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Women in Afghanistan: The violations continue

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On 24 May, the Taleban armed militia in Afghanistan briefly captured the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif from opposing forces in the Afghan conflict. Before losing control of the city one of their first acts was to announce the imposition of restrictions on women that would in principle deny them some of their most basic and fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of association, freedom of expression and employment. Women in Mazar-e Sharif were ordered through loudspeakers to stay indoors, only to be allowed out in the company of a close male relative and wearing the all-enveloping *burqa* robe. They were told not to report for work and that education for women and girls was discontinued. Men were also ordered to grow beards.

These edicts echoed the restrictions the Taleban have imposed on women in other parts of Afghanistan which they control. Such restrictions, since they were first imposed in Taleban controlled areas, have been enforced through cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments and ill-treatment. As the Taleban have consolidated their position these rules have not been relaxed in any way. In fact, the opposite is the case. Additional edicts have been issued which further physically restrict women solely on the basis of their gender. These edicts represent a further form of repression for the women of Afghanistan who have suffered human rights abuses perpetrated by the various warring factions during years of civil conflict¹. AI opposes in all circumstances torture and ill-treatment and punishments which are considered cruel, inhuman or degrading under international law. AI also considers women detained or otherwise physically restricted for reasons of gender to be prisoners of conscience.

¹Although this report focusses primarily on the human rights situation for women in Taleban controlled areas of Afghanistan, it is no way intended to absolve other factions from their responsibility to respect women's human rights. AI has for years been concerned about abuses of women's human rights in all parts of Afghanistan, including the northern areas. It has continually called on all factions to ensure that women are not treated as spoils of war or subjected to rape and other forms of torture. See *Women in Afghanistan: A human rights catastrophe* (AI Index: ASA 11/03/95).

One of the persistent policies of the Taleban has been to "punish" women for defying their edicts. In December 1996, Taleban-controlled Radio Voice of Shari'a announced that a group of 225 women had been rounded up and punished in Kabul for violating Taleban rules on clothing. The radio announcement warned women once again to wear the *burqa* and respect the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) or "face punishment". Sources state that punishment of the 225 women consisted of being lashed on the back and legs after the sentence was handed down by a tribunal enforcing the Taleban interpretation of Islamic law.

On at least one occasion, such punishments have taken the form of bodily mutilation. A woman in the Khayr-Khana area of Kabul in October 1996 was reported as having the end of her thumb cut off by the Taleban. This 'punishment' was apparently meted out because the woman was caught wearing nail varnish.

Women also continue to be subjected to stoning to death. In March 1997, a woman was reportedly stoned to death in Laghman Province in eastern Afghanistan. According to Radio Voice of Shari'a, the woman who was married had been caught attempting to flee the district with another man. An Islamic tribunal reportedly found her guilty of adultery for which the punishment was death by stoning.

Under Taleban dispensation, women are not allowed to be visible even within the confines of their homes. In March 1997 the Taleban ordered Kabul residents to screen windows in their homes at ground and first floor levels to ensure that women could not be seen from the street. A Taleban representative speaking from the 'Attorney General's' office in Kabul explaining the edict told journalists: "The face of a woman is a source of corruption for men who are not related to them."

In some exceptional circumstances the Taleban have suspended their ban on Afghan women working outside the home. However, even these women who have permission to work are not secure in the areas controlled by the Taleban. In May 1997, members of the Taleban are reported to have beaten a group of Afghan women in Kabul who were employed by the aid agency CARE International. Taleban from the department for 'preventing vice and fostering virtue' forced the five women out of the minibus in which they were travelling. The women were publicly humiliated in front of a large crowd and two of them were beaten. Foreign agencies have been warned by the Taleban not to employ local Afghan women, but CARE International stated the five women in question had documents permitting them to continue working in the relief sector. The incident was a blow to the efforts of the humanitarian organisations operating inside Afghanistan. CARE International with the backing of the other NGOs and UN agencies immediately suspended its relief programme and sought an apology from the militia. Taleban officials reportedly issued an apology, but it remains to be seen whether this will result in a greater degree of security for women who have permission to work.

Women and girls have continued to be barred from attending schools and universities in Taleban controlled areas. On a number of occasions in the past, the Taleban have stated that schooling for women and girls would be restarted when the security situation in the country improved. However, this has been shown to be an empty promise as girls remain excluded from schools even in areas of southwestern Afghanistan where the Taleban have been in uncontested control for nearly three years. Taleban representatives have argued that there are not sufficient funds to provide for girls' education. However, UNICEF stated in a press release on 1 April 1997 that this argument is implausible. The real economic issue is the degree to which the exclusion of girls from schools and women from the workforce is seriously undermining the economic and social development prospects for Afghanistan, as well as being an affront to human rights. UNICEF has called on Islamic scholars, UN agencies, and countries that have influence with the Taleban to keep the pressure up until "each and every girl and woman has her basic human rights restored".

