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AFGHANISTAN

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

A human rights catastrophe

1. Introduction

The lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghan women and children have been shattered in the human rights catastrophe that has devastated Afghanistan in the past three years. Thousands have been killed in artillery attacks apparently aimed deliberately at residential areas by the various political factions who have been fighting for territory since April 1992 when the Mujahideen groups took power. Thousands of others have been wounded.

Armed groups have massacred defenceless women in their homes, or have brutally beaten and raped them. Scores of young women have been abducted and then raped, taken as wives by commanders or sold into prostitution. Some have committed suicide to avoid such a fate. Scores of women have reportedly "disappeared" and several have been stoned to death. Hundreds of thousands of women and children have fled their homes in terror, only to suffer further abuses during their flight or in refugee camps. Many are traumatized by the horrific abuses they have suffered or witnessed.

These gross human rights violations of so many unarmed civilian women have been committed with total impunity. The Constitution has been suspended. Laws have become meaningless. The judicial structures have been destroyed. The central authorities have become virtually defunct. As a result, there has been little prospect of any of the perpetrators being brought to justice.

The perpetrators are members of the main Mujahideen groups and warlords, or indeed anyone who establishes control over a pocket of territory. As territory changes hands after long battles, an entire local population can be subjected to violent retaliatory punishments by the victorious forces. The conquerors often celebrate by killing and raping women and looting property.

Alongside these appalling abuses, women have been prevented from exercising several of their fundamental rights -- including the rights to association, freedom of expression and employment -- by Mujahideen groups who consider such activities to be un-Islamic for women. For instance, Mujahideen guards are reported to have stopped women from working outside their homes, or from attending health and family

planning courses organized by non-governmental organizations. Educated women, particularly those working in the fields of education and welfare, have been repeatedly threatened by Mujahideen groups.

The Supreme Court of the Islamic State of Afghanistan was reported in 1994 to have issued an "Ordinance on Women's Veil" which ordains that women must wear a veil that covers the whole body. It also forbids women from leaving their homes or being looked at "not because they are women, but for fear of sedition".

This report covers the period between April 1992, when Mujahideen groups took power in the capital, Kabul, and February 1995. All the cases cited are based on in-depth interviews conducted by Amnesty International with Afghan refugees who had recently arrived in Pakistan and other countries. The report calls on the transitional authorities and the leaders of all the armed political groups in Afghanistan to implement measures immediately to stop their forces abusing human rights and to ensure that women's human rights are respected. It also urges the international community to take urgent action to help end the human rights disaster that is continuing unabated in Afghanistan.

2. Political background

After years of civil war, the Soviet-backed government of President Najibullah was overthrown in April 1992 by a combination of Mujahideen forces and some army generals allied to them. The Mujahideen groups then began fighting each other to win control of Kabul and other major cities. However, none of the political groups could establish an effective central authority and lawlessness spread across the country.

Against this background, the civilian population increasingly suffered widespread human rights abuses as warlords sought greater power for themselves, for their political party or for their clan. Kabul suffered most as it became a battleground for rival political groups fighting fiercely for control of various administrative institutions and residential areas.

Alliances and hostilities between the warring factions are based on personal loyalties, ethnic identities or political beliefs - some are purely tactical and short-lived. The political groups often consider all members of a particular clan or all residents of a locality affiliated to a rival political group as enemies, and target attacks at such people whether or not they are combatants.

Until early 1995 there were two major political alliances fighting for control of territory and political authority in Afghanistan. One was the *Shura-e Nezar* (Supervisory Council), led by Ahmad Shah Masoud, which comprised all commanders belonging to *Jamiat-e Islami* (Society of Islam)

-- including the influential governor of Herat province, Ismael Khan -- and a number of smaller parties. The other was the Supreme Coordination Council, an alliance of the northern-based forces of General Abdul Rashid Dostum and the southern-based *Hezb-e Islami* (Party of Islam), led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. It also included the Shi'a party, *Hezb-e Wahdat*. (In one period, between April 1992 and May 1993, the forces of Sura-e Nezar, General Dostum and Hezb-e Wahdat were allied, fighting another alliance led by Hezb-e Islami.)

Although there has been no effective central authority since April 1992, leaders of the main warring factions retained high posts in a divided and largely ineffective government. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of *Hezb-e Islami* remained Prime Minister until late 1994 and Borhannudin Rabbani of *Jamiat-e Islami* continues to be the President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan. Throughout most of 1994 an alliance of Mujahideen groups led by *Jamiat-e Islami* retained control of most of Kabul, and an opposition alliance led by *Hezb-e Islami* controlled other parts of the capital. Autonomous commanders allied to one or other of the rival alliances controlled the rest of the country; some of these set up quasi-governmental structures.

As of February 1995, a strong and popular political force known as the *Taleban* (religious students) had taken control of nine of Afghanistan's 30 provinces, by far the largest number of provinces controlled by a single party. The *Taleban* appear to be orthodox Muslims intent on establishing a strict Islamic system of government. Some observers believe that the *Taleban* may have been aided by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Their most significant advance was the capture in February 1995 of *Hezb-e Islami*'s headquarters in Charasyab, south of Kabul.

