

Referring to allegations of mass killings, the reports note accusations of mutual atrocities committed by combatants against civilian populations and prisoners of war. The need for urgent action on the part of the UN is emphasized as is the need for credible efforts to separate fact from unsubstantiated rumour. Verification of accusations of human rights violations is characterized as indispensable, not only because of the gravity of the acts, but also to demonstrate UN responsiveness and even-handedness vis-à-vis the Afghan factions. The reports also refer to rape, murder, arson, looting, beatings, abductions, and bombing and rocket attacks on civilian areas, as well as Taliban directives affecting the location and operation of non-governmental organizations based in Kabul.

The reports state that the factions, supported by the uninterrupted supply of arms from outside, keep fighting in defiance of the will of the vast majority of the Afghan people. Foreign interference by countries in the region and beyond, in the form of active political and military support of one faction or another, reinforces the reluctance of the faction leaders to engage in serious political dialogue with one another and remains a major cause of the prolonged turmoil in Afghanistan.

The October 1998 report provides commentary on the fatal attack on UNSMA officials in Kabul, the case of the Iranian diplomats first reported missing (later acknowledged as killed), and the reactions of neighbouring countries. It also refers to concerns about the fate of the Hazara Shiite population in Bamiyan in the wake of allegations of massacres targeting Shiite Moslems after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif on 8 August. Reports indicated that as many as 2,000 people may have been massacred, although the Taliban have consistently denied these allegations and stated that their troops are under strict orders not to brutalize the population under their occupation.

The October 1998 report also refers to preparatory work undertaken by the OHCHR in order to embark on a full investigation of massive human rights violations that were alleged to have been committed in northern Afghanistan during 1997. In May, OHCHR dispatched an exploratory mission to northern Afghanistan in order to determine the ways and means of launching a full investigation into the allegations. The mission submitted a report to OHCHR in June. A project document for the proposed investigation mission was finalized in July. The report notes that, since security conditions have deteriorated steadily because of intensified fighting, it is difficult to foresee the dispatch of the investigation mission in the near future.

The report notes that the "Six Plus Two" Group (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, the United States) met in September 1998 and agreed to the following points of common understanding:

- ♦ the Taliban and other parties should declare an immediate ceasefire and undertake negotiations

aimed at achieving a political settlement culminating in the establishment of a broad-based, multi-ethnic, representative government;

- ♦ all forces should immediately release non-combatants in detention, including Iranians;
- ♦ the Taliban should expedite the return of the remains of the three Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan, cooperate fully with an international investigation into the killings of Iranian diplomats and UN staff in Afghanistan, and bring the guilty parties to justice;
- ♦ the UN should investigate the reports of mass killings and mass graves in Afghanistan;
- ♦ the Taliban should fully respect international humanitarian law and human rights, including the rights of women, cease providing a haven to international terrorists residing on its soil, and prevent the production and trafficking of narcotics;
- ♦ UN humanitarian assistance should be resumed as soon as possible, with all factions providing safe and secure conditions under internationally accepted norms; and
- ♦ with a view to reducing tensions in the region, all parties should exercise maximum restraint and resolve their disputes peacefully.

Statements by the President

In 1998, the Security Council agreed to a series of President's statements (S/PRST/1998/9, 6 April 1998; S/PRST/1998/22, 14 July 1998; S/PRST/1998/24, 6 August 1998; S/PRST/1998/27, 15 September 1998). The Council, *inter alia*: expressed grave concern at the continued Afghan war, noting that it is a serious threat to regional and international security and causes extensive human suffering, further destruction, refugee flows and other forcible displacement of large numbers of people; expressed concern at the increasingly ethnic nature of the conflict, reports of ethnic-based persecution, and the threat this poses to the unity of Afghanistan; urged all Afghan parties to stop the fighting, to agree immediately on a ceasefire, and to engage without preconditions in a political dialogue aimed at achieving national reconciliation and the formation of a broad-based fully representative government; deplored the fact that foreign interference in Afghanistan continues unabated in the form of the supply of war-making materials to the factions and reiterated its call to all states to stop such interference immediately; expressed concern at the deteriorating security conditions for UN and humanitarian personnel and called upon all Afghan factions, in particular the Taliban, to take necessary steps to assure their safety; acknowledged the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the UN and the Taliban on humanitarian issues and stressed the importance of its full implementation; expressed concern at the unilateral decision by the Taliban to relocate humanitarian organizations' offices in Kabul; expressed deep concern at the continuing discrimination against girls and women and