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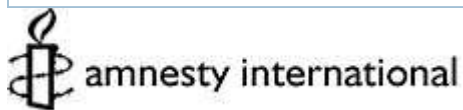
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Amnesty International Report 2016/17 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Afghanistan

The intensifying conflict resulted in widespread human rights violations and abuses. Thousands of civilians were killed, injured or displaced in the violence, while ongoing insecurity restricted access to education, health and other services. While armed insurgent groups were responsible for the majority of civilian casualties, pro-government forces also killed and injured civilians. Anti- and pro-government forces continued to use children as fighters. The number of people internally displaced stood at 1.4 million – more than double the number in 2013 – while approximately 2.6 million Afghan refugees lived outside the country, many in deplorable conditions. Violence against women and girls persisted, and there was a reported increase in armed groups publicly punishing women including through executions and lashings. State and non-state actors continued to threaten human rights defenders and impede them from carrying out their work and journalists encountered violence and censorship. The government continued to carry out executions, often after unfair trials.

Background

In January, officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the USA held talks on a roadmap for peace with the Taliban. However, at a conference in January in Doha, attended by 55 senior participants from a diverse international range of backgrounds, including the Taliban, a delegation of the Taliban's political commission based in Doha reiterated that a formal peace process could start only after foreign troops had left the country. They also set out other preconditions including the removal of Taliban leaders' names from the UN sanctions list.

In February, President Ghani appointed Mohammad Farid Hamidi, a prominent human rights lawyer, as Attorney General, and General Taj Mohammad Jahid as Minister of Interior Affairs. President Ghani opened a fund to support women survivors of gender-based violence, to which cabinet members contributed 15% of their February salary.

In March, the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another year; the UN Secretary-General appointed Tadamichi Yamamoto as Special Representative of UNAMA.

After years of peace negotiations between the government and the country's second largest insurgent group Hezb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, on 29 September, President Ghani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar signed a peace agreement granting Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his fighters amnesty for alleged crimes under international law and permitting the release of certain Hezb-i-Islami prisoners.

Political instability increased amid growing rifts in the Government of National Unity between supporters of President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. In October, an international aid donor conference was held by the EU to pledge aid to Afghanistan over the next four years. The international community pledged around US\$15.2 billion to assist Afghanistan in areas including security and sustainable development. Shortly

before the conference, the EU and Afghanistan signed a deal permitting the deportation of an unlimited number of failed Afghan asylum-seekers, despite the worsening security situation.

There were serious concerns about a mounting financial crisis as the international presence within the country was diminished and unemployment rose.

There was a rapid increase in September and October of Taliban attacks and attempts to capture large provinces and cities. In October, the Taliban captured Kunduz, during which the city power supply and water was cut; hospitals ran out of medication and civilian casualty numbers rose. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported some 25,000 Afghans internally displaced during one week from Kunduz to the capital, Kabul, and neighbouring countries.

Armed conflict

In the first nine months of 2016, UNAMA documented 8,397 conflict-related civilian casualties (2,562 deaths and 5,835 injured). Pro-government forces – including Afghan national security forces, the Afghan local police, pro-government armed groups, and international military forces – were responsible for almost 23%, according to UNAMA.

UNAMA documented at least 15 incidents in the first half of 2016 in which pro-government forces conducted search operations in hospitals and clinics, delayed or impeded the provision of medical supplies, or used health facilities for military purposes. This was a sharp increase on the previous year.

Men dressed in Afghan National Army uniforms entered a health clinic in the Taliban-controlled village of Tangi Saidan, Wardak province, on 18 February. The Swedish aid group that ran the clinic said the men beat staff members and killed two patients and a 15-year-old carer. NATO launched an investigation into the incident; no updates were made public by the end of the year.

No criminal charges were brought against those responsible for an air strike by US forces in October 2015 against a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz which killed and injured at least 42 staff and patients, although approximately 12 US military personnel faced disciplinary sanctions. In March, the new commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan issued an apology to the families of the victims.

Abuses by armed groups

The Taliban and other armed insurgent groups were responsible for the majority of civilian casualties, approximately 60%, according to UNAMA.

On 3 February, the Taliban shot dead a 10-year-old boy on his way to school in Tirin Kot, southern Uruzgan. It was believed that the boy was shot because he had fought the Taliban on earlier occasions alongside his uncle, a former Taliban commander who switched allegiance and became a local police commander.

On 19 April, Taliban militants attacked a security team responsible for protecting high-level government officials in Kabul, killing at least 64 people and wounding 347. It was the biggest Taliban attack on an urban area since 2001.

On 31 May, Taliban militants posing as government officials kidnapped around 220 civilians at a fake checkpoint along the Kunduz-Takhar highway near Arzaq Angor Bagh in Kunduz province. They killed 17 of the civilians and the rest were eventually rescued or released. At least 40 more people were kidnapped and others killed in the same area on 8 June.

On 23 July, a suicide attack claimed by the armed group Islamic State (IS) killed at least 80 people and wounded more than 230 during a peaceful demonstration by members of the Hazara minority in Kabul.

On 12 August, three armed men attacked the American University in Kabul, killing 12 people and injuring nearly 40, mostly students and teachers. No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 11 October, IS conducted a co-ordinated attack against a large group of mourners in a Shi'a mosque in Kabul. The attackers used explosive materials and stormed the mosque, reportedly taking hostage hundreds of mourners. At least 18 people were shot dead and over 40 injured, including women and children.