Recent efforts by the Head of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan, Mahmoud Mestiri, to set up a broad-based interim administration in Afghanistan for the transfer of power in February 1995 were blocked by the warring factions who did not agree on a peace formula. He proposed 21 March 1995 as the date for new transitional government to assume office in Kabul.

At the time of writing, there was no information about the composition or the program of the transitional administration which would take over from President Rabbani's government. Afghanistan continues to be in the grip of a devastating civil war which has cost an estimated 25,000 people their lives since April 1992. Control of Kabul was still divided between various armed political groups and there appeared to be no end in sight to the violence.

3. Civilian victims of armed conflict

Thousands of unarmed civilian women have been killed by unexpected and deliberate artillery attacks on their homes. The vast majority have been killed in Kabul. They have been blown up or hit by rockets or bullets while walking in the street, waiting at bus stops, working in their houses or sheltering in large buildings. Many have died or been injured in attacks aimed at mosques, schools and hospitals. Similar attacks have been carried out on residential areas in other parts of the country.

Most Afghan women have taken no active part in the fighting, yet their homes and neighbourhoods have been continually bombarded. A woman who left Kabul in October 1994 said she had witnessed a bomb explosion which killed over 70 people at a wedding ceremony in Qala Fathullah district of Kabul when the area was hit by several bombs a few months earlier. She saw the brother and sister of the groom digging bodies out of the ground. There had been no fighting in that street for several days and no military bases had been set up there.

Mujahideen groups justify such attacks by saying that the targeted area was controlled by a rival faction. However, many attacks on residential areas appear to have been deliberately aimed at killing defenceless civilians.

In almost all cases, no warning is given to the unarmed residents whose homes are about to be hit. Some Mujahideen groups have reportedly celebrated military victories in residential areas showing no concern about the destruction of homes or the killing and wounding of unarmed civilians. A woman teacher from Pul-e Charkhi area in Kabul, who returned from Pakistan to Kabul after the Mujahideen took power in April 1992, told Amnesty International that armed guards celebrating a victory had fired rockets at residential areas.

"We came back to Kabul thinking that things had got better. But the situation was actually worse than it had been under the Communists. For example, one night Hekmatyar was visiting his forces in Pul-e Charkhi area. His guards were showing a lot of enthusiasm and were firing in the air non-stop. Suddenly, two of the rockets they fired hit each other in mid-air and landed on my neighbour's house, ruining the house and injuring my neighbour. We then decided to leave. There was no safety."

4. Killings by armed political groups

Women related to men sought by Mujahideen groups, or who have

themselves resisted abduction or rape, have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed, sometimes in front of their families, or have been threatened with death by the warring factions.

A family who left Afghanistan in mid-1994 told Amnesty International how one night in March that year, members of General Dostum's forces had entered their house in Old Mycrorayan area of Kabul and killed their daughter.

"There were about 12 of them all carrying Kalashnikovs rifles with their faces covered. They asked us to give them our daughter. We refused. They did not accept that, and asked us to bring our daughter to talk to them. We asked her and she came and told them she did not want to go with them. One of them then lifted his Kalashnikov and shot my daughter dead in front of our eyes. She was only 20 and was just about to finish her high school. We buried her body. There were eight surviving members of our family."

An elderly couple described how their 19-year-old daughter had been killed in front of them in March 1994 because she refused to go with armed guards. The guards then looted the house and forced the family to leave.

A teacher from Kabul who left Afghanistan in mid-1992 reported how her residential area had been used as a battleground by three warring factions. She said that General Dostum's forces were in the Chel Sotoon area, *Shura-e Nezar* guards occupied the main road and *Hezb-e Islami* guards were on the mountainside. She recounted how she was nearly killed by the armed guards of a Mujahideen commander.

"Fierce fighting broke out and we were all running away in the streets of Kabul. As we were running, I saw an old man who told us not to go through one of the lanes because Dostum's guards were there. He warned us that the guards would take away our children. He showed us another alley to go through which we did. We were running away with a baby in my arm, with five girls and two boys of between 18 months and 18 years old. My mother-in-law, who is an old lady, had to run with us too. People were moving as fast as they could. Suddenly, I noticed that my husband was not with us. I was crying hard calling out his name. A guard from one of the checkpoints came to me and told me to keep quiet. I told him that I had lost my husband. Then he looked at his commander who was standing in the nearby house behind a window. I heard the

commander ordering the guard to kill us. I cried and begged for mercy and gave the guard some money, and he let us go. We reached Wasel Abad area and two rockets were fired towards us as we were running away. We could not tell who fired them; it could have been Dostum's or *Shura-e Nezar's* or Hekmatyar's forces. We managed to find a vehicle to take us outside Kabul."

Another woman who had fled to Pakistan told Amnesty International: "Heavy fighting had begun in early 1994 in the Bibi Mahroo district of Kabul. My sister-in-law had two young girls and we were worried about what might happen to them. One day, we noticed that they were missing. They had gone to the corner shop and had not returned. We searched everywhere and could not find them. Then we discovered their bodies in a ruined building. Their heads were battered, their faces swollen. We brought the bodies home and buried them there. The fighting got heavier. We had to leave our house and take shelter in the basement of the 400-bed hospital. We kept our other daughters with us at all times. When the fighting receded, we left Kabul."

