

CHILDREN DEVASTATED BY WAR: Afghanistan's lost generations

"War violates every right of a child -- the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to development of personality and the right to be nurtured and protected."¹

Twenty years of armed conflict have devastated the lives of millions of Afghan children. Ten years after the development of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, today ratified by almost all the world's states including Afghanistan, the most basic human rights remain for the children of Afghanistan no more than a paper promise.

Families have been torn apart in the fighting, many children have lost parents or siblings. Others have been forced to flee from their homes, either abroad or to other parts of Afghanistan. All have suffered from disrupted schooling and economic hardship. The physical, emotional and mental development of generations of Afghanistan's children has been severely affected by the ongoing fighting.

Children have been the victims of the war in many ways. Hundreds of thousands have been killed in indiscriminate bombing and shelling of their homes, schools or playing fields. Hundreds, possibly thousands,

have been subjected to deliberate and arbitrary killings and torture at the hands of the numerous armed political groups. Many more have been killed or maimed by the millions of landmines which litter the country.

Girl children, and at times boys, have suffered rape and sexual assault. They have been abducted by local warring commanders, either for their own sexual purposes or to be sold into prostitution.

Even if they have not been the direct targets of human rights abuses, the majority of Afghan children have been witness to acts of violence and destruction which have destroyed the social fabric of society. Death, displacement and loss of livelihoods have affected the ability of families to provide the emotional and financial support children require as they grow up. Children have suffered in greater numbers from the collapsed infrastructure, healthcare and educational systems. Disruption to food supplies, health services, water

systems and sanitation have caused premature and unnecessary deaths, particularly for those under five. About four million children in Afghanistan have died from malnutrition and illness, while some 268,000 children under the age of five have died each year from easily treatable diseases such as diarrhoea and pulmonary conditions².

Costs of war

The social costs of two decades of civil war in Afghanistan have been enormous. More than one million civilians are believed to have been killed and countless others injured. During the time of the Soviet occupation, over six million people fled the country. Although many returned after the Soviet withdrawal, there are still over two million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, making Afghans the largest single refugee group in the world. Inside the country, the infrastructure and institutions of state have been largely destroyed by the conflict. According to the UN, the socio-economic conditions of the population are amongst the worst in the world. Healthcare is rudimentary and many are without access to basic healthcare provision. Thousands of children die from malnutrition and respiratory infections every year. Maternal mortality is one of the highest in the world. Literacy rates are extremely low and are estimated to have dropped to as low as four per cent for women.

Amidst the devastation, children's educational and developmental needs have been forgotten. Access to education has been reduced as schools have been destroyed and teachers forced to flee. In recent years the actions of various armed groups who have banned education for girls has further limited opportunities for learning.

Children have had to find their own means of coping with the horrors of war. Young boys have taken on the responsibility of adults as the breadwinner of the family after their fathers have been killed. Criminal gangs engaged in drug trafficking and smuggling have preyed on their vulnerability. Armed groups have recruited children to fight in battles, turning them into perpetrators of violence themselves.

The trauma of experiencing such brutality and being surrounded by violence, fear and hardship has deeply affected the children of Afghanistan. Facing such conditions during a formative stage leaves permanent scars on the personality of a child. In October 1997 UNICEF revealed the findings of a first study of its kind in Afghanistan on the effects of the conflict on children. It showed that the majority of children in Kabul were suffering serious traumatic stress. Some 72 per cent of the children interviewed had



experienced the death of a relative between 1992 and 1996. Almost all of the children interviewed had witnessed acts of violence. Two thirds of them had seen dead bodies or body parts and nearly half had seen people killed during rocket and artillery attacks. A disturbing 90 per cent believed they would die during the conflict.

The effects of war in Afghanistan have had and will continue to have a lasting impact on the future development of society. The regeneration of civil society and rehabilitation of the country requires trained doctors, teachers and engineers. With generations of children missing out on the most basic schooling as well as higher education, the

Child soldier 1993 © Davis/Saba/Rea/KATZ Pictures

Recently, UNICEF has again urged all warring parties in Afghanistan to avoid recruiting children under 18 years of age. UN officials believe that the latest fighting between the Taliban and the Anti-Taliban alliance involves an increasing number of boys under the age of 18, with some as young as 14.

The CRC and international humanitarian law prohibit the recruitment of children under 15 into armed forces of governments and armed opposition groups. However, in view of the grave violations of physical and mental integrity involved when children participate in hostilities, Amnesty International and others are calling for the age to be raised to 18.

prospects for development remain bleak.

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES PERPETRATED AGAINST CHILDREN

All parties to the Afghan conflict have been responsible for direct abuses of children's human rights; for failing to adequately protect them and prevent them being caught in the crossfire; and for disregarding their development needs.

