

Afghanistan: Ensure years-long struggle and progress towards fundamental freedoms are not reversed

(Kathmandu, 8 September 2021) – Afghans are braving Taliban-controlled streets to demand respect of their fundamental rights, despite rapidly deteriorating peace and stability in the country. Amid growing dissent and protests across Afghanistan, the Taliban announced its interim government, which included members of the Haqqani network, but excluded women and representatives from the toppled government.¹

More must be done to protect Afghans – especially women and girls, minorities, human rights defenders and others at risk – to ensure that the hard-fought progress towards fundamental freedoms in recent years is not reversed, said the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA).

In the largest demonstration since the takeover of Kabul on 15 August, the Taliban wielded gunfire, intimidation and violent force to disperse protestors, who mainly comprised women. Journalists were prevented from filming at the rally, and a cameraperson from local news agency Tolo was reported to have been arrested and detained for almost three hours.²

In the latest of several protests by women in Kabul and Herat, local media had reported on 4 September that the Taliban used pepper spray and tear gas to disperse a crowd of women demanding their right to work and roles in any future government, as they tried to walk to the presidential palace.³ Images of a protester with blood running from her head, allegedly from being beaten, have been shared by journalists.

On 5 September, a woman police officer was shot dead at her home in central Ghor province in front of her relatives. Her family believed that the Taliban perpetrated the targeted killing, despite their denial of responsibility.⁴ This is the most recent among alleged reprisal killings reported across the country, although many such cases may go unreported.

Since the takeover of Kabul, chilling reports of abuses by the Taliban have intensified across the country, including the use of fatal force against protestors⁵, violence against women and children, door-to-door hunts for journalists and the killing of their family members⁶, and the deliberate targeting of government officers, security personnel, judges and civilians.

This has exacerbated the worsening trend of reprisals against those who work in the protection and advancement of human rights and democracy in Afghanistan.

Many people, especially women, minorities, journalists, human rights defenders and their families are at extreme risk as the Taliban escalate their crackdown on the right to freedom of speech and other fundamental freedoms. Reports of alleged revenge killings by the Taliban have emerged despite their

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-pakistan-afghanistan-arrests-islamabad-d50b1b490d27d32eb20cc11b77c12c87>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58472978>

³ <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-womens-rights-protest-turns-violent/a-59085102>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58455826>

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-19/afghanistan-taliban-protest-jalalabad-ashraf-ghani/100389028>

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-carrying-out-door-door-manhunt-afghans-blacklist-report-says-n1277231>

pledge to ‘grant amnesty to all, including those who worked for western militaries or the Afghan government or police’.

2020 – the deadliest year for Afghan human rights defenders

Based on a report by Afghanistan-based Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO), 2020 was the deadliest year for Afghan human rights defenders and civil society activists.⁷

From January to December 2020, SRMO documented 55 cases of violations against human rights defenders, civil society activists, and their family members – the highest number of targeted killings of defenders and civil society activists they have ever recorded. The violations ranged from intimidation and threats to kidnapping, detention, and injuries, while a total of 19 human rights defenders – including two family members – were killed.

Women human rights defenders were targeted in 16 documented cases, putting them among the most affected groups of defenders. An emblematic case is that of Fatima Khalil, a youth staff of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) who was killed in Kabul in June 2020.⁸

Based on FORUM-ASIA’s documentation, impunity was rampant in these violations⁹, and despite the Taliban being presumably responsible for at least 18 out of 55 cases recorded, they commonly denied their responsibility.

The International Community must not let the Afghans down

‘The international community has repeatedly failed the people of Afghanistan. The emergency session of the UN Human Rights Council on 24 August failed to do the bare minimum required to credibly respond to the human rights tragedy unfolding in Afghanistan,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

‘The upcoming 48th session provides the Human Rights Council another opportunity to correct its course by establishing an independent investigative mechanism with a mandate to document and investigate grave human rights violations and abuses in Afghanistan. All allegations of human rights violations and abuses, including acts amounting to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, must be promptly investigated and all perpetrators must be held to account. The Council cannot afford to delay its actions. Its credibility depends on it,’ said Shamini.

As FORUM-ASIA continues to work towards ensuring the protection of human rights defenders and their family members so they are able to carry out their legitimate work safely and securely, the organisation calls on:

⁷ <http://srmo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/report2020/State%20of%20Human%20Rights%20Defenders%20in%20Afghanistan%202020.pdf>

⁸ http://l.forum-asia.org/AIHRC_killings

⁹ [https://asianhrds.forum-asia.org/en/library/?q=\(allAggregations:lf,filters:\(country:\(values:!\(%2775cdfab1-229a-4ba8-92f1-c076dc11691b%27\)\)\),initial_date:\(from:1577836800,to:1609459199\)\),from:0,includeUnpublished:lf,limit:30,order:desc,sort:metadata.initial_date,types:!\(%275cb59d076eaf555bc54a2bd3%27\),unpublished:lf\)](https://asianhrds.forum-asia.org/en/library/?q=(allAggregations:lf,filters:(country:(values:!(%2775cdfab1-229a-4ba8-92f1-c076dc11691b%27))),initial_date:(from:1577836800,to:1609459199)),from:0,includeUnpublished:lf,limit:30,order:desc,sort:metadata.initial_date,types:!(%275cb59d076eaf555bc54a2bd3%27),unpublished:lf))

- The international community and neighbouring countries to expand, expedite, and facilitate humanitarian access for civilians, especially women, children, human rights defenders and all who are at risk of persecution and reprisals by the Taliban;
- Regional and international partners, particularly governments in South Asia, to respect and uphold the principles of human rights, as well as their legal and moral responsibility to provide safety for refugees and asylum seekers. States should remove the administrative burden on human rights defenders and their families wishing to relocate by providing transparent information on evacuation, expediting visas and travel documents, and coordinating evacuation efforts including flight services; and
- The UN Human Rights Council to, at minimum, establish an independent investigative mechanism to monitor and report on violations and abuses of international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and all applicable international law by all parties, including the Taliban, and to ensure accountability for such violations and abuses.

‘The international community, regional and international partners, South Asia governments, the UN Human Rights Council must meaningfully and effectively respond to the growing threats against human rights defenders and other at-risk groups. We must do more to support Afghans who are demanding that the recent progress towards fundamental freedoms in the country are not abrogated,’ said Shamini.

– END –

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 82 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

For further information, please contact:

- South Asia Programme, FORUM-ASIA, sasia@forum-asia.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

- Melissa Anathraj, Communication and Media Programme, FORUM-ASIA, communication@forum-asia.org