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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Human Rights Research League, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Revenge Killings and Other Serious Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took over control of Kabul and thus finalized their grip on power and re-established the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”.

Despite promises to the contrary, including the announcement of an inclusive government and amnesties for former Afghan security forces who had laid down their weapons, expulsion from homes, kidnappings, arbitrary detentions, revenge killings and other acts contrary to International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law remained the order of the day – amidst an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe: For 2022, Afghanistan’s population was estimated to pass 43 million, with more than half of the population (24.4 million people) in need of life-saving humanitarian support, and almost half of the population is under 15 years old, rendering it one of the largest youth populations in the world.¹ In 2023, with recurring droughts, continuing economic decline, and the added negative economic and humanitarian impact of policies severely restricting women’s rights, mobility and access to work, “a staggering 28.3 million people (two thirds of Afghanistan’s population) will need urgent humanitarian assistance to survive”.²

Against this background, Human Rights Research League (HRRL) conducted a research project over the past two years documenting revenge killings and other serious human rights abuses in Afghanistan with a view to better measure the Taliban by their actions. More specifically, this project aimed at contributing to three levels of accountability.

Three Levels of Accountability

First of all, accountability of the de facto authorities. By presenting the project’s finding and detailing the responsibility of the current regime for the crimes committed within the timeframe of the investigation, we intended to add to international efforts at holding the Taliban to account. Most of the atrocities documented in our report point to the Taliban as the perpetrators, and in any case, all of the crimes happened under their reign and at the very least therefore are their responsibility.

Secondly, by presenting detailed findings, we wanted to counter efforts by those states who far too quickly, uncritically and indulgently are tempted to resume business as usual with the current authorities. The more information on such atrocities is available, the harder it should be for states to willingly ignore them, and in any case, such ‘intentional blindness’³ would come at a greater cost, as such ignorance would be exposed as bad faith.

Finally, in a few select cases, our data may contribute to holding individual perpetrators to account in connection with (international) ongoing and future accountability mechanisms. Therefore, where the data we collected may add useful information and may be beneficial to certain case files and investigations before the International Criminal Court or other (future) international accountability mechanisms, we intend to contribute, where appropriate and possible in a suitable manner, more detailed information on individual cases.

Research Project and Findings

Our comprehensive findings were published in Human Rights Research League’s report (‘Those We Left Behind: Revenge Killings and Other Serious Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan in the Aftermath of the Taliban’s Seizure of Power’⁴) and publicly discussed in a series of conferences and seminars. For this particular project, partial funding was provided by the Fritt Ord Foundation, dedicated to promoting freedom of expression and public debate, and by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Preliminary findings of this research were previously presented in a side event at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva⁵, as well as in a series of conferences and seminars held at the University of Bergen's Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and its Centre on Law & Social Transformation⁶, at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)⁷, and at Oslo New University College (ONH)⁸. At these events, current and future challenges in Afghanistan were also discussed, including how states should deal with the Taliban on the world stage, and to what extent and at what cost engagement with or disengagement from the de facto authorities may be justified.

The main part of the research had been carried out on the ground, by our team of Afghan researchers, conducting in-person interviews with witnesses and victims throughout the country, gathering information and documenting revenge killings, acts of torture, enforced disappearances, kidnappings, expulsions, and other serious abuses (e.g., extortion, sexual violence, forced marriages etc.) committed in Afghanistan since 15 August 2021.

Our report was based on 433 face-to-face interviews conducted on the ground in Afghanistan across all the country's 34 provinces, detailing victim profiles, categories, frequencies, and patterns of crime, and exemplifying the complexity of the situation with the help of actual cases, drawn from the data collected in those personal interviews in all provinces.

Based on these interviews, we identified 578 individual victims, across the country, who were exposed to a total of 770 serious violations of their human rights, including, in more than 400 cases, having their ultimate human right taken from them, the right to life.

