

AFGHANISTANISSUE

The human rights situation in Afghanistan is among the world's worst. The ongoing civil war itself is very detrimental to human rights, fought as it is with disregard for the safety of civilians. While Taliban rule in some 70% of the country has reduced brigandage and rape, this has been accompanied by the elimination of personal freedoms and rights, especially for women.

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan has suffered armed conflict for over 15 years since the Soviet invasion in 1979. Since the toppling of Kabul's communist régime by the *mujahideen* in 1992, the country has been a patchwork of separate fiefdoms. Afghanistan has become seriously divided; ethnic, linguistic, tribal and factional differences all play a part in this chaotic situation which has resulted in a widespread breakdown of legal and humanitarian norms. People have been vulnerable to abduction, extortion, and mistreatment, including rape, at the hands of checkpoint guards and other armed groups. Such groups have routinely invaded civilian homes to seize property and frighten the populace. Justice is summarily dispensed by *mujahideen* groups and local warlords.

The 1980s saw some 6 million people take refuge, in roughly equal numbers, between Pakistan and Iran. While a great many have returned, there are still some 1.2 million refugees in Pakistan, and 1.4 million in Iran, with a further 800,000 to one million displaced internally.

Ambassador Mahmoud Mestiri, head of the UN Special Mission to Afghanistan, was replaced by German diplomat Dr. Norbert Holl to continue the difficult task of bringing about a ceasefire and a settlement involving the warring parties. The Organization of Islamic States, and various regional and/or muslim countries have also attempted the same.

The Taliban take-over of Kabul in September 1996 brought their policies to prominence. Taliban fighters, some of whom were indoctrinated in Qoranic schools, gained initial acceptance from war-weary populations by combatting extortion, robbery, rape, and general lawlessness. However, their imposition of an extreme form of "Islamic" behaviour has been criticized by the UN Secretary General, UN agencies operating in Afghanistan, and NGOs and the world community at large. Moreover, no government has established diplomatic relations with the Taliban authorities, and the UN seat continues to be occupied by the former régime. The Taliban have closed girls' schools; prevented women from working outside the home with a few exceptions such as health care or some international projects; imposed head to foot covering for women venturing out of the home; required men to grow beards; imposed compulsory attendance at Friday prayers at the mosque; and instituted such barbaric punishments as amputation and stoning to death.