

'I worry my daughters will never know peace': women flee the Taliban – again

Families fearful of what will happen to girls and young women as the Islamist militants gain ground are joining the tens of thousands of displaced Afghans



Mothers and children who fled fighting between the Taliban and Afghan army in the northern provinces find refuge in a Kabul park. Photograph: Rahmat Gul/AP

It was an exceptionally hot summer morning, on 13 July, when people in Malistan district, in the southern Afghan province of Ghazni, woke up to find that the conflict that had swirled around them for weeks had reached their small town and Taliban fighters were closing in.

By noon that day, 22-year-old Fatima, seven months pregnant, was seeking shelter from bullets raining down on her home in the village of Qol-e Adam, which was caught in the vicious crossfire between Taliban militants and government forces.

Surviving the battle was not the only thing on her mind – her family were terrified that if the Taliban gained control of their village, they would take Fatima as they had taken other young women in parts of the country falling under their control.

"We had had heard of cases where the Taliban would kill young men and sexually abuse girls and young women of the family," she says.

The fears of Fatima and her family were justified.

"When [the Taliban] finally came to our village, they wanted to take a young girl with them, but she jumped from the roof of her house and ended her life."

She says the Taliban fighters would also come into homes and demand that the women cook them food and wash their clothes.

Three days after the Taliban took over Malistan, Fatima escaped.

"I walked with my family for one day and night in the mountains to reach Ghazni city. From there we paid a driver three times the [normal] cost to bring us to Kabul," she says.

Fatima says that all the people from her village, about 50 to 60 families, fled except for the older people, who stayed in the hope of protecting their properties.

Reports of Taliban advances into villages and towns across Afghanistan have spread fear among women across the country. Wave after wave of displaced families are seeking sanctuary in cities such as Kabul and Herat.

Many have nowhere to go when they arrive. Fatima and her family have joined tens of thousands of displaced Afghans sleeping in parks and other public spaces in Kabul, with the numbers of new arrivals growing every day.

The *Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)* recently estimated that nearly a million Afghans have been displaced in the past few months. The *Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations* estimates that nearly 70% of the displaced are women and children.

Families wait for aid at shelters in Kandahar as the Taliban sweep across Afghanistan. Many villages have almost emptied as people flee. Photograph: M Sadiq/EPA



Shukria Ghafoori, from Kandahar, ended up in Herat, like Fatima, after fleeing Taliban forces. In Kandahar, she was the breadwinner for her family since her husband was diagnosed with severe asthma.

"We didn't have a lot but at least we had a roof over our heads. But now my entire life is packed in these few bags of clothes."

Ghafoori single-handedly brought her ill husband and their two daughters to safety in Herat when the conflict reached their doors. Now, with Taliban forces surrounding the city, Ghafoori may be displaced again.

"For the last three weeks, we have been living in the house of a resident of Herat. But sooner or later, they will throw us out because the situation here is also critical. Then we will sleep in a mosque," she says.

Since the beginning of May, foreign troops' abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan has allowed the Taliban to intensify their military offensive and the Islamist militants have since gained control of more than 200 districts.

The *Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations* confirmed that reports had been received of the Taliban killing civilian men and forcing women and girls into marriage. Neither the ministry nor the *AIHRC* have been able to verify or investigate these cases.



Men with Taliban flags cross the Pakistan-Afghanistan border at Chaman, Balochistan. Many believe the Taliban are more brutal now than in the 1990s. Photograph: Reuters

However, 38-year-old Zia Gul from Bamiyan does not need a government agency to tell her that the Taliban are using women as "weapons of war". She is old enough to remember what happened when they attacked her province in the 1990s.

"Even then when they attacked Bamiyan, they had raped women. This fear has always been in our minds. That's why we ran away, to prevent this from happening again," she says.

Zia Gul and six other women from Bamiyan escaped to the capital in the middle of the night. Many families in their villages are sending just the women and girls away to safer areas, they say.

Many believe that the Taliban have become more violent and brutal than in the 1990s.

"Much of the recent wave of displacement across Afghanistan has been caused by the fear the Taliban have created about how they will treat the survivors," says Ali Amiri, an Afghan sociologist and university professor.

"They were an unknown group with extremist ideologies in the 1990s, and the violence was much subtler then" - Prof Ali Amiri, Afghan sociologist

"This fear and related displacement did not exist in the 1990s. Because the extent of the Taliban's violence is something we did not witness back then, they were seen as an unknown group with extremist ideologies, and the violence was much subtler then. Now we know who they are and their position on education, working women, human rights, and religious and ethnic matters in Afghanistan is completely clear. That adds to the overall fear," he says.

People displaced by conflict in Ghor province wait for government aid at a shelter in Qaderabad village in neighbouring Herat province. Photograph: Jalil Rezayee/EPA

While many of those displaced end up in camps or are living in mosques in the city, some of the girls have found refuge in the homes of strangers. Among those sheltering people fleeing the violence is 60-year-old Rahima, who has taken many young girls and women into her house in west Kabul.



"It's been two weeks that my house is packed full of guests. I have personally experienced displacement so I know what it is like to seek a safe place," she says.

Rahima, who has seven girls of her own, is horrified at the changing situation in Afghanistan.

"I worry about the fate of my own daughters. I haven't experienced peace in my lifetime — and now I worry my daughters will never know peace," she says.

For women such as Fatima and Ghafoori, the exhaustion of living away from homes and families is visible on their faces.

"I'm tired of war, running away, and not ever feeling safe," says Ghafoori. "How long must we keep running?"

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Q&A

What is the Women report Afghanistan series?

As provinces and cities fall under Taliban control across Afghanistan, women's voices are already being silenced. For this special series, the Guardian's Rights and freedom project has partnered with Rukhshana Media, a collective of

female journalists across Afghanistan, to bring their stories of how the escalating crisis is affecting the lives of women and girls to a global audience.

Afghan journalists, especially women, face a dire situation. Dozens have been injured and killed. As the Taliban have advanced, many have lost their jobs or been forced into hiding. Female journalists face a double peril: attacked for their work and persecuted for their gender.

All of the reporting in this series will be carried out by Afghan women, with support from the editors on the Rights and freedom project.

These are the stories that Afghan women want to tell about what is happening to their country at this critical moment.

