

# .....**HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS** **IN AFGHANISTAN:** **Civil society destroyed**

Two decades of conflict, repression and neglect have had a devastating effect on civil society in Afghanistan. With the virtual collapse of the educational system there are now several generations of Afghans who have received little or no education at all. War and repression have deprived the country of peaceful political activity and intellectual pursuits that are the very foundation of civil and institutional life. Most Afghan politicians, professionals or those engaged in literary and artistic activities have either been killed, have left the country or have died of old age while press

and media activity has been reduced to its barest minimum. The negative impact of this impoverishment on the economic and social development of the country will be felt for decades to come.

### **A brief historical reference**

Modern education based on Western models in Afghanistan began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century when a number of schools were opened in Kabul. This coincided with the publication of a number of newspapers including *Serajul-Akhbar* (Lamp of the News, published during the reign of Habibullah Khan, 1901-1919) which attracted people engaged in intellectual activity.<sup>1</sup> These people in turn formed associations which aired demand for political reform. The faculty of Medicine - opened in 1932 - was the first ever higher education institute in Afghanistan. Kabul

The social costs of two decades of civil war in Afghanistan have been enormous. More than one million civilians are believed to have been killed and countless others injured. During the time of the Soviet occupation, over six million people fled the country. Although many returned after the Soviet withdrawal, there are still over two million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, making Afghans the largest single refugee group in the world. Inside the country, the infrastructure and institutions of state have been largely destroyed by the conflict. According to the UN, the socio-economic conditions of the population are amongst the worst in the world. Healthcare is rudimentary and many are without access to basic healthcare provision. Thousands of children die from malnutrition and respiratory infections every year. Maternal mortality is one of the highest in the world. Literacy rates are extremely low and are estimated to have dropped to as low as four per cent for women. Afghanistan is ranked bottom of the UN gender development index.

University - established in 1946 - became home to a flurry of political activity through the years. By 1992, there were universities in Balkh, Herat, and Kandahar. In Kabul alone, there were thousands of students in 1992 - most of whom were women as young men were being recruited by all sides to fight in the war.

Peaceful political activity was periodically encouraged or suppressed by various Afghan rulers, but many Afghans remember the first three decades after the Second World War to have been marked generally by greater tolerance of political dissent and less government interference in National Assembly elections.

With the ouster of Zahir Shah in 1973 by Mohammed Daoud, many Afghan intellectuals fled the country. Most of those

who stayed were absorbed in the state controlled institutions including universities, publishing houses and the media. Others, however, were imprisoned because they voiced opposition to the government.

Thousands of university educated Afghans fled after the communist take-over of power in April 1978 and the occupation of the country by Soviet forces in December 1979. The most common destination for fleeing Afghan intellectuals was the North West Frontier Province city of Peshawar in Pakistan which became a hive of political, cultural and literary activities. These included the formation of Afghan Information Centre in Peshawar by Professor Bahauddin Majrooh (assassinated in 1988); the formation of Writers Union of Free Afghanistan by Professor Rasool Amin; a range of political publications including *Payam-e Zan* of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) whose leader Mina Keshwar Kamal was assassinated in 1987; and Afghan Mellat or the Afghan Social Democratic Party. Some of the leading Afghan intellectuals were associated with the Council for Understanding and National Unity of Afghanistan known as *Shura-e Tafahom* whose Secretary General, Jamiatullah Jalal, "disappeared" in 1995.

Peshawar was also the power base of the armed Mujahideen groups fighting the Afghan government and Soviet forces. These groups received funds, weapons and training from some Western and regional governments via the Pakistani military. Pakistan maintained tight control over the distribution of this support and the organization of the Pakistan-based armed resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

In this milieu, Afghan intellectuals in Pakistan were under pressure to channel their activities in support of one or other of these armed political groups. Intellectuals who did not conform to these demands felt marginalised and were at risk of attacks by members of some of these Afghan parties. Those who raised their voice against the policies of the Mujahideen groups were targeted.

Afghan intellectuals residing in Iran were under heavy pressure to support the Hezb-e Wahdat (unity party) which was backed by Iran. Those who did not conform to these demands were under severe restrictions and unable to engage in any Afghan cultural or political activities.

Afghan intelligentsia today are scattered all over the world, representing shades of religious and political thinking inside Afghanistan. Some support the Taleban; some support the opposing United Front. Others generally advocate an end to the war and work towards a negotiated peace. It is this latter category of Afghan intellectuals both within the country and in refugee areas in Pakistan, which has been a particular target of assassination within the last decade or so, especially in the past two years.

