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Afghanistan Istanbul conference: Regional cooperation urged to defend rights

The Afghan government must work with neighbouring countries to protect human rights while facing an increasingly bloody insurgency, Amnesty International said today as a conference in Istanbul brought together officials from across the region.

Heads of state from Afghanistan and Pakistan joined other regional officials and key partners – including the USA and NATO – at the conference to discuss a road map for Afghanistan’s security handover, planned for 2014.

“The security of Afghan people is inextricably intertwined with that of the wider region, and any road map must ensure improved protection and promotion of human rights across the region,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Programme Director.

“Particularly, the stability and prosperity of the region depends on authorities on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border taking action to prioritize human rights – especially women’s rights – in the run-up to and after the NATO handover.”

Amnesty International’s recent assessment of the state of human rights in Afghanistan shows that some progress has been made in the decade since the US-led military intervention began. This includes enacting new human rights laws, a decrease in discrimination against women and better access to education and health care.

But progress has faltered on justice and policing in the country, and in improving conditions for the more than 450,000 people displaced by the conflict. Civilian deaths are on the rise, with the vast majority of civilian casualties now attributed to the Taleban and other insurgent groups. Afghans living in areas heavily affected by the insurgency have seen a serious deterioration in their living conditions.

While NATO forces have committed to build up the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces to protect Afghan people, serious and persistent challenges remain.

A UN report last month documented widespread torture in detention centres run by the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security. Amnesty International has for years raised concerns about such ill-treatment of detainees.

Peace negotiations with the Taleban and other insurgent groups have also been shrouded in secrecy, with the Afghan people, including civil society, human rights activists and even the Afghan parliament, not adequately informed about progress.

“If peace talks with the insurgents are to result in a genuine, legitimate process, more transparency is crucial. It is unacceptable that Afghanistan’s own population is kept in the dark about the negotiations,” said Sam Zarifi.

“It is also essential that women’s rights are not traded away during reconciliation talks with the Taleban and that Afghan women are meaningfully represented at the negotiating table.”

Amnesty International has outlined key areas where Afghan authorities and their international partners must stand firm in negotiations, to defend the limited improvements in human rights in recent years.

These include upholding advances in women's rights, as well as ensuring freedom of expression for all, as the country has seen a burgeoning community of independent journalists in recent years. The Afghan government must also work with the International Criminal Court to investigate those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afghanistan.

"It is absolutely essential for the road map drawn up by Afghanistan and its partners to draw a red line around the human rights improvements made so far. These important advances are non-negotiable and must form the basis for future progress," said Sam Zarifi.

A conference in Bonn next month will bring together hundreds of delegates to discuss the international community's role in promoting Afghan stability after the troop pull-out in 2014.