

AFGHANISTAN A FORGOTTEN TRAGEDY



Life in Kabul
is a daily hell

Each day, two to three thousand people take advantage of the temporary ceasefires to escape this ruined city

Afghanistan rings in Russian and American ears like a bad memory from the Cold War. Gradually, as the relationship between the superpowers thawed, the spotlights trained on the country went out, one by one, plunging this region of the world into total media darkness. Afghanistan, which featured regularly in the prime time news schedules of the eighties, is today a media «has been». But the war and its share of human tragedies have not ceased since the departure of the last Soviet soldier in February 1989. In Kabul, the fighting between forces loyal to President Rabbani and other factions have led to 5,000 deaths and 40,000 injured since January 1994. During the last two months, a distinct revival of the tension has been evident.

A war of shifting alliances

Left to their own devices after getting the better of the Najibullah pro-Soviet regime in 1992, the Mujahidin Afghans have been incapable of setting up a stable government in Kabul. The numerous opposing factions play a bloody game of musical chairs, each forming an alliance with yesterday's enemy to prevent some other rival from establishing itself. The fact that the country is full of arms left there by the Russians and Americans does not help matters. These internal conflicts have been reinforced by the interaction of the regional powers. Alliances are formed and unformed according to the vagaries of pressures from various neighbouring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan and, in the background, Saudi Arabia. Each of these countries is keen to retain a foothold in Afghanistan through an ethnic or religious group.

HIGH-RISK INTERVENTIONS

As basic security conditions cannot be guaranteed for the humanitarian workers in Afghanistan, ECHO applies in this country, and in Kabul in particular, a policy of «considered risk». Despite all possible precautions, there is always a risk of convoys being confiscated by local military leaders, of the humanitarian supplies being diverted from the initial objectives and of personnel being threatened in the course of their duties. But if we did nothing to come to the aid of these populations in distress... who would do it? Each convoy which reaches the intended recipients is a victory which gives the personnel the courage to continue.

Kabul : a city in ruins

Kabul is the focus of all the lust for power. The Rabbani/Massoud government alliance holds the biggest share of the city which is continually shelled by the troops of Hekmatyar/Doustom lying in ambush in the hills of Logar. A scenario which resembles that of Sarajevo, except that, here, the battles are also fought out in the built-up area. Most of the city has been destroyed and emptied of its former inhabitants who make the most of the sporadic cease-fires to flee. Today, 2 to 3,000 people leave the capital every day. Only those who have no means of leaving remain. 380,000 people are displaced inside the city today, squatting in public buildings or finding refuge with their families. Kabul has no water, electricity or heating. Public services such as refuse collection no longer operate, giving rise to a catastrophic sanitary situation. The price of foodstuffs is exorbitant because of the blockade of the city by opposition

forces. The inhabitants sell everything they own to buy food. In short, terrible living conditions which are set to worsen this winter because of the cold (-20° at night in winter) and malnutrition.

The four main supply routes into the city are all held by Hekmatyar's opposition troops making it virtually impossible for a humanitarian convoy to enter the city. Currently, the only aid reaching the city is being flown in by the ICRC. The absence of the United Nations and the lack of effective government make the work of the few NGOs still present extremely difficult, as security cannot be guaranteed. Convoys are attacked and personnel are often the target of threats, accused of favouring one faction at the expense of another.

ECHO gives considerable support to organizations such as MSF (France), Solidarités or CARE (Britain) which provide medical, food and sanitary assistance to the population of Kabul.

FAR FROM THE CAMERAS, AN EXAMPLE OF COORDINATION

The European Union is the main donor of humanitarian aid operations in Afghanistan today. The close collaboration between the Commission delegation based in Peshawar (Pakistan), DG I and ECHO has enabled rapid, efficient and concerted aid operations to be set up via humanitarian partners who have the courage to remain in the country. They work there in obscurity, far from television lights and cameras, to alleviate the suffering of a people who have seen 16 long years of war.

