

Too little, too slow: why more must be done to assist Pakistan's displaced millions

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After an arduous 18-hour journey from the northern Pakistani town of Mingora, Suleman Khan stands at the entrance to his family's tent at a camp in the district of Mardan. He had spent two weeks running from house to house, trying to escape heavy shelling in Mingora, the capital of Swat district and the scene of fierce clashes. He and his family eventually took advantage of a break in a military curfew and fled across the hills to relative safety.

Introduction

It is the world's biggest and fastest human displacement in over a decade.¹ The offensive launched by the Pakistan army against armed militants in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) at the end of April 2009 has resulted in a massive exodus requiring an enormous humanitarian response. Although exact numbers are difficult to verify, at least two million women, men, and children fled their homes in the districts of Swat, Dir and Buner, mostly during May. In late May, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) was registering 126,000 newly displaced people per day.²

This unprecedented internal flight comes after more than half a million people were displaced between August 2008 and March 2009 by clashes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).³ The total figure of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is likely to rise as military operations extend into other areas. Clashes in the tribal agency of South Waziristan in recent weeks have resulted in thousands of people fleeing to neighbouring districts such as Tank.

Hundreds of thousands have been trapped in embattled Swat and adjoining areas by clashes and curfews, suffering severe shortages of food, water, electricity, and medicines for weeks.⁴ Livelihoods have been severely damaged. Most IDP families rely on agriculture for their incomes and the conflict erupted just as the vital wheat harvest season was beginning.⁵ Civilian infrastructure has been severely damaged.

Addressing the relief and recovery needs of these IDPs is a massive challenge for the Pakistani government, the international community, and aid actors. Despite significant efforts by the Pakistani authorities and the humanitarian community, however, the response has been problematic. A lack of funding overall, and delays in disbursing funds to individual aid agencies, has undermined the relief response so far, contributing to gaps and delays in the adequate provision of assistance such as water and sanitation, shelter, and health care. Much more needs to be done, especially by the international community, to meet immediate needs and support a strong recovery that lays the foundations for sustainable peace and stability.

Recommendations

International community should:

- Respond more quickly and substantially with funds for the Pakistani government, the UN appeal, and aid agencies as appropriate to support timely and effective response, recovery and reconstruction activities. Faster disbursements of funds to implementing aid agencies are essential, including those working within the UN-led cluster system.
- Support democratic civilian political leadership to meet the needs of conflict-affected communities. Democratic, locally accountable civilian institutions should be strengthened appropriately to lead and deliver a robust relief, recovery and reconstruction strategy.
- Seize and maximise opportunities to build sustainable peace. Addressing the root causes of instability and conflict requires the recovery effort to spearhead wider social, economic and political development in restive regions. Such efforts should strengthen provincial and district governance, support civil society groups, and encourage effective civilian law enforcement.

The government of Pakistan should:

- Ensure that humanitarian assistance provided to IDPs is timely, appropriate, sufficient, and well targeted, through improved coordination and accountability
- Ensure safe unhindered humanitarian access to civilians in conflicted-affected areas and manage curfew restrictions in ways that allow stranded civilians to evacuate to safer areas.
- Develop a plan to monitor and assist IDPs and host communities as part of the overall response and recovery strategy, and incorporate such plans into contingency planning.
- Devise a robust long term strategy for recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction of conflict-affected areas, led by strengthened local civilian government actors with meaningful participation by affected communities and local civil society organisations.
- Ensure that right of freedom of movement, right of choice and guiding principles on internal displacement are respected and practised.
- Ensure that the distinct needs of vulnerable groups, including children and women, are respected and mainstreamed in relief, recovery and reconstruction plans in accordance with the UNSC resolution 1325.

An unprecedented crisis

This is the largest internal displacement in Pakistan's 62-year history and one of the largest and fastest seen by the humanitarian community in more than a decade.⁶ Most of those made homeless by the fighting in NWFP are relatively poor and fled with the few meagre possessions they could carry. Arriving in safer areas, displaced families have urgently needed food, clean water, sanitation facilities, appropriate shelter, and healthcare. At least half of those displaced are children, according to Unicef.

Women and girls face particular challenges, partly because of cultural practices relating to privacy, and restrictions on their public movement and contact with male non-relatives. In such situations, females are more vulnerable to threats such as trafficking, rising domestic violence in stressful circumstances, forced marriage (which is sometimes seen as a protective measure by desperate parents), as well as sexual abuse and exploitation. Such issues require careful, effective monitoring. Additionally, there are 69,300 displaced pregnant women, of whom 6,000 are due to deliver in June according to UN estimates, who need special health services.

