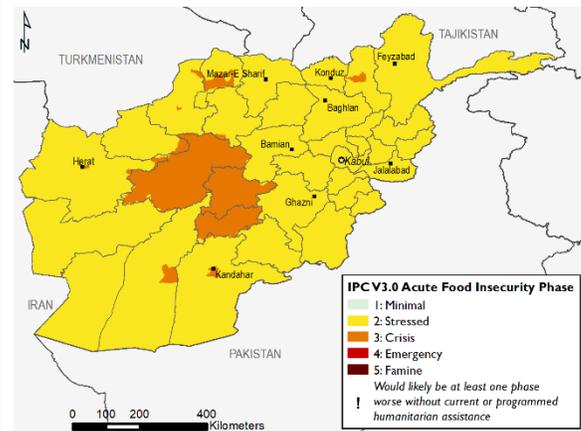*Winter wheat cultivation has mostly concluded despite drier start of the wet season*
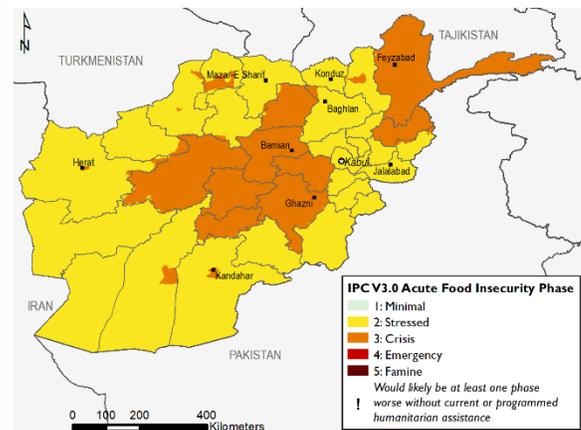
KEY MESSAGES

- The start of the 2020/21 wet season in October and early November 2020 was drier than typical, which delayed winter wheat cultivation in some provinces. However, heavy precipitation in mid-November generally eliminated cumulative precipitation deficits and facilitated completion of cultivation in most provinces. As of mid-December, cumulative precipitation remains average across most of the country, though deficits have re-emerged in some northern and northeastern areas.

- In November 2020, the Afghanistan government began implementation of a COVID-19 assistance program. The program will provide one-month rations (in-kind or cash) and hygiene products to 90 percent of households in Afghanistan in a first distribution, with a second distribution of in-kind or cash to follow in many urban areas. This is expected to improve food assistance outcomes to Stressed! (IPC Phase 2!) for many households who would be facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes in the absence of assistance. However, given significant uncertainty around implementation—including likely timing of distributions within a 15-month project timeline—food security outcomes during the projection period are analyzed in the absence of this assistance. Even so, given the likely staggered reach of villages within provinces, the assistance would be unlikely to change area-level classifications for the majority of a mapping period.

- In rural areas, households are now relying on their winter food stocks. In most areas, Stressed (IPC Phase 2) outcomes are widespread and are expected to persist throughout the projection period. However, in some areas that harvested lower amounts and in areas worst affected by conflict, Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes are likely during the lean season. Throughout the country, an increasing number of poor households—particularly those with below-average stocks or who are adversely affected by lower remittances—are expected to deteriorate to Crisis (IPC Phase 3) as the lean season progresses and stocks are exhausted.

- In urban areas, lower availability of income-earning opportunities during winter, below average remittances, and above-average food prices are likely to restrict access to food and income for many poor households, with Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes expected throughout the projection period in the absence of assistance. Households receiving humanitarian assistance are likely to improve to Stressed! (IPC Phase 2!) outcomes until they exhaust the assistance.

Projected food security outcomes, December 2020 – January 2021

Source: *FEWS NET*

Projected food security outcomes, February – May 2021

Source: *FEWS NET*

FEWS NET classification is IPC-compatible. IPC-compatible analysis follows key IPC protocols but does not necessarily reflect the consensus of national food security partners.
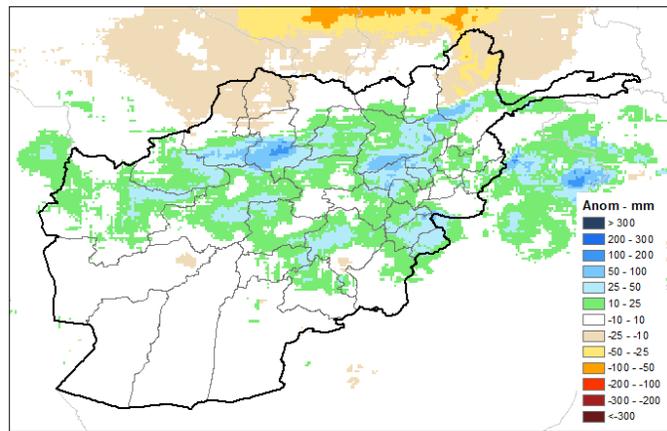
CURRENT SITUATION

