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Afghanistan: Joint call for an immediate end to attacks against human rights defenders and need for protection and accountability

The threats, harassment, intimidation and attacks against human rights defenders, activists, journalists and media workers in Afghanistan must end – the undersigned international human rights organizations said.

From September 2020 until May 2021, a total of 17 human rights defenders have been killed, including nine journalists, based on information compiled by the Afghan Human Rights Defenders Committee (AHRDC). Nine of those killed were in the first five months of this year. During this period, over 200 human rights defenders and media representatives reported that they were receiving serious threats to the AHRDC and the Afghanistan Journalists Safety Committee. A [report](#) published by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in February 2021, noted that 65 media practitioners and human rights defenders have been killed since 2018. In most of these cases, no perpetrators have been held to account. These attacks are aimed at silencing peaceful dissent and those working on human rights, especially women's rights, as well as those seeking justice and accountability for human rights violations. The timing of escalating attacks against human rights defenders, activists and journalists appears to be linked to the ongoing peace process between the Government of Afghanistan, the United States, and the Taliban.

It is vital to uphold and prioritize freedom of expression during this critical time in Afghanistan and for its future. The progress made on creating safe space for human rights defenders especially women human rights defenders and journalists is at stake with the [United States and NATO forces'](#) full withdrawal announcement from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021. The attack targeting [school children](#) in Kabul on 8 May, is a devastating reminder of escalating violence against civilians, especially against women and girls. The international community, as stakeholders of the current political processes, including the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and NATO member States, should under international human rights, humanitarian and criminal law, protect the rights of all, especially those being targeted such as human rights defenders and civil society activists. However, with the announcement of unconditional withdrawal and no progress on the peace process, the promotion and protection of the rights of human rights defenders and journalists does not seem to be a priority.

The lack of respect for International Humanitarian Law and the absence of accountability for attacks against human rights defenders and activists, have only increased the danger to defenders and emboldened perpetrators. Afghan authorities and the international community must call on all parties to stop using civilian targets for military gains and safeguard the progress in human rights made over the last two decades and ensure that they are not scaled back as a result of the ongoing negotiations.

Civil society members, women human rights defenders and journalists are systematically threatened and attacked for the work they carry out. Those working outside the capital are especially exposed to serious threats due to lack of support available in Kabul and through some international networks and embassies. Many of these defenders have had to relocate within Afghanistan and, in some cases, even temporarily leave the country with their families for safety concerns. Defenders fear publicly denouncing attacks they are subjected to due to concerns over security and sustainability of their work. This demonstrates the immense pressure under which Afghan defenders, activists and journalists are forced to live and work.

State mechanisms for the protection of defenders including the recently appointed Joint Commission for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders have yet to be operationalized. The government has failed to adequately respond to complaints of threats and early warning signals of attacks against human rights defenders and journalists. Defenders are faced with an impossible choice of balancing their commitment to work in their country with threats against themselves and their families. We call on the Government of Afghanistan to take greater responsibility to ensure the safety and security of defenders, activists, and journalists, and to end impunity for the attacks against them.

[Women human rights defenders, journalists](#) and minority groups in Afghanistan have been among the worst affected. Many women defenders have been compelled to relocate internally or outside the country, stop their work, or stay at home. Attacks on women defenders have included harassment of family members and colleagues. Women who have campaigned for years for equal rights, and equal participation in public spaces, including the peace process, have found themselves under attack in reprisals against them for their work.

The Government of Afghanistan and international stakeholders and facilitators in the ongoing peace process, must take responsibility through their conduct and engagement in the country to stop the increase in violent attacks against human rights defenders. Rights groups and the [United Nations](#) have consistently called for the effective participation of civil society representatives, especially women human rights defenders, in the peace process given its huge impact on security on the ground. Despite this, and even though rights groups and women defenders have worked continuously to engage with the peace process, the [Moscow summit](#) in March 2021 did not see effective representation of women. A peace process, or negotiation, that fails to include women representatives adequately and effectively, and in parallel engages with the Taliban without benchmarks on human rights, [undermines women's safety](#) and progress made on human rights over the past years. Much more must be done to ensure that the peace process takes into account the threats, harassment, intimidation and attacks occurring in the country and to ensure that it does not exacerbate people's suffering.

The crisis unfolding in the country requires a strong commitment to direct engagement and support for Afghan defenders to work and live in safety and dignity. It requires the international community to proactively support those defenders who have worked to promote and protect human rights, at great personal cost. As human rights organizations focusing on the protection of human rights defenders, we call for an effective protection mechanism for human rights defenders in Afghanistan. We therefore call on the Government of Afghanistan and relevant international actors to take the following measures:

- The newly established government-lead Joint Commission must deliver on its objectives to provide effective protection to human rights defenders at risk. We call for access to

information on the measures that the Joint Commission has taken so far to provide immediate protection to defenders, investigate the threats against them and to bring suspected perpetrators to justice.

- Ensure that human rights standards and the protection of human rights defenders are articulated as key benchmarks for any sustainable peace process. The Taliban and others targetting civilians and human rights defenders must immediately halt violence and prioritize intra-Afghan peace talks as a way to ensure sustainable peace.
- Offer human rights defenders immediate practical support on the ground at all levels, including through diplomatic and political channels.
- Actively ensure justice and redress for violence and threats against defenders especially by local authorities and law enforcement to ensure prompt responses to security threats.
- Establish a national monitoring mechanism, and an impartial and independent mechanism internationally to investigate the killings of human rights defenders, journalists, clarifying the circumstances in which the defenders were killed, expeditiously bringing those responsible to justice.
- Collaborate with human rights defenders and civil society organisations for designing and implementing robust protection policies with a gender perspective and an intersectional approach.
- Ensure effective representation of human rights defenders, especially women, in any peace process that has a bearing on their security, including but not limited to the peace process. Participation must include guarantees of safety, and effective and equitable representation of views.

Signatory Organizations:

Amnesty International

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

Civicus

FIDH, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

World Organisation Against Torture

(OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Front Line Defenders

South Asians for Human Rights

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights – Asia & Pacific

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

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