IDPs movements have been fluid, with a small number trickling back to their homes to harvest their crops or check abandoned properties or livestock in areas deemed safe. Although the government has begun declaring certain areas safe to return and asked government employees to report to the duty, large scale sustainable returns are unlikely until displaced families are confident that the government is in full, reliable control of the area.

In general, humanitarian conditions remain challenging and precarious. Although general improvements in coordination and the provision of assistance have taken place as aid actors scaled up their operations, significant delays in reaching those in need and gaps in coverage persist and need to be addressed. Overstretched health services have been dealing with thousands of cases of acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea, scabies and other illnesses.⁷ These conditions may deteriorate as

temperatures continue to rise with the approaching summer and torrential monsoon rains due from the end of June.

IDPs in host communities: special efforts needed

Approximately 85 percent of the total displaced population have found refuge with host communities, including relatives, friends and strangers, or in temporary shelters such as schools. A small proportion is in rented accommodation. IDPs in host communities face some of the same problems as displaced people staying in camps, as well some different issues, which require special measures by humanitarian actors to address them.

Displaced families in host communities are less visible than camp residents and have attracted less attention and concerted assistance. Such IDPs are harder to identify and reach – especially those in rural areas. Many face difficulties in reaching registration and distribution centres for a variety of reasons, including a lack of relevant information, long distances to these centres, unaffordable transport costs, cultural practices restricting the movement of many women and so on.

The resources of host communities, often poor themselves, have quickly become overstretched especially after a year of soaring food prices across the country and damaging floods in NWFP and Punjab.⁸ Adequate sanitation and washing facilities are usually lacking, leading to poor hygiene conditions often in cramped living areas. Nonetheless, the generosity of hosting relatives and strangers shown towards the huge influx of displaced families, as well as donations from local individuals and organisations, have been crucial in preventing a humanitarian disaster.

There has been no official structured relief aid package specially designed for IDPs outside camps, although some humanitarian organisations (including Oxfam) have tried to assist these displaced families and their overstretched hosts.⁹ A plan to monitor and assist IDPs and host communities should be developed by the government as part of the overall response and recovery strategy, and should be incorporated into contingency planning by the authorities and aid agencies.

Camp conditions: families at risk

More than 20 official camps have been hosting fluctuating populations (usually 150,000-250,000) mainly in the districts of Swabi, Mardan, Charsadda and Peshwar. Humanitarian actors working in official camps have been providing water and sanitation, food, shelter, and health care – but have struggled to reach satisfactory standards.

Some forms of assistance have not been sufficiently appropriate. IDPs who have been given wheat as food assistance (e.g. as donated by the Punjab government) have found this problematic because it has to be ground into flour before it can be cooked and eaten. Some IDPs have reportedly had to sell the wheat at low prices to millers in order to buy flour to make bread.¹⁰ Providing appropriate shelter quickly has also been a challenge amid rising temperatures (reaching 40C in early June) leading many to suffer heat stroke and dehydration in the types of tents commonly provided.¹¹

A lack of clean water and adequate washing and sanitation facilities has contributed to hazardous hygiene conditions in several locations. Women are disadvantaged by the lack of privacy, having to share communal washing and toilet facilities. Provision of safe play areas and the resumption of education for school-going children remain serious challenges. Conditions in hundreds of unplanned camps scattered across the region are worse as official camp residents are easier to assist on a large scale.

Civilians in the conflict zone: clashes and curfews

An estimated 200,000-300,000 people have been trapped by fighting and curfews in the conflict-affected districts of NWFP. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and many more injured during the conflict according to IDP testimonies – but precise numbers and circumstances have been impossible to confirm, as media and humanitarian access has been severely limited. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has reported that civilians in the conflict zone have been suffering severe shortages of food, water and medicines.

Round-the-clock curfews imposed at times by the Pakistani military in the conflict zone, although imposed with security considerations in mind, have had a harmful effect on the ability of civilians to access essential goods and services, and made safe evacuations more difficult. The recent easing of such restrictions is welcome and future such security-related measures should anticipate negative impacts on civilians in accordance with the government's legal obligations. All combatants, furthermore, should respect civilian lives and property.

