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AFGHANISTAN: WOMEN TARGETED FOR KILLING, RAPE IN THE ARMED CONFLICT

Women are particularly targeted in the continuing human rights crisis in Afghanistan, according to an Amnesty International report released today.

"Women are targeted for killings, abduction and rape by both government forces and armed political groups," Amnesty International said. "Although those engaged in the fighting frequently claim they wish to restore religious, ethnic and humane standards, they have persistently abused human rights."

Mothers have been forced to watch their young daughters being raped. Children witness their parents beaten and killed. Thousands of women have watched helplessly as their homes were destroyed and their families brutally ill-treated. Hundreds of thousands of women have made painful treks with their children across hazardous mountains, only to suffer sexual or physical abuse at border posts and in refugee camps in Pakistan.

"Such human rights violations could be prevented by strong action at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in September 1995, which should reaffirm governments' commitments to international human rights standards," the organization said.

In preparing the new 16-page report "Women in Afghanistan: A human rights catastrophe", Amnesty International conducted in-depth interviews with Afghan refugees recently arrived in Pakistan and other countries.

The report provides detailed testimonies by women about deliberate killings, rape and other forms of torture, abductions and sexual abuse, and political persecution of those who try to promote women's basic rights.

The human rights organization called upon the transitional authorities of Afghanistan and the leaders of all armed political groups to stop their forces from abusing human rights and to ensure that women's human rights are respected.

Amnesty International also urged the international community to take urgent action to help end the human rights disaster that continues unabated in Afghanistan. All governments should ensure that no military equipment or training is supplied to any force in Afghanistan without guarantees that it will not be used to commit human rights abuses, the organization said.

A family who left Afghanistan in mid-1994 recounted how members of General Abdul Rashid Dostum's armed forces entered their house in Kabul and shot their daughter dead when she refused to go with them. Another family who left Afghanistan in mid-1994 told Amnesty International how one night in March that year, members of General Dostum's forces entered their house in Kabul and killed their daughter:

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"There were about 12 of them all carrying Kalashnikov rifles with their faces covered. They asked us to give them our daughter. We refused. They did not accept that and asked us to bring our daughter to talk to them. We asked her and she came and told them she did not want to go with them. One of them then lifted his Kalashnikov and shot my daughter dead in front of our eyes. She was only 20 and was just about to finish her high school. We buried her body."

Rape of women by members of the various warring factions appears to be condoned by leaders as a method of terrorizing civilians and rewarding soldiers. Scores of Afghan women have been reportedly been abducted and detained by Mujahideen groups and commanders for sexual purposes, then sold into prostitution. Others are forcibly taken from their families in exchange for money, or for marriage to Mujahideen commanders.

A woman told Amnesty International that her 13-year-old niece was abducted by the armed guards of a Hezb-e Islami commander in late 1993:

"They said their commander wanted her. They took her away. She was resisting and screaming but they dragged her away. We were frightened that if we did anything we would all be killed. Several months later, the commander was killed during fighting and the girl was able to come back to their father's house. Abducting young girls has been very common in recent years. They would kill any girl who refused to go with them."

Until early 1995, there were only two major political alliances fighting for control of territory in Afghanistan. One was the Shura-e Nezar (Supervisory Council) comprised of all warlords belonging to Jamiat-e Islami (Society of Islam).

The other major political alliance was the Supreme Coordination Council, an alliance of General Dostum's forces, the Hezb-e Islami (Party of Islam), led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Shi'a party, Hezb-e Wahdat. Armed guards of both alliances have been involved in human rights abuses against women with impunity.

Since February 1995, a political force known as the Taleban (religious students) have taken control of nine of Afghanistan's 30 provinces. The Taleban are intent on establishing a strict Islamic system of government.

In addition to these appalling abuses, women have been prevented from exercising other basic fundamental rights -- such as the rights to association, freedom of expression and employment -- by the Taleban and Mujahideen groups who consider such activities to be un-Islamic for women.

For example, these groups are reported to have threatened women to stop them from working outside their homes or attending health and family planning courses held by non-governmental organizations. Educated women have been repeatedly threatened by the Mujahideen groups.

To obtain more information or a copy of the full report, please contact Amnesty International at (44) (71) 413-5729 [tel] or (44) (71) 956-1157 [fax].