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country summary

Afghanistan

Life for the average Afghan remains short, miserable, and brutal. Average lifespan for men and women hovers at around 45 years. According to the United Nations, nearly a third of all Afghans, some 6.5 million people, suffer from chronic food insecurity. Afghans face escalating violations of their human rights at the hands of a variety of abusers: the Taliban and other anti-government insurgent groups, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami and tribal militias, criminal groups and local warlords (many with government affiliations), and, increasingly, the Afghan government itself. The insurgency in the south undermines development and reconstruction in the comparatively peaceful north, and as predicted, destabilizes neighboring Pakistan. The United Nations' assessment of areas considered "most dangerous" and thus out of bounds for nearly all aid workers doubled in 2007 to cover one-third of Afghanistan.

Where there are signs of development and economic progress, much of it is driven by a narcotics industry that is burgeoning, despite more than a billion dollars from the United States and the United Kingdom for counter-narcotics efforts. Afghanistan produces some 95 percent of the world's total supply of heroin. The narcotics industry penetrates ever more deeply into all areas of the Afghan economy and political system, weakening the rule of law and perverting the political process.

Nevertheless, there were a few bright spots where international assistance allowed Afghans to improve their living conditions, for instance by allowing hundreds of thousands of children to return to school if they were not hampered by security, indicating that helping Afghanistan does not pose an intractable problem.

Violence and Insecurity

2007 was a bloodier year than any since the US-led forces ousted the Taliban in 2001. Casualty rates were at least 25 percent higher than the previous year. Civilians were

increasingly caught in fighting between anti-government forces and government forces and their international supporters. Anti-government forces also routinely violate the laws of war by launching attacks from civilian areas, or retreating to such areas, knowingly drawing return fire. NATO and US-led Coalition forces killed more than 300 civilians, although it is possible that the number is higher, given the difficulty of Western forces in distinguishing combatants from civilians and their extensive use of airpower. The Taliban began using anti-personnel mines in Helmand province again, complicating efforts to eradicate mines from one of the most mine-infested countries in the world.

Stymied by NATO from establishing clear control over more territory, in particular larger urban centers, anti-government groups carried out a record number of suicide bombings and attacks on civilian targets, destabilizing parts of the north and west of the country—including areas adjacent to Kabul—which had previously been relatively quiet. At this writing, such attacks have killed 374 Afghan civilians in 2007 and injured at least 631 civilians.

The Taliban increasingly relied on public executions to terrorize and rule populations living in areas under their influence. They carried out at least 28 beheadings, several of them filmed and broadcast on the internet. For instance, in April the Taliban distributed video footage of a clearly prepubescent boy beheading Ghulam Nabi, a Pakistani militant accused of betraying a top Taliban official killed in a December airstrike. The Taliban targeted humanitarian aid workers, journalists, doctors, religious leaders, and civilian government employees, condemning them as spies or collaborators. In June they publicly hanged four elders in Helmand province because they were perceived as cooperating with NATO forces. Insurgent groups killed at least 34 aid workers in Afghanistan in 2007.

At this writing, anti-government groups have kidnapped at least 41 Afghan civilians in 2007 and killed at least 23 of them, including journalist Ajmal Naqshbandi and driver Sayed Agha in Helmand. Anti-government groups also targeted foreign aid workers. The Taliban claimed responsibility for killing a German national whom they had taken hostage. In July the Taliban abducted a group of 23 South Koreans

affiliated with a Christian organization. The Taliban killed two of the hostages before eventually releasing the rest.

Government Abuses and Failures

The Afghan government continues to lose public legitimacy because of widespread corruption, failure to improve living standards, and lack of progress in establishing the rule of law even in areas under its control.

In a troubling sign, President Hamid Karzai's government did very little to implement the Action Plan for Peace, Reconciliation and Justice, a five-year plan for implementing transitional justice in Afghanistan, which is part of the Afghanistan Compact and which he officially initiated on December 12, 2006. The warlords and criminals entrenched in the Afghan parliament attempted to pass several pieces of legislation designed to curtail human rights. In a highly controversial move, a group led by Abdul Rabb al Rasul Sayyaf, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Taj Mohammad, all of whom have been implicated in war crimes and other serious human rights abuses, attempted to pass a blanket amnesty law. Facing unprecedented public opposition, the bill was amended to allow individuals to file criminal and civil cases against perpetrators, though these provisions are unlikely to be effective because of a lack of political will and severe threats and intimidation against witnesses and complainants. President Karzai did not sign the legislation and its legal status remains unclear.