Several refugee families told the story of a woman in labour who had been taken to a hospital in Kabul by her husband one evening at about 10pm in early 1994. There was a curfew in force at the time and cars were not allowed in the streets of Kabul. Armed guards reportedly stopped the car at a checkpoint, telling the husband that they would take the woman to the hospital themselves and that he should go back home. The next day, the husband was told at the hospital that the woman had not been taken there. The husband went to the guards to ask where his wife was. They reportedly showed him the dead bodies of the woman and the newly-born baby, telling him that since they had only seen videos of women delivering babies, they wanted to see how a baby was delivered in real life.

Refugees who had fled from Farah province told Amnesty International the story of the wife of Zaman Shoughi, a well-known Afghan singer who was killed in early 1994. A family who had lived in the couple's neighbourhood recalled:

"A friend of ours was told that Zaman Shoughi had been killed by armed guards of *Hezb-e Wahdat* who aimed a rocket at him outside his house. The group then arrested his wife who had come outside to see what was going on, and asked her to give them money. She has not been heard of since."

Many women recalled how the warring factions in Kabul killed civilians living under siege who tried to collect water or buy food in early 1994.

"The city's water supply had been cut during the war and we had to get the water from the few taps in the streets which were working. But we were frightened to go out. For example, I saw a 12-year-old child who had gone to get some water. He had taken a bucket with him, and was filling that bucket. The boy was hit by a bullet there. A sniper decided to kill him. Only one shot was fired. The mother ran there to collect his dead body; a second shot was fired and she was killed instantly. Their corpses were left there as no one dared collect them. Some days later, we saw stray dogs at them."

Members of another family recalled how a woman had received death threats for trying to feed her family. She had gone from Kabul to Jalalabad in Pakistan to buy flour for her destitute family in Kabul.

"This woman is now in Peshawar. She told us that she had been stopped between Jalalabad and Kabul, and the armed guards of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had taken away a bag of flour for which she had paid all the family's savings. They told her that if they caught her taking flour back to Kabul again, they would kill her."

5. Rape and other torture

Rape of women by armed guards belonging to the various warring factions appears to be condoned by leaders as a method of intimidating vanquished populations and of rewarding soldiers.

In March 1994 a 15-year-old girl was repeatedly raped in her house in Kabul's Chel Sotoon district after armed guards entered the house and killed her father for allowing her to go to school.

"They shot my father right in front of me. He was a shop-keeper. It was nine o'clock at night. They came to our house and told him they had orders to kill him because he allowed me to go to school. The Mujahideen had already stopped me from going to school, but that was not enough. They then came and killed my father. I cannot describe what they did to me after killing my father.."

A young woman who left her home in Mycroyan 3 in Kabul for Peshawar after intense fighting in January 1994 told Amnesty International about rapes which her father had described to her.

"One day when my father was walking past a building complex, he heard screams of women coming from an apartment block which had just been captured by forces of General Dostum. He was told by the people that Dostum's guards had entered the block and were looting the property and raping the women."

A teacher who left Kabul for Pakistan in mid-1994 told Amnesty International that her parents were frightened that she and other women in the family might be raped by members of the warring factions.

"I was frightened of becoming dishonoured by the armed guards, so we left Kabul. My neighbour was a middle-aged lady and had young sons. This woman was in the nearby shop when Dostum guards raided the shop. They got hold of the shop-keeper and took him away. They locked this woman in the shop for about one and a half hours. They then let her go. She came to us and told us to leave as soon as we could. She said she had been dishonoured by the guards. We knew we had to leave."

Some armed guards target women from ethnic minorities they regard as enemies. The following testimony was given by a 40-year-old woman who came to Peshawar in late 1993. In Kabul, she lived in Deh Dana area.

"First, the forces of *Hezb-e Islami* began to fire rockets on our residential area from the Chel Sotoon mountains. After that, the forces of General Dostum came to the city. They are known as *Gelim Jam* (carpet-takers). These guards were only looking for Pashtun people, and would not actually kill non-Pashtuns. We were not Pashtun, so at least our lives were spared... The next day armed guards of *Hezb-e Islami* came to us. They carried out a lot of atrocities. For example, a number of young women in our street were raped by them. One young woman was taken away by them and a few days later her body was found somewhere in the city."

The 40-year-old woman and her family spent five days in Khairkhana. She then returned to her house, only to find that it had been looted and turned into a checkpoint by armed guards. The family then left Kabul for Pakistan. A few months later the woman went back to Kabul:

"I went there with my father-in-law. The armed guards were still in

the house. They arrested me just outside my house and took me indoors to interrogate me. They beat me in my own house telling me that I had gone to spy on them. They beat me hard on my shoulder with a rifle butt. It was very painful. They then told us to leave and never to come back."

Suicide to prevent rape

Several Afghan women have reportedly committed suicide to avoid being raped. In at least one case, a father who saw the Mujahideen guards coming for his daughter reportedly killed her before she could be taken away.