According to the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) of Afghanistan, rice production in 2020 totaled approximately 440,000 MT. This production was 15 percent more than last year. The primary reason for the increase in production was an increase in area planted (to 148,000 ha), supported by sufficient availability of water for irrigation during rice growing stages. In terms of area planted and production, the top five provinces were Kunduz, Takhar, Baghlan, Nangarhar, and Hirat.

The start of the 2020/21 wet season in October and early November was drier than typical across most of Afghanistan, largely due to persistent La Niña conditions which are associated with lower precipitation for Central Asia. This delayed winter wheat cultivation—which typically starts in October—in some provinces. However, in mid-November, heavy and widespread precipitation fell across Afghanistan (as rainfall in lower elevations and snowfall in middle and high elevations). This and subsequent precipitation helped farmers to cultivate their winter wheat crops. Overall, despite delayed cultivation in some areas due to the late start of the wet season and, later, due to cold weather, most provinces have completed their winter wheat cultivation as of December. However, in some southern provinces (e.g., Zabul and Kandahar), farmers could not complete their winter wheat cultivation due to less precipitation. Overall, cumulative precipitation remains average across most of Afghanistan as of mid-December, though deficits have re-emerged in some northern and northeastern areas (Figure 1).
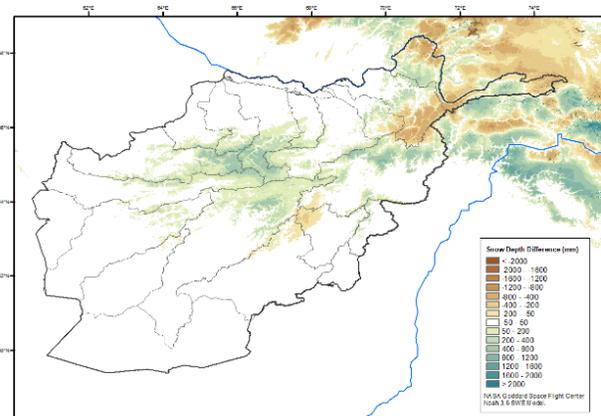
According to UNOCHA, around 332,255 individuals were forced to flee their homes due to conflict from January through early December 2020. This is 28 percent fewer people than during the same time period of 2019, when 460,603 individuals were displaced due to conflict. This is the result of a pattern of reduced conflict in 2020 relative to previous years (though levels of conflict are still high overall) according to data from ACLED. Among those displaced due to conflict in 2020, only 177,954 (53 percent) were assisted with food security and agriculture packages. Overall, the majority of displacements thus far in 2020 have occurred in the northeastern, northern, and eastern regions. It should be noted that patterns of conflict and displacement remain volatile. In August and September 2020, monthly displacement figures were around 63,000 and 68,000 people, respectively; in only five months since the beginning of 2017 were equal or higher totals recorded. In November and early December, most conflict-induced displacement occurred in Takhar, Nangarhar, and Badakhshan provinces.

Figure 1. Seasonal precipitation accumulation anomaly, October 1 to December 20, compared with the 1981-2010 average
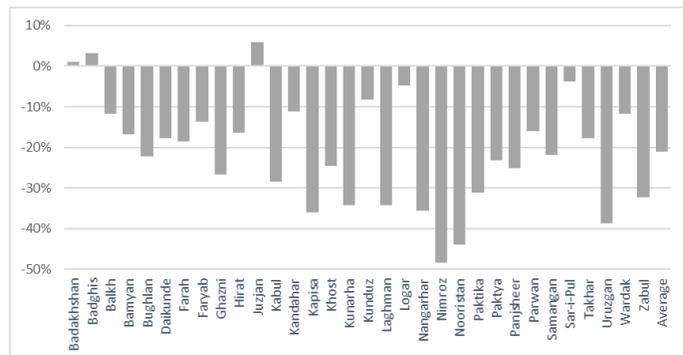

