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Afghanistan: Taliban Must Immediately Stop Arbitrary Arrests of Journalists, Civil Society Activists, Former Government Officials and Those Who Dissent

Under the Taliban rule, the rights to freedom of expression, liberty and assembly are increasingly being curtailed, and any form of dissent is met with enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention.

Enforced disappearances of women, and arbitrary arrest of journalists and civil society activists seem to be the latest tactics adopted by the Taliban to silence voices that speak out. The nine cases that we have documented contribute to a growing pattern of arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions and enforced disappearances by the Taliban against those who have tried to question the Taliban by way of peaceful protests or by exercising their right to freedom of expression.

The situation is particularly grim for women, who face the risk of being forcibly disappeared for protesting against a rapid reversal of their rights. The Taliban's continued denial of the whereabouts of women who have forcibly disappeared until they were released, points to their sheer lack of accountability and commitment towards protection of Afghan people. We demand that the Taliban immediately and unconditionally release all those detained for exercising their rights and they should not withhold information about the fate or whereabouts of the person deprived of liberty. It is particularly concerning that amongst those who suffered enforced disappearance in the past week was a 13-year-old girl.

As the de facto authority, the Taliban must abide by international human rights standards. They must allow all Afghans to freely exercise their rights without any fear of reprisal.

In this context, the wave of house-to-house searches by the Taliban as carried out in recent weeks violates human rights, and any such search must be done with due process, respecting the right not to be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with a person's privacy, family, home or correspondence, and the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks. All such search parties must be conducted based on individually evaluated cases.

The widespread and indiscriminate house searches are unjustifiable under human rights law – in particular given reports of the Taliban breaking into houses, destroying private property and intimidating house owners. The Taliban have announced the reason behind the house searches was to secure Kabul, in particular by “removing thieves, kidnappers, evil elements and other criminals”.¹ The Taliban claim to have confiscated weapons, explosive materials and government vehicles through the searches.²

The international community – including countries in the region and other countries that are in direct engagement with the Taliban – must condemn the ongoing human rights violations by the Taliban and call on the Taliban to respect and protect international human rights law.

Based on investigations and analysis carried out, Amnesty International concludes that the Taliban have been creating a climate of fear by increasingly committing the crime of enforced disappearance and other serious violations of international human rights law, including arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention to stifle critical voices by targeting women's rights activists and dissenters.

In the last two months, January and February, more than 60 people including children faced either arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention or enforced disappearance at the hands of Taliban authorities in Afghanistan. The number who have faced arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention and enforced disappearance in this period could be higher than the numbers reported in media given the intimidating environment that the Taliban have created and the shrinking space for freedom of media. Some of the cases listed below – including the women protesters – began with enforced disappearance at the hands of the Taliban authorities, and led to illegal often incommunicado detention; even when the Taliban acknowledged the detention, they failed to ensure that detainees were brought to courts within a reasonable time or to charge them with a recognizable criminal offence. The situation remains difficult to distinguish between arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearance.

¹ DW, “[The Taliban House-to-House Search Has Created Panic and Fear Among People](#)”, 27 February 2022.

² BBC Persian, “[International Reaction to the Taliban House-to-House and Restriction on Women's Travel](#)” 28 February 2022.

However, Amnesty International considers the cases of illegal detention of women as enforced disappearances because the Taliban – in particular with regard to Tamana Zaryab Paryani, Parvana Ibrahimkhel and their relatives – denied their involvement initially. Furthermore, the situation of Alia Azizi remains unknown after five months.

It is also important to highlight that according to sources who spoke with Amnesty International, those who faced arbitrary detention had no access to a lawyer and their cases remained with the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence,³ or the Taliban Ministry of Interior.⁴ Of the cases Amnesty International investigated, only one of the cases was sent to the Taliban prosecutor's office at the beginning of March 2022.⁵

Enforced Disappearance and Arbitrary Arrest of Women Protestors and Members of Their Families

On 11 February, the Taliban unlawfully detained 29 women's rights activists from a shelter in Kabul and initially did not acknowledge their involvement in the incident.⁶ Reportedly, a total of 40 people, including other family members such as men and children, were detained. On 20 February, the Taliban Ministry of Interior (Mol) announced that they had arrested some of the women protestors from a 'house' in Kabul, claiming that the women were provoked by external parties to protest against the Taliban.⁷ The Taliban Mol also released a video in which the women "confessed" that they were provoked into protesting and chanting against the Taliban. However, the circumstances in which the video was filmed remained unclear for Amnesty International – in particular given that the Taliban are known to intimidate and torture detainees. On 28 February, media reported that the Taliban had released the women protestors and their families.⁸

Earlier this year the Taliban had repeatedly denied detaining two women's rights protestors with their relatives on 19 January: Tamana Zaryab Paryani, who was detained along with her three sisters; and Parvana Ibrahimkheil, who was detained with her brother-in-law. On 13 February, the Taliban finally released them.⁹ The Taliban authorities further released Zahra Mohammadi and Murasl Ayar, who were arrested on 2 February for participating in protests against the Taliban's discriminatory policies against women and girls.