A number of families told Amnesty International the story of Nahid, who threw herself to her death to avoid being raped.

"Nahid was a 16-year-old high school student living with her family in Mycroyan. In mid-1992 her house was raided by armed Mujahideen guards who had come to take her. The father and family resisted. Nahid ran to the fifth floor of the apartment block and threw herself off the balcony. She died instantly.

"Her father put her body on a bed frame and wanted to carry it in the streets to show the people what had happened to her, but the Mujahideen groups stopped him."

Nafisa, a 25-year-old woman, reportedly tried to kill herself when armed guards came for her. A neighbouring family who subsequently took refuge in Pakistan recalled how in June 1993 armed men from *Shura-e Nezar* had come to the woman's house.

"Nafisa ran to the third floor of the building and jumped off the balcony. The neighbours came to the streets and the guards left the area. This happened in the Khairkhana district of Kabul. She had broken her legs and her back. She was in hospital for a very long time. We do not know where she is now."

6. Abductions and sexual abuse by armed political groups

Scores of Afghan women have reportedly been abducted and detained by Mujahideen groups and commanders and then used for sexual purposes or sold into prostitution. Young girls have suffered the same fate. Most have been victimized for belonging to a particular religious or ethnic group by commanders or guards allied to an opposed faction.

A woman told Amnesty International that her 13-year-old niece was abducted by the armed guards of a *Hezb-e Islami* commander in late 1993.

"They said their commander wanted her. They took her away. She was resisting and screaming but they dragged her away. We were frightened that if we did anything we would all be killed. Several months later, the commander was killed during fighting and the girl was able to come back to her father's house. Abducting young girls has been very common in recent years. They would kill any girl who refused to go with them."

A family who had lived in Iran for five years and went back to their home in Farah province after the Mujahideen took power in April 1992, told Amnesty International how armed guards of a *Jamiat-e Islami* commander entered their house in early 1994 to take their daughter for the commander.

"We were a farming family. There were 10 of us in the family. One *Jamiat-e Islami* commander who had three wives came with his armed guards to our house asking to marry my sister who was 15 years old. My brother objected and told him that as a white-bearded man he should not seek to marry such a young girl. But the commander's guards beat my brother. One of the guards pointed his Kalashnikov at my brother's arm and fired a shot. His shirt was covered in blood. We were forced to give my sister away."

Another family living in Darul-Aman in Kabul before fleeing to Pakistan in May 1994 reported that unarmed people tried to live together as much as possible to deter attacks from armed guards. Despite this, armed guards still entered their houses and on one occasion took a young woman with them.

"One late night, our houses were cordoned off by armed Mujahideen guards. This was about seven months ago [May 1994]. There were about 20 armed guards. They said they were looking for young women to take with them. Our men objected to this. They killed my husband and three other men in our house. They tied the hands of our two old men together. There were two young women in our house; they took one of them. In the morning, we buried the dead."

In May 1994 a pregnant woman was reportedly arrested in Darul-Aman district of Kabul by the armed guards of *Hezb-e Wahdat*. Her family has not been able to establish her whereabouts.

"She was a relative of mine. She had been arrested on her way home. We searched and searched for her and could not find her. The Mujahideen made life very difficult for women, abducting them, beating them and dishonouring them."

A school girl called Farida was reportedly taken away by the armed guards of *Hezb-e Islami* in January 1993 in the 'Low Cost Project' area in Kabul. A witness recalled:

"A commander of *Hezb-e Islami* saw her and decided to take her. The commander contacted the father and asked him to give his daughter to the commander. The family rejected this. The commander then came back in the evening with a number of armed guards and took the girl away. The family did not resist, so no one was killed. But no one knew what had happened to the girl."

A woman who had fled to Pakistan went to Kabul in October 1993 to re-establish contact with her sister who lived in Kartay Sekhi district. She was detained by the armed guards on suspicion of spying for a rival faction, and was severely beaten.

"We heard in Jalalabad that my nephew had been arrested by the *Hezb-e Islami* and we were worried. So I went there [Kabul] with my sister-in-law. When we got there we were told that my sister had gone to Ghazni. We were returning when armed guards stopped us. They arrested us and took us to a house which they used as their base. They told us that we were spies.

"They showed us a number of containers in the house. They opened one of these containers and I saw that there were gouged-out eyes stuck to the sides of the container. They told us that these were the eyes of those who fought against them. I cannot tell how many there were, there could have been about 50 to 60 eyes. They told us that our eyes would be gouged out if we did not tell them who had sent us there. I swore that I was not a spy but they hit me with rifle butts on my shoulder and also on my legs. My sister-in-law was also beaten. We begged them not to beat us and told them that we did not belong to any party."

Eventually, after about six hours of interrogation, the two women were allowed to go but were told they had to find their way out of the area over the Salam hills.

"We had no choice. My leg was in pain but we had to go. On top of the mountain, there was a checkpoint. A very large man came towards us. He said they had told him on the wireless that we would be going there. He again held us there for about one to one and a half hours, asking why we had gone to that area of Kabul. We were very thirsty but they did not give us any water. They beat us again. We cried and cried. Suddenly, there was an aeroplane and they ran away to take shelter. We took advantage of that and ran away from them hiding ourselves behind the rocks so we could not be seen. When we got back to Khairkhana, I sat down, and could not move after a while as my leg had begun to swell. We were unable to get a lift since the cars did not stop for women."