During the ten years of fighting that followed the Soviet invasion, serious human rights violations and abuses were reported. Civilians in rural areas, where most of the fighting took place, were targeted by Soviet and Afghan troops apparently in reprisal for the actions of armed opposition groups. Villages were bombed and burned. Men, women and children were killed in these attacks and people's homes and livelihoods destroyed. Many children were orphaned and forced to leave their homes with whoever from their family could take them. Up to six million people fled Afghanistan during this period, women and children making up the majority of Afghan refugees.

The years 1992-1995

Following the collapse of the pro-Soviet government and the failure of the Mujahideen groups to agree to power-sharing arrangements, the nature of the civil war in Afghanistan changed. With the fragmentation of political power and territory under the control of different militias the country plunged into lawlessness. Alliances and hostilities between the warring factions were often based on personal loyalties, some of which were purely tactical and short lived. As territory changed hands after long battles, local populations were subjected to violent retaliatory punishments by the victorious forces.

Children were deliberately killed in their homes by members of warring factions who suspected their parents supported rival factions. In November 1993, three children of a family of the Hazara minority were arrested in Karte Seh in Kabul. The head of the family had worked as a carpenter for several foreign embassies in the past. On 20 November 1993, his house was raided by a group reportedly belonging to the *Jamiat-e Islami*. He resisted and was beaten unconscious; when he regained consciousness, his son

Landmines

It is estimated that around 10 million landmines have been laid Afghanistan, making it one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. In 1998 over 1,000 civilians were reportedly victims of landmines. These indiscriminate weapons pose a particular threat to children, who are naturally curious and likely to pick up unknown objects. Every day around seven children are killed by landmines in Afghanistan, their small bodies unable to withstand the explosion. Many of those who survive the blast die later due to lack of medical facilities. Others are left blind or deaf or without limbs.

Picham Ali, a shepherd from Bagram in Parwan Province, was just 15 when he stepped on a mine in mid 1994. His father claimed that the mines had been placed in agricultural land by the then government forces to intimidate local farmers into supplying food for the soldiers based nearby. Picham lost his right leg and right eye in the blast.

Rahmatullah, aged 15, had been abducted. Two days later in a similar raid, two other sons, Ahmadreza aged 13 and Mustafa aged 11 were abducted. After negotiations with the abductors about the release of the children broke down, the family fled Kabul. The children's whereabouts remain unknown.

Children were subjected to abduction and sexual abuse by armed political groups. Young girls, in particular, have been abducted and detained and used for sexual purposes or sold into prostitution. The rape of women and young girls by armed guards appeared to have been condoned by leaders as a method of intimidating vanquished populations and rewarding soldiers. In March 1994, a 15-year-old girl was repeatedly raped in her house in Kabul's Chel Sotoon district after armed guards entered the house and killed her father for allowing her to go to school. *"They shot my father right in front of me. He was a shop-keeper. It was nine o'clock at night. They came to our house and told him they had orders to kill him because he allowed me to go to school. The Mujahideen had already stopped me from going to school, but that was not enough. They then came and killed my father. I cannot describe what they did to me after killing my father..."*

A school girl called Farida was reportedly taken away by the armed guards of *Hezb-e Islami* in January 1993 in Kabul. A witness recalled: *"A commander of Hezb-e Islami saw her and decided to take her. The commander contacted the father and asked him to give his daughter to the commander. The family rejected this. The commander then came back in the evening with a number of armed guards and took the girl away. The family did not resist, so no one was killed. But no one knew what had happened to the girl."*



Afghan refugee children at a school in Pakistan, 1995.

Education in Afghanistan

Modern education in Afghanistan has been at the centre of a long conflict between traditional and secular forces. It began with the reform program initiated by King Amanullah Khan in the 1920s. Opposition from traditionalist elements did not deter the gradual establishment of a network of schools which by 1967 offered primary, secondary and vocational education to approximately 450,000 students. Traditional families prevented many children from entering schools while many other children were deprived of schooling due to lack of facilities as the increase in the student population was far higher than the increase in the number of schools. In addition, there continued to be wide discrepancies between urban and rural areas where education, predominantly for boys, was religious instruction in the traditional *madrasa* or mosque school.

After the establishment of a pro-Soviet government under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978, education for girls and boys was further stressed and a mass literacy campaign was introduced, provoking a new form of opposition to secular education. With the *jihad* (Islamic holy war) which the Mujahideen mounted in early 1980s, they challenged not only the political legitimacy of the Soviet backed government but also the values it was promoting

1995 onwards

In late 1994, the Taliban armed political group emerged as a military and political force and has since captured around 80 per cent of Afghanistan. Over this period there has been a change in the nature of the conflict and human rights abuses have taken on a new dimension. In contrast to the Mujahideen groups of the past, the Taliban appeared as a more cohesive force in 1994 and 1995 bringing a degree of order to areas of the country brought securely under their control. Their policy of disarming opposition groups resulted in a reduction in acts of banditry and extortion, winning them popular support from

the traditional Afghan families. However, as the war continued and the Taleban's objective of a military take-over of the country proved more difficult, the Taleban opted for making tactical pacts with local commanders. These local commanders are now largely in charge of the security of the areas they control. The Taleban, on occasions, have blamed serious breaches in law and order and subsequent human rights abuses on their local forces over whose conduct they appear to have little control.