From Kabul to Jalalabad

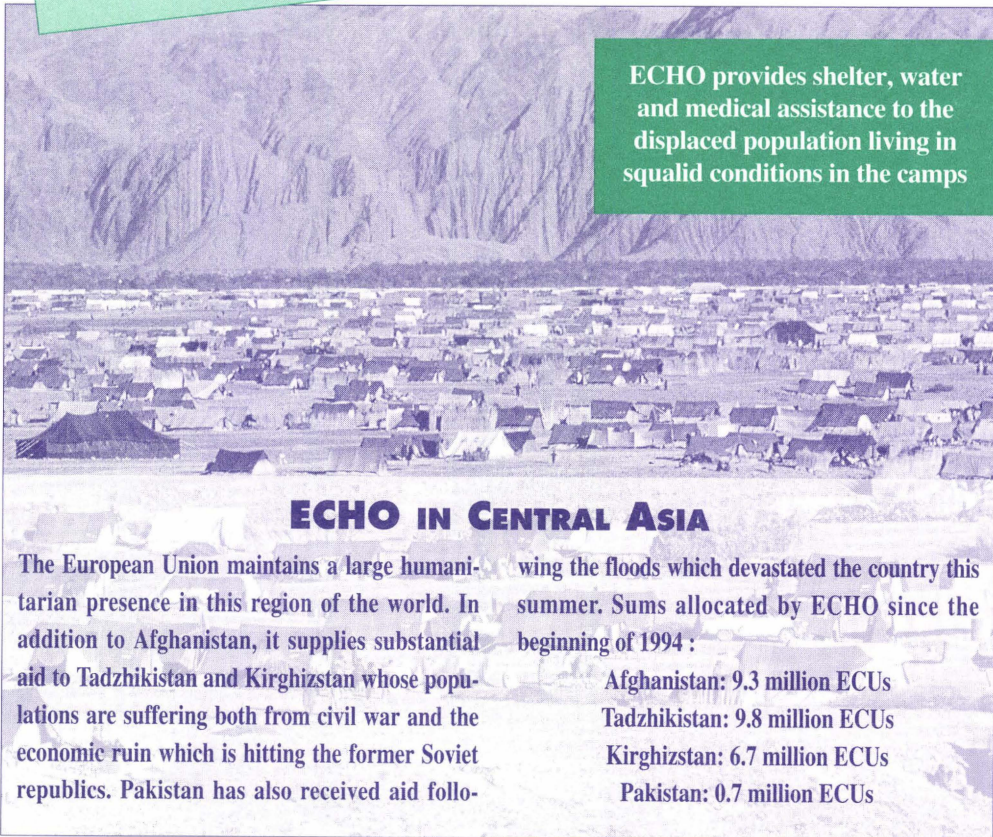
For the last 10 months, 200,000 people fleeing Kabul have sought refuge in the areas around Jalalabad, a city further to the east, near the Pakistani border. In less than a month, its population practically doubled. Faced with such a huge influx (1,000 additional arrivals a day are still being recorded), the local authorities have designated as a shelter zone an area of land turned into desert by the fighting between Soviet troops and Afghans a few years ago. This land quickly became an immense refugee camp. But the area is dangerous. A number of accidents involving exploding mines have occurred, mainly affecting women and children who go in search of firewood in the surrounding areas.

Today, Shar Shahi, the largest camp, has just reached its saturation threshold with 130,000 people living under tents in extremely difficult conditions. ECHO provides shelters, supplies water and medical assistance and is constructing a pipeline to cover drinking water needs. Winter is coming and 150,000 additional people are expected to arrive from Kabul. A new site has been designated to receive them. Although the humanitarian organizations were caught unawares when the displaced persons arrived ten months ago, today they are better equipped to deal with it. In close collaboration with the local authorities, the international organizations and NGOs, ECHO is helping to take charge of the new arrivals.

