Seen from the green valleys of its walnut-gardens, Badakhshan in north-eastern Afghanistan is a place of incredible natural beauty with steep valleys and high mountains, snow-capped for most of the year. On sunny days in spring it seems like a paradise on earth, a place where nature by its own example, should encourage harmony and peace among those living in these mountains.

However the reality on the ground is quite different. As in most other parts of Afghanistan, harsh living conditions, scarce resources and ethnic divisions create an ever-continuing breeding ground for political conflict and instability, making life for the people in these beautiful surroundings a constant struggle for survival. Along with the decades of conflict and weak governance, Badakhshan's hostile climate, difficult terrain, and unrestrained exploitation of the land has increased the frequency and severity of natural disasters and left rural households even more vulnerable and unable to respond to shocks and crises.

To take the example of the Warduj valley in central Badakhshan: difficult living conditions here have led to the development of a particularly strong sense of self-reliance amongst its population as well as a natural resistance to external control and authority. The valley is special since this sense of self-reliance and to the resilience of its people in the face of extreme living conditions has turned it into a key route for local smuggling in commodities, weapons and drugs. The Warduj valley also differs from the surrounding valleys in terms of its religious beliefs. This part of Badakhshan is dominated by one branch of the Shia sect of Islam, called Ismailis (together with adjacent areas in Tajikistan and Northern Pakistan). However this valley remains an “island” of followers of the Sunni faith amidst a concentration of Ismaili communities. There are long-simmering tensions between the two communities and outbreaks of hostility are common.

2013 was marked by a significant upturn in the level of conflict in Afghanistan, with more security incidents and more civilian casualties. This general pattern also applied in Badakhshan - and in the valley of Warduj. To Mission East this upturn in conflict and in intensified local fighting became a very concrete issue, since the Warduj valley is within the area of Mission East programme operation, and the fighting has resulted in a large part of the local population fleeing their homes and becoming IDPs (Internally Displaced People). The prospect for a quick return of these displaced people seems uncertain since with the departure of the ISAF in 2014, as well as the upcoming presidential elections, this instability is likely to continue or worsen - at least in the short term.
Every war creates great suffering for those caught up in the battle-zone, especially the non-combatants and the innocent, and this war is no exemption. The heavy fighting between government forces and armed insurgent groups (AOGs) has severely interrupted the cropping and harvesting cycles, destroyed village homes and agricultural infrastructure, as well as roads and bridges, further cutting off and impoverishing an already isolated population. Most of the villagers, consisting mostly of women and children, have fled to the neighbouring districts of government control, where they now face the coming winter and are confronted with an uncertain future as IDPs.

All the IDPs have more or less the same story to tell: of close-range helicopters firing rockets setting houses alight, of widespread ear-splitting machine gun fire and of bullets flying around, of days and nights on the run, of hunger, leaving the weakest behind, of walking in the night and hiding in caves during the day to avoid the worst of the fighting.

Now they have reached some sort of safety, but remain at the mercy of others, traumatized and having lost all their possessions, not knowing how to get food or to earn a living, and living in rudimentary shelters with very basic sanitary conditions. Even the option of earning a temporary income for their families by working as daylabourers on nearby farms is no longer available with the collection of the harvest and the onset of winter.

The Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM) is a programme funded by the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO) and implemented by a consortium of four INGOs in several provinces throughout Afghanistan. In Badakhshan province the ERM is run by Mission East and has worked actively to accommodate the immediate needs of the IDPs, to provide shelter with protection against the cold, to improve sanitary conditions, and to provide the means for cooking. It has unwaveringly worked to ensure cooperation between other
humanitarian actors in the province in the provision of food supplies. The worst cases of hunger, malnutrition and diarrhoea from inadequate sanitation have been relieved, and the food situation has improved. The ERM also contributed to pay for food, through a voucher system, upon observing that many of the IDPs had started to sell their NFIs because of insufficiencies in the food distribution.

At the end of this story, let us bring forward the tale of one of the women (most of the IDPs being women and children, their husbands having stayed back in the mountains to protect their lands and homes):

“We had to flee, because the soldiers were coming near the village, and some helicopters put the village on fire. I sent my younger son and daughter in the morning with the livestock as on any other day. I went to find them to tell them to leave the herd behind and join the family in the walk to Baharak, but I could not at first find them. When I finally found them I wished I was dead. Their dead bodies lay on the ground among the dead sheep, full of bullet holes. Who can do such things to innocent children? I am a widow now. I have heard that my husband was killed in the fighting. I only have a few children left alive and no-one to feed the family. My children are very scared and afraid of loud noises, they are not well and I do not have food for them. Now I am very pleased that I have got some help, but I do not know about the future.”