Afghanistan: Little Progress on Rights

Conditions Dire, Especially for Women

January 23, 2012

(New York) – The dire human rights situation in Afghanistan showed few signs of progress in the past year, raising serious concerns about the future, Human Right Watch said today in its World Report 2012.

 While progress was made in Afghanistan in several areas, the general population and women in particular suffered from the widespread lawlessness and abuses by the security forces and armed groups, Human Rights Watch said. International “donor fatigue” and the planned drawdown of international troops in 2014 raise the prospect of further deterioration and backtracking in key areas.

“The snail’s pace of human rights improvement over the past year heightens anxieties about Afghanistan’s future,” said Brad Adams [3], Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Basic rights are still not a reality for most Afghans. The country suffers from abuses without accountability, lack of rule of law, poor governance, laws and policies that harm women, attacks on civilians, and corruption.”

In its 676-page report, Human Rights Watch assessed progress on human rights during the past year in more than 90 countries, including popular uprisings in the Arab world that few would have imagined. Given the violent forces resisting the “Arab Spring,” the international community has an important role to play in assisting the formation of rights-respecting democracies in the region, Human Rights Watch said in the report.

 In Afghanistan, women’s rights are of particular concern, Human Rights Watch said. Since the defeat of Taliban rule in 2001, Afghan women have taken on more leadership roles, as members of parliament, judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, police officers, soldiers, civil society officials, and human rights activists. But many have been targeted for threats and violence.

 Ordinary Afghan women lack many basic protections, Human Rights Watch said. The Taliban and other armed groups attack and threaten women, frequently focusing on women in public life, school girls, and the staff of girls’ schools. The government incarcerates women and girls for “moral crimes” such as running away from home – even when there is no statutory prohibition. Infant mortality and maternal mortality remain among the highest in the world, with one in ten children dying before age five, and a woman dying of pregnancy-related causes approximately every two hours. Under-age marriage and forced marriage are widespread.

 Recent reforms, like the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women, have largely failed to improve the lives of ordinary women, as the government is not enforcing its provisions, Human Rights Watch said.

 Afghanistan’s justice system remains weak and compromised, and a large proportion of the population relies instead on traditional justice mechanisms to resolve disputes. Corruption in the courts and police have cut off many Afghans from justice. The January 2012transfer of Afghanistan’s prisons to the Interior Ministry reversed an important 2003 reform and increases the risk of torture of prisoners. Documentation in 2011 of systematic and widespread torture in Afghan detention facilities shows the failings of past reform efforts. Human rights abuses are endemic within the traditional justice system, with many practices persisting despite being outlawed, including baad, the practice of handing over a girl to another family to resolve a dispute.

 The Afghan government and its international allies have not addressed the longstanding security problems created by abusive regional commanders and militias, Human Rights Watch said. Regional commanders who have been implicated in serious abuses benefit from US military support to strengthen their control of local populations at the expense of human rights. A US-supported “Afghan Local Police” [4]program has a created a new kind of local militia without sufficient training, oversight or accountability. US plans to triple the size of the Afghan Local Police heighten concerns that this force will worsen the security situation.

 The Afghan government has repeatedly squandered opportunities to hold government or militia leaders responsible for abuses committed under their command, Human Rights Watch said. The 2005 Action Plan for Peace, Reconciliation and Justice has never been implemented, and no serious efforts have been made to prosecute high-level officials for corruption and other abuses. No progress has been made on seeking accountability for abuses committed before late 2001, whether during the Soviet period, the civil conflict of the early and mid-1990s, or the Taliban period.

“Afghans want justice and an accounting for the abuses of the past,” Adams said. “Yet the Afghan government and its backers, particularly the US, have not only ignored these calls but empowered the same warlords and power brokers who brought the country so much pain. Accountability is an important element of a lasting peace.

Conflict-related abuses are a daily reality in many parts of the country. During the past decade, thousands of Afghans have suffered as a result of violations of international humanitarian law by insurgent forces, militias, and Afghan government and international forces.

 The Taliban and other insurgent forces have committed widespread violations, in particular bombings that target civilians, and other attacks that do not discriminate between military targets and civilians. The Taliban have also used children as young as 8 years old as suicide bombers. All sides have mistreated people in their custody. Large areas of the country, especially the south, are now held by insurgent forces, who frequently violate human rights. Other areas are lawless zones in which no real governance exists.

 Human Rights Watch called on the Afghan government to make human rights a top priority and on Afghanistan’s international partners to make a long-term commitment to support human rights, the security of the population, and development in Afghanistan.

“The Afghan government needs to recognize the link between respect for human rights and the security of the population,” Adams said. “The government and its international partners should redouble their commitments to supporting accountability, justice reform, women’s rights, education and health, and civil society.”

*Copyright 2012 Human Rights Watch*