The north road

A new front has opened around the city of Kunduz, to the north of the country, giving rise to new population displacements. The situation there is very unstable and the general insecurity has led to the withdrawal of a series of NGOs which were active in this region. Only MSF Belgium, backed by ECHO, has returned there to provide medical aid, under very difficult conditions, to the city's population. The cities of Takhar and Baghlan are also receiving this aid.

In the town of Mazar-I-Sharif which, until recently, was housing 40,000 refugees from neighbouring Tadjikistan as well as many displaced persons from Kabul, the situation has improved. An increasing number of Tadjiks have returned to their country. Approximately 5,000 remain in the Mazar camps and ECHO is continuing to provide for their basic needs.



ECHO provides shelter, water and medical assistance to the displaced population living in squalid conditions in the camps

ECHO IN CENTRAL ASIA

The European Union maintains a large humanitarian presence in this region of the world. In addition to Afghanistan, it supplies substantial aid to Tadjikistan and Kirghizstan whose populations are suffering both from civil war and the economic ruin which is hitting the former Soviet republics. Pakistan has also received aid follo-

wing the floods which devastated the country this summer. Sums allocated by ECHO since the beginning of 1994 :

Afghanistan: 9.3 million ECUs

Tadjikistan: 9.8 million ECUs

Kirghizstan: 6.7 million ECUs

Pakistan: 0.7 million ECUs



ECHO's global reach

HAITI

A vast humanitarian aid programme has just been launched by the Commission on behalf of the disadvantaged populations of Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere. An unstable political situation since the 1991 «coup d'Etat» and sanctions have pushed the country to the sink of economic and social collapse. 80% of the population live below the poverty line and malnutrition is continually increasing, with children the main victims. Electricity and fuel are in short supply while refuse goes uncollected, blocking the streets of Port-au-Prince where the risk of epidemics is increasingly serious. Faced with a disastrous food and sanitary situation, the following priorities were set by ECHO following a series of missions to assess needs: medical aid (including community health facilities, vaccination

and the fight against epidemics), nutrition programmes aimed at children and pregnant women, provision of drinking water to the most disadvantaged areas, removal of refuse, provision of logistical support and technical assistance to enable these operations to be carried out. 15 million ECUs have been allocated to the people in need in Haiti: this confirms the European Union's wish to participate in the reconstruction of Haiti, following the political developments which enabled President Aristide's constitutional government to resume its functions. Living conditions in Haiti, already difficult, were worsened by the destruction caused by cyclone Gordon which struck the island last month. The Commission granted a further 3 million ECU in aid for the relief operations to the storm victims.

RWANDA

Persuading the refugees to go back to their country is the main priority today, both for the political authorities and the humanitarian organizations. This return is being made almost impossible at the moment by the pressure of Hutu militia inside the refugee camps, who threaten refugees showing any intention of returning to their country. To help the Rwandans gain the confidence and the feeling of protection they need, humanitarian staging posts have been organized along the main road routes. The refugees can receive food and any medical care needed there. But so far very few of them have dared to return. When refugees or displaced persons who have succeeded in leaving the camps arrive home, they often discover their homes destroyed or occupied by other families. Despite official government pronouncements that property must be restored to its owners, there are no police to ensure that this is carried out. While continuing to provide humanitarian aid in the camps, both inside and outside Rwanda, ECHO has set up a rehabilitation programme to encourage displaced persons and refugees to resettle in their homes. The work involves re-connecting the electrical supply across the country and supplying drinkable water for the population of Kigali at a cost of around 5 million ECUs. Since October 1993, ECHO has devoted a total of 200 million ECUs to the Rwanda and Burundi crisis, in addition to 69 million ECUs in food aid.



