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COUNTRY SUMMARY

Afghanistan

By late 2006 Afghanistan was on the precipice of again becoming a haven for human rights abusers, criminals, and militant extremists, many of whom in the past have severely abused Afghans, particularly women and girls, and threatened the stability of the country, the region, and the world.

Resurgent Taliban forces, tribal militias, and rearmed warlords exploited the power vacuum in many parts of the country. These groups increasingly used bombings and assassinations, including attacks on “soft targets” such as schools, teachers, and religious figures, to terrorize ordinary citizens and demonstrate the central government’s inability to protect them. Much of the violence and insecurity was driven and financed by another record-setting year for poppy production, which exceeded 2005’s crop by 60 percent and generated nearly half of the country’s income and 92 percent of the world’s supply of heroin.

As NATO forces in the United Nations-mandated International Security Assistance Force finally extended their reach across the entire country, the insurgency they confronted in southern and southeastern Afghanistan escalated into open warfare. In other parts of the country, Afghans were routinely subject to abuses and oppression by regional warlords and militias, most of them ostensibly allied with the government. Throughout the country, including Kabul, Afghans were disappointed and frustrated by insufficient and poorly coordinated international security and financial assistance. They also suffered from the poor governance and corruption of the government of President Hamid Karzai, which often lacked the will or the capacity to protect the rights of ordinary Afghans.

Despite an increase in the country’s average per capita income (much of it fueled by the narcotics trade), economic growth remained mostly limited to urban areas, in particular Kabul. Human rights abuses, poverty, and insecurity increased markedly with distance away from city centers. The armed clashes and insecurity seriously hampered, and even

reversed, economic development in many parts of Afghanistan, which remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Reconstruction was particularly hurt in the south, adding fuel to local resentments.

Violence and Insecurity

At this writing, more than 1,000 civilians have been killed in 2006 as a result of violence related to the insurgency, most of them in southern Afghanistan. Overall more than 3,000 Afghans have died in the violence in 2006, twice as many as in 2005 and more than in any other year since the 2001 fall of the Taliban. The United Nations estimated that the violence displaced 15,000 families—about 80,000 people—in southern Afghanistan.

In a new development, Taliban and other anti-government forces carried out more than 80 suicide bombings, mostly killing civilians. In a sharp rise from 2005, anti-government forces carried out hundreds of attacks against teachers, students, and schools; these attacks constituted war crimes because of their civilian targets. In entire districts, attacks have closed all schools and driven out teachers and NGOs providing education. More than 200,000 students who were in school in 2005 were consequently deprived of an education in 2006.

More than 170 foreign troops died in the fighting in 2006. While NATO and US-led coalition forces tried to minimize harm to civilians, there were serious concerns about NATO's ability to distinguish between combatants and civilians due to extensive reliance on aerial bombardment to compensate for insufficient numbers of ground troops.

In southern Afghanistan, tribal chiefs like senator Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, who was removed as governor of Helmand due to allegations of corruption and involvement in the drug trade, have been allowed to operate abusive militias with the blessing of President Karzai. Across the country, warlords with records of war crimes and other serious abuses during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s, such as parliamentarians Abdul Rabb al Rasul Sayyaf and Burhanuddin Rabbani, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Vice President Karim Khalili, continue to hold and misuse positions of power.

Government Failures

President Karzai's government did not credibly attempt to quell rampant corruption or rein in abuses by militias and warlords. Too often, the government bowed to demands for political repression justified by the insecurity, though such moves alienated ordinary Afghans and weakened the government's legitimacy. In June the National Directorate of Security (NDS, the state intelligence agency) distributed to Afghan journalists a list of restrictions intended to curtail their reporting on the deteriorating security situation. The NDS increasingly resorted to intimidation and strong-arm tactics to gather information and silence government critics.

In May Karzai seriously undermined the crucial process of reforming Afghanistan's police by appointing several known human rights abusers and warlords such as Baseer Salangi and Ghulam Mustafa as regional police chiefs, although they had failed to meet human rights standards for senior police appointments. Kabul police under the command of Amanullah Guzar in July used excessive force to quell demonstrations in Paghman against illegal land grabs by Abdul Rabb al Rasul Sayyaf, a member of parliament with a notorious record of human rights abuses.