Source: CHIRPS version 2.0 prelim

Source: *USGS/FEWS NET*

Figure 2. Snow depth difference anomaly, December 22, 2020, compared with the 2002-2016 average

Source: USGS/FEWS NET

Figure 3. Purchasing power for laborers, defined by the ratio of casual labor wages (1 day) against the cost of wheat flour (1 kg), November 2020 compared with the three-year average

Source: *FEWS NET, based on MAIL data*

The number of new COVID-19 cases reported daily has generally been increasing again since October 2020, though with stability at relatively higher levels during the month of December to date. According to the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), a total 50,655 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 2,126 associated deaths have been reported in Afghanistan as of December 21, 2020. However, due to limited testing, these figures are expected to underestimate the true scale of the outbreak. Though the number of reported new daily cases remains significantly lower than during the peak of the recorded outbreak from mid-May to mid-June of 2020, the number of daily reported deaths is only somewhat lower on average.

Figure 4. Purchasing power for pastoralists, defined by the ratio of price of a sheep against the cost of wheat flour (1 kg), November 2020 compared with the three-year average

Source: *FEWS NET, based on MAIL data*

According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL), wheat flour prices at the national level have been generally stable from July to November 2020, at 34-35 AFN/kg on average. However, prices in November 2020 were 10 percent higher than the same time last year and 24 percent above the three-year average. Meanwhile, casual labor wages have decreased by around 4 percent from July to November 2020 at the national level, in line with seasonal trends. However, wages were generally stable (decreased by 1 percent) between October and November 2020, at levels similar to the same time last year (3 percent below) and average levels (1 percent below). However, because of the high wheat flour prices, the purchasing power of casual labors in November was 12 percent lower than last year and 21 percent below average at the national level, and below average in nearly all provinces (Figure 3). Livestock prices were also stable (increased 3 percent) between October and November 2020, with November prices 18 percent higher than last year and 30 percent above average. Livestock prices are generally compensating for high wheat flour prices, with purchasing power of pastoralists seven percent above last year and four percent above average at the national level, though significant variation exists across provinces (Figure 4).
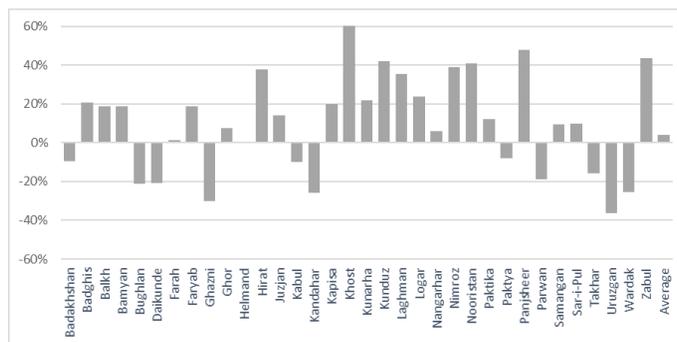
According to the Cross-Border Return and Reintegration (CBRR) data of the IOM, 838,192 undocumented Afghan migrants have returned from Iran and Pakistan from January 1 to December 19, 2020, which is overall 30 percent above the five-year average for this period. Of these, only 10 percent received humanitarian assistance upon arrival in Afghanistan. Of all the returnees, the vast majority (more than 99 percent) returned from Iran. From September to November 2020, more migrant workers returned to Afghanistan than during the same three-month period of any previous year since 2012. This may be associated with the spike in COVID-19 cases in Iran from early September to late November. As a result, the number of undocumented Afghan migrants in Iran is expected to be below average, with remittances from Iran to Afghanistan likely also below average. Meanwhile, 2,008 Afghan refugees/documented returnees returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan (1,055), Iran (865), and other countries (88) in 2020 according to UNHCR. This total is 61 percent lower than the during the same period of 2019.

Based on OPD Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) data, in the last eight months (April 2020 to November 2020) 180,124 children under five with severe acute malnutrition were admitted into the OPD SAM program, around similar level with the same period of last year. Overall, admissions in the OPD SAM program have slightly decreased in 2020 relative to 2019.