A family who lived in Kalala Poshta near Shahr Nou district in Kabul told Amnesty International that they had left their house in 1993 when the area turned into a battleground between the then alliance of *Shura-e Nezar* and General Dostum's forces against *Hezb-e Islami*. They were told a few days later that the guards had taken away dozens of Pashtun-speaking women from their locality. The area was reportedly captured again by a rival faction and the women were found in a house. All of them were naked. Some of the women reportedly asked the guards to kill them because they had been dishonoured, but the guards reportedly let them go.

Scores of women have reportedly been forcibly taken from their families in exchange for money. Some have been taken as wives -- Mujahideen commanders have been known to marry several young women in one night. Others have been sold into prostitution. Some party leaders and influential commanders have also reportedly forced families to sell them their young daughters and sons who are then reported to have been sold into prostitution, frequently in Pakistan and other countries.

A woman who fled Kabul in January 1994 saw armed guards whom she believed to be members of General Dostum's forces taking away young girls and boys.

"I was baking bread in my flat one day when I saw armed guards entering the building complex. Some went to the basement of an

apartment block and came out carrying young boys aged 12 and 13. They were screaming but the guards forced them to go with them. I saw this with my own eyes. I could not bear it any more. We had to leave. My brother (a student), my father (a university lecturer), my sister (also a student) and my mother -- we all left. We had nothing with us but our clothes. We had no money to even pay a driver to take us. There were corpses lying everywhere. No one had the time to collect the dead as the fighting never stopped."

7. Persecution of women's organizations

Only two Afghan women organizations are known to have been formed that are not affiliated to a political party. Leading members of both groups have persistently faced harassment and death threats from Mujahideen groups, particularly the *Hezb-e Islami*.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) has been active for over a decade. It is a left-of-centre group which does not advocate violence. RAWA campaigns for women's rights and provides education and health facilities for women and children. It has set up a number of educational and health programs in Afghanistan but has had to scale down these operations because of the threats it receives. Most of its operations are based in Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan. These include several well-organized schools in Peshawar and Quetta and a health centre in Quetta. Even in Pakistan RAWA's leaders continue to receive death threats from the Mujahideen parties, and several have had to go into hiding in fear of their lives.

Mina Keshwar Kamal, a health worker and founding member of RAWA, was assassinated along with two other members of her family in February 1987 in her house in Quetta. The circumstances of the killing and testimonies received by Amnesty International from independent sources and witnesses strongly indicate that the assassins may have been closely linked to *Hezb-e Islami*. Prior to her assassination, Mina Keshwar Kamal had received repeated death threats for her "anti-jihad [holy war]" activities. These reportedly related to her trips to Western Europe where she made public statements about the situation of Afghan women both in Afghanistan and in refugee camps controlled by Afghan Mujahideen groups in Pakistan. Although she informed the Pakistan authorities of the threats, she reportedly received no protection from the police.

When the bodies of Mina Keshwar Kamal and her two relatives were found, a number of Pakistani dailies closely associated with the

government portrayed the victims as agents of the then Afghan secret police. RAWA members denied the allegations and urged the police to investigate the killings and bring those responsible to justice. The Pakistan police, however, reportedly took no effective action. RAWA leaders, fearing assassination by Islamist groups or politically-motivated arrest by the Pakistani police, went into hiding.

In February 1989 RAWA members reportedly planned a demonstration to protest against the failure of the Pakistani police to provide adequate protection to RAWA leaders, to highlight the problems faced by Afghan women opposed to both the Kabul government and the Mujahideen groups, and to press the Pakistani authorities to bring to justice those responsible for the killing of Mina Keshwar Kamal and her family members. Prior to the demonstration, however, the police raided the houses of some RAWA leaders in Quetta, reportedly at the instigation of *Hezb-e Islami* and other Mujahideen groups. The demonstration was reportedly cancelled.

A RAWA activist described to Amnesty International in late 1994 the problems her organization had been facing.

"We are working for Afghan women's welfare in Pakistan. We are being threatened. We receive written threats. We are not allowed to provide the much needed education for Afghan women. We cannot even raise the women's understanding of their own rights. There are Islamic Youth groups affiliated to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's party [*Hezb-e Islami*]. He has warned women not go to public places and to wear Islamic clothing. The Islamic Youth members question Afghan young women in the streets about the reason why they are out of their homes. There are clinics in Islamabad, for instance, providing free medical treatment to Afghan women. The group stops women from going there, objecting to Afghan women being treated by a male doctor. We cannot distribute our publications or educational cassettes. Any shops selling these can have serious problems. The Islamic Youth members take away these and create serious problems for the shop-keeper selling them. Some have been threatened that if they sell any more of our publications, they will be killed. The Pakistani police are reluctant to act against these atrocities."