The de facto authorities have repeatedly objected to limited reports depicting them as perpetrators of serious crimes, claiming instead these casualties were related to the armed conflict during the take-over, or committed by others, or by rogue groups, or based on personal feuds. But this is not what we have seen.

Our data suggests that a broad pattern of revenge killings and other serious human rights abuses emerges, not just in a few provinces, but throughout the entire country, not just during the immediate power transition period, but more than two years after the de facto authorities' seizure of power, and not just against people directly connected to the former government, but against all people, including women and children targeted by association.

Furthermore, we have seen that the announced (but never published) general amnesty for former police, army and security forces is not generally observed. Whether or not it is honored seems to depend on arrangements with local authorities. That, along with case examples of rivaling factions also points to a division among the Taliban's ranks and underlines the insight that the Taliban are not one unified group.

Recommendations

The international community should hold the de facto authorities to account and limit engagement, if at all envisaged or unavoidable, to engagement with local authorities, where feasible and promising, as this may provide some room for maneuver and for negotiating certain improvements at the local level – among Afghans. Considering the grim human rights situation and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan coupled with – and exacerbated by – the unprecedented abuses of women's rights (to freedom, education, work etc.) amounting to gender persecution and indicative of gender apartheid, that is not only hampering, but directly preventing direly needed development of the country, such local civil society initiatives need to be supported.

Member State's immigration authorities need to acknowledge that not only people directly connected to the former government, but also their family members are at risk of being targeted for revenge killings and other serious violations of human rights, and hence may be in need of and would qualify for international protection.

The International Criminal Court and other (future) international accountability mechanisms need to focus their attention on holding individual perpetrators of the most serious crimes to account. While such justice is never quick and necessarily selective, the outlook of being able to eventually see at least a few of those responsible for the atrocities committed put on trial, even in a distant future, may provide some sense of justice and hope to all those who now feel utterly forgotten by the international community: Those We Left Behind.

1 Cf. Humanitarian Response Plan Afghanistan, UNOCHA (March 2023), p. 6-7, 13. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/attachments/86fcc7cc-1fc7-490b-bdeb-75ea760281bc/Afghanistan-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-2023.pdf>

2 Ibid., p. 16.

3 Norwegian philosopher Harald Ofstad once used the term intentional blindness to describe the uncritical attitude of simply not thinking about what one does not want to think about, not seeing what one does not want to see, all along in bad faith. See Harald Ofstad, 'Vi kan ändra världen' ['We May Change the World'], Stockholm: Bokförlaget Prisma 1987, p. 137 f (referring here to Albert Speer's self-characterization when trying to explain and minimize the extent of his knowledge of the atrocities committed by the regime he served).

4 'Those We Left Behind: Revenge Killings and Other Serious Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan in the Aftermath of the Taliban's Seizure of Power', Human Rights Research League (Nov. 2023), available on our website (<https://www.hrrleague.org>) or via direct link at: [https://www.hrrleague.org/gallery/HRRL-AFG%20Report%20\(Those%20We%20Left%20Behind\)%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.hrrleague.org/gallery/HRRL-AFG%20Report%20(Those%20We%20Left%20Behind)%20(FINAL).pdf).

5 Revenge Killings and Women's Rights Abuses in Afghanistan after the Taliban's Seizure of Power, UN Human Rights Council Side Event, Geneva, 13 September 2023, program available at: [https://www.hrrleague.org/gallery/HRRL-HRC54%20Side%20Event%20on%20AFG%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.hrrleague.org/gallery/HRRL-HRC54%20Side%20Event%20on%20AFG%20(FINAL).pdf).

6 Those We Left Behind. Norwegian Afghanistan Policy after Taliban's Seizure of Power, Conference, Bergen, 10 October 2023, program available at: <https://www.lawtransform.no/event/those-we-left-behind-norwegian-afghanistan-policy-after-talibans-seizure-of-power/>.

8 Dealing with the Taliban? Two Years of Atrocities after Regime Breakdown in Afghanistan, Seminar, Oslo, 18 October 2023, program available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CyS9DErQmxR/>.