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Afghanistan: public executions and amputations on increase

Dramatic public executions and amputations are increasingly being reported in Afghanistan this year, the latest phase in the Taleban's abuse of human rights in the country, Amnesty International said today.

In a new report, the organization states that people have been executed by being hanged, having their throats slit, or by having walls toppled on top of them. As well, people accused of theft have had one hand amputated.

"The death penalty is at all times the most extreme violation of the right to life, and when carried out as a form of public theatre can only serve to fuel a climate of violence and vengeance," Amnesty International said.

Worryingly, the executions have included five men convicted of sodomy -- a further sign that people who don't adhere to Taleban edicts will be singled out for harsh punishment.

The verdicts for both the executions and amputations have been passed by the Taleban's Shari'a courts where defendants do not receive a fair trial. Judges in these courts, many of whom are virtually untrained in law, reportedly base their judgements on a mixture of their personal understanding of Islamic law and a tribal code of honour prevalent in the Pastun areas.

Amnesty International has received information that these courts often decide a dozen different cases in the same day in sessions which may only take a few minutes. Defendants do not have the right to have a lawyer, the presumption of innocence is dispensed with and verdicts are final, with no mechanism for appropriate judicial appeal.

"The right to a fair trial becomes even more important when defendants risk losing their limbs or their lives," Amnesty International said.

In its report, the organization highlights several recent cases of executions and amputations carried out after such unfair trials.

- In February and March, a total of five men were convicted of sodomy and sentenced to death by crushing a wall on them. In the first case, a battle tank was used to topple the wall on three men in front of thousands of spectators at Kotal Morcha north of the city of Kandahar. They were seriously injured but didn't die immediately. Two of them died in hospital the next day; the third man survived but it is not known if he is still in hospital.
- On 10 February, the Taleban reportedly hanged a man accused of exploding one of their military planes, and paraded his body strung from a crane's hook throughout the city.

- on 13 March, more than 30,000 spectators were told through loudspeakers to gather at Kabul national stadium to watch the father and brother of a murdered man shoot the alleged murderer. The killings was carried out by the victim's brother who shot the man twice with a machine gun.
- On 20 February, the right hand of an alleged thief was amputated at a football ground in Kabul in front of thousands of residents who had gathered there after the Taleban radio had issued "invitations" for people to view the amputation. Witnesses said the surgeon took some five minutes to chop off the thief's hand. A senior Taleban official told the crowd "we have not invited the public for a picnic here. We have gathered them to see the implementation of the orders of the Islamic Shari'a and to learn a lesson".
- On 15 May, Taleban radio Vocie of Shari'a announced that the right hand of an alleged burglar was amputated before thousdans of Kabul inhabitants. According to reports, three doctors employed by the Ministry of Public Health cut off the hand within three minutes using a scalpel.
- on 27 February, a woman was given 100 lashes for alleged adultery at the Kabul Sports Stadium in front of some 30,000 spectators. The Taleban governor in Kabul, Abdul Manan Niyazi, is reported to have said "*this was only to expose her and humiliate her in public and it gave no pain*".

According to Amnesty International's report, the Taleban authorities have been uncompromising in their response when confronted with the criticism that such punishments violate international humanitarian law. Taleban officials have been quoted as saying "The Islamic Emirate (of Afghanistan) will bow under no kind of influence in the implementation and enacting of Shari'a punishment and divine orders".

"In a climate of increasing intolerance, these attitudes towards executions and amputations give rise to fears for the lives and physical integrity of people currently held in Taleban prisons on a range of criminal charges," Amnesty International said.

"We are calling on the Taleban authorities to forbid the imposition of the death penalty, amputations and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments by the Shari'a courts in areas they control."

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**For further information, please refer to Amnesty International's report:
Afghanistan: Flagrant abuse of the right to life and dignity, AI Index: ASA 11/03/98 or contact
the Amnesty International Press Office on +44 171 413 5566.**