



May 18, 2021

Chairman Gregory W. Meeks (D-NY)  
House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs  
2170 Rayburn House Office Building,  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Ranking Member Michael McCaul (R-TX)  
House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs  
2170 Rayburn House Office Building,  
Washington, D.C. 20515

**RE: Amnesty International Statement for the Record for Hearing on “The U.S.-Afghanistan Relationship Following the Military Withdrawal”**

On behalf of Amnesty International USA and our members and supporters in the United States, we hereby submit this statement for the record. Amnesty International is an international human rights organization with national and regional offices in more than 70 countries, including in the United States. Human rights in Afghanistan, including the rights of Afghan human rights defenders, internally displaced persons, and Afghan women and girls, are a top priority of our organization.

**Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is plagued by an almost incalculable series of human rights challenges. Corrupt government officials abuse and extort their citizens, anti-government elements including the Taliban and Islamic State – Khorasan have routinely targeted and killed civilians, U.S. and coalition drone strikes have reduced people’s homes to rubble, over four million internally displaced persons are consigned to lives of abject poverty, and women are denied their human rights. In this environment, human rights defenders (HRDs) call the world’s attention to human suffering of incredible proportions. To do so, they travel to dangerous locales and shine the spotlight on powerful people who would prefer to remain in the dark. As members of various Afghan communities, they have an intimate knowledge of local customs and languages. Without their work, major human rights abuses would simply go unreported. Yet precisely because of their invaluable service, human rights activists in Afghanistan face severe threats to their lives. In many cases, they are on their own. Their government has failed to prevent attacks against them, denied their requests for assistance, refused to hold their attackers to account and, at times, punished them for seeking justice.

Human rights defenders, activists, and journalists are continuously subjected to intimidation, violence, and even death. In the 2019 Amnesty International report "[Defenseless Defenders](#)," our organization



documented multiple instances of violence and intimidation against human rights defenders. In the report, human rights defenders share the staggering violence they face while doing their jobs. One activist who worked to document the government of Iran's mistreatment of Afghan refugees and raise concerns about growing levels of radicalization in Afghanistan was shot seven times while driving home. The activist had received threats for weeks prior to the attack, including from the Taliban and from diplomats of the Islamic Republic of Iran. When he reported the harassment to Afghanistan's security officials, they took no action. In another case, a renowned women's defense attorney who represented clients accusing powerful individuals of domestic violence was threatened with having acid sprayed in her face. Her car was stolen, and her brother was severely beaten. When she complained to the authorities, they accused her of fabricating evidence.

Some of the pressure faced by HRDs remains below the surface and is marshalled by powerful people through quiet messages and phone calls. When an Afghan civil society organization drafted a "shadow report" for the UN Committee against Torture in 2017, they shared the document with several peer organizations for review. Shortly thereafter, they received a phone call through an anonymous number detailing in-depth knowledge of the report, its authors, and its contents. The caller demanded that the names of several prominent Afghan officials be removed from the report and threatened the authors.

The challenges facing HRDs have increased in recent years. Amnesty International has noticed increased attacks against both men and women human rights activist. Many activists and journalists have left the country to seek refuge from attack.

Following years of research and advocacy by Afghan and international civil society organizations, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani signed a decree [establishing a Joint Commission](#) for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in December 2020. [Prior government efforts](#) to protect rights activists proved limited, unambitious, and hobbled by budget constraints. None of the pre-existing bodies, for example, were empowered to provide immediate support for rights defenders or investigate abuses. Yet, despite this encouraging move, the commission remains merely a promise on paper. In the months since the announcement, the government of Afghanistan [made no progress](#) on forming a functional commission to address the protection needs of rights defenders. Meanwhile, attacks on human rights defenders have spiked. In February 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued a [new report](#) documenting a sharp rise in killings of human rights defenders and media workers in targeted attacks. Mere days after President Ghani signed the decree, [Freshta Kohistani](#), a prominent women's rights activist, and her brother were shot by unknown gunmen near their home in Kapisa province.

## **Internally Displaced Persons**

Amnesty International has closely tracked the plight of Afghanistan's Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) through [periodic long form reports](#), informed by extensive on-the-ground research. In that time, the major thing to change was their number. In 2012, half a million Afghans were IDPs. In 2016, that number rose to 1.2 million. Today, there are an estimated [four million](#) internally displaced people in Afghanistan, a number approximately equivalent to the population of the United States' second largest



city, Los Angeles. The violence, poverty, and insecurity endemic to their daily lives represents an international policy failure.

Our research has documented how many of these IDPs live lives [of staggering privation](#), unable to provide for their most basic needs. Many of those who eke out meager survival are one crisis away from death. In these situations, the loss of a breadwinner spells catastrophe for the family, marking the difference between sustenance and hunger, shelter and the elements, life and death.

