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Parties to the conflict in Afghanistan continued to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes, and other serious human rights violations and abuses with impunity. Indiscriminate and targeted killings reached record levels. Human rights defenders, women activists, journalists, health and humanitarian workers, and religious and ethnic minorities were among those targeted by the Taliban and non-state actors. A wave of reprisal killings was unleashed during the Taliban takeover of the country. Thousands of people, predominantly Shia Hazaras, were forcibly evicted. The limited progress made towards improving women's rights was sharply reversed under Taliban rule. Rights to freedom of assembly and expression were drastically curtailed by the Taliban. Access to healthcare, already severely compromised by the pandemic, was further undermined by the suspension of international aid.

Background

The conflict in Afghanistan took a dramatic turn with the withdrawal of all international troops, the collapse of the government, and the takeover of the country by Taliban forces.

On 14 April, US President Joe Biden announced that remaining US troops in Afghanistan would be withdrawn by 11 September. A subsequent Taliban military offensive overran the provinces and reached the capital, Kabul, on 15 August, causing the government to collapse and President Ghani to flee the country. In early September, the Taliban announced an interim government.

An evacuation operation accompanied the final withdrawal of US and NATO forces, which was brought forward to 31 August in the face of Taliban gains. Some 123,000 people were airlifted in chaotic conditions from Kabul airport, including thousands of Afghan nationals at risk of reprisals from the Taliban.

The already precarious humanitarian situation deteriorated further in the second half of the year due to the conflict, drought, the Covid-19 pandemic and an economic crisis exacerbated by the suspension of foreign aid, the freezing of government assets, and international sanctions against the Taliban. In December, the UN warned that some 23 million people faced acute food insecurity and hunger, including more than 3 million children at risk of death from severe malnutrition.

Indiscriminate attacks and unlawful killings

Government forces under the leadership of President Ghani, as well as non-state actors, carried out indiscriminate attacks with improvised explosive devices and air strikes, killing and injuring thousands of civilians. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, civilian casualties reached record levels in the first half of the year, sharply increasing in May as international military forces began to withdraw. By June, 5,183 civilian deaths or injuries had been recorded, including 2,409 women and children. More than two-thirds (68%) were attributed to the Taliban and other non-state actors and 25% to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and other pro-government forces. On 29 August, a US drone strike killed 10 members of one family in Kabul, including seven children. The US Department of Defense later admitted acting in error and offered financial compensation to the victims' relatives.

Non-state groups deliberately targeted civilians and civilian objects throughout the year. A bomb attack on Sayed-ul-Shuhada High School in West Kabul on 8 May killed or injured more than 230 people, nearly all girls.¹ On 26 August, a suicide attack outside Kabul airport carried out by the armed group Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-K) resulted in at least 380 casualties, mostly Afghans seeking evacuation. Three separate attacks took place in October on Eid Gah Mosque in Kabul and two Shia-Hazara mosques in the cities of Kandahar and Kunduz, reportedly killing dozens and injuring hundreds of others.

The Taliban and other armed actors were responsible for numerous targeted killings throughout the year, including of human rights defenders, women activists, humanitarian and health workers, journalists, former government officials and security force members. Religious and ethnic minorities were at particular risk.

During its offensive and following its takeover, the Taliban carried out reprisal and extrajudicial killings of people associated with the former administration, including members of the ANDSF. On 19 July, the Taliban abducted and killed two sons of former Kandahar provincial council member Fida Mohammad Afghan. Former police officers, particularly women, were also targeted. Also in July, Taliban fighters killed nine ethnic Hazara men in Mundarakht village in Malistan district, Ghazni province.² On 30 August, in Kahor village in Khidir district, Daykundi province, the Taliban extrajudicially executed nine ANDSF members after they had surrendered, and killed two civilians, including a 17-year-old girl, as they attempted to flee the village. All were ethnic Hazaras. On 4 September, Banu Negar, a former member of the police force in Ghor province, was beaten and shot dead by Taliban fighters in front of her children. A further 100 former members of the security forces were killed or forcibly disappeared by the Taliban between mid-August and the end of December.

Forced displacement and evictions

Between January and December, some 682,031 people were displaced by fighting, adding to the 4 million already displaced by conflict and natural disasters.