PHOTO NEWS

Haiti : a vast nutrition programme has been mounted for the under fives

THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

The humanitarian situation in the republics of the former Yugoslavia has improved over the last few months, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina, though the situation should be assessed with caution. There are still tensions in Sarajevo and other enclaves but in general, the intensity of the fighting has lessened,

harvests have been good and free access has permitted the resumption of commercial traffic and a measured revival of the local economies. On the basis of this improvement, the European Union is gradually reducing its financial effort, while at the same time ensuring that winter needs are satisfactorily covered. The Commission has just allocated 156 million ECUs (i.e. a reduction of 35% compared to last winter) to continue the humanitarian effort until next spring. It remains the main donor of aid to the populations of the different republics. The main objectives of the winter programme are: food aid to refugees and displaced persons in Croatia, Serbia/Montenegro and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, medical and sanitation assistance, psychological and social aid to traumatized people, the restoration of infrastructure and the provision of logistical aid to enable relief operations to be carried out.

200,000 others had to be evacuated. Rice fields were destroyed, which cannot be recultivated until next spring. In addition, the so-called «number 8» typhoon swept the coastal provinces, wiping out the crops of almost 30,000 families. ECHO responded to the appeal launched by the Vietnamese authorities: food (rice and condensed milk) and shelters, mosquito nets, blankets and clothes will be distributed to those families hardest hit; an operation involving a sum of 500,000 ECUs.

BELARUS

The aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident continues to threaten the health of around 4 million people living in the areas contaminated by radiation including parts of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus. ECHO is supplying substantial medical aid to the victims in these different republics, including Belarus which has just been granted 1 million ECUs which will cover the provision of medicines and basic equipment to hospitals in remote regions.

VIETNAM

The Mekong delta has just suffered its worst flooding in living memory. Over 180 people died and almost



PHOTO NEWS

Women and children often suffer most from the mental traumas of war: psycho-social assistance also has a role in humanitarian aid

EP mission to Rwanda

At the end of 1994, you travelled to Rwanda to lead a mission on behalf of the European Parliament. What were your findings?

This is the first time the European Parliament has organised a mission of this type within such a short time frame (2 days!). It reflects the Parliament's determination to pursue a sustained policy in humanitarian affairs. The delegation was comprised of five Members of the European Parliament, including Bernard Kouchner, Chairman of the Development Committee, and myself in my capacity as Chairman of the Joint EU/ACP Assembly. We arrived in Kigali on 27 July to judge for ourselves the appalling consequences of what can only be called genocide. For once I believe the images conveyed by the media - usually so quick to dramatise events - fell far short of reality. We at once met representatives of the United Nations, the Prime Minister and the other ministers of the new government of Rwanda (constituted on 19 July), representatives of the UNHCR, the ICRC and the many NGOs operating in the field.

We were immediately able to make three observations. First, no water, electricity, telecommunications, administration, or public services were available. The government can take all the decisions it likes to set the country back on its feet, but there is nobody to implement them. Secondly, four million people have fled the country and need to be persuaded to return. This is the most important role which the international community can play. It is an extremely difficult task, so great is the fear of refugees and displaced people of returning home. Thirdly, the perpetrators of the massacre are still at large. The government has the means neither to arrest nor to try them in accordance with normal procedures, due to the lack of a competent legal and administrative infrastructure.

How can the European Union come to the aid of a country which is in the grip of such widespread chaos?

The European Union can intervene in a very practical way. After discussions with the Rwandan authorities, we were able to make specific proposals, notably concerning the following points.

- In order to encourage repatriation, humanitarian relay stations must be organised along roadsides, to reassure people of support.
- The European Union should send observers, possibly under the auspices of the United Nations, in order to set

LORD PLUMB MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



up some sort of organisational infrastructure for administration, justice, policing, etc.

- Urgent technical assistance is needed to help the government, which does not have the means to implement its policies.
- An international tribunal must be set up as rapidly as possible in order to try the perpetrators of the massacre.
- The humanitarian aid effort must continue, particularly inside the refugee camps, and transport should be provided to repatriate the very weakest by road. Furthermore, the safety of refugees and humanitarian aid personnel working in the camps must be ensured.

Immediately upon our return, we passed on our recommendations to President Hänsch, who forwarded them forthwith to the Presidents of the Commission and the Council.