The Afghan Women's Council

The Afghan Women's Council (AWC) was formed in mid-1993. Composed solely of Afghan women, including doctors, teachers and university lecturers, the AWC is headed by Fatana Gilani. Its aim is to provide

educational and health facilities to Afghan children and women in the refugee areas, and to train Afghan women in the area of women's rights within the framework of Afghanistan's religious and cultural traditions. It maintains a well-organized school and a mother-and-child health clinic in Peshawar, Pakistan, as well as a hospital and a clinic in Kabul. Its leaders have also been threatened by some Mujahideen groups.

8. Refugees and the displaced

Hundreds of thousands of Afghan women have fled to Pakistan with their families, the vast majority of whom have headed for Pakistan. On their way they have suffered terrible hardship and abuses, on arrival they have found grossly under-equipped refugee camps where many are still not safe from attack.

Many reported that they had frequently been stopped during their flight on account of their ethnic identity. They were forced to bribe *Shura-e Nezar* guards who stopped cars near Kabul and forced those who appeared to be Pashtun to get out. Some armed guards were reportedly looking for Hazaras. At *Hezb-e Islami* checkpoints, guards were looking for Tajiks and Uzbeks whom they would force to leave cars.

Most families said they had to pay money to pass from one territory to another, irrespective of their own political leanings.

"Before we reached Torkham we passed through a *Shura-e Nezar* checkpoint, then through a Yunus Khalis [a Mujahideen leader] checkpoint. They all wanted money. We gave them money and other valuables so they let us pass. Then we had to pay money to Pakistani officials at Torkham. They let us go through the mountainous pass. We had to carry everything with us on our shoulders. It takes two to three hours to do that."

Sometimes, armed guards have stopped women from travelling in order to get money from their male relatives. A family who left Kabul via Khairkhana was stopped at a checkpoint near Samarkhel and were told to get out of the vehicle.

"These guards belonged to the Moulavi Khalis party. They said the women could not go, only the men were allowed. Of course, our men did not go alone. We knew that the guards wanted money, so we paid a lot of money and were eventually allowed to go with our men. We passed through a lot of checkpoints on the way until we reached Torkham. There, the Pakistani soldiers took a lot of money from us

and we were allowed to go through the gate."

Some refugees told Amnesty International that Mujahideen guards controlling checkpoints near the border with Pakistan consider people living in Kabul to be "atheists", and consequently beat or killed them if they could not pay the required money. One Afghan woman reported that Afghans from non-Pashtun minorities experience great difficulties crossing the border into Pakistan.

"My brother had two young girls and we were worried that they might be taken away, so we all left for Pakistan -- part of the way on foot, part of the way in a vehicle. When we got to the Torkham border, the Pakistani police asked us for money. Pashtu-speaking Afghans have an easier time. Those speaking Dari are not welcome and are usually beaten by the Pakistani soldiers."

At the Torkham border the Pakistani guards have reportedly charged higher rates to walk through the Torkham gate and lower rates to cross the border by night through the rough mountainous terrain. Most families said they could only afford to cross through the mountain pass by night, involving a journey which is dangerous and arduous for hungry and often injured and traumatized women and children.

Once in the refugee camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, women are still not safe. In the camps in Pakistan, most of which are controlled by one or other of the warring Afghan factions, women have been attacked, particularly those who are unaccompanied by men. If they refuse sexual favours to the Mujahideen representatives, they are often denied access to vital rations.

Non-governmental organizations offer training in skills, family planning and health programs in some of the camps. Most Afghan women welcome this, but *Jihadi* (Islamist) guards often interfere and frustrate the organizations' efforts, which they believe to be un-Islamic.

9. Traumatized by the brutality

Mothers have been forced to watch their young daughters being raped. Girls have witnessed their parents being beaten and killed. Thousands of women have had to watch helplessly as their homes were destroyed and their homes were destroyed and their loved ones brutalized. Hundreds of thousands of women have made painful treks with their children across hazardous mountainous passes in freezing conditions, only to be abused on arrival at border-posts and refugee camps. Not surprisingly, many of these women are traumatized and are in desperate need of professional

help.

A woman who left Afghanistan in early 1994 witnessed a succession of human rights abuses against her family in Shindand, including the killing of her brother by the Mujahideen guards.

"One night, I was in my house with my mother, my 10-year-old sister and nine-year-old brother, and my father-in-law. The armed guards attacked our house. They were on the roof. My brother picked up the lamp to see what was going on. When he reached the roof top, they shot at him. He ran away. My father-in-law went to see what was going on. He saw the men but did not climb the roof; instead he jumped into the adjacent garden. He did not come back to the house. Then the armed guards entered the house. They were Mujahideen guards. They asked us to give them our keys. We had no choice. They then began to beat us. They beat all of us in the house. Then they took away all our belongings. Meanwhile, my brother had gone to the square to inform the people, but the guards saw him there and killed him at the square's gate."

A woman who is now a refugee in Pakistan told Amnesty International of the many abuses she had witnessed in her home town of Farah.