Violence against women and girls

The Afghan judiciary said that it had registered more than 3,700 cases of violence against women and girls in the first eight months of 2016. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission also reported thousands of cases in the first six months of the year, including beatings, killings and acid attacks.

In January, a man cut off the nose of his 22-year-old wife in Faryab. The incident was condemned across Afghanistan, including by a Taliban spokesperson.

In July, a 14-year-old pregnant girl was set on fire by her husband and her parents-in-law to punish her father for eloping with a cousin of the girl's husband. She died five days later in hospital in Kabul.

Armed groups targeted women working in public life, including women police officers. Armed groups also restricted the freedom of movement of women and girls, including their access to education and health care, in areas under their control.

UNAMA reported an increase in the number of women punished in public under Shari'a law by the Taliban and other armed groups. Between 1 January and 30 June, UNAMA documented six parallel justice punishments by armed groups of women accused of so-called "moral crimes", including the executions of two women and the lashing of four others.

Refugees and internally displaced people

According to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, approximately 2.6 million Afghan refugees were living in more than 70 countries, making them the second largest refugee population worldwide. Around 95% lived in just two countries, Iran and Pakistan, where they faced discrimination, racial attacks, lack of basic amenities and the risk of mass deportation.

Approximately 1.4 million refugees in Pakistan risked mass deportation with their registration tentatively expiring at the end of the year. UNHCR estimated that a further one million undocumented refugees were in Pakistan. According to UNHCR, more than 500,000 Afghan refugees (documented and undocumented) were repatriated from Pakistan during the year. This was the highest number since 2002. Officials reported up to 5,000 returnees during each of the first four days of October. The situation was intensified with the deal signed between the Afghan government and the EU on 5 October 2016, agreeing to the unlimited return of Afghan refugees from EU member states.

Internally displaced people

By April 2016, the number of people internally displaced reached an estimated 1.4 million. Many continued to live in squalid conditions without access to adequate housing, food, water, health care, education or employment opportunities.

According to UNOCHA, from 1 January to 11 December, 530,000 individuals became internally displaced mainly due to conflict.

The situation facing internally displaced people (IDPs) has worsened in recent years. A national IDP policy launched in 2014 was hindered by corruption, lack of capacity in the government and fading international interest.

IDPs, along with other groups, faced significant challenges in accessing health care. Public facilities remained severely overstretched, and IDP camps and settlements often lacked dedicated clinics. Medicines and private clinics were unaffordable for most IDPs and the lack of adequate maternal and reproductive health care was a particular area of concern.

IDPs also faced repeated threats of forced evictions by both government and private actors.

Human rights defenders

Armed groups continued to target and threaten human rights defenders. Women human rights defenders in particular faced death threats against themselves and their families.

In early 2016, a prominent human rights defender received a death threat via Facebook from the Taliban against himself and nine others. After the 10 activists approached the authorities about the threat, the intelligence agency National Directorate of Security arrested two people with reported links to the Taliban, but no subsequent information was provided to the human rights defenders. Threats continued against the activists, who self-censored their human rights work as a result.

In August, the brother of a local women's rights activist in a southern province was kidnapped, tortured and subsequently killed by unidentified individuals. The perpetrators used the man's phone to intimidate the activist and her family, threatening her with fatal repercussions if she did not cease her human rights work. No one had been arrested for the kidnapping and killing by the end of the year.

Freedoms of expression and assembly

Freedom of expression, which strengthened after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, has steadily eroded following a string of violent attacks, intimidation and killings of journalists.

Nai, a media freedom watchdog, reported more than 100 cases of attacks against journalists, media workers and media offices between January and November. These included killings, beatings, detention, arson, threats and other forms of violence by both state and non-state actors.

On 20 January, a suicide attack on a shuttle bus carrying staff working for Moby Group, the owner of the country's largest private TV station Tolo TV, killed seven media workers and injured 27 people. The Taliban, which had previously threatened Tolo TV, claimed responsibility.

On 29 January, Zubair Khaksar, a well-known journalist working for Afghan national TV in Nangarhar province, was killed by unidentified armed men while travelling from Jalalabad city to Surkhrood district.

On 19 April, police in Kabul beat two staff media workers of Ariana TV while they were carrying out their reporting duties.

Activists in several provinces outside Kabul said they were increasingly reluctant to stage demonstrations, fearing reprisals from government officials.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Armed groups including the Taliban continued to carry out killings, torture and other human rights abuses as punishment for perceived crimes or offences. Parallel justice structures were illegal.

Between 1 January and 30 June, UNAMA documented 26 cases including summary killings, lashings, beatings and illegal detention. The punishments were imposed for alleged violations of Shari'a law, spying or connections with the security forces. Most occurred in the western region, particularly in Farah and Badghis provinces.

On 14 February, Afghanistan Local Police in Khak-e-Safid district, Farah province, allegedly detained, tortured and killed a shepherd for his alleged involvement in planting a remote-controlled IED (improvised explosive device) that killed two police officers. UNAMA reported that, although it was aware of the incident, the Afghan National Police prosecution office did not initiate any investigation or arrest any suspects.

Death penalty

On 8 May, six death row prisoners were executed by hanging in Pol-e Charkhi prison in Kabul. The executions followed a speech by President Ghani on 25 April, soon after the large-scale Taliban attack of 19 April, in which he vowed to implement tough justice, including capital punishment.

It was feared that more executions could follow. Approximately 600 prisoners remained on death row, many convicted of crimes such as murder. Many of their trials did not abide by fair trial standards. Around 100 individuals were sentenced to death during the year for crimes including murder, rape and murder, and terrorism resulting in mass killings.

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