### **A few names among hundreds**

Among the many hundred civil servants and university lecturers who “disappeared” after the communist take-over of power in the country in April 1979 was **Dr Mohammad Younis Akbari**, a nuclear physicist and lecturer at Kabul and Jalalabad universities. He was arrested on 27 April 1983 when Babrak Karmal was in power. In May 1994, the state controlled Radio Kabul announced that he had been sentenced to death by a ‘Special Revolutionary Court’ for ‘counter-revolutionary activities’ with no explanation about the details of the charges or the trial. His fate remained unknown until June 1990 when Amnesty International heard from an official of the Najibullah government that he had been executed years before without specifying the exact year or the circumstances of his killing.

Scores of Afghan intellectuals defying the policies of armed Mujahideen groups were similarly targeted. **Mina Keshwar Kamal**, a founding member of the Afghan women’s organization, RAWA, was assassinated along with two other members of her family in February 1987 in her house in Quetta. The assassins were believed to have been closely linked to Hezb-e Islami. Prior to her assassination, Mina Keshwar Kamal had received repeated death threats for her "anti-jihad [holy war]" activities. These reportedly related to her trips to Western Europe where she made public statements about the situation of Afghan women both in Afghanistan and in refugee camps controlled by Afghan Mujahideen groups in Pakistan. Although she informed the Pakistan authorities of the threats, she reportedly received no protection from the police.

Civil war broke out in Afghanistan in 1979 after Soviet troops invaded the country to back the communist government in power. Islamic and tribal groups opposed to the policies of the communist government and the Soviet occupation responded by mounting armed opposition. For ten years the country became a Cold War battleground, as Soviet and Afghan government troops fought against armed Islamic guerrilla fighters backed by the USA and its European allies, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, fighting continued between government and opposition forces until the communist government finally collapsed in 1992. The fall of the government did not bring peace, however, as the loosely allied and fractious Mujahideen groups started fighting each other for control of territory and administrative institutions. Despite the formation of a coalition interim government, central political authority was weak and unstable, and Afghanistan plunged into lawlessness.

At the end of 1994, a new political and military force - the Taleban - emerged on to the scene. Stating as their aim to rid Afghanistan of corrupt Mujahideen groups, the Taleban have succeeded in capturing large areas of country from opposing armed groups. They are now said to control around 80 per cent of Afghanistan. Fighting however continues between the Taleban and opposition forces and the political situation remains volatile.

Another victim was **Professor Sayed Bahauddin Majrooh**, who published an independent monthly bulletin in English from the Afghan Information Centre in Peshawar and was killed on 11 February 1988 after repeated death threats. He was known for his advocacy of a political solution to the Afghan conflict. He was killed by gunmen in his home in Peshawar. Several of the threats to his life are believed to have been made by *Hezb-e Islami* (Hekmatyar) who at that time were the armed group most favoured by Pakistan in seeking a military solution to the war in Afghanistan. No one has been brought to justice for his killing.

Among those targeted inside Afghanistan after the Mujahideen took power in April 1992 was **Abdul Karim Shadan**, a former Chief Justice of Afghanistan. He was reportedly abducted, tortured and killed in Kabul on 3 May 1992 by Mujahideen armed guards acting on behalf of the new government. Amnesty International knows of no official attempts to identify the killers or bring them to justice.

As Mujahideen groups began to fight each other in the streets of Kabul and other cities after the collapse of the last pro-Soviet government, Afghans inside and outside the country who opposed the conflict and the continued suffering of the Afghan civilians were threatened with death. **Wali Khan Karokhel**, a strong opponent of the new fighting in Afghanistan was killed in 1993 in Peshawar. Two days before his assassination he had reportedly spoken against the intervention of neighbouring countries in Afghanistan's affairs, and his associates believe this may have motivated his killers.

At times, those officially involved in negotiations among the Mujahideen groups for peace have themselves been killed. **Najmuddin Musleh**, a noted and widely respected Uzbek politician who had held high government office, including the governorship of Takhar, Ghazni and Herat, during Mohammad Daoud's presidency was found dead in a Hezb-e Wahdat detention centre on 10 March 1994 in western Kabul. Despite being sent by a warring faction, Jamiat-e Islami, to negotiate with a rival leader General Dostum immediately before the renewed outbreak of fighting on 1 January 1994 which eventually left tens of thousands of people dead in Kabul, he was taken prisoner by the allied forces of General Dostum and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Members of this alliance publicly admitted that they were detaining him, but did not disclose his whereabouts. Later, he was reportedly handed over to the forces of *Hezb-e Wahdat* in western Kabul, but the detention centre in which he was held was never disclosed. When the prison was discovered after the armed guards of Jamiat-e Islami had taken over the

area, about 1,500 prisoners held there were released but eight of the prisoners, including Najmuddin Musleh, were found to have been shot dead.

In 1996 and 1997, Afghan personalities from the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek minorities were targeted in tides of repressive action against these communities by the Taleban during which thousands were killed and thousands more were taken to unacknowledged detention. In 1998, a new wave of repression began against Pushtun Afghan personalities in Afghan territory controlled by the Taleban and in refugee areas in Pakistan.

