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Afghanistan: Urgent need for justice after killing of female official

The assassination of a prominent female official is a major setback to the fragile advances in human rights in Afghanistan, Amnesty International said as it urged the government to bring those responsible to justice.

Hanifa Safi, Director of the Ministry of Women Affairs in Laghman province, eastern Afghanistan was targeted in Mehtarlam city when a magnetic bomb was placed on the vehicle in which she, her daughter and husband were travelling.

Safi and her husband were killed and 11 people injured including her son, daughter and driver.

The killing of Safi comes shortly after video footage surfaced of a young Afghan woman, named in media reports as 22-year old Najiba, being shot dead on “charges” of adultery, reportedly by a Taleban insurgent.

Laghman provincial authorities have accused the Taleban of today’s attack, but so far no-one has accepted responsibility.

“Hanifa Safi was clearly a target of individuals or groups determined to undermine the fragile gains made for women’s rights in Afghanistan.” said Horia Mosadiq, Amnesty International’s Afghanistan Researcher.

“This is not the first such incident - a number of Afghan women in public roles have been assassinated over the past 10 years.

“The targeting and killing of civilians is an appalling act that violates the right to life and constitutes a crime under international law.”

Hanifa Safi is the second provincial head of women's affairs to be killed since Safiye Amajan, former head of the Kandahar province women's department, was shot dead outside her home in 2006 by members of an armed group thought to be linked to the Taleban.

High-profile Afghan women and human rights defenders are routinely attacked.

“The typical pattern which follows such incidents is failure by the authorities to adequately investigate the case and bring perpetrators to justice,” said Horia Mosadiq.

In the Tokyo International Donors Conference for Afghanistan on 8 July, the Afghan government committed to build a stable state based on the “rule of law, effective and independent judiciary and good governance”.

“Such commitments will remain meaningless if those responsible for violence against women in Afghanistan are able to escape justice,” said Mosadiq.

“The Afghan government - with international support - must fully implement the National Action Plan for the Women and the 2009 law on Elimination of Violence against Women.”

In May this year, Lal Bibi, a young girl from Kunduz province, revealed that she had been gang raped by a local police commander and his men.

In the last ten years, the Afghan government has largely failed to bring the perpetrators of human rights abuses, particularly against women - including those in public life - to justice. In the cases of Lal Bibi, Najiba and Safiye Amajan and others, the perpetrators have yet to be arrested and prosecuted.

“The Afghan government must - in line with the country’s international legal obligations as well as its Constitution - protect all Afghan people, including women human rights defenders targeted for their work,” said Mosadiq.

Amnesty International said that as the Afghan government pursues a political settlement with the Taliban and other insurgent groups, the Afghan government and its allies must ensure that human rights, including women’s rights, are not compromised or traded away in expedient deals.

Background

Afghan women in public life and women human rights defenders are at the frontline in protecting human rights in the country. They face intimidation and attacks, particularly by powerful elements in society, some of them members of the government, others allied with the Taliban and other anti-government forces.

Several Afghan women, some who have held high-profile positions, have been attacked since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001:

- In March 2010, a female member of the national Afghan Parliament, Fawzia Kofi, was injured by gunfire, attacked by unknown gunmen while travelling from Jalalabad to Kabul.
- In April 2010, Nida Khyani, a female Provincial Council member, was left in critical condition after being attacked in a drive-by shooting in Pul-e-Khumri, the provincial capital of Baghlan in northern Afghanistan.
- In April 2009, Sitara Achekzai, a member of the Kandahar provincial council, was killed in Kandahar. The Taliban claimed responsibility for her death alleging that she was “spying” for the Americans.
- In September 2008, Taliban gunmen shot dead Malalai Kakar, Afghanistan's most senior policewoman. She was head of Kandahar's department for crimes against women.
- In 2007, Zakia Zaki, director of Radio Peace in Parwan province, and known to be vocal against warlords, was shot dead while sleeping beside her two young sons. Zaki had previously received several death threats after criticising local warlords and the Taliban.
- In September 2006, Safiye Amajan, then the Kandahar provincial head of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Kandahar, was repeatedly shot outside her home by gunmen on a motorcycle reportedly linked to the Taliban.