The Taliban forcibly evicted thousands of people from their homes and land in Daykundi and Helmand provinces and also threatened to evict residents of Balkh, Kandahar, Kunduz and Uruzgan provinces. Evictions particularly targeted Hazara communities, as well as people associated with the former government. In June, the Taliban ordered Tajik residents of Bagh-e Sherkat in Kunduz province to leave the town in apparent retaliation for their support of President Ghani's government. In late September, more than 740 Hazara families were forcibly evicted from their homes and land in Kindir and Tagabdar villages in Gizab district, Daykundi province.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

The Taliban takeover increased the number of Afghan refugees entering neighbouring countries. After evacuations from Kabul airport were stopped, thousands of desperate Afghans sought land routes to Pakistan and Iran. Tens of thousands crossed into Pakistan before it closed its borders on 2 September to most Afghans. Only the Torkham crossing point was open to those holding gate passes. In November, the Norwegian Refugee Council reported that 4,000-5,000 Afghans were crossing the border to Iran every day.

The right of Afghans, including those at risk of reprisals, to seek asylum in third countries was compromised by Taliban-imposed restrictions on departures, including often insurmountable challenges in obtaining passports and visas. There were fears that border restrictions by neighbouring countries would force Afghans to make irregular journeys using smugglers, placing them at further risk of human rights abuses.

Women's and girls' rights

Prior to the Taliban takeover, women and girls continued to experience gender-based discrimination and violence. After the Taliban takeover, they lost many of their fundamental human rights. Despite reassurances from the Taliban that women's rights would be respected, the limited progress made in the previous two decades was quickly reversed.

Women's participation in government and the right to work

Women were severely under-represented in the final round of the failed peace talks, with just four women in the government delegation and none in the Taliban delegation.³ Four cabinet posts were held by women under President Ghani's administration; women were excluded altogether from the Taliban's interim government. Shortly after coming to power, the Taliban disbanded the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and its provincial offices.

In August, a Taliban spokesman told reporters that women should refrain from attending work until "proper systems" were put in place to "ensure their safety". In September, women employed in government ministries were told to stay at home while their male colleagues resumed work. There were reports of women being barred from their workplaces or sent home in different parts of the country – with the exception of women working in the passport office, airport and health sector. In some cases, women were reportedly escorted home from work by Taliban fighters and told that they would be replaced by their male relatives.⁴

Women lawyers, judges and prosecutors were effectively dismissed from their jobs and forced into hiding. They faced reprisals from men whom they had convicted and imprisoned for domestic and other gender-based violence, who were subsequently freed from prison by the Taliban. There were reports of ex-prisoners and Taliban fighters ransacking the homes of female judges.

Right to education

On taking power, Taliban leaders announced that a “safe learning environment” was required before women and girls could return to education. Boys were permitted to resume school in mid-September, but the situation for girls remained unclear. At the end of the year, except in Kunduz, Balkh and Sar-e Pul provinces, the majority of secondary schools remained closed to girls. Intimidation and harassment of teachers and pupils led to low attendance rates, particularly among girls, even where schools and other education facilities were open.⁵

Sexual and gender-based violence

Violence against women and girls remained widespread but chronically under-reported. In the vast majority of cases, no action was taken against perpetrators. Between January and June, the MoWA registered 1,518 cases of violence against women, including 33 murders. Beatings, harassment, forced prostitution, deprivation of alimony, and forced and early marriages remained the main manifestations of violence against women. There was no government data available for the second half of the year.

Violence against women escalated further from August when women’s legal and other support mechanisms began shutting down – in particular when women’s shelters closed. The Taliban’s ending of institutional and legal support for women left women at risk of further violence, and they feared the consequences of reporting incidents.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders faced intimidation, harassment, threats, violence and targeted killings. A spike in attacks that began in late 2020 continued into 2021. According to the Afghan Human Rights Defenders Committee, at least 17 human rights defenders were killed between September 2020 and May 2021, while hundreds more received threats.

From late August, the Taliban occupied all 14 offices of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, forcing its staff to flee the country or go into hiding. Door-to-door searches by Taliban fighters looking for human rights defenders and journalists were reported, and NGO workers and their families were beaten.