Women and Girls

Afghan women and girls continue to suffer extremely low social, economic, and political status. They rank among the world's worst off by most indicators, such as life expectancy (46 years), maternal mortality (1,600 deaths per 100,000 births), and literacy (12.6 percent of females 15 and older). Women and girls confront barriers to working outside the home and restrictions on their mobility; for example many still cannot travel without an accompanying male relative and a burqa. While the number of girls in school increased quickly after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, only 35 percent of school-age girls were in school in 2006. The violence directed at schools hit girls' schools particularly hard.

Women active in civil or political affairs braved violence and intimidation, such as death threats often conveyed through "night letters." Safia Amajan, a prominent educator, women's rights activist, and government official was assassinated in Kandahar in September. Malalai Joya, a member of parliament from Herat, was

physically attacked in parliament and threatened with death when she criticized members of parliament notorious for past and current human rights abuses.

Violence against women remains endemic, with few avenues for redress. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission registered 704 cases of violence against women, including 89 cases of forced marriages and 50 cases of self-immolation, in 2006—significant increases over 2005. The AIHRC believes these numbers seriously under-represent the true scale of the violence due to factors such as social stigma and poor response from the justice system. More than one-third of all marriages were forced, according to the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and more than half of girls were married before the age of 16, the legal age for marriage.

The government took several steps that weakened the already weak government commitment to women, in part because of pressure from ultra-conservative political supporters, and in part to counter anti-Western propaganda by opposition groups. In June, Karzai sent the Afghan parliament a proposal for reestablishing the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which under the Taliban had established a record of arbitrary abuses, notably for beating and harassing women and girls for traveling without male guardians and for even slight infractions of stringent dress requirements. At this writing the National Assembly had not debated the proposal. In November, parliament began debating the possibility of closing the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which, although weak in terms of implementing programs, served as an important symbol of support for Afghanistan’s women.

Delivering Justice

Karzai failed to adequately implement the Transitional Justice Action Plan, a five-year process to gather information about Afghanistan’s legacy of warfare and violence and to consider methods of achieving accountability. His cabinet approved the plan in December 2005, but it has languished pending the required presidential announcement.

The Taliban and other anti-government forces used the government’s failure to confront warlords in the government to gain public support and discredit Karzai’s administration and its international backers. The Taliban have reintroduced their brutal brand of justice

in southern Afghanistan, taking advantage of the failure of the international community to provide promised assistance in reestablishing Afghanistan's judiciary.

Assadullah Sarwari, who headed Afghanistan's brutal intelligence agency during the communist government of the late 1970s, was sentenced to death in March 2006 after a trial that violated basic due process standards. At this writing the sentence had not been carried out.

The Afghan judiciary in September released the chief suspect in the 2004 murder of five staff members of Medecins sans Frontieres. The suspect had been acquitted in January 2006 for lack of evidence but had remained in custody pending a prosecution appeal. He was released because the judiciary said it had lost his file and he had already been detained for the maximum time allowed by Afghan law.

Key International Actors

International military and economic aid to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban was, and remains, a fraction of that disbursed in other recent post-conflict situations. On January 31–February 1, 2006, high-level delegations from more than 60 countries attended a conference in London to establish a framework for Afghanistan's development. This framework, known as the Afghanistan Compact, replaced the Bonn Agreement that had guided Afghanistan's political process after US forces ousted the Taliban. The London conference netted Afghanistan pledges totaling about US\$11 billion over the next five years, significantly less than the \$28 billion viewed as necessary by the World Bank and the Afghan government.

Similarly, international security assistance to Afghanistan (a total of 40,000 troops under NATO and US command) was far less than deemed adequate by military experts. While the US reversed its plan to draw down its forces, other NATO countries have been reluctant to meet the coalition's request for greater manpower and logistical support.

Anti-government forces and drug traffickers traveled widely and sought refuge in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan, raising suspicions of Pakistani government negligence or complicity.