

AFGHANISTAN

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Afghanistan, particularly for women, is among the world's worst. The ongoing civil war is fought with disregard for the safety and human rights of civilians. While Taliban rule in the 90% of the country it controls has reduced incidents of brigandage and rape, it has also brought gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially against women, and instances of ethnic cleansing.

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan has suffered continuous armed conflict since the Soviet intervention in 1979. Since the toppling of Kabul's communist regime in 1992 by an unstable coalition of *mujahideen*, the country has been a patchwork of separate fiefdoms divided along ethnic, linguistic, tribal and factional lines. The result has been a widespread and chaotic breakdown of legal and humanitarian norms. Over 2 million Afghans remain in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, while another 1.2 million are internally displaced.

Over the last two years, the radical Taliban faction has gradually extended its control over Afghanistan. The Taliban gained initial acceptance from war-weary populations by combatting general lawlessness. However, this has been overshadowed by their imposition of an extreme form of "Islamic behaviour" and its concomitant severe restrictions on women have been criticized by the UN Secretary-General, UN agencies operating in Afghanistan, and by NGOs and the world community at large.

Though women's rights began to deteriorate when the *mujahideen* factions overthrew the communist regime in 1992 and imposed village-based social values on the cities, the Taliban have carried this regression to extremes not seen elsewhere in the Muslim world. In particular, women have been barred from employment and most girls from schools, restrictions have been placed on health care available to women, and women are required to cover themselves from head to foot when venturing outdoors. In addition, "Islamic punishments" such as amputations and stoning to death have been instituted as penalties. Taliban strictures are applied most forcefully in Kabul; they are less strictly enforced in areas where the Taliban are more confident of their control. Women also face restrictions in the Alliance's territory, although girls' schools were operating in many Alliance areas.

The killing this past summer of a UN Military Observer and two NGO staff members in Jalalabad, as well as the Taliban's decision to relocate all international NGO offices to a remotely-located school compound in Kabul, resulted in the unanimous decision by international NGOs to withdraw from Afghanistan. Despite the October 1998 signing of a security agreement between the UN and the Taliban, no UN agency personnel will return to Afghanistan until the Taliban provide a satisfactory accounting of their efforts to bring the murderers of UN personnel to justice. The absence of the UN and NGOs has had a negative impact on the level of humanitarian assistance available in Afghanistan, but some NGO staff are now returning.