Additionally, the lack of electricity to power water pumps has compelled some people to resort to alternative sources of drinking water, triggering the rise of water-borne disease. The centre of the Swat capital, Mingora, was visibly in ruins when the Pakistani army took control at the end of May. Local education officials estimate that 60 percent of Swat's schools have been destroyed.¹²

The humanitarian response: struggling to cope

The provincial NWFP authorities have been actively leading the Pakistani government's response, backed by a federal coordinating body (the Special Support Group). NWFP authorities have provided limited aid directly (e.g. water, cooked food, electrification) and are supervising provincial coordination mechanisms. The Pakistani military has also provided some relief items mainly to urban residents in conflict-affected areas.

The federal government has promised a small one-off grant of 25,000 rupees (just over \$300) via bank accounts as well as food rations and other support for returning IDPs. It has prioritised poor IDP households who are eligible for income support from an expanded national scheme. It also publicised its National Response Plan on 21 May, advocating a cluster-based approach with an emphasis on early recovery. The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) has set up facilities to support and verify registration.

Although the government appears not to have anticipated that its offensives from late April would cause large scale displacement (despite the experience of 2008), the authorities have subsequently worked hard to deliver a strong humanitarian response. However, government capacity is overstretched at provincial level and insufficient at district level to deal with the huge exodus. It is therefore dependent on UN and other agencies to conduct assessments, provide assistance, and support coordination.

Coordination mechanisms have been functioning at federal and provincial level and are improving despite some problems with capacity and effective NGO participation. District level coordination was initially weak, with problems in information-sharing raising risks of gaps and duplication, but this has also been improving.

The UN, international aid agencies and Pakistani organisations have been supporting the government's response to the emergency by providing a range of items and services, including food and nutrition assistance, shelter, water, sanitation facilities, primary healthcare, education, restoration of livelihoods, as well as coordination

support. Oxfam is working with local partner organisations to provide relief to 360,000 women, men and children in urgent need of assistance, especially in the sector of water, sanitation, and hygiene.¹³

Although these efforts have provided much needed relief to thousands of families, gaps in assistance persist owing to several reasons. The displacement is unprecedented in Pakistan in terms of size and speed, severely challenging locally available capacities. Access, especially (but not exclusively) for international aid agencies and personnel has been problematic owing to security concerns, restrictive cultural practices, and gender discrimination. In the provincial capital Peshawar, militants killed more than a dozen people in May while an attack on 8 June killed 18 people including two UN personnel. Such attacks have curtailed movement and disrupted activities such as coordination meetings. Access to the conflict zone has been especially limited. Cultural practices restrict access to, and the movement of, women. The majority of IDPs, staying with host communities, are harder to reach than those in camps.

Moreover, underlying these challenges, UN agencies and NGOs have been hampered by slow and insufficient funding flows, which have undermined their capacity to deal with the huge, rapid exodus and make effective plans.

Funding: a weak international response

Pakistani officials have said about \$1bn will be needed for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, according to preliminary assessments. The authorities allocated an initial one thousand million rupees (about \$12.37 million) for relief efforts in May. More recent additional support includes \$6.5 million-worth of food aid channelled through the UN cluster system.

At a government-hosted donor conference on 21 May, international donors pledged approximately \$224 million in mostly bilateral support for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, including \$110 million from the United States. US officials have subsequently indicated another \$200 million in emergency aid will be forthcoming.

Although this support and other recent pledges and contributions are welcome, the overall total falls far short of what is needed by Pakistan's civilian authorities and institutions to deliver an effective, equitable response that meets the needs of conflicted-affected communities.

Moreover, the level and pace of donor funding to the UN appeal has been woefully inadequate. As IDP numbers quadrupled in May, the UN revised upwards its Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2008-09, through which dozens of organisations had been working since September to respond to the earlier wave of displacement.¹⁴ A total of 165 projects from 52 UN agencies and NGO partners now require \$543 million (up from \$176 million). The revised appeal was launched on 22 May.

However, one month after the new massive displacement began, only \$118 million had been provided or committed to the overall appeal – 22 percent of the revised total, leaving a shortfall of \$424 million. By 12 June, this figure had crept up to \$139 million (25 percent of requirements). More than half of this (\$88 million) was money provided earlier, targeting the previous wave of displacement. Following the launch of the revised UN appeal, rich countries had added a mere \$50 million by 12 June.

Overall, the US has been the greatest contributor by far. By 12 June, it had provided \$68m to the UN appeal, giving 12.5 per cent of what is required since the initial emergency began in 2008. Japan, the world's second largest economy, had given 1.4 percent.