International responsibility for human rights disaster

War has been the background and context for widespread and serious human rights abuses in Afghanistan for the past 20 years. The conflict, which has so devastated the country, has been fuelled by outside powers who have provided political and military support to their favoured Afghan armed groups, advancing their own geo-political and economic goals at the expense of the suffering of millions of Afghan civilians. For over a decade during the Soviet occupation vast quantities of arms and ammunition poured into the country at a cost of untold millions of dollars. The states primarily responsible were the former Soviet Union (including its successor states of the Commonwealth of Independent States), the USA and its western European allies, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. All seemed indifferent to the fact that the arms they financed were being used to commit human rights abuses on a massive scale. Even today, years after the Soviet withdrawal, outside political and military interference is recognised as being a critical factor in the perpetuation of the conflict, and in the persistence of human rights abuses. As stated by the UN Secretary General in his report to the General Assembly in November 1998.

"Afghanistan, once a flashpoint of superpower rivalry, has now become the stage for a new, regional version of the "Great Game", in which the domestic, economic and national security interests of Afghanistan's neighbours and their supporters are played out. A vicious cycle has developed in

The Taleban's strict interpretation of Islam incorporates a rigid social code which has been imposed on the civilian population in areas under its control. Through a multitude of edicts, severe restrictions have been placed on women's movement, employment and education, institutionalising traditional discrimination prevalent in Afghan society. The edicts banning women's employment and education and restricting women and girl's movement have undermined, especially in urban areas, women's ability to contribute to the financial well-being of the family while the children have to inevitably share the humiliation that their mothers, other women relatives and the entire family are subjected to under these edicts. Very young children have been forced out to work, at times with the livelihood of the entire family dependent on their jobs. The aid community in Kabul believed that as of early 1999 an estimated 28,000 children, some as young as nine years old, were working on the streets of the capital. With increasing numbers of displaced families arriving in the city, this figure is now thought to be even higher.

Great concern has been expressed about the edict preventing girls from going to school, which has institutionalised the wide gender

gap prevalent in education in Afghanistan. Many consider this edict as seriously weakening Afghanistan's prospects for economic and social development. The disruption of education has not only affected girls; boys too have suffered from the ban on women's employment due to the fact that around 40 per cent of teachers were female².

The Taleban has responded at various times saying schooling for girls would be reinstated when peace and security is achieved, or when they have taken control of the whole country, or when they have sufficient funds to implement segregated education. However, whether the Taleban will live up to these promises remains to be seen. In the southwest of the country where the Taleban have been in uncontested control for several years, the restrictions on female education are still in force. Some initiatives have been taken to get around the Taleban ban by setting up home-based schools for girls. However, in Kabul, such home schools and vocational centres were closed down by the Taleban administration in June 1998 disrupting the program of the humanitarian agencies struggling to respond to the children's need for education. The head of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the

Prevention of Vice was reported as saying that the schools were “against the Islamic *Shari’a* (law)” and accused them of spreading anti Taleban propaganda.

In the context of the ongoing fighting there have been reports of the Taleban carrying out deliberate or indiscriminate killing during wide scale massacres. Children were among around 70 civilians who according to the survivors were arbitrarily killed by armed Taleban guards in September 1997 in Qezelabad village near Mazar-e Sharif. All of the victims belonged to the Hazara ethnic group. Among them an eight-year-old had been decapitated. Two boys of about 12 were reportedly held by the guards and had their arms and hands broken with stones.

As the Taleban have clamped down on political activists who peacefully oppose the continuing war, children have been held hostage in place of their fathers who have escaped arrest. Last year Amnesty International learnt of at least nine boys who had been taken hostage in Kabul and other parts of the country in 1998. These children were released after several months in detention where they were reportedly subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

Most recently, an international aid agency warned that around 20,000 women and children were facing death in Afghanistan unless they received urgent supplies of medicine and food. The warning came after the forced displacement of over 100,000 people north of Kabul by the Taleban during a military offensive against the anti-Taleban alliance in the area.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is one of the most comprehensive instruments in international human rights law which elaborates human rights specifically for children. The rights contained in the CRC range from the child’s most basic subsistence needs –food, shelter, access to healthcare– to other fundamental things that children need to develop their fullest potential –rights to education and freedom of thought and religion. The Convention also includes the right to be protected from abuse and neglect. Recognising that every child has an inherent right to life, State Parties are directed to take all appropriate measures to ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

Along with other international human rights instruments, the CRC reaffirms the special obligation on the part of states to respect the rights of children in armed conflict. Article 38 (4) obliges states in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflict, to ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict.

