

Afghanistan

Human rights concerns: a message from NGOs to donors

The international community's lack of sustained action on past and present human rights abuses in Afghanistan has brought a number of non-government organizations (NGOs) together to raise concerns before the Afghan Support Group (ASG). It is only when human rights are given priority in donor interventions, including the Afghan Development Forum that we will begin to see meaningful stability and peace. We trust that the successor to the ASG will be able to take note of our experiences and find ways to ensure that voices in support of human rights are heard.

The following NGOs have contributed to and support this presentation –Action Aid, Afghan Women Judges Association, Afghan Women Lawyer and Professional Association, Afghan Women's Network, All Afghan Women Union, Amnesty International, ARTICLE 19, Association for Advocacy of Youths Rights, Cooperation Centre for Afghanistan, Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), medica mondiale e.V., and The Equal Rights Association.

Security and an end to conflict in Afghanistan will come only when human rights are fully protected in Afghanistan.

There have been many positive changes over the past year. However, despite changes in the government in Afghanistan, major human rights abuses continue. Improvement will require pressure from the international community and an increase in technical advice and support to Afghan institutions.

We wish to emphasize that the new decision making fora that succeeds the ASG must contain clear mechanisms whereby the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Afghan and International NGOs, and individual human rights defenders can raise human rights concerns. We strongly suggest that there are procedural guarantees of a response by Ministries and relevant coordination bodies.

The lack of security represents the most serious obstacle to reconstruction. Human rights abuses continue to be committed with impunity in Afghanistan. The reliance of the international community's political and security strategy on people suspected of serious human rights abuses undermines the international community's commitment to a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.

To date the international community's limited focus on Kabul has undermined long-term national security. The international community needs to provide increased financial and technical support to ensure that appropriate indigenous institutions develop across the whole country to protect human rights. Institutions that urgently need such support include the police, prisons and judiciary.

Afghans deserve the opportunity to decide how to address their country's long legacy of abuse, but they cannot begin such a process without international assistance. There has not yet been a nationwide discussion on how to address abuses of the past—the initiation of which falls within the mandate of the AIHRC. The international community should provide financial, technical and political support to the AIHRC so that it can carry out this consultative process. We also recommend that donors provide adequate assistance so that recent and past abuses can be investigated and fairly addressed, contributing to the long-term stability of the country.

Integral to Afghanistan's development is the opening of economic, social, and cultural opportunities for women. Most women and girls do not feel secure to move outside the home despite the fact that formal legal restrictions on their movement have been lifted by the Kabul government. Those who do move outside frequently face harassment in public places, affecting their access to education, health facilities, jobs and leisure. Domestic violence is widespread and there are no effective mechanisms to seek assistance or redress. Despite its illegality, girls as young as nine years old are married without intervention by the government. International support for women's rights must be made more visible to Afghan authorities at all levels. This should be borne out through programs that address issues of women's security and effective access to decision making processes and the criminal justice system. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that women and girls can safely access these mechanisms.

Widows, orphans, the disabled and other marginalized groups in society also require targeted protection and assistance.

There is evidence that those who speak out in Afghanistan face intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and violence from both government and non-government actors. The international community should raise such cases with the Afghan authorities and challenge any infringements of the right to freedom of expression, including legal limitations on press freedoms.

In closing we would like to urge the international community to consider the more intangible aspects of Afghanistan's development, particularly the Afghan

government's ability to protect and promote human rights of all Afghans. This should be seen as equally important if not more important than the tangible construction of roads, schools and clinics.'

We welcome any responses or queries to the issues we have raised.

[They can be addressed to human rights workers in any of the following NGOs who are present in Kabul: Action Aid – bijay02afg@yahoo.co.uk, Amnesty International – AI-Kabul@amnesty.org, medica mondiale e.V. – medicamondiale@les-raisting.de]