In November, the government of Afghanistan began implementation of the Dastarkhan-e-Milli COVID-19 relief program which aims to support 90 percent of households throughout Afghanistan in both rural and urban areas. According to government sources, food packages were distributed to 34,087 households around 83 districts in Afghanistan from November 8 to December 24, 2020. Under this program, targeted households will receive one-month rations (in-kind or cash) and hygiene products in a first distribution, with a second distribution of in-kind or cash to follow in many urban areas. All targeted households will receive either cash or food commodities and soap equivalent to 4,000 AFN. In-kind food rations will include wheat flour, cooking oil, rice, and beans.

Most households in rural areas now relying on food stocks and income from their average to above-average first and second season crop production. Pastoralists and agro-pastoralists are also consuming the food stocks they procured for winter after selling livestock. However, income from remittances is likely below average, affecting many poor households across Afghanistan. Overall, given this and given the impacts of protracted conflict on the labor market, many poor households likely do not have sufficient income to meet all essential non-food needs, with Stressed (IPC Phase 2) outcomes expected across most of the country. However, an increasing number of rural households are likely to be exhausting food stocks with the

progression of the lean season, particularly in areas that harvested less. At the area level, Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes are currently expected in some central highland areas that typically harvest lower amounts, including Ghor (where production was also significantly below average), Daykundi (where terms of trade also remain below average), and Uruzgan (which is being impacted by conflict-related access constraints).

In urban areas, income from casual labor opportunities and remittances from abroad are still expected to be below average. This is also a time of seasonally low availability of casual labor opportunities given cold weather. Meanwhile, most staple food prices remain significantly above average. As a result, many poor households are expected to be facing food consumption gaps in the absence of humanitarian assistance, with Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes likely at the area level.

UPDATED ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions used to develop FEWS NET's most likely scenario for the October 2020 to May 2021 Food Security Outlook report remain unchanged, except the following:

- The Afghanistan government with the financial support from the World Bank started its COVID-19 relief program, also called the Dastarkhan-e-Milli program, to target all households whose income is 2 USD a day or less. Under this relief program, almost 90 percent of all households in Afghanistan will be targeted with food or non-food assistance. The program will provide one-month rations (in kind or cash) and hygiene products to all targeted households in a first distribution, with a second distribution of in-kind or cash to follow in many urban areas. This is expected to improve food assistance outcomes to Stressed! (IPC Phase 2!) for many households who would be facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes in the absence of assistance. However, given significant uncertainty around implementation—including regarding the likely timing of distributions within a 15-month project timeline—food security outcomes during the projection period are analyzed in the absence of this assistance. Even so, given the likely staggered reach of villages within provinces, the assistance is unlikely to change area-level classifications for the majority of a mapping period.

PROJECTED OUTLOOK THROUGH MAY 2021

In rural areas, most households will likely continue to rely on their food stocks throughout the majority of the lean season. Given average to above-average production and favorable livestock body conditions and livestock prices in most areas, most rural households are expected to meet minimum food consumption needs throughout the projection period. However, given expectations for below-average income, many poor households will likely be unable to meet their essential non-food needs, with Stressed (IPC Phase 2) outcomes likely to persist throughout the projection period. In areas where production was below average or where production amounts are typically lower (such as in the highlands) and in areas severely affected by conflict, deterioration to Crisis (IPC Phase 3) is expected as the lean seasons progresses from February through May 2021. Of particular concern are Uruzgan (where conflict continues to cause access issues), Samangan and Ghor (where production was below average), and many central highland and other high elevation areas (e.g., Badakhshan and Nuristan) given typical harsh winters and lean seasons and lower availability of work opportunities.

In urban areas, poor households will likely continue to experience below-average purchasing power due to reduced income opportunities during the winter months, below-average remittances, and above-average food prices. Poor households who do not receive external assistance or who exhaust the assistance will likely face food consumption gaps and Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes throughout the projection period. Households receiving humanitarian assistance are likely to improve to Stressed! (IPC Phase 2!) outcomes until they exhaust the assistance.

ABOUT SCENARIO DEVELOPMENT
To project food security outcomes, FEWS NET develops a set of assumptions about likely events, their effects, and the probable responses of various actors. FEWS NET analyzes these assumptions in the context of current conditions and local livelihoods to arrive at a most likely scenario for the coming eight months. Learn more here.