



Introduction

This annual report provides a summary of the situation for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Afghanistan in 2021. Over the course of the year, a total of 37 activists, media workers and their family members were killed in targeted attacks. A further 5 were targeted in failed assassination attempts. Of those targeted, 13 were women and 29 were men. Those killed included 18 civil society activists, three family members of civil society activists, 6 women human rights defenders, the son of a human rights defender, and nine media workers.

Executive Summary

- This annual report provides a summary of the situation for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Afghanistan in 2021: a year that will forever be marked in history as that in which the Taliban retook power. Over the course of 2021, a total of 37 activists and media workers were killed in targeted attacks. After 20 years of human rights advancement, the Taliban have completely closed any space for dissent. They have launched a campaign to persecute and silence critical voices, particularly women. HRDs and Civil Society Activists (CSAs) face an extremely hostile operating environment marred by intimidation, killings, arbitrary detention and the disappearance of outspoken male and female activists and journalists.
- This report is divided into two sections: the first section covers events between January 2021 until 14 August 2021, and the second details the period from the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 until the end of December 2021. While there is an obvious need to focus on the situation post-August 2021, SRMO sees as part of its mandate ensuring that crimes committed against HRDs by different actors in the earlier part of the year are not forgotten in the chaos of the Taliban takeover. All violations against HRDs must be kept on the record, investigated and prosecuted.

January to 14 August

- The wave of targeted killings of civil society activists and human rights defenders that escalated in late 2020 continued at an alarming pace in the first 8 months of 2021. Between January and mid-August, SRMO documented 21 cases of violence against HRDs, CSAs and their family members. These cases include the targeted killings of two WHRDs (in Baghlan and Farah) and the kidnap and murder of the son of the head of the Mazar-e Sharif office of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).
- Eleven CSAs were killed, along with three family members. A further three CSAs were seriously injured in attempted killings, while two more CSAs escaped injury after failed assassination attempts. In addition, 10 media workers died in targeted killings in the first 7.5 months of the year, while several more were killed in crossfire in conflict zones.
- The vast majority of targeted killings between January and mid-August involved shootings, with smaller numbers of cases involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs); at least four targeted killings in Kabul involved the use of magnetic IEDs or 'sticky bombs' attached to the victims' cars.

This type of attack often causes additional casualties including drivers, other passengers, and bystanders.

- Violence against activists took place countrywide, but Kabul and Nangarhar saw the largest numbers of incidents.
- In the period from January to 14 August, the majority of attacks on activists went unclaimed. This continued a pattern from 2020 where the Taliban no longer openly claimed responsibility for attacks on civil society, likely because they were involved in negotiations and wanted to be able to claim plausible deniability. However, the Taliban were very likely responsible for many of these incidents; the group continued to issue threats civil society activists, were able to operate countrywide despite ongoing military operations against them, and had a clear motivation to drown out independent voices that were critical of Taliban human rights abuses.
- In addition to CSAs and HRDs, several other groups of professionals were subjected to a similar pattern of attacks. These included legal professionals, humanitarian workers, and religious scholars. For example, seven legal professionals (including judges, prosecutors and lawyers) were assassinated in incidents in Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Logar.

15 August to 31 December

- Since the Taliban takeover, HRDs are not only experiencing the collapse of the state framework and legal protection mechanisms within which they operated, but are also at direct threat of retaliatory actions for their work. Taliban claims that they would govern in a more inclusive manner have been quickly and fully contradicted by their actions, as illustrated in a table of the group's words vs actions set out in Annex 1.
- Since the Taliban takeover, SRMO has documented 11 targeted killings of HRDs, CSAs and journalists, with another media worker seriously injured in an attempted killing and many more injured in beatings. The targeted killings included the deaths of at least four Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) who had arranged and participated in demonstrations against the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh province. The women had reportedly been called with promises of a seat on an evacuation flight; they subsequently went missing and their bodies were found several days later.
- Three CSAs were killed in separate incidents in Nangarhar, while two activists were killed by Taliban gunfire during a demonstration in Nangarhar's provincial capital Jalalabad in the early days of Taliban rule. Journalists have been killed in Kabul and Nangarhar, while another journalist was seriously injured in an attack in the former.
- Relatives of victims and local civil society networks accused the Taliban of being responsible for at least three targeted killings of civil society activists since 15 August. Nine other fatal attacks on activists or media workers were carried out by 'unknown gunmen'; given the Taliban's almost total territorial control it is likely the group's footsoldiers were responsible for some if not all of these incidents.
- All 12 detentions of civil society and media workers recorded in SRMO's database between 15 August and 31 December 2021 were carried out by the Taliban. In addition to these cases of individuals being detained, there are frequent and well documented reports of journalists being detained and beaten by Taliban security personnel while they are reporting, often while covering demonstrations. Sometimes journalists have been beaten as a means of dispersing them; on other occasions journalists have been beaten and tortured in Taliban custody after being detained.
- While SRMO's main focus is on civil society, the human rights situation since August has also been marked by a wave of extra judicial killings and disappearances of former security force personnel. Although denied by the Taliban, many of these deaths are likely to be the result of

revenge killings by the new Taliban de facto authorities despite the 'general amnesty' it issued in August. In one such incident in October, the bodies of 21 former police/NDS were found dead with gunshot wounds in Daykundi Province.

Recommendations

- SRMO urges the international community to pressure the Taliban to ensure the safety of HRDs and civil society. Taliban leaders must be pressured to stop and publicly condemn revenge attacks, disappearances and intimidation of activists. Previous attacks must be investigated.
- The international community must also in the immediate term provide support for those HRDs who have fled Afghanistan, are struggling to establish themselves in their new countries and who in many cases have lost their livelihoods. These activists, with their extensive knowledge and experience, represent a valuable resource built in the course of 20 years that must not be lost.

Support for civil society and creating the space to operate – both in Afghanistan and in exile - should be a key policy and resource priority.

