



BACKGROUND PAPER:

United Nations Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM)

The Afghanistan Water Crisis

Introduction:

The Taliban, an Islamist movement that first seized power of Afghanistan in the 1990s after the Soviet withdrawal and Afghan civil war, ruled Afghanistan with harsh restrictions until being toppled by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. They regained control in 2021 after the U.S. withdrawal, once again imposing strict religious rule, limiting freedoms, and struggling with international isolation and economic collapse. Since retaking power in 2021, the Taliban's restrictive governance in Afghanistan has been compounded by a severe water crisis in the nation's capital city Kabul. In Kabul the groundwater levels have plummeted by up to 30 meters, nearly half of the city's wells are dry, and up to 80 percent of remaining water is contaminated, with projections warning the capital could run dry by 2030. As if that weren't enough, a devastating series of earthquakes struck eastern provinces, triggered by tectonic fault lines beneath the Hindu Kush, killing over 2,200 people, injuring thousands, and destroying more than 6,700 homes, which has already overwhelmed emergency response efforts. Together, these overlapping crises, environmental collapse, natural disasters, and political isolation have deepened Afghanistan's humanitarian emergency under Taliban rule.

Background & History:

Afghanistan, a landlocked nation at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, has long been shaped by its rugged geography of mountains and deserts, which made it both difficult to govern and strategically vital to empires. The region has been invaded and influenced by Persians, Greeks under Alexander the Great, Arabs, Mongols, and later the British and Soviets, earning it the nickname the "graveyard of empires." After the Soviet invasion in 1979 and a decade of resistance by Afghan mujahideen fighters, the country collapsed into civil war in the 1990s.

The Taliban emerged during this period and captured Kabul in 1996, imposing a strict interpretation of Islamic law until their overthrow by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. For the next two decades, Afghanistan struggled with insurgency, corruption, and political instability despite efforts to build democratic institutions. In 2021, following the U.S. and NATO withdrawal, the Taliban rapidly regained power, reestablishing an authoritarian regime and isolating the nation once again on the global stage.

Current Status & The Problem:

Afghanistan is facing a worsening water crisis, most acute in the capital city of Kabul, where decades of unplanned urban growth and over-reliance on groundwater have severely depleted natural reserves. Wells across the city are running dry, groundwater levels have dropped dramatically, and studies warn Kabul could run out of usable water within the next decade. Contamination compounds the problem, with a significant share of remaining water unsafe for drinking, fueling the spread of disease and endangering public health.

The crisis is intensified by climate change, prolonged droughts, and the country's mountainous terrain, which limits access to consistent water sources. Governance challenges under Taliban rule and Afghanistan's international isolation make large-scale infrastructure projects and aid coordination difficult. With millions dependent on limited and unsafe supplies, the water shortage poses not only a humanitarian emergency but also a looming threat to stability and survival in one of the world's most fragile states.

Committee Mission:

The SOCHUM committee's mission is to address the humanitarian and social consequences of Afghanistan's worsening water crisis, while considering long-term approaches that uphold human rights and dignity. Delegates should focus on:

- Providing humanitarian assistance to ensure access to safe drinking water and sanitation for vulnerable populations.
- Supporting international cooperation to address water scarcity through sustainable practices and resource-sharing initiatives.

- Highlighting the human rights implications of water shortages, particularly their disproportionate impact on women, children, and marginalized groups.
- Coordinating with relevant UN bodies, NGOs, and regional actors to facilitate equitable aid delivery despite political and security challenges.
- Encouraging dialogue on environmental sustainability and climate resilience as part of Afghanistan's humanitarian recovery.

Questions to Consider:

- How can the international community provide humanitarian aid and clean water access in Afghanistan despite political instability and restrictions under Taliban governance?
- What measures can be taken to protect the rights of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and ethnic minorities who are disproportionately affected by the water shortage?
- How can SOCHUM encourage cooperation between the Taliban authorities, NGOs, and UN agencies to ensure equitable distribution of aid?
- What role can neighboring countries and regional organizations play in addressing shared water resources and mitigating cross-border impacts of Afghanistan's water crisis?
- How can the committee promote long-term human rights protections and sustainable water management while addressing immediate humanitarian needs?

Additional Research:

Delegates are encouraged to delve deeper into the history of Afghanistan, how the country's effect on geopolitical conflicts in the 20th and 21st century, the role of the Taliban, and the country's current political dynamics. Understanding the water crisis itself is crucial and the effect of the recent earthquake on the

crisis. We also hope for delegates to innovatively create solutions to both of the major issues at hand.

Sources:

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