Wealthy European states have committed tiny amounts to the UN appeal. The world's sixth richest country, the UK, is the second biggest donor to the appeal, having given 3.4 percent of requirements by 12 June.¹⁵ The fourth richest country, Germany, had given 1.3 per cent. Norway had provided 0.4 percent, Italy 0.3 percent, Netherlands 0.3 percent, Sweden 0.2 percent, and France 0.02 percent. Other donors included Canada with 1.0 percent and Australia with 0.8 percent.

Aid agencies involved in the original appeal had been responding to a worsening emergency for seven months with less than half the funds required.¹⁶ As a result, they have struggled to scale up quickly and plan sustained support. For example, Unicef warned on 27 May it had almost exhausted its contingency funds and stocks of relief goods and needed another \$41.4 million urgently. Certain crucial sectors – clusters in the UN system – have been especially under-funded. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene cluster (WASH) remained stuck at 16 percent coverage of its requirements seven months after the original appeal and, coincidentally, one month after the latest crisis began despite some small recent donations. Health was only 13 percent covered in early June and still trying to cover its original requirements when there were half a million IDPs, instead of more than four times that number as today.

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also struggling financially. Those working as partners in the UN system have experienced a slow disbursement of funds – in several cases, cash-strapped NGOs have waited more than two months between submitting proposals and receiving funds owing to various administrative and bureaucratic delays.¹⁷ For humanitarian organisations joining the revised appeal launched on 22 May, none had received any funds from the UN system by the third week of June, six weeks after many had started responding to the new emergency. Although the lack of overall donor funding to the appeal has been the most crucial factor, the UN system nevertheless should have adapted and streamlined procedures to ensure funds are disbursed within days rather than months. Recent moves to do so are welcome, positive developments.

International aid agencies have also struggled to receive funds through other channels, partly as a result of lower private donations at a time of economic recession, and because many international donors prefer bilateral or UN mechanisms. The refusal by some international donors to consider a diversity of funding mechanisms – including direct funding to humanitarian organisations – ignores on-the-ground realities and thus fails to constitute a response that is appropriate to circumstances.

All these financial challenges have put plans for assistance at risk. For example, Oxfam launched a \$9.4 million response on 8 May aiming to assist approximately 360,000 people. However, it had received no institutional funding more than one month later, leaving it to underwrite its projects with \$2.3 million of its own funds. With those funds alone, Oxfam can supply safe water to only 50,000 people instead of 120,000 in need. Similarly, money to pay essential Oxfam staff installing water and sanitation facilities will run out two months into the response. Other agencies have voiced similar concerns.¹⁸

Response and recovery: opportunities being missed

The humanitarian emergency provides another opportunity for international community to show its support and solidarity with conflict-affected communities in underdeveloped and unstable areas of Pakistan. However, the international community in general has so far been slow to support the civilian, democratic government and the humanitarian community in responding to waves of displacement from FATA and NWFP since August 2008.

This weak reaction not only signifies a failure to meet obligations to respond adequately to the humanitarian needs of more than two million women, men and children. It also risks undermining crucial opportunities to support Pakistan's civilian, democratic institutions to meet the needs of its people effectively, build positive relationships between aid and development actors and conflicted-affected communities, and begin addressing some of the root causes of social and political instability in long neglected and underdeveloped regions such as FATA.

The slow and insufficient arrival of funds in general, and through the UN appeal in particular, has contributed to problems in the humanitarian response. As media reports of large foreign aid pledges fail to achieve visible results that meet public expectations, popular frustration with the assistance community has been simmering.¹⁹ Some public protests by angry IDPs have occurred. In such circumstances, the risk of popular suffering and resentment being exploited by criminal or politically extreme individuals and groups is rising.²⁰ Moreover, unless the relief effort is quickly bolstered to provide a better level of assistance, aid actors' effective involvement in future recovery and reconstruction work will be made more difficult.

Backed by the international community, the Pakistani government must ensure that a better resourced relief effort is followed quickly by a robust and rapid programme of recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction – all led by local civilian authorities. The government's national response plan outlined in May sketches a positive picture in many respects, with progressive references to safe, voluntary returns, community ownership, transparency and accountability, as well as the distinct needs of women and other vulnerable groups.

This requires sustained support and commitment to be turned into a detailed reality. Recovery and rehabilitation plans must involve the active participation of affected communities – including vulnerable groups such as women and minorities – and be led by locally accountable civilian institutions for these efforts to enjoy popular support and long term sustainability. To maximise their impact, such efforts should spearhead wider social, economic and political development in regions of Pakistan prone to violence, crime and political instability, including strengthening provincial and district governance, supporting civil society groups, and encouraging effective civilian law enforcement.

