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World Report 2024



Afghanistan

Events of 2023

Afghan refugees return to Afghanistan from Pakistan, in Torkham, Afghanistan, November 3, 2023

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The human rights situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate in 2023 as the Taliban committed widespread human rights violations, particularly against women and girls. Afghanistan remained the only country where women and girls could not access secondary and higher education and were banned from most employment with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations (except in health care, nutrition, and primary education). Women also faced significant barriers to freedom of movement and speech. Human Rights Watch has concluded that the pattern of abuses against women and girls in Afghanistan amounts to the crime against humanity of gender persecution.

Taliban authorities cracked down further on local media and freedom of speech and increased arbitrary detentions of journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society activists, including women protesters. Their forces detained and executed members of the former government's security forces. [On August 22, 2023](#), the UN reported that since August 2021 there had been at least 800 instances of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrests, and detentions, over 144 cases of torture and brutal treatment, 218 extrajudicial deaths, and 14 enforced disappearances of former government employees and security personnel by Taliban forces.

[More than 28 million](#) people, almost two-thirds of the population, needed humanitarian aid in Afghanistan in 2023, 14.7 [million](#) of whom needed it for basic survival, making it one of the

world's worst humanitarian crises. The UN reported that by mid-2023, 4 million Afghans were acutely malnourished, including 3.2 million children under 5. The loss of most foreign assistance after August 2021, a shortfall in humanitarian assistance in 2023, and a longstanding drought exacerbated by climate change were the primary reasons for the humanitarian crisis.

A [December 24, 2022](#) ban on women working with local and international NGOs, except in positions relating to health, nutrition, and education, continues to deprive many women of their livelihoods. The ban exacerbated the humanitarian crisis by making it more difficult to deliver aid to women and girls and assess and monitor the humanitarian needs of women and girls who generally have more difficulty accessing food and other humanitarian assistance.

Afghanistan's criminal code makes same-sex conduct a criminal offense, and the Taliban have echoed the previous government's support for the criminalization of same-sex relations, with some of their leaders vowing to punish lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, many of whom live in hiding as a result.

The number of attacks by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Afghan affiliate of the Islamic State, declined, but several bombings and improvised explosive devices caused civilian casualties.

Women's and Girls' Rights

The Taliban have imposed and enforced rules and policies that comprehensively bar women and girls from exercising their fundamental rights, including freedom of assembly, movement, work, and education. These rules also undermine other rights, such as the rights to life, livelihood, and access to health care, food, and water. In addition to the ban on women working in most jobs for the UN and international NGOs, Taliban authorities previously prohibited women from working in the public sector or holding senior positions within their central or provincial institutions. Most women who worked for the former government have been unable to resume their jobs.

In most of Afghanistan's provinces, the authorities have also issued regulations that forbid women from travelling or leaving their houses without being accompanied by a male relative as a chaperone, including to work. [In most places, women must wear a full hijab and have their faces covered in public.](#)

Actions by Taliban authorities through 2023 suggest the crackdown is deepening, including their [refusal to allow 63 women](#) to travel to the United Arab Emirates to accept scholarships, their [closure of all beauty salons](#), which cost women 60,000 jobs, and their ban on [women visiting the Band-e-Amir national park](#).

Taliban security forces have used excessive force to disperse women protesting against Taliban policies and have arbitrarily detained some female protesters, holding them for hours or days. In some cases, their family members have also been detained. [Detained women](#) protesters and their family members have sometimes been tortured. Among the women's rights protesters detained in 2023 were Neda Parwani and Zholia Parsi, both taken by the Taliban in September.

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls visited Afghanistan in April and May. They presented a [report](#) to the UN Human Rights Council in June describing the widespread and systematic discrimination to which women and girls in Afghanistan are subjected, concluding it "constitutes gender persecution and an institutionalized framework of gender apartheid."

Extrajudicial Killings, Enforced Disappearances, and Torture

Taliban forces carried out revenge killings and enforced disappearances of former government officials and security force personnel. [In a report](#) published in August 2023, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 218 extrajudicial killings, 14 enforced disappearances, and over 144 cases of torture and mistreatment of detainees since August 2021. In a September [report](#), UNAMA documented the systematic torture of detainees, particularly by the Taliban's intelligence agency, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), with methods including waterboarding. UNAMA [reported](#) public floggings of at least 34 men, 8 women, and 2 boys for drug offenses, gambling, and so-called moral crimes since August 2021.

Attacks on Journalists and the Media

Taliban authorities enforced extensive censorship and used unlawful force against Afghan media and journalists in Kabul and the provinces. Hundreds of media outlets have been closed, and most female media workers across Afghanistan have lost their jobs. Foreign correspondents also face severe [visa restrictions](#) when coming to Afghanistan to report, and many Afghan journalists now live in exile due to safety concerns.

