

Human Rights Watch
1630 Connecticut Ave, NW Suite 500
Washington, DC 20009
Tel: 202-612-4321
Fax: 202-612-4333
E-mail: hrwdc@hrw.org
Website: <http://www.hrw.org/asia/afghanistan.php>

Afghanistan: Deteriorating Security Situation Threatens Human Rights
Statement by John Sifton, Afghanistan Researcher
House International Relations Committee
June 18, 2003

Mr. Chairman,

My name is John Sifton, and I am the Afghanistan Researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

I want to take this opportunity to tell you about the latest research Human Rights Watch has conducted in Afghanistan, in the last six months, research in provinces across Afghanistan, based on hundreds of interviews with ordinary Afghans—farmers, teachers, laborers, doctors, aid workers, women and men. The results of this research will be published in a report to be released in July 2003, but I will describe many of our core findings here.

We don't have good news.

Human Rights Watch believes that human rights conditions in Afghanistan—which of course had improved dramatically with the collapse of the Taliban—are now in a state of deterioration.

Our most recent research shows that, in many districts and villages in Afghanistan today, families are now living in a constant state of fear. Most of the country is in the hands of warlords and gunmen—fighters in Afghanistan's past wars—who are now terrorizing local populations under their authority, robbing houses at night, stealing valuables, killing people, raping young women and girls, raping boys, seizing land from farmers, extorting money, and kidnapping young men and holding them until their families can pay a ransom. The situation is of course different in each district, but in almost every district Human Rights Watch has visited in the last six months, we have heard complaints about some or all of these types of abuses.

I have interviewed numerous families myself who have been robbed in the night by Afghan military troops or police, and listened to witnesses describe being beaten by troops, and begging for mercy.

But sadly there is more: our research has also uncovered cases of Afghan military commanders and officials—including high-level Afghan government officials—threatening and arresting journalists and political organizers, and beating or even torturing perceived opponents. I have interviewed myself several people who were tortured by Afghan government security forces, for organizing dissident political parties or groups. My colleagues have interviewed women who have been threatened with death for advocating women's rights.

Of course, these abuses are bad enough on their own, but their consequences for Afghanistan's future are even worse.

In many areas, Afghan civil society organizers, political organizers, and women's rights activists are now terrified of the warlord-rule, which makes it impossible for them to speak or organize openly. Many political organizers are now operating in secret. Journalists, in Kabul and elsewhere, are censoring themselves. The situation, to put it mildly, does not bode well for Afghanistan's upcoming constitutional loya jirga or elections in 2004.

The continuing instability is also keeping many refugees in Iran and Pakistan from returning home. We talked to many returned refugees, who were stuck in Kabul city, unable to return to the more dangerous rural areas. "We wish we had stayed in Pakistan," some of them said.

The worst consequence by far, however, has been the effect of the insecurity on the lives of women and girls.

Here in the United States, administration officials, and the President himself, have repeatedly said that Afghanistan has been liberated, and noted that girls have gone back to school.

The reality is more sobering. In many areas of Afghanistan today, insecurity is in fact forcing women and girls to stay indoors, and is depriving them of the opportunity to attend schools, go to work, or even seek health care at clinics and hospitals. We talked to countless families who affirmed this.

Today, the U.N. estimates that only thirty-two percent of school children in Afghanistan are girls. Population statistics in Afghanistan are always somewhat hit or miss, but under even the most conservative government estimates, it is clear that the majority of school-age girls in Afghanistan are not attending school. UNICEF estimates that in some provinces, the attendance rate for girls is as low as three percent.

Why are girls not in school? Some people think there is a "cultural" reason, having to do with entrenched Islamic conservatism. Our research does not support such a conclusion.

Instead, the reasons in many cases seem to be security-based. In many provinces, especially around Kabul, Afghan families tell us that they aren't letting their daughters go to school because they fear they will be assaulted by gunmen on the way, kidnapped or raped. Many say that they *want* to send their daughters to school, but cannot, because of insecurity.

Let me be clear about what we are talking about with all of these abuses: We are not talking about crime here, we're talking about human rights abuses by government forces: warlords and gunmen who ostensibly work for the Afghan government. We are talking about abuses by the leftover militias of the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban forces, the irregular military forces who work in some areas with the United State military, and the current police forces made up of former military personnel. These forces were the allies of the United States in its war against the Taliban regime, and were armed, assisted, and enabled by the U.S. government.

These words we use —“warlords” and “warlordism”— are not mine but those of Afghans themselves. They are Persian and Pashto words, translated into English: in Persian, the words *jang salar*, warlords; *tufangdar*, gunmen (*topakyan* in Pashto); *jang salari*, or *jang salarism*, warlordism, the rule of the gun. These are the words Afghans themselves are using to describe those who terrorize them.

And this is the vocabulary of Afghanistan today. This is the result of the Taliban’s totalitarianism being replaced by the violence and cruelty of unfettered warlordism.

Recommendations

You have heard from other witnesses today about the need for increased peacekeeping outside of Kabul, for more U.S. involvement in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former fighters (including a better vetting procedure, to sideline those with abusive pasts), and the need for funding for policing forces. Human Rights Watch seconds all of these recommendations. We also think that the U.S. should insist that the United Nations increase its human rights monitoring efforts.

But we would add that there is also a need for the U.S., and all other nations involved in Afghanistan, to cut off support for the warlords themselves. We urge specifically the Department of Defense, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency— all of whom are cooperating with local military leaders in Afghanistan—to take better steps to avoid strengthening local military leaders.

As it stands, the United States has a split strategy in Afghanistan—supporting Hamid Karzai on the one hand, but cooperating with local warlords to hunt former Taliban on the other. Indeed, U.S. officials have for the most part just stood by and allowed local military leaders to seize control of local governmental offices—not only military bases, but health departments, trash collection offices, transportation ministry officers, and so on. This is not a good policy. Oftentimes, it seems that U.S. military and intelligence officials have assumed that, because Afghan forces are helping them, these forces are good and honorable people. This is an untenable view.

One last point: At some time in the future, the situation in Afghanistan could very well explode. When that happens, it is more than likely that most people in the world will not blame the United Nations, or the people of Afghanistan. They will, however, blame the United States—which has been involved in Afghanistan’s internal affairs for almost a quarter century.

It is vitally important for the U.S. administration to take action now to avoid such an outcome, and we strongly urge all of the members of this committee to urge them to do so. The U.S. must give more support to President Karzai in his efforts to bring warlords under control, and make better efforts to cut off the warlords themselves.

I will end with the words of a displaced Afghan man from a rural area who told us he was unable to return to his home district because of the security problems there. He told me:

The gunmen, who have guns in their hands, are irresponsible forces. The United States, in a way, brought them to power, and it is these gunmen who create problems now for our people. These people must be disarmed. This is the foremost, most important step to be taken, immediately. Guns must only be given to those who have been trained. You must raise our voice to the United States, to disarm these people.

I very much hope I have done so today.

Thank you.