



PRESS RELEASE –Date November 25, 2006

Drought forces Afghans to abandon villages says Oxfam
Aid to help bridge the food gap this winter

International aid agency Oxfam warns today that many villages in central Afghanistan have become populated entirely by women as drought forces men to migrate in search of work in order to survive. Now these women and their families are beginning to abandon their homes because there is no food left in the villages.

Oxfam has found that with almost a 50% fall in harvests of wheat and fodder this year, half of the population in one of the worst affected regions, Hazarajat will not have enough food this winter. This is the fifth consecutive year of drought and according to figures from the UN, some 2.5 million people, half of them children, face chronic food shortages this year.

“In this isolated rural area, husbands, fathers and sons have migrated as far as Iran and Pakistan in a desperate search for a means to support their family,” said Ms Grace Ommer, head of Oxfam in Afghanistan. “Local authorities are also beginning to report migration of entire families. Several consecutive drought seasons have left families with little no means to survive the coming winter.”

Hazarajat is one of the worst affected regions among the 17 provinces reeling under drought across the country. The succession of droughts since the late 1990s, combined with the impact of conflict and insecurity, mean that these people are literally on the brink of survival.

“With the next wheat harvest not due until September 2007, these drought-affected families are in an extremely precarious position,” said Ms Ommer. “Aid agencies must urgently focus on these people to prevent suffering and to stem the slow but sure migration of desperate people who can no longer maintain the traditional livelihoods that used to see them through the severe winters here.”

Oxfam is providing emergency assistance to almost 30,000 drought survivors in Daikundi in a bid to reach out to the most vulnerable sections and help them survive the coming winter. Farmers in the province say this drought is as severe as that of 2001-02 when the international community tripled its food aid in a single year to cover the need

Oxfam, with support from World Food Programme (WFP) and European Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), is working with the *shuras* (local people’s councils), to distribute free food to over 1600

families and provide minimal income through a cash-for-work programme to another 2400 families.

The priority for free food distribution is families with no male member of working age and families with no way of making a living. Cash-for-work activities that will rehabilitate village roads will be targeted the poorest, those with the largest families and people with less than three months of food supply left.

For Oxfam it is a race against time before the winter sets in over the next month and villages become inaccessible.

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