LGBTI people’s rights

On 29 October, the Taliban spokesperson for the Ministry of Finance said that LGBTI rights would not be recognized under sharia law. Afghanistan’s Penal Code continued to criminalize consensual same-sex sexual relations.

Freedom of expression and assembly

The Taliban forcibly dispersed peaceful protests across Afghanistan, including using gunfire, electroshock weapons and tear gas, and beat and lashed protesters with whips and cables. On 4 September, a protest in Kabul involving around 100 women demanding the inclusion of women in the new government and respect for women’s rights was dispersed by Taliban special forces, reportedly with tear gas and electroshock weapons. Women protesters were beaten. On 7 September, the Taliban shot and killed Omid Sharifi, a civil society activist, and Bashir Ahmad Bayat, a schoolteacher, as they protested against the Taliban in Herat province. Eight other protesters were injured. On 8 September, the Taliban’s Ministry of the Interior issued an order banning all demonstrations and gatherings “until a policy of demonstration is codified”.

Despite assurances that it would respect freedom of expression, the Taliban severely curtailed media freedom. Journalists were detained and beaten and had equipment confiscated, particularly when covering protests. Media workers, particularly women, were intimidated, threatened and harassed, forcing many to go into hiding or leave the country. House-to-house searches for journalists were conducted, particularly those working for western media outlets. On 20 August, Taliban members broke into the home of a journalist working for the German media outlet Deutsche Welle. Unable to find him, they killed one of his relatives and injured another. By late October, more than 200 media outlets had closed. The Afghan Journalist Safety Committee announced that at least 12 journalists had been killed and 230 assaulted in the 12 months to November 2021.

Right to health

The already weak health sector was further damaged in August by the suspension of international aid to the System Enhancement for Health Action in Transition Project for Afghanistan (Sehatmandi). As of November, 3,000 health clinics had closed due to lack of funding. The multi-donor project was the main source of support for quality health care, nutrition and family planning services across Afghanistan. In September, the WHO warned of a rapid decline in public health conditions, including escalating rates of measles, diarrhoea and polio in children.

Lack of emergency preparedness and the poor state of public health infrastructure meant that Afghanistan was already ill-equipped to deal with a mid-year surge in Covid-19 cases. Internally displaced people living in overcrowded conditions with insufficient access to water, sanitation and health facilities were at particular risk.⁶ As of 15 November there had been at least 7,293 deaths from Covid-19. About 7% of the population were vaccinated.

Health workers and health facilities came under attack throughout the year. Nine polio vaccinators were shot and killed in Nangarhar province in the first six months of the year.⁷ In October, the Taliban committed to supporting the resumption of a nationwide polio vaccination campaign and to permit the involvement of women frontline workers. They also committed to provide security and safety for all frontline health workers.

Impunity

On 27 September the Prosecutor of the ICC announced plans to resume investigations into crimes committed in Afghanistan, but focused only on those crimes allegedly committed by the Taliban and IS-K. The decision to “deprioritize” investigations into possible war crimes committed by the National Directorate of Security, ANDSF, US armed forces and the US Central Intelligence Agency risked further entrenching impunity and undermining the legitimacy of the ICC.⁸

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1. [“Afghanistan: Unspeakable killings of civilians must prompt end to impunity”, 10 May](#)
 2. [“Afghanistan: Taliban responsible for brutal massacre of Hazara men – new investigation”, 19 August](#)
 3. [“Afghanistan: Unravelling of women’s and girls’ rights looms as peace talks falter”, 24 May](#)
 4. [The Fate of Thousands Hanging in the Balance: Afghanistan’s Fall into the Hands of the Taliban](#), (Index: ASA 11/4727/2021), 21 September
 5. [“Afghanistan: Taliban must allow girls to return to school immediately – new testimony”, 13 October](#)
 6. [“Afghanistan: Oxygen and vaccines urgently needed as Covid-19 infections surge”, 11 June](#)
 7. [“Afghanistan: Despicable killing of female polio vaccine workers must be investigated”, 30 March](#)
 8. [Afghanistan: ICC Prosecutor’s Statement on Afghanistan Jeopardises his Office’s Legitimacy and Future](#) (Index: IOR 53/4842/2021), 5 October

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