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Afghanistan: Taliban Use Excessive Force against Protesters

(New York) – Taliban security forces in Afghanistan used excessive force against protesters in the city of Herat on June 9, 2026, Human Rights Watch said today. They beat protesters and shot toward the crowds, killing a child and injuring others, and detained an unknown number of people.

The protest followed recent arrests of women in Herat accused of violating the authorities' strict dress code. According to the United Nations, at least 30 women had been detained as of June 7 for alleged "noncompliance" with dress requirements. Herat residents said that officials of the Taliban's Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice—the "morality police"—had called for strict adherence to the dress code at Friday prayers on June 5 as part of a wider crackdown; Kabul residents also told Human Rights Watch that they had received such instructions.

"The Taliban authorities fear any dissent and so are escalating their repression of free expression and other basic rights," said Fereshta Abbasi, Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The authorities should cease these attacks and ensure that Afghans can protest peacefully without fear of violence or arrest."

The protest broke out in a predominantly Hazara neighborhood. One protester told Human Rights Watch that Taliban security forces had closed the roads before the protest started to keep people away. "It was calm at the beginning, until the Taliban started beating and pushing people," she said. "When the crowd began to get bigger, they started shooting and

some protesters started throwing stones. I saw a few injured people, including one who had been shot in the back."

Witnesses said the security forces at first shot into the air to disperse the crowds but then aimed toward the protesters and followed people as they fled. A doctor in Herat told the media he had treated three people with gunshot wounds. The UN stated that an 11-year-old boy was fatally shot.

A woman who observed the protest from her rooftop said: "When the shooting began, people started to escape, and I saw the Taliban shooting toward those attempting to flee. I witnessed some people getting injured. The Taliban even went to the streets and beat children to send them home. Everyone was terrified … some of the wounded [said] they didn't go to the hospital [for fear of arrest]. I saw the 11-year-old who had been killed. He was bleeding terribly."

She said her father, who had participated in the protests, was taken from their home and detained later in the day as security forces began searching homes, examining phones for videos of the protests, and detaining men and women.

Families in neighborhoods where women were previously arrested for violating the dress code said anger over the arrests had sparked the protests. Protesters were chanting demands for "Work, Education, and Freedom." One woman said the morality police had visited the area two days earlier: "In the last few days, they brought big vans to the area and arrested many women including pregnant and older women. All the women were wearing hijabs, but the style did not meet their [the police's] preferences." The UN stated that the detained women were released on June 8.

A media report quoted a spokesperson for the Herat police as saying that protests had disturbed public order.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Afghanistan is a party, protects the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The ICCPR allows only for limited restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly that are "necessary in a democratic society" to protect a narrow range of important interests including public order, public safety, and the rights of others. The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials require officials policing assemblies to use force only when necessary and proportionate, and permit lethal force only when strictly necessary to protect life.

Afghanistan is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which obligates the authorities to eliminate discrimination against women in all forms, including laws or practices that enforce stereotyped gender roles. The Taliban's dress code enforcement and detention of women for their

clothing constitute violations of CEDAW's core provisions on equality, dignity, and freedom of movement.

The events in Herat are not an isolated incident. The Taliban have been committing a widespread and systemic gender-based attack on women and girls in Afghanistan that amount to crimes against humanity. Since taking over the country in August 2021, the Taliban have imposed laws and policies intended to deny women and girls throughout the country their fundamental rights because of their gender.

Taliban officials should immediately and unconditionally release all those arbitrarily detained for peaceful protest or alleged noncompliance with the dress code, end abusive restrictions on women's clothing, and provide accountability for those killed and injured. They should allow peaceful protest and ensure their security forces use only the minimum force necessary to ensure public safety.

"The Taliban authorities appear determined to silence those who try to speak out against their abusive practices," Abbasi said. "By punishing people for exercising their free expression rights, the Taliban authorities aren't silencing the message but only adding to their mounting list of human rights abuses."

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Herat: Taliban security forces used excessive force against protesters; one child killed; several other people injured

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