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Afghanistan ten years on: Slow progress and failed promises

Ten years after a US-led military invasion removed the Taleban from Afghanistan, the Afghan government and its international supporters have failed to keep many of the promises they made to the Afghan people, Amnesty International said today.

“Hopes were high in Afghanistan in 2001 following the international intervention but since then human rights gains have been put at risk by corruption, mismanagement and attacks by insurgent groups who have shown systematic contempt for human rights and the laws of war,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia Pacific director.

“Today, many Afghans dare to hope for improvements in human rights in their country. The Afghan government and its international supporters must back these hopes with concrete action to defend them.”

An Amnesty International scorecard on the state of human rights in Afghanistan has found some progress in enacting human rights laws, reduction of discrimination against women and access to education and health care.

However, progress on justice and policing, human security and displacement had stagnated or even regressed, Amnesty International found. Afghans living in areas heavily affected by the insurgency have seen a serious deterioration in their conditions.

The development of a small but vibrant community of journalists and the modest re-entry of women into schools, the workplace and the government are all signs of the progress made over the last ten years.

Afghanistan has also enacted a number of laws that appear to strengthen women’s rights. The new constitution gives equal legal status to men and women and also sets aside a quota of a quarter of parliamentary seats for women. Two parliamentary elections held in 2005 and 2010 saw women take slightly more seats than their allotted quota.

However, violence against journalists and media workers has increased. In areas heavily affected by the Taleban and other insurgent groups, freedom of speech and opinion are severely curtailed.

Without the restrictions imposed by the Taleban, access to education has also significantly improved since 2001. There are now 7 million children attending school, of whom 37 per cent are girls. Under the Taleban there were less than a million students and almost no girls were allowed to attend school.

However, in the nine months leading up to December 2010 at least 74 schools in Afghanistan were destroyed or closed as a result of insurgent violence including rocket attacks, bombings, arson, and threats. Of these attacks, 26 were directed at girls’ schools, 13 at boys’ schools, and 35 at mixed schools.

“The Afghan government and its partners can’t continue to justify their poor performance by saying that things are better than during the 1990s. Wherever Afghans were given security and financial assistance, they overcame tremendous obstacles to improve their conditions. But too

often promises of assistance were not kept,” said Sam Zarifi.

Initial improvements made after 2001 have been significantly harmed by the burgeoning conflict, as insecurity hinders the work of schools and clinics in conflict areas and rural communities. Maternal mortality rates in Afghanistan have improved but remain among the highest on the planet.

At the start of 2010 the Afghan government began a reconciliation process with the Taliban and other insurgent groups. But a 70-member “High Peace Council” body established to negotiate with the Taliban has only nine women members and Afghan women’s groups have expressed their fear that their modest gains will be traded away in exchange for a ceasefire.

“It’s vital we don’t sell out women’s rights in expedient peace deals. The peace process in Afghanistan shouldn’t mean putting a price on women’s rights. These are non-negotiable. The Taliban has an appalling human rights record, and all negotiation for reconciliation must include proper representation of Afghan women,” said Sam Zarifi.

In the last decade increasing numbers of Afghan civilians have been injured during armed conflict. Over the last three years, around three-quarters of civilian casualties have been caused by attacks by insurgent groups, and the rest by international and Afghan forces.

The UN documented 1,462 civilian deaths in the first six months of 2011, another record high. 80 per cent of these deaths were attributed to “Anti-Government Elements”, with IEDs and suicide attacks, accounting for almost half of all civilian deaths and injuries.

The conflict has left nearly 450,000 internally displaced people in Afghanistan, mainly situated in Kabul and Balkh provinces and often living in extremely poor conditions with limited access to food, adequate sanitation or safe drinking water.

“The Afghan government’s international allies, including the US, have repeatedly said that they will not abandon the Afghan people. They must stand by this commitment to ensure that rights are not swept aside as the international community seeks an exit,” said Sam Zarifi.