Calls for an end to Taleban policies which prohibit women from seeking employment and education have come from many Afghan civil rights groups. These include the Advisory Group on Gender Issues in Afghanistan, made up of Afghan men and women working for UN agencies and NGOs handling aid programmes in the country. In May the group called on the UN and member states to safeguard basic human rights in Afghanistan and urged them to take "careful account" of the Taleban's human rights record when considering their request for recognition or assistance for reconstruction in Afghanistan. Afghan women's rights groups, notably the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and the Afghan Women's Council based in Peshawar, Pakistan have made similar appeals to the international community to protect women's human rights in Afghanistan.

Detailed information about the human rights situation for women in areas of Afghanistan under the control of the anti-Taleban alliance is difficult to obtain. Amnesty International is, however, seriously concerned at recent reports that Afghan women in the northern areas of the country have been banned from working with a number of foreign aid organisations. The International Committee of the Red Cross in Mazar-e Sharif reported in mid-June that they had received an official note from the northern administration of General Abdul Malik that Afghan women working for the organisation were to be suspended, with the exception of their Afghan female staff working in the health and medical sector. At the time of writing, notification of the ban had not been sent to all the foreign agencies in Mazar-e Sharif and the ban apparently did not extend to women working in the civil service sector of the administration. Amnesty International urges all armed political groups in Afghanistan not to impose restrictions on women which would deny them their fundamental human rights.

International Involvement

Since the Taleban took control of Kabul in September 1996 they have been calling for international recognition of their administration. Following the Taleban's capture of Mazar-e Sharif, Pakistan became the first country to officially recognise the Taleban administration as the government of Afghanistan. Pakistan is known to support the Taleban and many observers believe that this includes military assistance, despite Pakistan's denial of such assertions. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also formally recognised the Taleban administration as the government in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia is believed to support the ultra-conservative Sunni militia as a counterweight to the influence of Shi'ite Iran in the region. Iran and neighbouring CIS states have also backed parties in the coalition opposed to the Taleban.

Taleban representatives abroad are understood to have had meetings with government officials in the US and the UK on the issue of recognition. The United States when questioned publicly avoided saying whether it would or would not recognise the Taleban. A State Department official said that the issue could come up if the Taleban asked either to take control of the Afghan embassy in Washington or to take up Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations. Should that happen the official said the US would "take an appropriate position".

Amnesty International takes no position on the question of recognition itself, but believes that the Taleban's call for recognition gives governments of the world an important opportunity to impress upon the Taleban - as an armed group making a claim to constitute a government - that international recognition brings with it international responsibility to comply with the international human rights treaties that Afghanistan has previously ratified, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

The outside governments that have offered political and material support to Afghanistan's warring factions over many years have an opportunity and responsibility to hold them to account to international norms of behaviour, particularly the minimum standards set out in international humanitarian law. Economic actors, such as the US oil company, Unocal, Saudi Arabian company Delta Oil and Argentinian oil company Bidas who are reportedly competing to build a \$2billion natural gas pipeline across Afghanistan from Central Asia should also use any leverage they have on the Taleban and other groups to command respect for human rights. Amnesty International is appealing to the international community to ensure that concern for the human rights of all Afghans is not put second to other political and economic strategic interests.

Security and human rights

The Taleban have stated that they have brought peace and stability to Afghanistan and this is often used by their supporters to justify human rights abuses by the Taleban, including their discriminatory practices against women. Kabul's residents have welcomed an end to the

rocketing and shelling that has come with the Taleban's takeover of the city. But some have questioned the price they have had to pay in giving up fundamental human rights. One university student told foreign journalists: "Yes it was not so secure before the Taleban, but we had freedom. Our women could study and work outside and we could say what we liked".

In Mazar-e Sharif people had lived in relative peace for many years away from front-line fighting around Kabul. The arrival of the Taleban in the city heightened tension, insecurity and instability. Fighting broke out between the Taleban and residents of a predominantly Shi'a area in the north of city when the Taleban started ransacking people's homes and removing 'un-Islamic' items such as television sets and tape recorders. The fighting escalated and spread. After two days of street battles in which, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, hundreds of people were killed, the Taleban were driven from the city. At present fighting continues in areas of the north and northeast between the Taleban and the opposing factions. Prospects for peace in the near future appear remote.

After years of bitter civil conflict in Afghanistan, in which the civilian population has suffered persistent human rights abuses perpetrated by the numerous warring factions, there is only one thing that can be said with any degree of certainty. Lasting peace and stability will not be achieved unless the fundamental human rights of all Afghanistan's tribal, ethnic and social groups, including women, are respected by those who wield power.

What you can do

Approach government representatives in your country to raise the following concerns about the human rights situation for women in Afghanistan:

- C Taleban restrictions imposed on women deny them some of their most basic and fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of association, freedom of expression and employment. Similar restrictions imposed by any other group would equally amount to a violation of these rights;

- C Women in Taleban controlled areas of Afghanistan continue to be beaten by Taleban guards for defying orders about dress or for working outside their home;
- C Women detained or otherwise physically restricted under Taleban codes solely by reason of their gender would be considered by AI to be prisoners of conscience.

Urge your government to put pressure on the Taleban, or any other group in Afghanistan imposing the same restrictions on women, to respect the fundamental human rights of women in all circumstances.

Appeal to your government to ensure that concern for the human rights of the Afghan population is not overshadowed by political, strategic and economic interests.

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