Conclusion

The massive displacement of more than two million women, men and children fleeing conflict in northwest Pakistan has caused a humanitarian emergency that requires a rapid and substantial response. However, the reaction by the international community has been unacceptably slow and insufficient in relation to the speed and scale of the problem. With Pakistani government resources stretched and the UN and other aid agencies hampered by a shortage of funds, the risk of a worsening humanitarian crisis is rising in a volatile environment. This situation calls for a redoubling of efforts by the international community to help the democratic, civilian Pakistani authorities at all levels and supporting aid agencies to meet the relief, recovery and reconstruction needs of conflict-affected communities. The time to act is now.

Notes

- ¹ The term militant is used in this report to cover fighters associated with various non-state armed groups including Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – itself an umbrella movement containing different groups – and Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohmadi.
- ² UNHCR briefing, 26 May 2009, Geneva.
- ³ FATA is the tribal region bordering Afghanistan where the writ of the Pakistan state has been severely challenged. Composed of seven tribal areas or “agencies”, the region has been the centre of Pakistan Taliban activity and has seen long-running Pakistan army operations and unmanned aerial drone attacks attributed to the US.
- ⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross, 31 May 2009.
- ⁵ Conflict-Paralysed Agriculture, Farmer report, South Asia Partnership, June 2009. The report estimates that livelihood of 2.3 million people in the conflict-affected region is tied to agricultural, excluding casual farm labour.
- ⁶ Martin Mogwanja, UN Humanitarian coordinator for Pakistan, said: ‘This is one of the largest and fastest displacements of human beings that the world has witnessed in the last 15 years’. As quoted in Dawn newspaper, 6 June 2009.
- ⁷ World Health Organisation, Pakistan Health Cluster bulletin 2-3 June 2009
- ⁸ Approximately 300,000 people were displaced by monsoon floods in these two provinces in 2008.
- ⁹ The UN has targeted up to 200,000 conflict-affected people who were not displaced themselves, including members of host households.
- ¹⁰ Let Them Eat Cake, editorial in The News, 1 June 2009
- ¹¹ Shelter “summerisation” projects aim to adapt tents to hot temperatures, while work has begun to build cooler communal facilities, and distribute fans and cooling systems.
- ¹² According to District Department of Education (DoE) officials, saying that 60 percent of schools (122 of 204) were completely destroyed. Quoted by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on 6 June.
- ¹³ Oxfam International’s response includes improving access to clean water, installing shallow tube wells and setting up water storage and distribution tanks. We are constructing latrines, either building them ourselves or supporting communities to build them, and distributing hygiene kits and kitchen sets. Oxfam is also supporting efforts to help conflict-affected communities achieve their rights, raising awareness on Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement with special reference to the rights of children and women enshrined in UNSC Resolution 1325. Additionally, we are monitoring the overall response and making recommendations to relevant actors based on our findings.
- ¹⁴ Between August 2008 and April 2009 approximately 550,000 people were displaced from their homes in FATA and NWFP.
- ¹⁵ This figure represents £6 million (\$8.6 million) for the UN appeal provided before the revised appeal launch in May plus an additional £6.5 million due to be allocated during the production of this report.
- ¹⁶ The UN appeal seeking \$176 million was only 49% funded before its revision on 22 May.
- ¹⁷ Several agencies contacted by Oxfam said they had found different clusters using different formats, requirements and budget guidelines for grant applications. What was acceptable for one cluster could be rejected by another. They found certain budget lines such as overheads, administration, advocacy, or foreign staff costs excluded, causing delays and problems with planning. They also found a lack of guidance on application rules and procedures.
- ¹⁸ See Reuters Alertnet article: Aid Groups Facing 'Funding Crisis' in Pakistan at <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N11516357.htm>

¹⁹ See Reuters Alertnet article Aid Agencies and Government Under Fire in Pakistan
<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/STRI-7SNS2N?OpenDocument>

²⁰ Some observers suggest that this is already happening. See *Winning the Hearts and Minds of the Displaced*, Samina Ahmed, Global Post, 26 May 2009