The increase in internal displacement is largely driven by the accelerating pace of the conflict in Afghanistan, which has expanded from the traditional hotspots in the south and southeast to encompass much of the country. Fractures within Taliban forces and the emergence of additional anti-government elements loyal to the Islamic State – Khorasan have prompted further violence and catalyzed even more displacement. U.S. negotiations with the Taliban and subsequent intra-Afghan dialogues have not abetted the violence. According to [UNAMA](#), the first quarter of 2021 marked a 29 per cent increase in civilian casualties compared with the same period last year.

In February 2014, the Afghan government launched a [National Policy on IDPs](#) that was based on the UN Guiding Principles for Internal Displacement. Although the policy was hailed by international observers at its inception, it has demonstrated little impact to date. The Afghan government [ministry charged with implementing the policy](#), the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations, has been hamstrung by limited resources and repeated charges of corruption.

For many Afghans interviewed by Amnesty International, the IDP policy has made not an iota of difference. Shelter in IDP camps is flimsy and unable to provide safety and security. Displaced Afghans live in [makeshift huts](#) made from mud and poles and covered with plastic sheets, or under tarpaulin tents. In other cases, where Afghan families can afford more permanent structures (also constructed from mud), rainwater frequently floods the dwellings, leaving the streets between them virtually impassable. When not flooded, mud brick huts provide almost no protection from Afghanistan's summer heat and winter cold, as well as from insects and other wildlife.

Access to water and food in displaced communities remains a critical challenge. People are forced to make arduous trips to gather water from wells installed by aid agencies. In other cases, residents are forced to purchase water at rates far beyond what they can afford from private proprietors. When pumps fail, there is often nobody to repair them. A community leader at a displaced person's camp in Kabul [told Amnesty](#), "Food is a luxury here, no one can afford it. We mostly live off bread or spoiled vegetables from the market".

Displaced Afghans face few avenues to gain employment. Most families draw income from one breadwinner, typically the father, who finds irregular work through informal channels, often manual labor or construction. Children are sometimes [forced to seek employment](#) to supplement family income. Children in displaced families are often unable to access educational opportunities. Many families cannot afford books, school uniforms or other basic educational materials. Some families reported to Amnesty International that their only option was to send children to attend religious instruction at a local mosque. Women are often hardest hit by economic insecurity, having previously worked in



agriculture on their family's land that has become inaccessible to them following their displacement. In many cases, Afghan IDPs suffer from illiteracy and innumeracy are prevented from gaining meaningful employment outside of trades that involve manual labor.

As the world first awoke to the threat of COVID-19 in early 2020, Iran quickly emerged as a global hotspot for infections by the virus. [As feared by many observers](#), the virus quickly spread across the porous Iran-Afghanistan border into Herat Province. The impact of the pandemic compounded numerous pre-existing challenges faced by people in Afghanistan. Healthcare facilities are few and of low caliber, doctors are rare and concentrated in urban areas, personal protective equipment (PPE) is limited, and Afghans frequently live in multigenerational households and in close proximity to one another, making it difficult to implement social distancing measures or isolate the sick.

Internally displaced Afghans have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to other Afghans, they are far more likely to live in inadequate housing and lack access to health care, clean water and sanitation. COVID-19-associated lockdowns have worsened their economic situation. Because IDPs primarily work low-paying jobs in the informal sector, lockdowns have resulted in a rapid loss of income for many displaced families. Additionally, COVID-19 lockdown measures have caused a spike in commodity prices, often rendering IDP families unable to afford goods previously available to them. This, in turn, has forced many IDP families to push their young children out of school and into the labor market to help the family make ends meet. In the past, international aid agencies and humanitarian organizations would step in to fill these gaps. However, the pandemic has forced them, too, to curtail operations.

### **Afghan Women and Girls**

Under Taliban rule, a [patchwork of laws and edicts](#) barred women from seeking employment outside their home and shuttered education opportunities for Afghan girls. A draconian modesty code, enforced routinely with physical violence, allowed the Taliban to punish minute violations of their morality code with beatings, humiliation, and sometimes killings. Women could not leave their homes without an escort or secure medical care from a male physician. Upon capturing a town or city, Taliban forces would immediately discontinue education for girls, often spreading news of their decision via loudspeaker. Women were routinely executed in public on flimsy allegations of crimes or for no crimes at all. The Taliban instituted a series of brutal punishments, including bodily mutilation, for real or perceived infractions of their moral code. In one instance representative of many similar cases, a woman caught [wearing nail polish](#) was "punished" by the Taliban by having the end of her thumb cut off.

Since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, the situation for women has improved dramatically. Slowly but deliberately, Afghan women have progressed up the ranks of their country's bureaucracies. Today, women are [ministers](#), [generals](#), [ambassadors](#), [members of parliament](#), [entrepreneurs](#), and civil society leaders. The constitution of Afghanistan recognizes the equality of men and women, rape is criminalized, and women are legally empowered to seek education and health care.

