

## **Made worse by tree loss, flooding forces migration in Afghanistan**

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FAIZABAD, Afghanistan (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - In a small village in northern Afghanistan, nestled in barren mountains and cut off from main roads, Arsam points to what is left of his house: the few crumbling mud walls that managed to withstand flash floods around March last year.

The 70-year-old farmer, who only goes by one name, said that in the last two years, about 40 households in the narrow valley in eastern Shar-e-Buzurg have been destroyed by flooding.

Some of the families have moved to higher terrain, Arsam explained, while others have left the village, moving to bigger cities or seeking work in neighbouring Iran.

"When I was younger, Shar-e-Buzurg was covered with trees, it was a whole jungle," he said of his district in Badakhshan province, motioning towards the hills behind his house.

"Floods were less common back then, as the trees absorbed large parts of the spring's snowmelt," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Large-scale deforestation driven mainly by four decades of war has contributed to widespread flooding throughout Afghanistan, prompting many in rural areas to move to the capital Kabul or leave the country.

Trees have long been casualties of extreme poverty and war in Afghanistan, with many people in remote areas having little choice but to cut down forests to build houses, fuel stoves and keep warm in winter, climate experts say.

The grave consequences of the country's tree loss have led to calls for reforestation, but the task will not be easy, said Jalaludin Naseri, director of natural heritage protection at Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA).

"We're trying, but it will take a long time," he said in emailed comments.

"We are planning to restore the forests to their original state, but this needs time, budget and peace. During years of war, many depend on forests and natural resources."

### **DROUGHTS AND FLOODS**

Once covered in lush forest, Afghanistan has lost the majority of its trees, which now occupy only 1.5% of the country's land mass, according to Rajendra Aryal, country representative for the U.N.'s food agency (FAO).

"Nearly 70% of the original forest cover has been lost since the 1950s," explained Aryal, noting that the most recent count was in 2010. More trees have been cut down since then, he said, but no reliable up-to-date estimate is available.

Climate change has exacerbated the situation.

“Frequent droughts result in accelerated land degradation, desertification and displacement,” Aryal said, adding that more than half of the country’s area is vulnerable to desertification.

Environmentalists say forests prevent soil erosion and act as a buffer against flooding, while barren land is less able to hold the water from heavy rains and snowmelt, resulting in flash floods.

According to figures from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly 1.2 million people in Afghanistan have been forced from their homes by natural disasters such as floods and droughts since 2012.

In Badakhshan, the country’s northernmost province, they make up 40% of the total number of internally displaced people in the province, explained IOM displacement expert Michael Speir.

The rest have been displaced mainly by poverty and war, he said.

### **DRIVEN TO THE CITY**

Shakira Nuddin, 30, said her husband went to work in Iran several years ago after their main source of income - a few houses they were renting out in the village’s valley - was completely washed away.

Two years ago, while back in Afghanistan for a visit, he slipped and fell down a mountain, breaking his back. Unable to walk, he is largely confined to the house while Nuddin, a mother of four, now works as a farmer.

“Life in the village has become too complicated, especially with my husband’s disability,” she said.

“The floods took our houses and it’s difficult for me to find good work here. We’re hoping to move to the city.”

Faizabad, the small provincial capital the family plans to relocate to, is about a five-hour drive away - even longer by donkey followed by a bus ride, which is how the family would travel, passing over mountains and through empty riverbeds.

“Migration to cities happens inevitably. People seek safety, work, food,” said Naseri at the NEPA.

### **TREE-PLANTING PUSH**

Afghanistan’s challenging environmental conditions and ongoing insecurity have so far hampered large-scale reforestation efforts, said Naseri.

But recent years have seen several projects start up with the hopes of improving the country’s forest cover.

The NEPA last year inked a deal with the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs to have clerics address climate change during prayers, stressing the importance of picking up litter and planting trees.

Earlier this year, the government announced plans to plant 13 million saplings as part of a programme to rehabilitate groundwater supplies.

And during the coronavirus pandemic alone, the FAO has restored 1,035 hectares (2,560 acres) of degraded forest by planting pine and walnut trees, according to Aryal, the country representative.

“Areas under deforestation and forest degradation can be brought back through various development programmes,” he said.

In his village in Badakhshan, Arsam said he was lucky he wasn't home when the flash floods destroyed his house.

He would have liked to leave, as other families have done, but is too old now, he explained.

Instead, he will remain in the house that his neighbours helped to partly rebuild, adding a few flood walls further up the hill, constructed out of big rocks "hoping to keep the water at bay next year," he said.

His hope is that he will be able to see the start of a growing forest during his lifetime.

"When the war ends, this country can bring its forests back," Arsam said.

Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-environment-floods-trfn/made-worse-by-tree-loss-flooding-forces-migration-in-afghanistan-idUSKBN25Z1HQ>