"One night about five months ago [June 1994], armed guards came to our house [in Farah]. There were six to seven of them. They forced us to go to a corner of the room while they got hold of my husband. They kept beating him violently, saying he had been teaching girls at the village school. We all shouted for mercy but they did not stop. They then stood him in front of me and my four small children. One of them aimed a Kalashnikov at his heart and shot him dead. The guard then said he was going to stay in the house and marry me. The next day, I talked to my mother-in-law, and we decided to flee. We had no money so we had to walk most of the way from Farah. It was very difficult with four small children. At every checkpoint, they asked us for money. My mother-in-law cried and begged them to let us go. At the Pakistan border we were asked for money again and it took us several days to find a way to enter Pakistan."

A woman recalled the abduction of her cousin from a remote village in Farah province in 1994.

"Several armed guards of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar went to my uncle's house in a village in Farah province. It was about midnight. My uncle had no money to give to them, so they took his 22-year-old son. Twenty-five days later, his body was found under a bridge. It showed a lot of bullet wounds."

Several Afghan refugees recalled the plight of a young woman who lived in Shahrara district of Kabul in early 1994.

"Her husband had been killed in a bomb attack. She had three children of between two and nine years old. One day she leaves her children to go and find some food. Two Mujahideen armed guards arrest her in the street and take her to their base in a house where 22 men rape her for three days. She is then allowed to go. When she reaches her home she finds her three children have died of hypothermia. She has now lost her sanity and lives in Peshawar."

Another woman described artillery attacks and heavy fighting in early 1994 in the residential area of Bibi Mahroo in Kabul.

"I was in my daughter's house when suddenly heavy fighting and bombing started. We did not know what to do but we could not stay in our houses. We all had to take shelter in the basement of a hospital. There were no toilets there. My daughter had four children. There was nothing to eat. We spent five days there. We were not fighters, but we could not leave the basement. My grand-daughter who was six years old was very ill. She just died there in my daughter's arms."

A couple who fled to Pakistan said that during an unexpected artillery attack in early 1994 on their residential area in Kabul, they took their youngest child to their basement, but did not have time to find their two other children. During a short lull in the bombing, they ran upstairs and found the bodies of the two children driven into the ground by the force of a bomb. The mother said:

"I told people to bury them where they were as I did not know how much of them could be pulled out of that hole."

An Afghan university lecturer recalled how she woke up on the morning of 1 January 1994 to the sound of artillery attacks.

"The fighting suddenly began and never stopped. Men holding positions on top of apartment blocks further away were firing rockets at our houses. One of these hit our house. We could not leave the house because of the fighting. During the first few days, armed guards kept coming to the door telling us to let them in, but we refused. They said they would break the door but they did not actually do that. We went to the basement and spent about a week there. We only left the basement for about 10 minutes each time to prepare some food in the kitchen upstairs, and went to the basement again. It was like hell."

10. Women's rights violated with impunity

Afghanistan's Constitution -- which guaranteed fundamental rights to women -- was suspended in April 1992 when the Mujahideen groups took power in Kabul. The legal system existing before 1992 has been ignored by warlords and the judicial structure has been largely dismantled. Those who perpetrate human rights violations and abuses do so with virtual impunity.

In several provinces, warlords have assumed the functions of judges; in some other provinces Islamic clergy or local *shuras* (councils of elders) assume judicial functions. In some of these provinces, trials which fall far short of internationally accepted standards of fairness have reportedly resulted in sentences involving punishments such as stoning to death and public lashings, which Amnesty International considers are cruel, inhuman or degrading and therefore opposes.

A family which left Kabul for Jalalabad in May 1993 told Amnesty International that they had witnessed a woman being stoned to death near Sarobi.

"In Sarobi we saw a lot of people standing on the river bank. We were told that a woman was being stoned near the river. We went forward and I saw her being stoned. We were told she had been married to a *Hezb-e Islami* commander who had then disappeared and had not been heard of for eight years. His wife's father had allowed the wife to marry another man. Now, the commander had come back and found out about the marriage. He told his men to find the woman and stone her to death."

A few Afghan warlords are reported to have responded to complaints against the human rights violations carried by their armed guards. However, the majority of the warlords pay no attention to such complaints.

A woman reported to Amnesty International that in April and May 1994 in Kartay Nou, the combined forces of *Hezb-e Islami* and *Hezb-e Wahdat* attacked family homes of the Panjshiris (an ethnic group) in Kabul.

"They raped a lot of women. I knew a 60-year-old woman who had been raped. That same woman then went to the main commander of *Hezb-e Islami* to complain, but the commander did not pay any attention."

11. Conclusions and recommendations

Women are the main victims of the continuing human rights crisis in Afghanistan. They are being killed and maimed in what appears to be deliberate artillery attacks on civilians. They are being targeted for assassination, abduction and rape. These abuses are being committed with total impunity by government forces and armed political groups who are prepared to terrorize the civilian population in order to secure and reinforce their power bases. Leaders of armed political groups have been able, when they wished, to release detained civilians and prevent arbitrary killings and other abuses. Yet most of the time they have chosen not to.

While frequently claiming that they wish to "restore" religious, ethnic and humane standards, those engaged in the fighting have persistently indulged in widespread human rights abuses and looting of property. Even non-violent groups such as women's organizations have been systematically targeted for attacks -- sometimes the perpetrators claim the attacks are motivated by religious principles, but in reality they are part of the warring factions' attempt to control and intimidate civilians.