Taliban arbitrary arrests of media workers increased in 2023. [On August 13](#), the Taliban detained Ataulloh Omar, a journalist reporting for Tolo News, and accused him of working with media outlets operating from exile. [On August 10](#), Faqir Mohammad Faqirzai, the manager of Kilid Radio, and Jan Agha Saleh, a reporter, were detained by the Taliban's GDI. On the same day, Hasib Hassas, a reporter for Salam Watandar, was arrested in Kunduz. All three journalists were released a few days later. Taliban authorities rarely provide any information about the basis for such arrests or whether those detained will be put on trial. Those in custody lack access to lawyers and in most cases family members are not allowed to visit them. [On January 5](#), the French Afghan journalist Mortaza Behboudi was arrested; he was released on October 18 with any charges against him unknown.

Attacks on Civil Society Activists

The Taliban also continued to crack down on civil society activists. On February 2, the Taliban arrested university professor [Ismail Mashal](#) who had publicly protested the Taliban's [ban](#) on women's university education. On March 27, the GDI arrested [Matiullah Wesa](#), an education activist and the founder of Penpath, an organization that advocates for education in Afghanistan, along with several of his family members. He was released on October 26 with no charges against him.

After Taliban authorities closed down beauty salons on July 19, security forces [used water cannons](#) and fired shots into the air to disperse a peaceful protest by salon owners and employees. Four women protesters were reportedly arrested and released later that day. The Taliban detained dozens of women's rights protesters across the country in 2023.

Economic and Humanitarian Crises

In 2023, an unprecedented number of Afghans needed humanitarian assistance. According to [the UN Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2023](#), acute malnutrition affected more than 4 million people, including more than 840,000 pregnant and nursing women and over 3 million children. Six million people were expected to face extreme food insecurity by the end of the year, putting them one step away from famine. The loss of millions of jobs after August 2021, the loss of most foreign aid, and a multi-year drought [were](#) the principal reasons people were unable to buy enough food to feed their families.

The ban on Afghan women working for international humanitarian NGOs and the UN exacerbated the crisis and constrained the operational capacity of humanitarian aid organizations, with long-

lasting consequences for all people in need, especially women-headed households. [The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#) estimated 48 percent of women-headed households have a poor Food Consumption Score (FCS) compared to 39 percent of male-headed households.

The Taliban's restrictions on women's rights are among the factors that have influenced donors' decisions to cut aid, leading to an alarming funding shortfall. The [UN requested](#) US\$3.26 billion in humanitarian funding for Afghanistan for 2023, but as of November, it had received less than 25 percent of the appeal. Afghan and international NGOs cite this shortfall as the main reason for stopping aid programs. By late 2023, several organizations providing health care were either closing clinics and hospitals or withdrawing support for them due to lack of funding.

Attacks on Civilians

On January 12, the ISKP claimed responsibility for [a suicide bombing](#) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul that killed 33, many of them civilians, and wounded at least 45. [On June 6](#), a car bomb killed the Taliban's provincial governor in Badakhshan; a suicide attack on June 8 during the funeral killed nine civilians and injured 37. [On November 7](#), a minibus explosion killed seven and injured 20 members of the Hazara community. The attack occurred in the Dasht-e Barchi area of Kabul, a predominantly Shia Hazara neighborhood that has seen many ISKP attacks.

Key International Actors

In March 2023, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of UNAMA, including its role to report on human rights conditions. It also [called](#) on the secretary-general "to conduct and provide, no later than 17 November, an integrated, independent assessment, after consultations with all relevant Afghan political actors and stakeholders, including relevant authorities, Afghan women and civil society, as well as the region and the wider international community." Feridun Sinirlioğlu, the former permanent representative of Türkiye to the UN, was appointed to lead the assessment. [Human Rights Watch and others](#) stressed that the assessment should prioritize the rights of women and girls.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva renewed and further strengthened the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on Afghanistan.

On December 21, 2022, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union issued a [joint statement](#) condemning the ban on women attending universities. On February 1, the US State Department [announced](#) additional travel restrictions on several Taliban officials in response to the Taliban's ban on women's university education and most jobs with international NGOs.

In Australia, the Office of the Special Investigator charged a [former special forces soldier](#) with a war crime for allegedly executing an Afghan civilian, the first of several such charges expected in the ongoing investigation of abuses by Australian military personnel against Afghan civilians and captured combatants in Afghanistan.

Following authorization by the pre-trial chamber in November 2022, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court resumed its investigation into alleged crimes in Afghanistan, focusing on those perpetrated by the Taliban and ISKP while continuing to de-prioritize alleged abuses by US personnel and former Afghan government forces.

On April 5, the UN issued a [statement](#) condemning the Taliban's ban on Afghan women working with the UN. The EU and many countries issued similar statements of condemnation.

