

Terror, poverty, crisis and earthquakes



Algeria is experiencing widespread and increasing poverty, and frequent terrorist attacks. Natural disasters - droughts, earthquakes and floods - have also ravaged the country. Together these are the main threats to human security. A series of economic reforms and a political crisis dating from the early 1990s have only made the situation worse.

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Human security is the primary objective of all policies aimed at social and economic development. However, the social and political crisis of the last decade poses a real threat to human development and human security.

In recent years, three factors stand out as obstacles to human security in Algeria: terrorism, poverty and natural disasters.

Public safety and the terrorist threat

Terrorist activities began in the early 1990s. Since then, lack of public safety has been the main obstacle to achieving human security. In spite of the best efforts of the police and security services to protect individuals' lives and public and private property, thousands of Algerians have died in the last 10 years. Estimates of the exact number of direct victims of terrorism differ, but it is clear that, to a varying degree, the wave of terrorist assassinations has affected all social sectors and regions of the country, with the following consequences:

- A large number of highly qualified people - writers, teachers, journalists, doctors and artists - went into exile because they felt under threat.
- There has been an exodus of peasant farmers from the areas where massacres took place, to the cities and their outskirts. As a result, lands and goods were abandoned and living conditions in urban areas deteriorated.
- There has been an increase in social tension and an intensification of collective demands in nearly every region of the country. Demonstrations and disturbances of public order are common. In some regions this has brought about a situation of such generalised disorder that many people fear for their safety.

The dimensions of poverty

Poverty has become a permanent feature of Algerian society, affecting one-fifth of the population (6.3 million people). The scale of the problem has turned it into a pressing political issue.

Eight per cent of Algerians were living below the poverty line in 1988; this rose to 14% in 1995.

People living in extreme poverty were 3% of the population in 1988, increasing to 6% in 1995. The proportion of the population at risk of sliding into poverty given any change in their living conditions was 12.2% in 1988, but rose to 22% in 1995.

Structural causes

The period of increasing terror and poverty coincided with economic reforms, in the context of which structural adjustments were made as directed by the Bretton Woods institutions. Although political reforms were also carried out, these ended in failure with the suppression of elections and the political crisis which began in the early 1990s.¹

Violence and the political and economic crises threatened human security and gave rise to contradictions: while the poor got steadily poorer, a new affluent class of people enriched by the crisis emerged, and the middle class gradually disappeared. While state-owned companies foundered, and several were closed, private banks and companies sprang up amid suspicions of corruption and a lack of transparency.

All of these circumstances, added to institutional incompetence and excessive bureaucracy, have discouraged production, profitable investment and employment. Consequently, economic development has been halted for several years. The profound employment crisis has been deepened by labour deregulation, there is a housing crisis, health services have been cut back, diseases and epidemics have appeared, there is not enough safe drinking water and the environment has suffered.

1 "In the December 1999 elections, 40 per cent of ... registered voters abstained. The first round, for 430 seats in Parliament, gave the victory to the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front), which took 188 seats. ... President Chadli Ben Jedid resigned under strong pressure from the military and politicians fearful of a FIS victory. A Security Panel made up of three military leaders and the Prime Minister was put into power. ... In February, the High Council of State proclaimed a state of emergency throughout the nation, for a year. The army was opposed to any possibility of sharing power with the FIS. In March 1992, the FIS was outlawed." From then on, Islamic militants resorted to violence and terror. See Instituto del Tercer Mundo. *The World Guide. An alternative reference to the countries of our planet. 2003-2004*. Montevideo: ITeM-New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2003.

Unemployment

The structural adjustment programme has caused considerable deterioration in the employment situation in the last 10 years. Four hundred thousand jobs were lost and the informal sector of the economy grew. A total of 2,339,450 people are out of work, of whom 37.79% are peasant farmers (884,110 people). The unemployment rate is 26%.

Consumption

Average household consumption and expenditure went through major changes from 1988 to 2000. According to figures from the National Statistics Office, in 2000 families spent USD 22,400 million, an average of USD 4,938 per household, and USD 745 per person. In 1988, total spending was USD 4,027 million, an average of USD 132 per person. Average spending per person has therefore increased by a factor of 5.6 in 12 years.²

Over the same period, the difference in spending power between rich and poor households has also continued to increase: the poorest 20% of families accounted for only 7.5% of total expenditure, while the richest 20% spent 43.2% of the total.

Health

Although the population is afforded free public health care, the most vulnerable families now have less access to medical care, for various reasons. The high cost of medicines and the fact that some of these are not covered by health insurance systems have led to a reduction in the purchase of medicines. Other factors which contribute to restricting these families' access to medical care include the deteriorated condition of clinics and hospitals, malfunctioning equipment, lack of maintenance, the frequent lack of medicines and, especially in rural areas, the distance to health centres.

Indicators for 2000 show that 80% of mothers received antenatal care during pregnancy, and that 86% of these mothers received their care in public health institutions. Ninety-seven per cent of children had been vaccinated. In cities, 92% of children aged 12 to 23 months had received all their vaccines; in rural areas, only 86% were fully vaccinated.