The human rights catastrophe in Afghanistan demands immediate action. The cycle of unpunished abuses undermines any hope for a lasting environment in which human rights can be enjoyed. Amnesty International appeals to all parties fighting in Afghanistan to end the abuses of civilians and build respect for human rights.

Amnesty International also calls on the international community to take action. For over a decade many of the world's governments have sent vast quantities of lethal weaponry into Afghanistan, and have provided training and military facilities to the government and the armed groups fighting them. The weapons are now being used to kill and injure unarmed civilians, most of whom are women and children. Amnesty International calls on the international community help find and implement effective solutions to end the horrendous levels of suffering in Afghanistan.

Amnesty International urges the transitional authorities in Kabul to:

- * publicly commit themselves to safeguarding women's human rights.
- * ensure that government forces and armed groups allied to them are prevented from committing human rights violations such as unlawful killings and torture.
- * take special steps to prevent rape during armed conflict, as well as sexual abuse of women and girls.
- * thoroughly and impartially investigate all reports of deliberate and arbitrary killings, rape and other torture, and bring those responsible to justice, and provide fair and adequate redress to relatives of victims, including financial compensation and appropriate medical care.
- * ensure that government forces do not collude in human rights abuses by armed political groups, and do not lend such groups support in ways that facilitate human rights abuses.
- * make it clear that the killing, abduction or torture of women in order to punish or bring pressure on their relatives will not be tolerated, and hold those responsible for such abuses to account.
- * abolish all forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment, including the death penalty, stoning and flogging.
- * abolish all legislation that treats women and men unequally and condones human rights violations against women.
- * guarantee that women activists and non-governmental organizations working peacefully for the promotion and protection of women's human rights enjoy all rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- * recognize that discrimination in law and practice against women and girl children is a key contributory factor to human rights abuses such as torture, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, and initiate a plan of action against such discrimination.

Amnesty International urges the leaders of all warring Afghan armed political groups to:

- * take immediate steps to safeguard women's human rights.
- * observe minimum humane standards, as set out in the Geneva Conventions, in particular to treat civilians humanely, and to prevent deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture (including rape), ill-treatment and hostage taking.
- * prevent those under their command their from committing arbitrary and deliberate killings, rape and other forms of torture, political detentions

and sexual abuse.

- * maintain strict chain-of-command controls over their forces and hold accountable any members of their forces who commit or condone human rights abuses.

Amnesty International urges the international community to:

- * issue a clear warning to the warring factions in Afghanistan that the world's governments will not ignore abuses of human rights against women and other civilians.

- * ensure that no military equipment and training is supplied to any of the forces in Afghanistan without guarantees that it will not be used to commit or facilitate human rights abuses.

- * ensure that standards set out in international humanitarian and human rights law designed to protect women's rights are upheld in Afghanistan. At present, women who are working to promote development, equality and peace in Afghanistan risk imprisonment, torture and other human rights violations and abuses.

- * publicly state their commitment to ensuring that the intergovernmental bodies which monitor human rights violations against women, including the UN Commission on Human Rights and its Special Rapporteur on violence against women, the UN Commission of the Status of Women and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, have adequate resources to carry out their tasks effectively.

- * support education and training programs in Afghanistan designed to promote awareness of women's rights as human rights.

Amnesty International also urges:

- * the UN Secretary General to ensure that the recommendations made by international human rights bodies, including the Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan, are implemented.

- * members of other intergovernmental organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to condemn the human rights situation in Afghanistan and to become actively involved in trying to end the abuses.

- * all governments, particularly those in Pakistan and Iran, to respect fully the rights of Afghan refugees and offer them adequate protection, both at border-posts and in refugee camps. Governments should ensure that women's physical safety and integrity are protected by taking immediate steps to prevent torture, including rape, and all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, such as extorting sexual favours for commodities.

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

CAPTIONS

A devastated street in Kabul, late 1994 ©**Seamus Murphy**

A young Afghan woman pushing the few belongings she had saved from her house in Kabul in late 1993. Mujahideen groups have taken over many civilian houses and then killed the men, raped the women and looted the property.

Hundreds of thousands of Afghan women and children have fled their homes since April 1992, when Mujahideen groups took power in Kabul. The picture shows a family who had recently arrived in a refugee camp near Jalalabad, Pakistan. They had left Afghanistan in early 1994 after their house in Kabul was destroyed in a bomb attack.

Mina Keshwar Kamal, a founding member of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. She was assassinated in February 1987 in Quetta, Pakistan, reportedly by members of an Afghan Mujahideen group. Other leaders of the association have been threatened with death, and some have been forced to go into hiding.

A young Afghan refugee arriving at Naser Bagh camp in Peshawar, Pakistan, in mid-1993. Many families have faced human rights abuses and terrible hardship during their flight to Pakistan. They have been detained and sexually abused by various armed Afghan groups, and forced to cross mountain passes by night in freezing conditions if they had insufficient money to bribe border guards or if they belonged to certain ethnic groups.

An Afghan woman who had recently arrived in a refugee camp in Pakistan

Women wailing with grief as they are turned away from a funeral in Kabul in late 1994 ©Seamus Murphy