

## 2. AFGHANISTAN

Stalled peace process under threat



### KEY FACTS

Population: **38.9 million**

**18.4 million** people in need of humanitarian aid

**16.9 million** people facing crisis or worse levels of food insecurity (IPC 3+)

**3 million** people internally displaced due to conflict and violence

**1.2 million** IDPs due to natural disasters

**2.8 million** Afghan refugees

**6,000** civilian casualties in the first three quarters of 2020

**130th** (of 195 countries) for capability to prevent and mitigate epidemics

**50.8%** of women over 15 report they have ever experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner

**166th** (of 167 countries) for women's equality

**176th** (of 181 countries) for resilience to climate change

**4/5** score for severity of access constraints

**45%** of funding received for 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan

Above: Children playing at an IRC Safe Healing and Learning Space in Deh Surkh, Qala-e-Naw, Afghanistan.

### PROBABILITY

**10** HUMAN THREAT

**7** NATURAL THREAT

### IMPACT

**8** CONSTRAINTS ON COUNTRY RESPONSE

**9** EXISTING PRESSURES ON POPULATION

**Afghanistan has risen to second on Watchlist because of its high exposure to the triple threats of conflict, COVID-19 and climate change and uncertainty over the stalled peace process between the government and the Taliban.**

Even after four decades of crises, humanitarian needs in Afghanistan are growing rapidly amid COVID-19 and unrelenting violence, with the number of people in need for 2021 nearly doubling compared to early 2020. Needs could rise rapidly in 2021 if intra-Afghan peace talks fail to make progress, particularly amid uncertainty about the continued US military presence in the country. The global pandemic and climate-related disasters are exacerbating needs for Afghans, many of whom have lived through decades of conflict, chronic poverty, economic crises, and protracted displacement. Some armed groups oppose the peace talks and so the security situation in Afghanistan will remain volatile regardless of that process, with violence continuing to drive humanitarian needs and civilian casualties.

"The people of Afghanistan have little opportunity to build an income and improve their lives. When Afghans cannot provide for their family, we see the surge in violence against the most vulnerable family members. This forces many families, including children, to risk their lives in desperate attempts to leave Afghanistan and seek safer, better lives elsewhere. A peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict is the only sustainable solution to meeting chronic need in Afghanistan."

- Vicki Aken  
Country Director, IRC Afghanistan



## HUMANITARIAN RISKS IN 2021

- ▶ **Political uncertainty is likely to dominate 2021 and incentivize conflict between the Taliban and Afghan government forces.** The US-Taliban deal of early 2020 has been followed by stalled intra-Afghan talks, but the US has nonetheless signalled it intends to continue reducing troop numbers in Afghanistan. If progress in the talks remains elusive, both sides may try to improve their negotiating position with military gains on the ground - or the process could break down entirely. Fighting in late 2020 in Helmand province displaced 35,000 and could indicate a larger escalation in conflict that is likely to carry into 2021 ([OCHA](#)). If a deal is reached, 2021 could see reduced levels of violence, though the Islamic State and other non-state armed groups would continue to act as spoilers, so conflict would remain a persistent driver of needs.
- ▶ **Civilians and humanitarians are likely to continue bearing the brunt of the conflict. Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for civilians and aid workers.** While overall casualties fell in 2020 due to the reduction in violence around the US-Taliban deal, fatalities from incidents recorded by [ACLED](#) as “violence against civilians” have increased relative to 2019 and 2018. October 2020 saw higher civilian fatalities than the same month in any of the previous three years. Meanwhile, 278,000 people were displaced in the first 10 months of 2020 ([OCHA](#)). Conflict dynamics also threaten the humanitarian response. Attacks forced 38 health facilities to close in 2020 despite the pandemic ([WHO](#)). Meanwhile, access constraints by key parties to the conflict drastically increased in the months after the COVID-19 outbreak compared to the same period a year earlier ([OCHA](#)).
- ▶ **COVID-19 has pushed Afghans at home and abroad into poverty, making food insecurity likely to continue to grow in 2021.** Lockdowns in neighboring states contributed to growing returns; 573,000 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan by September – a 53% increase compared to the same period in 2019 ([OCHA](#)). Within Afghanistan, 59% of households saw their income reduced due to the pandemic ([OCHA](#)) and an additional 6 million people could face poverty ([WFP](#)). 3 million more people could become food insecure due to the pandemic ([WFP](#)) with 42% of the country expected to face crisis or worse levels of food insecurity in 2021, making it the fifth-highest food insecurity crisis in terms of proportion of the population affected ([OCHA](#)).
- ▶ **Women are disproportionately affected by crises.** The country ranks as the second worst country for women ([WPS Index](#)). Women and children have made up nearly [45%](#) of civilian casualties in the first nine months of this year. A new [IRC/UN Women survey](#) in Afghanistan finds women are also disproportionately affected by COVID-19, particularly due to cultural barriers to health services and work in the formal sector; 48% of women in the formal sector are working fewer hours and 63% of women in the informal sector have lost their jobs since the beginning of the pandemic. IRC staff report concerning increases in child labor, violence against women and children and early marriage. COVID-19's wider crises and the exclusion of women from meaningful participation in the peace process threatens to roll back critical and fragile gains made in gender equality.
- ▶ **Climate impacts are exacerbating needs and displacements.** Afghanistan is prone to natural disasters, and the likelihood of extreme weather events is rising due to climate change. Afghanistan is ranked in the ten countries globally most vulnerable to climate change ([ND-GAIN](#)). An estimated 1.1 million people remain displaced due to natural disasters ([IDMC](#)) and around half of the districts in Afghanistan experienced a natural disaster in 2020, affecting over 110,000 people ([OCHA](#)).

### THE IRC IN AFGHANISTAN

The IRC has been working in Afghanistan for over three decades (since 1988) providing aid to the most vulnerable. We work with thousands of villages across nine provinces, reaching over one million people each year with education, protection, water and sanitation, emergency response, and economic recovery programs. The IRC is responding to COVID-19 and other health needs by supporting over 100 health facilities, installing hand-washing stations at communal gathering points and providing information and training sessions about COVID-19. Having expanded our protection and women's protection and empowerment activities in recent years, the IRC is now a leading actor in the protection field in Afghanistan. Learn more about the [IRC's Afghanistan response](#).