Without doubt, Afghanistan's women and girls continue to face tremendous challenges. [Their life expectancy](#) is scandalously low, and [child marriage](#) rates are stunningly high. Women account for almost



all [suicides](#), and almost all women experience [domestic violence](#). Working women are threatened, intimidated, and killed. From January- May 2021, at least six women working in media and polio vaccination efforts were shot dead in Nangarhar provinces. In majority of provinces, women fear their safety. They have either opted reduced activities, moving out of the province or even the country in some cases. Still, Afghan women are eager to protect their gains and secure more of them. Proving time and again they have no better advocate than themselves, Afghan women have [shared their stories](#) on social media and [spoken](#) out in [forums](#) across the [world](#).

Their ability to secure their rights has been stymied by the fact that women have been locked out of all but a few of the U.S. – Taliban negotiations. When pressed about why they were undertaking high-level and sensitive negotiations about the future of Afghanistan without the presence of women, [U.S. officials replied](#) that women would be granted a seat at future inter-Afghan dialogues. Yet, following the conclusion of the U.S.-Taliban negotiations, women were only granted limited representation in the inter-Afghan dialogues. The latest round of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban was scheduled to take place in April 2021 in Istanbul but [has been postponed](#) until after the end of Ramadan in May.

Despite their progress and the changes that have occurred since 2001, many women remain afraid for their future. In various media outlets, women journalists and activists [describe their fear](#) that the future of their country does not include them. Were their fears to come to pass, their lives and freedoms and everything they have struggled for would be imperiled.

## Recommendations

### On HRDs

- [\(For Congress\) Provide funding for human rights defenders and civil society organizations directly, especially to those operating outside of major cities:](#) Afghan civil society organizations have long complained that the government exercises undue influence over international funding to civic organizations. Additionally, human rights defenders operating across Afghanistan's rural regions do pivotal work but struggle to access funding. The U.S. Congress should provide additional funding directly to these activists and organizations.
- [\(For Congress\) Provide opportunities for Afghan rights defenders to temporarily leave Afghanistan and build their skills:](#) Afghan human rights defenders operate in difficult circumstances with limited support. They face credible threats to their lives and are often unable to secure training to improve their security and capacity. In this environment, some rights defenders have benefited by temporarily leaving Afghanistan to attend skills workshops and fellowships. The U.S. Congress should provide funding for Afghan rights defenders to participate in trainings and fellowships abroad, in partnership with academic institutions where appropriate.
- [\(For Congress\) Provide material support for Afghan rights defenders to relocate internally:](#) When human rights activists in Afghanistan are unable to continue to operate in their local environments owing to the increased threats from the local government or from anti-government forces, they are forced to relocate internally. This need will become more acute as U.S. forces exit the country and the Taliban consolidates its military gains. Yet relocation for



rights activists is not without its own risks. By moving to a different location in Afghanistan, rights activists often lose access to gainful employment and their social support network. Congress should direct the U.S. Department of State to provide funding to support relocated human rights defenders in Afghanistan.

## On IDPs

- (For the Congress and the Administration) Highlight the plight of IDPs during future discussions with the government of Afghanistan: The U.S. Department of State and Members of Congress should highlight the plight of IDPs in all future discussions with the government of Afghanistan, especially during negotiations around assistance levels.
- (For Congress and the Administration) Call on the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations to combat corruption within its ranks: Both the U.S. government and the UNHCR have previously limited assistance to the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation due to "ongoing corruption and capacity issues". The U.S. aid watchdog Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has also criticized corruption at the ministry. While the ministry has taken some steps to tackle corruption, the U.S. Department of State and Members of Congress should call on the Afghan government to prioritize rooting out corruption at the ministry.
- (For Congress) Provide capacity support to humanitarian organizations working with IDPs: Numerous international humanitarian organizations work with internally displaced persons across the country. Congress should appropriate additional funds to support their efforts and ensure they are able to continue their critical work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## On Afghan Women and Girls

- (For Congress) Provide additional assistance for women's development assistance: [U.S. development assistance](#) helps Afghan women access an education, become leaders in their communities, and attain a decent standard of living. Were the U.S. to step back from this assistance as troops leave the country, the results would be devastating to the millions of women who are beneficiaries of this funding. Congress should allocate additional funding to this effort.
- (For Congress) Provide oversight of the U.S. Department of State's efforts to include women in peace talks: The U.S. Department of State has committed to ensuring that Afghan women will be provided a seat at the inter-Afghan talks. Congress should conduct oversight of the Biden Administration's progress on implementing these promises. Congress should also ensure that Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Khalilzad's team includes human rights and gender equality specialists as they continue their work.
- (For Administration) Guarantee prioritization of women's rights: The U.S. must ensure that women are part of any effort to secure peace in Afghanistan. The Biden administration should publicly commit to providing women with a seat at the table in all future negotiation rounds in which the U.S. is involved. Similarly, senior administration officials should publicly state that the protection of women's rights will not be used as a bargaining chip and retained as a red line in any U.S. negotiating position.

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For more information, please contact Daniel Balson, Advocacy Director for Europe and Central Asia at (202) 893-6302 or at [dbalson@aiusa.org](mailto:dbalson@aiusa.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Daniel Balson', written in a cursive style.

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