Alia Azizi, head of the women's prison in Herat, was forcibly disappeared in October 2021 after reporting for duty under the Taliban, according to her family.¹⁰ Amnesty International raised this case with the Taliban; however, they are yet to respond.¹¹

Arbitrary Arrest of Former Politicians, Civil Activists and Journalists

The Taliban – in particular the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence – have been arbitrarily detaining activists, journalists, women's rights activists and members of the former government in increasing numbers. The male detainees mostly have been arrested from public places by the Taliban according to the cases Amnesty International investigated. However, the arrests and detentions have been arbitrary as those arrested and detained have not been charged and, in most cases, the detained have been denied access to a lawyer or their families and have not been brought before a court or charged with a recognizable criminal offence.

Amongst those arbitrarily arrested and who remains in detention is Mawlawi Din Mohammad Azimi, a former politician and member of the Independent Electoral Commission.¹² The Taliban General Directorate of intelligence arrested him on 6 January, according to his nephew, from the district 15 of Kabul.¹³ However, since 31 January, his family has been able to meet him at the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence, Investigation Department, in Kabul.¹⁴ Azimi suffers from high

³ Amnesty International remote interview, 28 February 2022

⁴ Amnesty International remote interview, 07 March 2022

⁵ Amnesty International remote interview, 02 March 2022

⁶ The Guardian, "Taliban have detained 29 women and their families in Kabul, says US envoy", 12 February 2022. Taliban have detained 29 women and their families in Kabul, says US envoy | Afghanistan | The Guardian

⁷ BBC Persian, "Taliban Ministry of Interior: Women Who Protested Were Followed and Detained", 21 February 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-60446128>

⁸ Rukhshana Media, "29 Women Protesters and Their Family Members are Released from the Taliban's Detention", 29 February 2022. <https://rukshana.com/29-protesting-women-and-their-families-were-released-bytaliban>

⁹ UNAMA News Twitter, 13 February 2022. <https://twitter.com/unamanews/status/1492847372468203521?s=24>

¹⁰ Amnesty International remote interview, 01 March 2022

¹¹ Amnesty International, "Taliban authorities must reveal Alia Azizi's whereabouts", 21 January 2022.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/afghanistan-taliban-authorities-must-reveal-alia-azizis-whereabouts/>

¹² Hasht-e Subh Daily, "Taliban Arrest Former Deputy Head of the Electoral Complaints Commission", 7 JANUARY 2022. Taliban Arrest Former Deputy Head of the Electoral Complaints Commission - Hasht-e Subh Daily (8am.af)

¹³ Amnesty International remote interview, 13, 22 January 2022

¹⁴ Amnesty International remote interview, 02 March 2022

blood pressure and is diabetic, according to his nephew, who added that the Taliban has accused his uncle of maintaining relations with former politicians who oppose the Taliban. Until 3rd of March, he was not released from the Taliban detention.

The Taliban arrested Azeem Azeemi, an activist in his 20s from Chahar-Rahi Shahid, near Kabul Airport, after he and other activists planned a protest against the visit of Pakistan's national security adviser to Kabul.¹⁵ According to a source, he was arrested and blindfolded before he could stage the protest on 18 January. Later that same day, Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence in Shash Darak arrested three other protesters – Ahmad Shah, Abdul Karim, and Hayatullah Raofi – after they had gone to demand Azeemi's release. With regard to the protest, Belal Azeemi was also arrested by the Taliban Intelligence, the source added.¹⁶ After 5 February, Azeemi's and other activists' families were allowed to see visit them. Until 3rd of March, they were with the Taliban General Directorate of Intelligence, Investigation Department, in Kabul.¹⁷ Now, according to media, the Taliban are accusing Azeemi for a so-called 'illegal protest' to disrupt the country's security and flee to the west.¹⁸ Ahead of their protest, Azeemi via his Twitter account had informed the Taliban spokesperson and security official for Kabul of their intention to protest.¹⁹

The Taliban arrested Fayaz Ghouri, a former civil society activist and government official, in Herat province on 1 February.²⁰ According to sources, Ghouri was arrested in the evening from Mukhabirat street of Herat Province by the Taliban Provincial Directorate of Intelligence.²¹ The sources added that the Taliban had denied his arrest for several days.²² By 2nd of March, he was transferred to the Herat central prison, his family has been able to see him only once. Under the former government, Ghouri had worked for the Afghanistan Ministry of Counter Narcotic in Herat province and had been voluntarily working with the Herat Civil Society Institution Activist Solidarity. Under the Taliban, he had been criticizing some of the policies via Facebook according to the source. His file has been sent to the Taliban prosecutor's office.

