

Health of a Nation

The neglected Afghan health care system is rebuilt from the ground up.

Charikar, Afghanistan

Women wearing blue burkas crowd the health education room at the new clinic, their children staying close and respectful as they wait for the nurse to begin the lesson. The kids may sense that the vaccine injections will follow.

Nafasgul, 32, (who uses only one name) walked the two miles from her home with her son Firdaus, 2. He has a stomach ache, nausea, and diarrhea and he can't sleep—typical symptoms of the worms or intestinal diseases that affect millions in Asia.

"During the Taliban time, we couldn't even leave the house to do minor things for ourselves. Now we leave the house to do our things, to take the children to a doctor, to go to the market, to visit relatives, or take the kids to a park in the evenings and simply walk around," she said through an interpreter.

"Before, I could not even take my child to a doctor."

The clinic is the first of 226 being built by USAID, one of several national and international aid groups renovating and building clinics and hospitals, training Afghan nurses and doctors, and providing clean, potable

water systems. Aid groups also work with the Ministry of Health to train senior staff and district health officers.

"Now the donors give money directly to NGOs such as MSH [Management Sciences for Health] and CHF [another NGO], which operate primary health care," said Peter Saleh, a Farsi-speaking U.S. health care advisor to the Afghan government. "The goal is to prepare the Ministry of Health to take over delivery of health care."

Afghanistan is healthier today than it was when the Taliban barred women nurses and doctors, prevented women from leaving their homes to seek medical treatment for themselves or their children, and turned back the calendar on medical services 100 years.

Some vital statistics: life expectancy is 46; the population is growing at close to five percent a year; the birth rate is one of the highest in the world at seven to 10 per woman; 165 of every 1,000 children die in their first year and two of every 100 women die in childbirth. U.S. aid programs have rehabilitated 72 health clinics, birth centers, and hospitals; provided funding to UNICEF to treat 700,000 cases of malaria; vaccinated 4.26 million children against measles and polio, likely preventing some 20,000 deaths; and provided basic health services to more than 2 million people in 21 provinces. The U.S. civilian and military aid programs also are upgrading the Rabia Balkhi and Malalai hospitals for women in Kabul, while U.S.



A male doctor is now allowed to treat a child held by its mother since there are no longer any Taliban

limits on women leaving the home and having any contact with men outside their family.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams

US reconstruction aid is being delivered through a new concept created for the Afghan crisis: the Provincial Reconstruction Team. PRTs operate from fortified bases. From there soldiers and civilians can deliver aid in relative safety.

Some 19 PRTs have been set up. Britain, New Zealand, Netherlands, and Germany run six; U.S. forces run the rest. Protected by 80 to 90 troops, PRTs work closely with village leaders on projects like schools, clinics, and water systems.

Many NGOs pride themselves on being neutral in conflicts, serving humanitarian goals without taking sides. However the armed attacks on aid workers in Afghanistan by Taliban, Al Qaeda and other forces—who oppose all Western-supported projects—has made it essential that USAID and many other aid groups work closely with military units. It's an important innovation that has delivered a lot of aid over the past year.

U.S. Military Doctors Treat 800 Patients in a Day



Ben Barber/USAID

On an early August morning, a military medical team set out from a fortified PRT compound, rolled through Ghazni, the main city between Kandahar and Kabul, to a lush valley packed with orchards, fields and small villages.

At the village of Tormay, Dr. Steve Jones, 51, a U.S. National Guard colonel from Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, and the leader of the medical team, found an unused girls' high school—the fall classes had not yet begun—with two entrances so that women and men could be treated separately.



Ben Barber/USAID

Dr. Jones asked the janitor to get the town elders, four white-bearded men, who agreed to let the team use the school to treat people

and their farm animals. "You came to help," said one elder. "Our duty is to get the people to come here."



“During the Taliban time, we couldn’t even leave the house... to take the children to a doctor,” Nafasgul, 32, said as she waited with her children at a new clinic.

Results

- Clinics, birth centers, and hospitals have been rehabilitated across Afghanistan.
- Funded via UNICEF treatment of 700,000 cases of malaria.
- Vaccinated 4.26 million children against measles polio, preventing some 20,000 deaths.
- Surveyed health facilities and services throughout country, helping Ministry of Health expand basic services for 16.5 million women and children
- and rebuild 550 rural health centers.
- Upgrading the technical skills of the Ministry of Health. Currently, most health care is still managed by NGOs.
- Providing basic health services to more than 2 million people in 21 provinces; 90% are women and children.
- CARE, with funding from US and others, supplies ¼ of Kabul’s water. Rehabilitating water systems in Kandahar and Kunduz.

army doctors are treating thousands all over Afghanistan.

The lack of clean water for drinking and washing causes chronic stomach illnesses, draining the health and energy of many people. Aid groups have sponsored the use of chlorine to purify water. The U.S. also works with CARE to supply 600,000 people in Kabul clean drinking water and to dig wells throughout the country. Foreign aid also hires teams to clean out drainage ditches so that waste water flows away from populated areas.



Ben Barber/USAID

They sent out men on motorcycle and on foot to alert the nearby villages and soon a stream of men, women and children were walking across the fields and down the paths to the

makeshift clinic. Some brought cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, dogs and poultry to be treated with deworming medicine and vaccines by the army veterinarians who set up outside the school.



Ben Barber/USAID

At the school, female nurses and a physician’s assistant treated a steady stream of women and children for body aches, stomach pains, indigestion, eye infections, joint pains, low iron and the like. Male doctors from the U.S. and Afghan National

Army treated men in a separate room for similar complaints. Each doctor had a translator. Patients left the impromptu clinic with bottles of amoxicillin, acetaminophen and other medicines. Some 800 patients were treated by the end of the day.



Ben Barber/USAID

The veterinarians treated 2,000 animals at the village. Here a vet uses a syringe to measure medicine into a chicken’s beak. The vets also treated cows,

goats, sheep, donkeys and dogs, giving de-worming medicine and vaccinations.

March '03

Draft constitution completed
 US provides \$50 million for private sector support
 First Afghan women’s radio station launched

World Bank announces \$108 million interest-free loan

USAID announces \$60 million basic education program

ICRC worker killed in Kandahar

Customs collection begins

USAID prints 8.7 million textbooks

April '03

UN demobilization program begins

Refurbished Rabia Balkhi Women’s hospital reopens in Kabul

First computer networking class graduates from Kabul University