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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Pakistan: Afghan Women's Day demonstrators must be protected

In view of continued threats against Afghan women's rights activists living as refugees in Pakistan, Amnesty International today urged the Pakistani government to ensure their safety during meetings and demonstrations to mark International Women's Day on 8 March 1999

There is particular concern that members of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) are at risk of attack. Even in Pakistan, RAWA's leaders continue to receive death threats from Afghan warring factions, and several of them have had to go into hiding in fear for their lives.

"Members of RAWA and other women's groups could clearly be in danger, especially because of continued threats and recent political killings of prominent Afghans in Pakistan," Amnesty International said. "The government of Pakistan must take this threat seriously and do everything in their power to protect all Women's Day protesters."

In December 1998, RAWA had to postpone a scheduled demonstration against Taleban policies towards women following Pakistani press reports that a person claiming to represent the Taleban had warned that they would "break the legs of RAWA participants if they took out a protest demonstration".

A number of people were detained by members of an armed political group, reportedly with cooperation from the local police, during a peaceful RAWA demonstration in Islamabad on 28 April 1997, organized in protest against the Taleban's policies towards women in Afghanistan. At least one of the detainees was severely beaten in custody and others were pressurized to give details of RAWA leaders, their telephone numbers and their whereabouts.

Background information

RAWA is a non-violent, left-of-centre group which has been active for over a decade. It is at the forefront of campaigning for women's rights in Afghanistan and has continuously opposed the Afghan Mujahideen groups' policies towards women.

RAWA campaigns for women's rights and provides education and health facilities for women and children, mostly in Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan. It has set up a number of educational and health programs in Afghanistan but has had to scale down these initiatives because of threats. RAWA's demonstrations are attended by Afghan women only, but many Afghan men who support their cause usually stay in the background and provide security when necessary.

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