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International community should pay more than lip service to plight of Afghan women

Amnesty International welcomes the campaign "A Flower for the Women of Kabul" launched by European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs Emma Bonino and dozens of other prominent women which dedicates Women's Day on 8 March to Afghan women.

Amnesty International has continuously brought the plight of Afghan women to the attention of the international community and has urged all armed groups in Afghanistan, as well as countries which support these groups to acknowledge their responsibility for the human rights abuses in Afghanistan and end the cycle of abuses there.

Scores of women have been abducted and raped by members of the various political factions, often being treated as the spoils of war. Thousands of women have been indiscriminately killed in fighting between opposing sides in the conflict. Hundreds of thousands of women and children have been displaced, sometimes forcibly, or fled the country as a result of systematic human rights abuses.

In recent years, the Taleban have imposed a new form of repression against women in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar and other areas they control. The situation of women in these areas is a matter of grave concern which deserves special attention and action by the international community.

Tens of thousands of women remain physically restricted to their homes under Taleban edicts which ban women from seeking employment, education or leaving home unaccompanied by a male relative. Other measures restricting women include the closure of women's *hammams* (public baths). Women are also barred from the streets for certain periods during the fasting month of *Ramadan*. The Taleban have enforced these restrictions through the use of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments and ill-treatment. Hundreds of women have been beaten by Taleban guards in detention centres or in public places including shops, streets and bus stops for defying Taleban edicts.

Amnesty International welcomes any move to promote Afghan women's rights to education and employment and gender equality as well as unrestricted access to health facilities. It will consider women detained or physically restricted solely on account of their gender as prisoners of conscience and will continue to raise its concern about the beating of women in the streets or any other abuses. The organization fully supports any initiative which seeks to highlight the flagrant abuse of human rights in Afghanistan, and which recognises the vital role that the international community can play in bringing such abuses to an end.

Amnesty International takes no position on the question of recognition of any regime but is calling on all armed political groups in Afghanistan to respect fundamental human rights,

particularly those of women, in accordance with international human rights standards and the principles of humanitarian law. Governments with vested interest in Afghanistan who appear to provide military support to the warring factions must accept responsibility for fuelling human rights abuses. For other governments which provide political and material support to Afghanistan's warring factions this is an opportunity to hold leaders of armed groups to account for the human rights abuses against women in Afghanistan.

But responsibility to end the suffering of Afghan women does not end just there. In September 1995, at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, governments of the world committed themselves to ensuring the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the Beijing Declaration they pledged their determination "to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity". It is now their chance to enforce respect for women's human rights in Afghanistan.

For further information see Amnesty International documents:

- *Women in Afghanistan: A human rights catastrophe* (ASA 11/03/95), May 1995
- *Women in Afghanistan: The violations continue* (ASA 11/05/97), June 1997