

## Report Claims Afghanistan Rife With Abuse, Fear Powerful Figures, Gunmen Blamed

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Tuesday, July 29, 2003

KABUL, Afghanistan, July 28 -- Afghans are being terrorized routinely by gunmen working for faction leaders, local authorities and high-ranking officials whom the United States helped bring to power, an international human rights group said in a report to be released Tuesday.

The 101-page report by Human Rights Watch was based on hundreds of interviews conducted between January and June in Afghanistan's southeastern provinces, the most densely populated region of the country. Quoting alleged victims who were not fully identified, the report charges that police, intelligence agents and soldiers working for some of the nation's more powerful military and political figures have helped silence critics and intimidate the ordinary Afghans they are supposed to serve. It said the victims were robbed, beaten, kidnapped and imprisoned.

Gen. Mohammad Fahim, the defense minister, Yonis Qanooni, the education minister, and Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf, a powerful former Islamic guerrilla leader, were criticized in the report.

A spokesman for Fahim denounced the report as inaccurate propaganda written by outsiders who never fought for Afghanistan. "When Afghan people defended Afghanistan, they lived in Europe," Mir Jan, head of the foreign affairs department of the Defense Ministry, said today of the outside critics. Violent crime, political intimidation and media censorship have created such a climate of fear in Afghanistan that they threaten to derail national elections now slated for next year, the report said.

"Afghanistan's window of opportunity is closing fast," the report says. "A new constitution and national elections are on the horizon, and warlords and abusive military commanders are becoming more and more entrenched. . . . If allowed to continue with impunity, these abuses will make it impossible for Afghans to create a modern, democratic state."

To help stop widespread abuses, the rights group said, the United States should pressure national and regional strongmen to follow the rule of law, and the international community should expand its peacekeeping forces beyond Kabul, the capital.

"The situation today -- widespread insecurity and human rights abuse -- was not inevitable, nor was it the result of natural or unstoppable social or political forces in Afghanistan," the report says. "It is in large part the result of decisions, acts and omissions of the United States government, the governments of other coalition members and parts of the transitional Afghan government itself."

"The warlords themselves, of course, are ultimately to blame. . . . But the United States in particular bears much responsibility for the actions of those they have propelled to power."

Young girls and women have suffered disproportionately under the rule of Afghanistan's gunmen and warlords, the report says. Sexual assaults are so common that many are afraid to walk to school or to leave home without wearing a *burqa*, making it impossible for them to enjoy the freedoms supposedly won with the fall of the repressive Taliban, the human rights group reported.

"In addition to the terrible physical and psychological harm caused by these attacks, they also serve to limit the participation of women in civil society and the public sphere," the report states. "Sexual violence curtails their rights to education, to work, to privacy and to health care. Many women and girls are essentially prisoners in their own homes."

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