The Afghan parliament made other attempts to restrict human rights. On May 21 the lower house of parliament voted to suspend parliamentarian Malali Joya, one of Afghanistan's most outspoken defenders of human rights, for her televised criticism of her colleagues. The parliament also attempted to enact significant limits on the freedom of the press, but in the face of strong pressure from Afghan and international journalists the parliament eased some of the proposed restrictions. The legislation has not been enacted as of this writing.

Unable to stem the growing crime wave associated with increasing militia activity and narco-trafficking, Karzai bowed to pressure from ultra-conservative groups and

authorized the execution of 15 criminals in October by firing squad at the Pul-i Charkhi high security prison outside Kabul.

The National Directorate of Security, recipient of significant financial and operational support from the US, increasingly abuses prisoners. Many of them, including some originally detained by NATO forces, are held in unofficial or secret prisons.

Women

Afghan women and girls rank among the world's worst off by most indicators, such as life expectancy (46 years), maternal mortality (1,600 deaths per 100,000 births), and literacy (12.6 percent of females 15 and older). Women and girls still confront significant barriers to working outside the home and restrictions on their mobility; for example, many still cannot travel without an accompanying male relative and a burqa.

Children

As part of their campaign of terrorizing the civilian population, the Taliban target schools, and in particular girls' schools—the government reported that insecurity shut down 450 schools throughout the country, including 40 percent of schools in the south. On June 12, Taliban killed two schoolgirls in front of a girls' school in Logar, near Kabul, and injured three others and a teacher. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said these incidents stalled or reversed the progress achieved in female education since the fall of the Taliban regime, and had already caused a significant drop in attendance in secondary schools. While the number of girls in school increased quickly after the Taliban's ouster in 2001, only one-third of school-age girls attended school in 2007.

According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, child labor was widely prevalent throughout the country and ranked alongside insecurity as one of the top reasons for children not attending school.

Refugees and Displacement

Insecurity and armed conflict continued to cause new displacement and deter millions of Afghans from returning to their homes. Tens of thousands of Afghans in the southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Oruzgan, and Farah left their homes to escape fighting, leaving them particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and disease and with very limited access to humanitarian aid.

Nearly two million Afghan refugees have returned to their country, mostly from Pakistan. But the United Nations continues to report the presence of three to four million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Between April and June the Iranian government forcibly deported nearly 100,000 registered and unregistered Afghans living and working in Iran (see Iran chapter).

Key International Actors

Despite a strong UN mandate, Afghanistan's chief international supporters continue to dither over their role and responsibilities in Afghanistan. The existing military, political, and economic resources are poorly coordinated. There is no coherent mechanism for assisting civilians injured or displaced by NATO forces. One sign of this is that, five years after the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was created, there are not nearly enough UNAMA human rights monitors.

Taking into account Afghanistan's population and size, the 40,000 NATO and US-led coalition forces in the country are a small fraction of the security forces deployed in other recent post-conflict areas like the Balkans and Timor-Leste. Many are limited by national laws to comparatively safe areas in Afghanistan or cannot act to protect ordinary Afghans adequately. Despite significant overlap between NATO and the European Union, the international security effort in Afghanistan has been hobbled by insufficient resources and the failure to effectively address the security concerns of the Afghan population. For instance, the 160 police trainers fielded by the EU were too few to train the needed number of officers, resulting in a police force rife with corruption and lacking in public legitimacy.

The US military operates in Afghanistan without an adequate legal framework, such as a Status of Forces Agreement with the Afghan government, and continues to

detain hundreds of Afghans without adequate legal process. In a singular exception to an otherwise poor record of accountability, on February 13, 2007, a US federal court sentenced David Passaro, a CIA contractor found guilty of assault in the beating death of Abdul Wali in June 2003, to eight-and-a-half years in prison.