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Afghanistan: The international community must uphold its human rights responsibilities

Afghanistan is facing a critical moment in its ongoing reconstruction efforts and its future will remain unchanged unless the international community takes human rights issues seriously, said Amnesty International in a letter sent today to the countries participating in a forthcoming international conference on reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan.

"We have seen some positive steps emerging, such as the building of a professional police force, training of the judiciary, police and lawyers, legal reform and physical rehabilitation of prisons and courts in Kabul," said Amnesty International. "However, it is extremely worrying that progress is being limited to the capital while human rights remain far from realized for Afghans living in other provinces."

In the letter, Amnesty International urges the international community to take action on the issues of security, violence against women and prison conditions. These were among the areas in which the organization recorded some of the gravest human rights violations during its last visit to the country in February 2004.

Security currently remains the most important concern in Afghanistan. Over the last two years, the security situation has continued to deteriorate with a significant impact on reconstruction efforts. In 2003, 11 Afghan and two international aid personnel have been killed and since January 2004, ten Afghan members of staff of aid organisations have lost their lives.

"Violations of the rights of women and girls, including physical abuse, underage marriage, exchange of girls to settle feuds were widely reported to Amnesty International during the recent visit."

"It is particularly worrying that the Afghan government has not addressed these issues in any substantial way so far and thus is failing to implement its international commitments at the national level," said Amnesty International

Conditions in prisons and detention facilities in Kabul have seen an improvement but there remains an urgent need for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of detention facilities in the provinces

Furthermore, impunity remains common throughout the country. Despite the scale of war crimes, crimes against humanity and other serious human rights violations committed in Afghanistan over nearly a

quarter of a century, justice to date has been denied to victims.

"Human rights violations are likely to continue as long as people reasonably suspected of being responsible for gross human rights violations are allowed to escape criminal responsibility and to hold positions of authority," Amnesty International stressed.

"Amnesty International recognises the many challenges still facing Afghanistan. The commitment of donors to provide long term and coordinated support will be a key factor to achieve a successful outcome. It is therefore vital that mainstreaming of human rights is integral to the reconstruction plan," Amnesty International concluded.

Background Information

The international conference on reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan will take place in Berlin between 31 March and 1 April 2004. This conference represents an important opportunity for donors to evaluate the impact of reconstruction efforts to date and agree to a long term framework for the future development of Afghanistan.

Amnesty International welcomes the joint Afghan and international agency report "Securing Afghanistan's Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path" which outlines a 28 billion dollar proposal for future investment. However, Amnesty International is concerned that this document pays inadequate attention to three key areas where insufficient progress has been made to date: protection of women; reform of the criminal justice system and establishment of effective accountability mechanisms for the investigation and prosecution of all human rights violations both past and present.

For a copy of the open letter, please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGASA110032004>

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