2 Office National des Statistiques (ONS). *Enquête sur la Consommation en Algérie*, Algeria: 2000.

Housing

According to the General Population Census of 1998 there were 5,021,000 housing units, of which 4,102,000 (81.64%) were occupied. Although the number of occupied houses increased, demographic growth was even higher. Consequently, the average occupancy index rose from 7.14 persons per household in 1998 to 8.6 persons per household in 2001.³

Furthermore, the number of people living in unsanitary housing conditions is nearly 3.7 million, that is nearly 12% of the population. This high proportion of inadequate dwellings, and the absence of recreational areas for children such as public parks, indicate a deteriorating living environment.

Education

School attendance by 6 to 14-year-olds stands at 94%. Schooling levels among people who have received some kind of education are distributed as follows: 39% have attended primary schools, 35% have reached middle schools, 19% have been to secondary schools and 6.5% have had a university education.

The illiteracy rate remains high, in spite of efforts by the Government and civil society. In 1998 32% of the population was illiterate, falling to 23% in 2002. Illiteracy is higher in rural areas (31%) than in urban centres (18%). It is also greater among women (30%) than among men (18%), and is particularly high among peasant women (40%) as opposed to urban women (23%).

School attendance, educational attainment and the years of schooling received are all factors of social differentiation. Children from peasant families have difficulty in completing a school cycle that lasts for several years. Additional differences between town and countryside, and between rich and poor, put these children at a disadvantage when looking for jobs. The most disadvantaged in this situation are the poorest, particularly poor girls who live in rural areas.

Natural disasters: droughts and floods

The following types of natural disaster have hit Algeria particularly hard:

Drought and desertification

Algeria suffered ten years of drought which caused serious crop losses and increased the costs of agricultural production. In consequence, more food had to be imported. Expenditure on food imports is almost USD 2 billion, and represents a high percentage of export earnings. These funds could have been spent on imported products of greater eco-

nomical usefulness, such as spare parts and equipment needed for production, or on paying for new development programmes and reducing unemployment.

Ninety per cent of the population lives on just 12% of the country's surface area. In the absence of proper environmental policies, the area of cultivable land has been steadily reduced by erosion, drought, and demographic or developmental factors. Wilderness areas have increased in size: the desert is rapidly encroaching on agricultural land.

Floods

After the drought there were heavy rains in various parts of the country which caused serious flooding and great loss of life and property. The worst effects of the 2001 floods were felt in the city of Algiers, especially in the Bab El Oued district. Hundreds of people died, many more were declared missing, whole neighbourhoods were buried and there was considerable material damage.

Earthquakes

The most densely populated part of Algeria is the north, and it is also an area of frequent seismic activity. The latest earthquake alone, on 21 May 2003, caused the death of 2,500 people and left 30,000 families homeless. Public authorities are still struggling to rehouse them, even if only in huts. Other earthquakes in different parts of the interior have caused dozens of deaths. Many families have lost their homes, but there is no up-to-date information about their situation.

Social needs

Algerian society has many needs, all of them urgent.

After all that the population has suffered at the hands of terrorists, guaranteeing the safety of persons and property must take first place among social needs. Society demands better results from the security forces entrusted with public safety.

Poverty is a complex social phenomenon and as such requires sustained action, aimed at improving the present situation but also planned for long-term effectiveness. On this issue and also with respect to education different social sectors have expressed a range of demands:

- Revise, update and restructure the distribution of social welfare benefits, in coordination with civil society, and local associations in particular.
- Contain unemployment by encouraging the practice of training contracts, mainly for young university graduates, so that they can contribute to their family incomes and gain professional experience.

- Promote micro-businesses among young people by facilitating access to bank loans and simplifying administrative red tape.
- Increase salaries, especially those of public sector workers responsible for priority services such as health and education (including higher education), to increase their buying power and improve their standard of living.
- Improve housing quality and implement programmes to make houses affordable for the majority of the population; compel real estate companies, banks, and savings institutions to respect their obligations and commitments to their clients; prevent electoral considerations from determining housing allocation.⁴
- Guarantee free and compulsory schooling, especially for children from the neediest families and in remote areas, where children often have to do tough physical work in order to survive. Remove education from the political arena.

Finally, with respect to natural disasters and their consequences, civil society urges the following:

- More aid for the victims of the 21 May 2003 earthquake, and for all the victims of the other disasters (floods, droughts, etc.) that have occurred in different regions of the country.
- Address environmental problems by including them in the country's socio-economic development programmes, as well as in educational curricula. Encourage greater concern for environmental issues among different sectors of society.
- Combat activities and practices that are causing serious damage to the environment, which are steadily increasing and are a threat to large population centres; involve the population in measures to raise environmental awareness. ■

References

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⁴ "Many Algerians say corrupt local mayors and other officials regularly distribute housing among family and friends - allegations that have sparked rioting outside municipal offices in Algiers." www.miami.com/ml/d/miamiherald/2002/08/11/news/world/3839094.htm

³ Office National des Statistiques (ONS), *Résultats du Recensement Général de Population*, Algeria: 1998.