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Afghanistan: Learning from the past to build the future

Islamabad/London: "In debating the future of Afghanistan, the international community must ensure that human rights are not just on the agenda, but that human rights become the agenda," Amnesty International said today in a new report.

"The international community has an opportunity at this critical moment to put the human rights of the Afghan people first, to learn from the past to build the future. The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative to Afghanistan, Mr Brahimi, has the responsibility to ensure that human rights are integrated into all discussions about the future of Afghanistan."

The report makes several recommendations to assist in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. Those entrusted with leadership must be persons of integrity committed to the human rights protection of all, particularly women. Women and ethnic and religious minorities must not be discriminated against in the creation of government and institutions.

Throughout the ongoing conflict Amnesty International has documented grave human rights abuses by combatants of all the various warring parties. Any settlement to the conflict must ensure accountability for these abuses and the perpetrators should be brought to justice in accordance with international standards of fair trial.

"While Amnesty International appreciates the need for national reconciliation after years of war and repression, any future political agreement must not allow for impunity for those who have abused human rights in the past. Avoiding the truth about a country's past and ignoring accountability will not achieve peace."

Ignoring a past history of human rights violations for reasons of political expediency has a poor track record. From Cambodia to Sierra Leone, Angola to Chile, the legacy of grave human rights violations which have never been accounted for continues to have a negative effect on the peace process, and has undermined human rights protection - even decades after the violations occurred.

Any political settlement should contain explicit guarantees from the parties on the immediate ending of serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture and arbitrary detention. Specific protection should be sought against retaliation and discrimination against ethnic and religious groups.

The report calls for child soldiers to be demobilized, restrictions on arms supplies, international protection for refugees, and a vigorous program of human rights institution-building. Disarmament and demining should be included as important components of a political settlement, and should be adequately resourced and supported by the international community.

An expert commission should be set up to examine and advise on how to bring perpetrators to justice and ensure that all future institutions, including the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, are established to promote and protect human rights.

Amnesty International is also calling for human rights monitors to be deployed throughout Afghanistan as soon as possible to assist in ensuring protection of human rights during peace-making, in the immediate post-conflict phase as well as during the phase of institutional reform. The monitors should include experts on women's rights.

The report gives a history of human rights abuses over the past 23 years until the present day, including under Northern Alliance and Taleban and provides a human rights agenda for the future. For a copy of the report contact mcatsani@amnesty.org

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