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Oxfam America 226 Causeway Street, 5th Floor Boston, MA 02114-2206, USA +1 617 482 1211 (Toll-free 1 800 77 OXFAM) E-mail: info@oxfamamerica.org www.oxfamamerica.org	Oxfam Hong Kong 17/F., China United Centre, 28 Marble Road, North Point, Hong Kong Tel: +852 2520 2525 E-mail: info@oxfam.org.hk www.oxfam.org.hk
Oxfam Australia 132 Leicester Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia Tel: +61 3 9289 9444 E-mail: enquire@oxfam.org.au www.oxfam.org.au	Intermón Oxfam (Spain) Roger de Llúria 15, 08010, Barcelona, Spain Tel: +34 902 330 331 E-mail: info@intermonoxfam.org www.intermonoxfam.org
Oxfam-in-Belgium Rue des Quatre Vents 60, 1080 Brussels, Belgium Tel: +32 2 501 6700 E-mail: oxfamsol@oxfamsol.be www.oxfamsol.be	Oxfam Ireland Dublin Office, 9 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2, Ireland Tel: +353 1 635 0422 Belfast Office, 115 North St, Belfast BT1 1ND, UK Tel: +44 28 9023 0220 E-mail: info@oxfamireland.org www.oxfamireland.org
Oxfam Canada 250 City Centre Ave, Suite 400, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 6K7, Canada Tel: +1 613 237 5236 E-mail: info@oxfam.ca www.oxfam.ca	Oxfam New Zealand PO Box 68357, Auckland 1145, New Zealand Tel: +64 9 355 6500 (Toll-free 0800 400 666) E-mail: oxfam@oxfam.org.nz www.oxfam.org.nz
Oxfam France - Agir ici 104 rue Oberkampf, 75011 Paris, France Tel: + 33 1 56 98 24 40. E-mail: info@oxfamfrance.org www.oxfamfrance.org	Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) Mauritskade 9, Postbus 30919, 2500 GX, The Hague, The Netherlands Tel: +31 70 342 1621 E-mail: info@oxfamnovib.nl www.oxfamnovib.nl
Oxfam Germany Greifswalder Str. 33a, 10405 Berlin, Germany Tel: +49 30 428 50621 E-mail: info@oxfam.de www.oxfam.de	Oxfam Québec 2330 rue Notre Dame Ouest, bureau 200, Montreal, Quebec, H3J 2Y2, Canada Tel: +1 514 937 1614 E-mail: info@oxfam.qc.ca www.oxfam.qc.ca

<p>Oxfam GB Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK Tel: +44 1865 473727 E-mail: enquiries@oxfam.org.uk www.oxfam.org.uk</p>	
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Oxfam International Secretariat: Suite 20, 266 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DL, UK
Tel: +44 1865 339100 Email: information@oxfaminternational.org. Web site: www.oxfam.org

Oxfam International advocacy offices:

E-mail: advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

Washington: 1100 15th St., NW, Ste. 600, Washington, DC 20005-1759, USA

Tel: +1 202 496 1170.

Brussels: Rue Philippe le Bon 15, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +322 502 1941

Geneva: 15 rue des Savoises, 1205 Geneva, Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 321 2371.

New York: 355 Lexington Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10017, USA

Tel: +1 212 687 2091.

Brazil: SCS Quadra 08 Bloco B-50, Sala 401 Edifício Venâncio 2000, Brasília DF 70333-970 ,

Brazil Tel: +55 61 3321 4044

Linked Oxfam organizations. The following organizations are linked to Oxfam International:

Oxfam Japan Maruko bldg. 2F, 1-20-6, Higashi-Ueno, Taito-ku, Tokyo 110-0015, Japan

Tel: + 81 3 3834 1556. E-mail: info@oxfam.jp Web site: www.oxfam.jp

Oxfam India - 2nd floor, 1 Community Centre, New Friends Colony, New Delhi, India 110 065,

tel: +91 (0) 11 4653 8000, fax: +91 (0) 11 4653 8099, email: delhi@oxfamindia.org, website:

www.oxfamindia.org

Oxfam International and Ucodep Campaign Office (Italy), Via Fogliano 10, 00199 Rome, Italy

Tel +39 0645 432939, Fax +39 0645 438046 email: ucodep-oi@oxfaminternational.org, website:

<http://www.ucodep.org>

Oxfam observer member. The following organization is currently an observer member of Oxfam International, working towards possible full affiliation:

Fundación Rostros y Voces (México) Alabama 105, Colonia Napoles, Delegacion Benito Juarez, C.P. 03810 Mexico, D.F.

Tel: + 52 55 5687 3002 / 5687 3203 Fax: +52 55 5687 3002 ext. 103

E-mail: comunicación@rostrosyvoces.org

Web site: www.rostrosyvoces.org