

Human Rights Assessment Mission to Afghanistan

Human Rights Conditions

Over twenty years of successive armed conflicts and massive human rights violations have killed at least 1.5 million Afghans and rendered 6 million homeless. Even prior to 11 September and 7 October, the Afghan population suffered severe destitution and hardship: a ruined infrastructure, abysmal socio-economic indicators, the world's largest population of refugees and internally displaced persons, the world's highest concentration of land mines, three years of worsening drought, a repressive government and international isolation marked by economic sanctions.

The United States-led Coalition's military campaign has ousted the Taliban but also worsened the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Air strikes have killed thousands of civilians and caused many more to flee their homes in search of safety and food. Military action and widespread insecurity severely restricted international relief operations resulting in a massive reduction of humanitarian support to millions of at-risk civilians. Massacres and reprisals have been reported throughout the country.

It is in this context that the international community is undertaking the largest reconstruction effort in UN history. The lessons of recent interventions in Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Timor highlight the difficulties encountered when development and reconstruction is undertaken delinked from a commitment to ensure the human rights of affected populations. A human rights approach would prioritize people's access to food security, health care, education, housing and employment and also emphasize the development of institutional structures to ensure participation as well as accountability. This means ensuring that international assistance programs address structural inequalities that impede the ability of all Afghans to enjoy their full human rights.

Mission Description

Purpose/Goals. The mission will undertake an analysis of the existing factors that impact, positively or negatively, on the realization of human rights in Afghanistan, with particular emphasis on the rights to food, health, housing and education. This is important not only to promote the rule of law but also to ensure that the international community does not repeat the mistakes of the past and ignore the Afghan people's need for socio-economic policies based on human development and human rights.

The main goals of the mission are to:

- Develop an analytical profile of priority human rights concerns based on review of available data and consultations with a cross-section of Afghan, aid personnel and others;
- Report on the extent to which the rights to food, health and education are enjoyed in Afghanistan and the circumstances that shape and inform this situation;
- Inform concerned actors at the local and international level about the human rights situation in Afghanistan according to locally-expressed concerns;

- Determine the type and nature of additional research needed to complete a study of the human rights in relief and recovery efforts; and
- Propose concrete mechanisms to ensure the realization of human rights in Afghanistan.

Methods/Outputs. A human rights assessment team will collect both quantitative and qualitative data on human rights, in particular the rights to food, health and education, through: (a) interviews with a cross section of Afghan society, refugees (including unregistered “urban refugees”), aid personnel and others, (b) analysis of reports and briefings on the humanitarian crisis and © direct observation and data collection. Based on the findings, the team will prepare a report on realization of the rights to food, health and education. The research findings will also be disseminated in press releases, fact sheets and position papers aimed at a wider audience. These materials will (a) place the crisis in context, (b) present the findings within a human rights framework, and © propose recommendations for reconstruction and development assistance. This project will help ensure a deeper understanding of the complexity and multifaceted nature of the human rights situation in Afghanistan. This, in turn, will contribute to improved awareness among aid and other personnel of the human rights dimension of issues of critical concern to the Afghan population and the aid community. It will also facilitate greater coherence and collaboration between local and international actors in promoting the human rights of Afghans.

Sponsor/Funding. The mission is being organized by the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR), an international human rights group based in New York, in collaboration with the Human Rights Consultative Group in Afghanistan and with the support of the Human Rights Advisor’s Office. CESR was established in 1993 with the goal of helping people secure their basic rights to housing, food, employment, education and health care. CESR’s methodology combines: 1) scientific research to document human rights issues, 2) collaboration with local partners to support grassroots and community activism, 3) advocacy to promote legal and political accountability and 4) education to raise public awareness of the human rights dimensions of poverty and inequality. The mission is funded by the UN Consultative Group on Human Rights, the United Methodist Church and the Ford Foundation.

Mission Participants

- *Hadi Ghaemi* is a former professor of physics who has studied the treatment of minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran. An Iranian citizen, he is writing a book on pluralist politics within Islam on a grant from the MacArthur Foundation.
- *Aziz Hakimi* is a human rights program officer with the Human Rights Advisor’s Office of the UN Coordinator’s Office for Afghanistan. An Afghan citizen, he formerly worked with ICRC in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- *Roger Normand* is an international lawyer and co-founder and executive director of CESR. A US citizen, he has directed human rights projects throughout the world, including in Iraq, Palestine and Cambodia, and written widely about human rights and refugee rights.
- *Sarah Zaidi* is a public health expert and co-founder and research director of CESR. A native of Pakistan, she has designed and participated in assessment missions to Iraq, Palestine, Ecuador and Haiti, and worked with refugees on the Pakistan border.
- *Omar Zakhilwal* is a senior research economist with the Canadian Bureau of Statistics.

An Afghan national and Canadian citizen, he specialized in labor and trade issues in Afghanistan and co-founded the Institute of Afghanistan Studies.