been destroyed; livestock are dying; fruit trees are destroyed. Sanitation, already a problem, is collapsing, and the effect on public health is extremely bad. There could be mass migrations within the country, or even across the borders, by people who have lost everything. The effects on the countries, themselves already hit by drought, where such refugees might go, would create even more instability in this already highly volatile region.

### 'A Human Catastrophe'

In its report of July 27, the WFP warned: "A failure to provide fast and effective food assistance in Afghanistan raises concerns of a human catastrophe that could range between acute malnutrition and loss of life. It could also lead to massive movement of people within the country and across borders into Iran and Pakistan." Some 3-4 million Afghans are in danger of famine, out of a population of 21.9 million, and another 8-12 million will also be affected, if less severely, the WFP estimates. Famine is already affecting areas including southern Samangan province, the Panjshir Valley, and Badgis and Ghor provinces.

In a bitter irony, the drought is reportedly also taking a big toll on Afghanistan's opium crop, one of the biggest in the world, and estimated for last year at 4,600 tons. This will certainly have an effect on the Taliban regime in Kabul.

In late July, WFP teams reported a very bleak situation in the provinces of Ghor and Badgis. Many people have already consumed their seed wheat, and sold their livestock — and the Summer is still at its height. This year, agricultural production could be only about 55% of last year.

Next year could be worse. While 300,000 tons of wheat seed is planted annually in Afghanistan, this year there will be a deficit of at least 60,000 tons. Since much planting is generally done during October-November, there is little time to distribute adequate seed grain, and some 400,000 farmers could miss the Winter planting season, the WFP reports.

The worst-hit area of Afghanistan is a wide region extending from the northwest to southeast. Rain-dependent wheat farmers in the north have lost their entire crops. This is the second year of severe drought in these regions, and last year people had already sold off most of what they possessed just to buy food. In 1999, southwest Afghanistan harvested only 40% of the previous year's crop.

All areas of the country are affected. In the southern areas, up to 80% of livestock have died due to lack of water and fodder. The nomad population is possibly worst affected, some people losing all their livestock, and forced to go to the cities in search of food.

Even regions which have irrigation are facing deteriorating conditions. Water infrastructure was damaged by floods two years ago, on top of overall lack of maintenance due to the chaotic situation in the country. The low water levels in the rivers, will also limit production.

The poor in the cities are also facing rising food prices and lack of water. Already, the WFP reports, in the cities of Mazar and Herat, wheat and flour prices are double those of last year, and drinking water is in short supply.

Afghanistan, always dependent on food imports, now will have to import an unprecedented 2.3 million tons of food over the next year, twice what it needed last year. However, it is becoming much more difficult for Afghanistan to import food. Formerly, food had been imported from Pakistan, but,

after the military coup there in October 1999, border controls have become stricter, and the result has been "an acute decrease" in grain imports, the WFP reported. The amounts of grain imported from Iran have also dropped greatly.

## Tajikistan

Tajikistan is also in danger of severe food shortages for 3 million people, out of a population of just 6.2 million. Due to long-term problems in water management, poor quality agricultural machinery, and the lack of seed, the population has little ability to meet the crisis. Irrigation canals, water pumps, and farm machines have broken down, and seed grain has already been consumed. People here, as in Afghanistan, have sold or are selling their possessions just to buy food.

Crops dependent on rainfall have failed completely, and 30-50% of irrigated crops have also been lost. Grain production this year is predicted to be 236,000 tons, only 46% of the 1999 crop. For Tajikistan, this is the third consecutive year of shrinking harvests, but this year's collapse is the biggest so far. The Tajikistan grain crop will meet national needs for only three months, whereas, in the three previous years, at least six months of food supply had been produced in the country.

The WFP warned that, even with imports of 400,000 tons and food aid of 74,000 tons, Tajikistan faces a grain deficit of 313,000 tons until 2001, and if this grain is not available, this "will inevitably result in widespread, serious nutritional consequences and even loss of life."

The rivers are also lower than normal, due to less than half the normal snowfall in the past Winter. Power supplies are endangered, which also limits the working of water pumps.

## Pakistan

In Pakistan, some 2.2 million impoverished people in Baluchistan and Sindh provinces are suffering from severe drought. The drought had been getting worse over the past three years, but now, the monsoon has brought relief, even to some of the worst-hit areas. The drought-affected population had survived on food and fodder donations from the government and international donors. Conditions in areas which have not received rain, will only deteriorate further. Prices for livestock have fallen drastically, as there was nothing to feed them, further undermining the overall economic situation in affected areas.

## Iran

In Iran, some 12 million people, in 18 of the nation's 28 provinces, are facing shortages of drinking water, in the second year of drought. In 1999, wheat production fell by more than 3 million tons, almost 25%, due to water shortages, forcing the government to make record-high wheat imports of about 6.5 million tons. One of the most difficult situations,

is the presence of 128,000 Afghan and Iraqi refugees in Iran, who also must be fed.

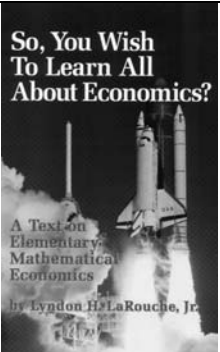
## India

Eleven states, especially in western India, were hard-hit by drought. At its height in late Spring, as many as 26 million people and 35 million cattle were affected, and there was mass migration from the region. Despite a timely and apparently adequate monsoon, many thousands still face economic hardship and hunger, because two to three cycles of crops have been undercut by the drought. This year, wheat and barley production are the lowest in five years, and oil seeds and pulses, the vital source of protein for the vast majority of the Indian population, are severely reduced.

## The Caucasus

Georgia is experiencing the worst drought in 30 years. Average wheat harvest losses of 58% are expected, with some areas losing 70%. An almost complete sunflower crop failure is expected. Livestock fodder is in short supply and its price has reportedly increased threefold.

Armenia is facing drought conditions, especially in the mountain areas. The wheat crop is badly affected, scorched and reduced in size, and vegetable and fruit output are reduced.



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