International humanitarian law

International humanitarian law establishes minimum standards for the protection of individuals in situations of armed conflict to which all governments and opposition groups must abide. In particular, Common Article 3 which appears in all four Geneva Conventions of 1949 requires the humane treatment of all persons who do not take a direct part or who have ceased to take part in hostilities “without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria”.

...2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

...3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.

Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions also enjoins all parties to hostilities to ensure that children are the object of special respect and are protected against any form of indecent assault, and to provide them with the care and aid they require, whether because of their age or any other reason.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Protection of civilians in armed conflict, especially children, is a basic requirement of international humanitarian law which governs the conduct of all warring factions in all armed conflict situations. Welfare of the children and protection of their human rights is contained also in the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child to which Afghanistan is a party. All warring factions have ignored the safeguards in these instruments that prohibit human rights abuses against children.

It is now time for Afghan armed groups to start respecting children's human rights and safeguarding Afghanistan's future. Generations of children have been physically and mentally scarred by the horrors of endless conflict. Unless immediate action is taken to ensure the freedom and dignity of children and create conditions in which they can develop their potential the prospects for lasting peace and prosperity remain remote.

Recommendations to Afghan Armed Groups:

Amnesty International is urging all armed groups to end the cycle of abuses against children by ensuring that:

- ! Leaders of all armed groups declare total opposition to human rights abuses against children, maintain a strict chain-of-command control over their forces and hold accountable any members of their forces who commit or tolerate human rights abuses. In particular they should ensure that:
- ! Children or other civilians do not become the target of deliberate or indiscriminate attacks;
- ! Children are not subjected to torture and ill-treatment, including sexual abuse;
- ! Children are not held prisoners in place of their fathers, or in any way as prisoners of conscience; Amnesty International considers any girls or boys physically restricted on account of their gender to be prisoners of conscience;
- ! The compulsory or voluntary recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 into armed forces is prohibited;
- ! An end to the use of anti-personnel mines and other weapons whose effects are indiscriminate;
- ! No child is deprived of the right to education.

Recommendations to the International Community:

Amnesty International is urging the international community, and particularly those governments with influence over the warring factions in Afghanistan to bring pressure to bear on the armed groups to respect children's fundamental human rights in all circumstances.

- ! All governments should support the adoption of an Optional Protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child protecting the recruitment and participation of child soldiers.

- ! All governments should ratify and implement the international Convention on the Prohibition of Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction and provide economic and technical assistance to mine-clearance efforts in Afghanistan.
- ! Outside governments that have provided arms, or continue to provide arms and political support to the warring factions in Afghanistan have a particular responsibility to ensure that violations of children's human rights, as well as other civilians, are brought to an end. Governments must end transfers of equipment and training to military forces in Afghanistan which could be used to commit or facilitate human rights abuses.

Countries with influence in Afghanistan

The main countries with influence are brought together by the UN in the "Six plus two" group, which meets regularly under UN auspices to discuss ways of bringing peace to Afghanistan. This consists of the six countries bordering Afghanistan - Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China - plus the USA and Russia.

Other countries with influence that have attended UN meetings on Afghanistan: Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Turkey, UK and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Afghanistan Support Group brings together main donors and organizations working in Afghanistan. These countries overlap with the UN groupings: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Britain, the US, Australia, Russia, Canada, Norway, Japan, and the EU's executive commission.

Please send appeals based on the recommendations above to:

YOUR OWN GOVERNMENT

THE EMBASSIES OF PAKISTAN, SAUDI ARABIA, IRAN, AND THE USA IN YOUR OWN COUNTRY

THE TALEBAN :

Alhaj Mullah Mohammad Rabbani

Salutation: Dear Mullah Rabbani

(Chairman of the Taleban Caretaker Council)
Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
House No 8, Street No. 90
G-6/3 Islamabad
Pakistan

and

Mullah Mohammad Omar

Salutation: Dear Mullah Omar

(leader of the Taleban)
Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
House No 8, Street No. 90
G-6/3 Islamabad
Pakistan

THE UNITED FRONT (ANTI-TALEBAN ALLIANCE):

Embassy of the Islamic State of Afghanistan
31 Prince's Gate
London
SW7 1QQ
United Kingdom

ENDNOTES

1. Graça Machel, (Expert to the Secretary General of the United Nations) *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, UNICEF, 1996.

2. UNICEF et al, *The Impact of Conflict on Children in Afghanistan*, UNICEF, May 1998.