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Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)  
South Asia Region, Regional Office for Asia-Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand

## DISASTER RESPONSE

### Disaster Response in Focus: Winter Emergency in Afghanistan

The 2011/2012 winter was the most severe Afghanistan has seen in 15 years, with subfreezing temperatures increasing needs and causing the deaths of children in Kabul's informal settlements—a situation that sparked an immediate and thorough distribution of winter supplies from international humanitarian organizations, including USAID/OFDA partners. As temperatures warm, the above-average snowfall that accumulated in Afghanistan's mountainous northern and eastern regions poses new challenges, as melting snow renders communities vulnerable to avalanches and floods. A key component of USAID/OFDA's preparedness and response strategy in Afghanistan is pre-positioning emergency relief supplies in numerous locations—an arrangement that has readied USAID/OFDA partners to respond rapidly and effectively to the winter emergency and subsequent flooding.

#### **Melting Mountainsides: Response to Afghan Avalanches**

Avalanches struck villages in Afghanistan's Badakhshan, Nuristan, and Parwan provinces during March, resulting in approximately 60 deaths and affecting hundreds of people. In each case, USAID/OFDA implementing partners were on the scene, facing harsh weather and nearly impassible transportation routes to provide emergency relief supplies, conduct rapid needs assessments, and aid the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) in coordinating response efforts. With support from USAID/OFDA, partners including IOM and Focus Humanitarian Assistance (FOCUS),



*A flood-affected family in Afghanistan's Helmand Province receives USAID/OFDA-funded shelter materials and other relief supplies (Courtesy of the International Organization for Migration [IOM]).*

an affiliate of the Aga Khan Foundation, assisted search-and-rescue operations and distributed emergency relief supplies, including shelter materials, blankets, hygiene kits, and warm clothing and shoes. In total, thousands of people affected by avalanches and other winter hardships received USAID/OFDA-funded supplies during the winter season.

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## DISASTER PREPAREDNESS



*USAID/OFDA staff view a newly retrofitted school building in Lamjung District of central Nepal. With USAID/OFDA support, NSET projects also teach school children proper actions to take to remain safe during an earthquake (Courtesy of NSET).*

After assuming his new role as the acting USAID/OFDA disaster response and mitigation division chief for USAID/OFDA activities in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East, James Fleming was eager to see projects in his regions in action. To that end, he traveled to Asia in March on a trip that included visits to USAID/OFDA-funded earthquake preparedness projects in Nepal implemented by the Kathmandu-based National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET). The trip took him to the municipality of Vyas, where the community has independently decided to adopt building codes and, with the support of NSET and the local masons association, built 300 buildings according to code between June 2011 and March 2012. In addition, Fleming and USAID/OFDA colleagues visited the school pictured here, one of many that has become safer after USAID/OFDA-trained masons added retrofitting to key structural elements that could otherwise become unstable or collapse during an earthquake.

## Winter Emergency in Afghanistan (Continued from page 1)

### Following Forecasts: USAID/OFDA Flood Preparedness



With support from USAID/OFDA, a Badakhshan village built this channel to direct floods away from homes and into irrigation canals (Courtesy of FOCUS).

Localized floods are common during Afghanistan's spring; however, above-average snowfall increased flood risk as temperatures rise. In April, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that up to 50,000 households could require international assistance due to localized flooding through May.

To address that risk, USAID/OFDA is in regular communication with partner OCHA as it develops a countrywide flood contingency plan and as its

Humanitarian Regional Teams updated existing contingency plans down to the district level. The plans better prepare the international humanitarian community to predict and plan for flood responses.

Humanitarian agencies predict that flooding is more likely to impact livelihoods and food security than to cause extensive casualties. To address possible impacts on livelihoods, USAID/OFDA partner Information Management and Mine Action Programs (iMMAP) is participating in U.N. efforts to validate information on flood-prone areas and map gaps in potential humanitarian responses in agricultural regions. In April, iMMAP and the U.N. Food Security and Agriculture Cluster led two regional workshops with food security experts from relief agencies and the GIRoA.

USAID/OFDA also has been in dialogue with the GIRoA and development colleagues at USAID/Afghanistan about the status of key dams, learning that several are under capacity and of potential use for flood control. In April, USAID/OFDA partner the International Rescue Committee completed emergency erosion repairs on the Surkhob dam in Logar Province to buttress it against any immediate flood threat.

As expected, seasonal floods have begun in some communities, with 18 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces having experienced localized flooding since mid-April. Due in part to preparedness measures taken by the GIRoA, relief agencies, and USAID/OFDA, all flood-related emergency humanitarian needs have been or are being addressed. Floods have destroyed homes and displaced individuals but have not caused mass fatalities to date. In conjunction with local authorities, USAID/OFDA partners, including IOM and Save the Children, have come to the aid of affected populations with distributions of emergency shelter kits and other urgently needed items drawn from pre-positioned stocks. Localized flooding may continue through May; however, the risk of major flooding in southern areas of the country has passed. USAID continues to respond to flood needs and stands ready to expand efforts should the need arise.

## DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

### In Bangladesh "We, too, Can" Prepare for Disaster

Many remote communities along the Bay of Bengal are vulnerable to regular cyclones, tidal surges, and floods—the impacts of which are increasingly exacerbated by climate change. Yet, rather than despairing, these communities have resolved to survive in the face of adversity. Seizing this spirit of hope, in March, USAID/OFDA, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and Caritas Bangladesh launched *Amrao Pari*, Bengali for "We, too, can," a coastal community resilience project targeting 50,000 people across 19 villages in Khulna and Barisal divisions of western and southern Bangladesh.

Facing the Bay of Bengal, Barisal and Khulna are home to communities living precariously behind earthen embankments, which need constant care to provide adequate protection for homes and livelihoods. No strangers to disaster, several of these

communities suffered losses when Cyclone Aila struck in 2009. Although villages are now rebounding, long stretches of the embankments remain unrepaired, leaving the people who rely on them highly vulnerable.

To reduce such risks, the *Amrao Pari* project will train communities to form village help teams tasked with first response in case of a disaster, as well as infrastructure management committees responsible for identifying and shoring up key communal infrastructure in need of repair.

In March, a USAID/OFDA regional advisor (RA) for South Asia visited several villages that will benefit from the *Amrao Pari* project. The RA, with staff from CRS and Caritas, met with village representatives and attended community meetings to identify and prioritize key village infrastructure for strengthening to increase its ability to withstand hydrometeorological disasters. Attendees also discussed ways to coordinate project activities with local authorities to ensure sustainability.

Disasters and the frontline effects of climate change characterize life along the Bay of Bengal. Yet, while vulnerable, the communities that live along the coast are also determined. *Amrao Pari's* goal is to shape that determination into a culture of preparedness.



Community members in Kalapara subdistrict of Barisal Division review village infrastructure priorities (Rob Friedman, USAID).

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