Intimidating Environment

The ongoing arbitrary arrests and detention, cases of enforced disappearances particularly of women protesters, and lack of clear accountability within the Taliban rank and file have created an intimidating environment for the victims' families and others to openly report violations and advocate for redress and change. The space for reporting human rights violations has become even more precarious because of limited access to the internet.

The Taliban have allegedly been discouraging victims' families from publishing information on their cases or talking to media.²³ In this regard, sources told Amnesty International that the Taliban had told the victims' families, "they had better not raise their voice" because the detainees will be released if they are found to be "innocent."²⁴ The source added that due to fears of reprisal from the Taliban, victims are afraid to talk.

According to sources who talked to Amnesty International, the Taliban allowed the detainees, including the women, to contact their families to tell them they were in Taliban custody that they might be released after investigation, and they should avoid engaging media and advocacy. It appears this is aimed at preventing the detainees' families from engaging with the media.²⁵

The Taliban takeover of the country has also had a chilling effect on media freedom in the country. Since 15 August 2021, many media outlets faced closure, a number of journalists either left the country due to fear of the Taliban or because they

¹⁵ VOA, "Taliban Detain Human Rights Activists Planning Protest of Pakistan Official's Visit", 18 JANUARY 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-detain-human-rights-activists-planning-protest-of-pakistan-official-s-visit-/6402892.html>

¹⁶ Amnesty International remote interview, 28 January 2022

¹⁷ Amnesty International remote interview, 01 March 2022

¹⁸ Radio Free Europe - Pashto, "Protestor of the Pakistan National Security Adviser's visit to Kabul is still in Taliban's Detention", 18 March 2022. <https://pa.azadiradio.com/a/31757795.html>

¹⁹ Twitter, Azeem Azeemi, "informing the Taliban spokesperson about their planned protest," 18 January 2022.

<https://twitter.com/Azeemazeemi1/status/1483224448421572609>

²⁰ Etilaatroz, "Taliban Arrested a Civil Society Activist in Herat", 3 February 2022. <https://www.etilaatroz.com/135865/taliban-arrested-a-civil-society-activist-in-herat/>

²¹ Amnesty International remote interview, 28 February 2022

²² Amnesty International remote interview, 01 March 2022

²³ Amnesty International remote interview, 28 January 2022

²⁴ Amnesty International remote interview, 28 January 2022

²⁵ Amnesty International remote interview, 04 February 2022

lost their jobs, and about 50 journalists and media workers have been arrested by the Taliban over the course of the last six months.²⁶

Additionally, since their takeover, the Taliban have created extraordinarily restrictive rules such as instructing media to avoid publishing topics insulting national personalities, in conflict with 'Islamic values' – according to the Taliban's understanding - and instructing journalists to produce news in coordination with the Taliban government office.²⁷

Taliban Response

On 10th of March 2022, Amnesty International contacted the Ministry of Interior and Foreign Affairs and the Taliban Ministry of Information and Culture (as representative of the Taliban Authorities in Afghanistan) via email to provide an opportunity to reply and provide further information with regard to Amnesty's investigation findings. As of the date of publication there has been no response from the Taliban Authorities.

Background and Methodology

During the course of January and February, Amnesty International has been tracking the cases of arbitrary arrest of critical voices, journalists and activists as well as the cases of enforced disappearance of women's rights activists. Amnesty conducted 11 interviews. Six of the interviews were related to arbitrary arrest while other interviews were on enforced disappearances. Two of the interviews were with victims' families. In cases where it was not possible to conduct interviews, due to lack of connectivity or fear, Amnesty International also relied on media reports.

Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August last year, Amnesty International has documented extrajudicial and willful killings of former government and security personnel by the Taliban. According to a UN report published in January, over 100 former members of government and its security forces have been killed since 15 August 2021, when the former government collapsed and the Taliban took control.

²⁶ Reporters Without Borders, "Afghan journalists increasingly harassed by Taliban intelligence and new ministry", 4 February 2022. Afghan journalists increasingly harassed by Taliban intelligence and new ministry | RSF

²⁷ The New York Times, "New Taliban Guidelines Stir Fear About the Future of Press Freedom", 23 September 2021. Taliban's New Rules for Afghan Journalists Raise Fear - The New York Times (nytimes.com)