What has been done as a result of your recommendations?

Very little, I am sorry to say. Some efforts have indeed been made to establish humanitarian relay stations along return routes. European aid is also helping re-establish the country's water and electricity networks. Apart from massive humanitarian aid, no concrete decision has been

taken to send observers or set up an international tribunal. However, the proposals we made on the subject had been drawn up in agreement with the Rwandan authorities and do not involve excessive expenditure. The Council has not taken the necessary decisions to release funds to restore the country to normality. But we continue to bring pressure to bear ...

What is your feeling about the way in which humanitarian aid operations have been conducted?

Having witnessed for myself the terrible situation which humanitarian aid personnel are having to face, when we visited Goma and Gikongoro, I am anxious to express my deepest admiration. I can confirm that all efforts are being properly coordinated, which is not always the case. I was also impressed with the efficiency of French troops working under Operation Turquoise. However, although humanitarian relief is absolutely essential in such a human tragedy, it is nevertheless only one step along the path back to normality. And such normality depends upon political decisions. The European Union must step up its efforts to avert conflicts, and use all available political and diplomatic means to ensure that there will be no more «Rwandas». I am not particularly optimistic on this point at present, but hopefully I am wrong ...

After its two years of operation, what is your view about the work carried out by ECHO?

ECHO plays a leading role on the humanitarian scene. But nobody is aware of this! The Office should raise its profile in order to arouse genuine enthusiasm amongst the general public for the Union's humanitarian activities. ECHO should make it known that money alone is not enough to ensure the success of a humanitarian operation. Expertise and professionalism are prerequisites for success. This has nothing to do with an operation such as that led by the singer, Bob Geldof, who certainly aroused great public fervour, but whose 40 trucks full of food aid bound for Ethiopia never reached the people for whom they were intended. Due to poor logistical planning, they fell into the hands of guerrilla forces. Good intentions are no longer enough these days, and a solid mastery of the humanitarian task is needed. ECHO is proof of this.

Interview by Isabelle Brusselmans
for ECHOnews.

«Humanitarian day» in Berlin

IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE GERMAN PRESIDENCY

ECHO continued its tour of different European capitals: on November 17th 1994, the Office was the subject of a presentation in Berlin as part of the schedule of events linked with the German Presidency. A gala concert made possible by the participation of the European Youth Orchestra and the Berlin «Konzerthaus» highlighted the vitally important role played by the humanitarian aid of the European Union.

Dr. von Plöetz, Secretary of State representing Dr. Klaus Kinkel, the German Foreign Affairs Minister chose the following words: «It is not by coincidence that the Commission of the European Union is celebrating today's 'Humanitarian day' in Germany, here in Berlin. The German Government identifies itself with this cause. Humanitarian aid has not only become increasingly important over the past few years, but has also fundamen-

tally changed in character. In the past it was mainly a matter of helping the victims of natural disasters. Today, most interventions are aimed at providing relief to the victims of conflicts. The former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Somalia have presented almost insoluble problems. In all these cases, the EU has been at the forefront of the aid effort. The problems are also enormous in the republics of the former Soviet Union. So the European Union and the German government bilaterally have given special



NEW COMMISSIONER FOR HUMANITARIAN AID

Emma Bonino has been appointed Commissioner in charge of humanitarian aid and consumer policy. She will take up her post this coming January.

help to the Caucasus region. The 'Humanitarian day' aims to bring home to all European citizens that the contribution of every one of us is indispensable, be it as donor or as helper, in attempting to alleviate the suffering in the world. The aid given by countries or by the EU alone is not enough.

«In the years to come, the credibility of the European Union, as much in the eyes of its citizens as those of the rest of the world, will depend to a large extent on its capacity to respond efficiently to the major problems facing us towards the end of this century. The constant need for humanitarian interventions and the importance of protecting the victims of conflicts or natural disasters are among the most pressing of these issues.» These were the words spoken by Manuel Marin, Vice-President of the Commission, on this occasion.