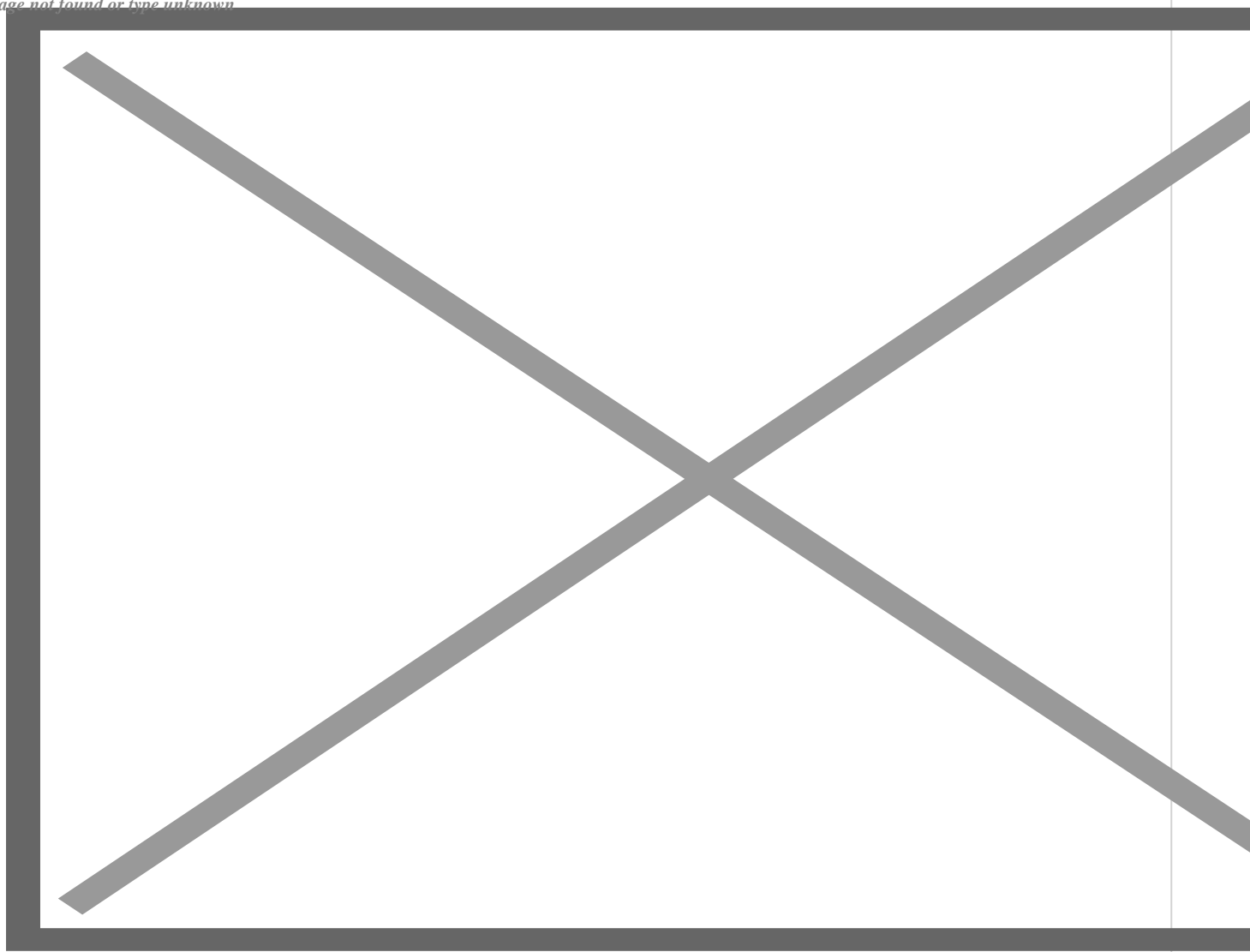


Hunger and poverty continue to hit Afghans

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The bitter cold of Afghanistan's winter has small children huddled beneath blankets in makeshift camps, while sick babies in hospitals lie wrapped in their mothers' all-enveloping burqas.

Kabul, January 5 (RHC)-- The bitter cold of Afghanistan's winter has small children huddled beneath blankets in makeshift camps, while sick babies in hospitals lie wrapped in their mothers' all-enveloping

burqas. Meanwhile, long lines at food distribution centers have become overwhelming as the country sinks deeper into desperate times.

Since the August 15 Taliban takeover of Kabul, an already war-devastated economy once kept alive by international donations alone is now on the verge of collapse. There is not enough money for hospitals.

Saliha, who like many Afghans uses just one name, took her infant son to the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul. Weak and fragile, four-month-old Najeeb was badly malnourished. For many of Afghanistan's poorest, bread is their only staple. Women and children line up outside bakeries before dawn to get bread.

The statistics provided by the United Nations are grim: almost 24 million people in Afghanistan, about 60 percent of the population, suffer from acute hunger. As many as 8.7 million Afghans are coping with famine.

The World Health Organization is warning of millions of children suffering malnutrition, and the United Nations says 97 percent of Afghans will soon be living below the poverty line.

The majority scramble to find food and fuel. For millions living in camps for the displaced or sitting outside government ministries seeking help, the only source of warmth is to huddle around open wood-burning fires.

Nearly 80 percent of Afghanistan's previous government's budget came from the international community. That money, now cut off, financed hospitals, schools, factories and government ministries.

Sanctions have crippled banks while billions of dollars of Afghanistan's funds and assets remain frozen abroad. The UN says it is struggling to figure out how to get humanitarian aid to Afghans while bypassing the Taliban government.

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