

Afghanistan: human rights situation

The human rights gains made over the past 12 years in Afghanistan are increasingly under threat with a resurgence of violence, and women's rights in particular being degraded. The EU is deeply concerned by the country's deteriorating situation.

Current situation

On 21 September 2014, following a [two-month audit](#) of the disputed election results, presidential candidates [Ashraf Ghani](#) and [Abdullah Abdullah](#) signed an [agreement](#) on the formation of the National Unity Government, paving the way for the country's first democratic transfer of power after [Hamid Karzai's](#) rule for 13 years. Ghani assumed the country's presidency, with Abdullah as the Afghan Government's chief executive officer (effectively prime minister). The Afghan Taliban were quick to issue a [statement](#) rejecting the new government, on the grounds that it had been engineered by the United States. September 2014 saw an intensification of the Taliban's summer offensive. The Taliban continued to attack civilians and government offices across the country, and detonated two truck bombs in front of the intelligence service offices in [Ghazni](#), killing at least 10 and injuring more than 160. The most shocking and brutal was that militants aligned with Islamic State volunteers launched a [brutal offensive](#) alongside Taliban fighters in Ghazni; it was reported that 15 civilians were beheaded and 100 civilians in total were killed. Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a prominent religious cleric and former jihadi leader made an [influential speech](#) in support of the Afghan forces, calling the Taliban and their sympathisers 'infidels'. On 30 September 2014, Hanif Atmar, the Afghan National Security Adviser signed a Bilateral Security Agreement with the US Ambassador and a separate Status of Forces Agreement with the NATO Ambassador. The agreements allow for some foreign special forces, including NATO troops, to remain in the country to conduct counter-terror operations, and support and train Afghan forces until 2024.

Human rights

Women's rights

Violence against women is on the rise in Afghanistan. The form of such violence differs: some women are being sexually abused in their workplace, others tortured by their husbands, for example. For the 12 months to December 2013, about [500 such cases](#) have been documented by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Most victims still await justice. UNAMA reported that implementation of the 2009 law on violence against women ([EVAW](#)) is limited and the rate of prosecutions of, and convictions for, offences criminalised by the law is still low. Most women victims do not go to the police because of the traditional society in which they live. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) [reported](#) that violence against women increased by 28% in 2013. Some 4 154 cases of violence against women were registered by 1 179 complainants. The year 2014 alone saw 4 466 cases of self-poisoning, 2 301 cases of self-immolation and 166 confirmed suicides, according to the [Ministry of Public Health](#). [Amnesty International](#) reports that defenders of women's human rights, and women in public life, continue to face threats, intimidation and attacks from armed groups, conservative religious leaders and power-holders, and lack adequate government protection. Some provincial clerics have [warned](#) women and girls not to leave their homes to attend school or work in an environment with male counterparts, calling it a 'prohibited' act.

Internal displacement

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), by September 2014 there were 701 900 internally displaced persons ([IDPs](#)) in the country, largely as a result of the conflict. Many IDPs experience multiple human rights violations, including forced eviction, inadequate housing and lack of access to affordable food, water, health and education.

Civilian victims

Thousands of civilians have suffered targeted and indiscriminate attacks by armed opposition groups, with national and international security forces also responsible for civilian deaths and injuries in total impunity. In the first six months of 2014, [UNAMA](#) documented 4 853 civilian casualties (1 564 civilian deaths and 3 289 injured). This represents a 24% increase overall in civilian casualties compared to the first half of 2013.

Freedom of expression

Since 2001, more than [517 journalists](#) and other media workers in Afghanistan, including more than 52 in 2014, have been killed, injured, beaten, threatened or detained by state and non-state actors across the country. According to the independent Afghan NGO 'Nai Supporting Afghanistan Open Media', government officials are reportedly implicated in the majority of these incidents. The [murder](#) of a female journalist in September 2014 highlights the growing attacks on media and journalists in the country, with women being particularly at risk. Afghanistan was ranked 128th of 180 countries in the [2014 World Press Freedom Index](#).

Death penalty – torture

On [15 September 2014](#), a Kabul appeal court sentenced to death five men accused of gang rape. During the last days of his presidency, Karzai signed their death warrants. They were [executed](#) on 8 October 2014. Despite the prohibition of torture under national and international human rights law, the UN [reports](#) that torture is widely used in most Afghan police stations and detention centres to obtain confessions.

Rate of suicide

The World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) representative for Afghanistan has pointed out that more Afghans commit suicide annually than are killed by a combination of the conflict and nationwide homicides: 4 466 cases of self-poisoning and 707 cases of self-immolation have been registered in central hospitals. According to the WHO, gender-based violence, substance abuse, trauma and conflict-related stress, as well as displacement, poverty and continued insecurity around the country increase the risk of suicide.

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)

The AIHRC has drafted an 800-page report mapping war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afghanistan since the communist era. [Human Rights Watch](#) reports that former President Karzai has blocked its release, with the support of international donors, arguing that the report could be destabilising, particularly since it is widely assumed to implicate people in senior positions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has raised some [concerns](#) about the integrity of the AIHRC.

Ratification of UN human rights instruments

As a UN member since 1946, Afghanistan has [ratified](#) the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two optional protocols on children in armed conflict and on child prostitution and pornography and finally the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [recommends](#) that Afghanistan include in its constitution and in other relevant legislation, provisions on equality between women and men and prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination against women in the public and private spheres. An evaluation report by Afghanistan has to be submitted to the UN in July 2017.

Afghanistan and the EU

In June 2014, the EU adopted a [new strategy](#) for Afghanistan. Advancing human rights a top priority in this new strategy, in particular the rights of women and children; support for an independent judicial sector, the end of impunity for serious war crimes and human rights, the right to freedom of assembly and expression, including through support to journalists and human rights defenders. In a September 2014 [message](#) to the new elected President, the EU reiterated its commitments to working closely with the new Afghan government to implement urgently needed political reforms and foster full respect for human rights, in particular the rights of women and girls. The EU [deplored](#) the decision of the Afghan authorities to carry out death sentences in October 2014. In a [resolution](#) adopted on 13 June 2013 on an EU-Afghanistan cooperation agreement on partnership and development, MEPs insisted on addressing the situation of women and girls in a comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led, and owned, approach to reconciliation.