

Afghanistan: Report documents violence and repression by US-backed warlords

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The 102-page report on Afghanistan issued by the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) on July 29 catalogs the systematic violation of human rights by the militias of the Northern Alliance who were placed in power following the US invasion in late 2001.

The summary declares: “Much of what we describe may at first glance be seen as little more than criminal behavior. But this is a report about human rights violations, as the abuses described were ordered, committed or condoned by government personnel in Afghanistan—soldiers, police, military and intelligence officials, and government ministers. Worse, these violations have been carried out by people who would not have come to power without the intervention and support of the international community. And these violations are taking place not just in the hinterlands of Afghanistan. The cases described here took place in the areas near the capital, Kabul, and even within Kabul itself...”

“The situation today—widespread insecurity and human rights abuse—was not inevitable, nor was it the result of natural or unstoppable social or political forces in Afghanistan. It is, in large part, the result of decisions, acts, and omissions of the United States government, the government of other coalition members and parts of the transitional Afghan government itself. The warlords themselves, of course, are ultimately to blame. They have ordered, committed or permitted the abuses documented in this report. But the United States in particular bears much responsibility for the actions of those they have propelled to power, for failing to take steps against other abusive leaders and for impeding attempts to force them to step aside.”

All the abuses recorded by the report took place in 12 provinces of southeastern Afghanistan—home to one third of the population, including the 3 million people now crowded in Kabul. The warlords in control of this region are those most closely associated with the US.

In Kabul, the majority of soldiers, police and militiamen are loyal to the ethnic Tajik movement Jamiat-e Islami, or to Ittihad-e Islami, a Pashtun militia that has been aligned with Jamiat for over a decade. Jamiat-e Islami was one of the main militias of the Northern Alliance that fought alongside American troops during the overthrow of the Taliban and seized Kabul with US

assistance.

With tacit US support, Jamiat-e Islami intimidated the *loya jirga* or grand council in June 2002 to award its leaders the major political posts in the “interim government.” Human Rights Watch denounces the *loya jirga* for entrenching “the dominance of military leaders both at the local level and in Kabul.” It comments that President Hamid Karzai has “little capacity to enforce his orders without the support of powerful military figures or the United States” and “barely retains control over Kabul-based security and military forces.” HRW indicts the Bush administration for this state of affairs, noting that US military forces “cooperate with (and strengthen) commanders in areas within and outside of Kabul.”

The Defense Ministry and control of the official armed forces is held by Jamiat-e Islami leader Mohammed Qasim Fahim, Younis Qanooni holds the Education Ministry and Abdullah Abdhullah holds the Foreign Ministry. Members of the organization command both the Kabul police and the national intelligence agency. Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, the leader of Ittihad-e Islami, maintains militia forces and exerts de facto control over the area to the west of the capital, including the city of Paghman.

Hazrat Ali, another warlord who has worked closely with the US military in post-invasion operations along the Pakistani border, exerts control over the city of Jalalabad to the east of Kabul, as well as the surrounding provinces of Laghman and Nangarhar.

HRW accuses these and other US-sponsored militias in Afghanistan’s southeast of presiding over “a climate of fear.” The interviews and testimony conducted by HRW suggest an atmosphere of unchecked violence, theft, intimidation and sexual abuse of the population by the militias. This takes place in front of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, who are a main military and political prop for the Northern Alliance’s despotism over the Afghan people.

The report documents cases of arbitrary arrests in which people are seized and held until their families pay a ransom. In Kabul province, a former delegate to the *loya jirga* told HRW that “there are arbitrary arrests all the time—people held by the authorities for money.” According to HRW, the various militias enforce mafia-style protection and extortion rackets in the areas

they rule. Vehicles are regularly stopped at checkpoints and forced to pay either money or in goods to pass through. A shopkeeper in Kabul testified that Interior Ministry police collected protection money from him “every Thursday at around 3:00 p.m.” Another told HRW: “If you do not pay, they close your shop and lock it with their lock. If you break it open, they will arrest you and put you in jail.”

HRW claims it has “documented numerous robberies and home invasions by soldiers and police in many provinces of southeastern Afghanistan.” In testimony cited in the report, police in West Kabul followed a trail of footprints from a robbed home to a barracks of militiamen loyal to Sayyaf, at which point they “got scared and turned back.” In two cases cited by HRW, troops believed to be on Sayyaf’s payroll forced homeowners to tell where their money was by stabbing them with bayonets. An interviewee refers to militiamen looking at women with “bad eyes” and trying to “touch them.” The report also cites witnesses alleging young women and boys have been raped in their homes or kidnapped off the street and sexually assaulted.

The report outlines the systematic political intimidation of the few political and media figures who have dared raise public criticism of the “interim government.” A politician and publisher referred to as “H. Rahman” told HRW he was personally threatened by Younis Qanooni in November 2002 that he would “have no right to live any longer” if he continued to criticize the government in his newspaper. Members of the national intelligence agency visited his house and told him if he would be exiled, imprisoned or assassinated if he did not “change his policy.” He received further threats on his life from Sayyaf and was beaten by soldiers in May 2003.

Another oppositional politician told HRW: “If a member of our party—and any political party except the *jihadis* [a term used to describe the Northern Alliance]—does anything publicly, he might be killed.”

Other examples of political violence in the HRW report include:

- * death threats, assaults and other intimidation by officials in and around Jalalabad against people speaking publicly in favor of educating girls or advocating women’s rights;

- * the beating and imprisonment of two students who protested against nepotism at Kabul University by the chief of the Kabul police and Jamiat-e Islami member Basir Salangi;

- * death threats and police intimidation against journalists and cartoonists who have been critical of Jamait-e Islami leaders.

In the lead-up to the invasion of Afghanistan, a great deal was written about the reactionary social policies of the Taliban, particularly its treatment of women. The HRW report charges that little has changed since the installation of the pro-US regime.

The presence of armed men who feel they are a law unto themselves and often use religious dogma to terrorize the population has created such anxiety that many women, and

especially teenage girls, are prevented from leaving their homes except when accompanied by family males. The fear is such that in some areas families will not even take pregnant women to the hospital.

While some girls are now attending school, real or perceived security concerns in many areas cause families to pull their daughters out of education as they reach puberty. A UNICEF spokesman estimated for HRW on May 8, 2003 that no more than 32 percent of girls were attending school and in some areas the participation rate was only 3 to 10 percent. A Jalalabad journalist told HRW that only 10 girls were attending the city’s university. Male teachers in Kabul have been beaten by police for teaching girls. The full body *burqa* is still worn by most women outside of Kabul due to fear of fundamentalist attacks on either their male companions or on the women themselves.

The HRW report comments: “In discussions on women’s rights in Afghanistan, it is often heard that restrictions on women’s and older girls’ liberty of movement, access to education, political participation and privacy, including the right to choose whether to wear a *burqa*, are cultural, or that they are part of Afghan tribal codes or religious traditions. But when soldiers and police abduct and rape women and girls with impunity, and where these actions have the effect of denying them access to education, health care, jobs and political participation, women and girls are not experiencing ‘culture.’ They are experiencing human rights violations.”

The Human Rights Watch report is available in both html and PDF formats at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/afghanistan0703/>.

One can safely assume that the HRW report provides only a pale indication of the social devastation and political chaos that reign in Afghanistan nearly two years after the American invasion. The reality on the ground in the Central Asian country completely exposes the lies that were used to justify the US intervention, whose essential aim was to replace one set of warlords with another that would be more pliable to American interests, above all its designs on the rich oil and natural gas resources in the adjoining Caspian basin.



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