Hundreds of such Afghan political personalities were arrested by the Taleban in 1998 and 1999 apparently only because of their peaceful opposition to the continued war in the country. The vast majority of the detainees, who include intellectuals, community leaders, former army officers and civil servants of Pushtun ethnic background, have reportedly been severely tortured. Over a dozen of them have been killed while in custody. Some of the detainees have been released and the exact number of those still in detention is not known. However, the killings have continued. These developments are particularly disturbing as they represent a continued crackdown on elements within Afghan society who are peacefully advocating the establishment of a civil society and rule of law after years of devastation and gross human rights violations.

An alarming number of attacks on Afghans have been taking place in Pakistan over the past months. In November 1998 alone, at least four prominent Afghan personalities strongly advocating a political solution to the war were killed in the cities of Peshawar and Quetta in Pakistan. Pakistani authorities are reported not to have taken serious measures to investigate these attacks.

These killings have continued and one of the latest victims was **Abdul Ahad Karzai**, a prominent Afghan politician engaged in recent Afghan efforts to bring about a negotiated peace to the country. He was gunned down by two assailants on 15 July 1999 as he was leaving a mosque. The gunmen reportedly used automatic assault rifles and drove off on a motorcycle immediately after the shooting. Two Pakistanis were also killed in the firing outside the mosque. Mr Karzai, who had been living in the United States, had arrived in Pakistan only a few days before the attack. He is believed to have been targeted because of the prominent role he played in efforts by the former king, Zahir Shah, for a negotiated settlement.

Several other Afghan personalities with similar profile have been killed in Quetta in the past year including **Nazar Mohammad**, a deputy leader of the Afghan party, *Da Solh Ghorzan*. No one has been brought to justice for these or other killings of Afghan political activists and human rights defenders in Pakistan.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Amnesty International recommendations to the Taleban authorities:**

#### **Killing of Afghan political personalities**

- To facilitate the investigation by an independent, impartial and competent body of the killing of Afghan personalities after their arrest in Afghanistan;

The main countries with influence are brought together by the UN in the “Six plus two” group, which meets regularly under UN auspices to discuss ways of bringing peace to Afghanistan. This consists of the six countries bordering Afghanistan - Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China - plus the USA and Russia.

Other countries with influence that have attended UN meetings on Afghanistan: Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Turkey, UK and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Afghanistan Support Group brings together main donors and organizations working in Afghanistan. These countries overlap with the UN groupings: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Britain, the US, Australia, Russia, Canada, Norway, Japan, and the EU’s executive commission.

- To ensure the safety of those providing testimony to such an investigation;
- To state publicly the steps they are taking to ensure that those found responsible for deliberate and arbitrary killings are brought to justice;
- To ensure the strict protection of civilians (in line with international humanitarian law) including Afghan political personalities in areas under Taleban control.

### **Amnesty International recommendations to the Pakistani authorities:**

#### **Afghan personalities at risk in Pakistan**

- To investigate each of the assassinations mentioned in this report thoroughly and to bring to justice those found to be responsible for the killings.
- To ensure the safety and physical integrity of all Afghans likely to be at risk in Pakistan.

**Please send appeals based on the recommendations above to:**

- YOUR OWN GOVERNMENT**
- THE EMBASSIES OF PAKISTAN, SAUDI ARABIA, IRAN, AND THE USA IN YOUR OWN COUNTRY**
- THE TALEBAN :**

**Alhaj Mullah Mohammad Rabbani**

**Salutation: Dear Mullah Rabbani**

**(Chairman of the Taleban Caretaker Council)  
Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan  
House No 8, Street No. 90  
G-6/3 Islamabad  
Pakistan**

**and**

**Mullah Mohammad Omar  
(leader of the Taleban)**

**Salutation: Dear Mullah Omar**

**Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan  
House No 8, Street No. 90  
G-6/3 Islamabad  
Pakistan**

- THE UNITED FRONT (ANTI-TALEBAN ALLIANCE):**

**Embassy of the Islamic State of Afghanistan  
31 Prince's Gate  
London  
SW7 1QQ  
United Kingdom**

**ENDNOTES**

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i. The newspaper, *Shamsun-Nahar* (Daytime Sun, published during the reign of Dost Mohammad Khan, 1793-1863), was perhaps the earliest publication to offer space for writing, although this was primarily dealing with court news. See Harvey Smith et al, *Area Handbook for Afghanistan*, US Government Printing Office, Fourth Edition, Washington DC, 1973, p.237.

ii. For further details about these arrests and killings see Amnesty International, *Afghanistan: Detention and killing of political personalities* March 1999 (AI Index: ASA 11/05/99).