

URGENT ACTION

SPIKE IN VIOLENT ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

“A killing machine has been unleashed on us, and it looks like every other person we meet on road”, Afghan human rights defenders (HRDs) said as they continue to struggle under intensifying attacks from both the authorities and armed groups. They face intimidation, harassment, threats, violence, and targeted killings. While a Presidential Decree was issued on December 2020, for establishment of a Joint Commission for the protection of HRDs, there has been no progress in creating an effective, functional protection mechanism for those at risk. The government of Afghanistan needs to immediately step up to make the joint commission functional and responsive to the needs of HRDs.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

H. E. Muhammad Sarwar Danish
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H.E. Vice President Muhammad Sarwar Danish,

Human rights defenders in Afghanistan are being threatened, harassed, intimidated and killed, pushing into fleeing the country, by both authorities and armed groups, and I am writing this letter to express my grave concern over the deteriorating situation of their security.

I am sure you can appreciate, human rights defenders (HRDs) have long played a key role in addressing serious human rights challenges in Afghanistan. The public pledge by you in January 2020 to establish a protection mechanism for HRDs, based on the [Afghanistan Human Rights Defenders Protection Strategy](#), was a promising development. Also, while it was encouraging to learn that a Joint Commission for the Protection of HRDs was established in December 2020, months have now passed and there is yet to be any progress on forming a functional commission to address the protection needs of HRDs. Against the backdrop of escalating and widening violence across the country, the civic space within which HRDs can operate has shrunk dramatically. It is time for action now, as HRDs continue to be murdered on your streets.

I found it distressing to note a recent spike in attacks against human rights defenders over the last months. Despite guarantees in the Afghanistan Constitution, and the ratification of several key UN treaties on human rights, HRDs are not afforded adequate protection.

Therefore, I call on you to:

- 1. Ensure that the Joint Commission for the Protection of HRDs is effective, functional, and immediately addresses the imminent and long-term security concerns faced by human rights defenders,**
- 2. Investigate attacks and threats against HRDs under international laws on fair trials and hold the perpetrators accountable, establish a referral system for their protection, and provide them with psychosocial assistance.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

After two years of research, campaigning and advocacy by Amnesty International and other civil society organizations, the government of Afghanistan issued a Presidential Decree establishing a Joint Commission for the Protection of HRDs. More than three months have passed since then with no steps taken to make it a functional protection mechanism, despite deteriorating security situation in the country.

In December 2020, merely days after the Presidential Decree on the protection mechanism was issued, women's rights activist Freshta Kohistani was killed by a group of unidentified gunmen in Kapisa province. A day prior to that, another prominent activist Mohammad Yousuf Rasheed was killed after being ambushed and shot by unidentified gunmen in Kabul. These incidents are on the rise in Kabul as well as in other provinces, where the activists are mostly targeted on the roads. There have also been incidents of explosives being delivered to homes, threatening calls and various other intimidation tactics that make the activists and their families feel extremely vulnerable. There are multiple hit-lists (lists of people to be killed) in circulation as well.

Currently, discussions are ongoing on resuming peace talks but the [future looks extremely uncertain](#) for the Afghans. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) [issued a special report](#) in February 2021 stating that there is "sharp and chilling number of killings of human rights defenders and journalists in Afghanistan" – a total of 65 HRDs killed within last two years.

Human rights defenders play an integral role in Afghan society and have promoted civic education, awareness of human rights, carried out their own research into human rights violations and abuses through 'shadow reports', and advocated for the protection of human rights.

In speaking up for and working to defend human rights, human rights defenders in Afghanistan are continuously facing intimidation, harassment, threats, and violence – from both the authorities and armed groups. As highlighted in Amnesty International's 2019 report [Defenceless Defenders: Afghanistan's Human Rights Community Under Attack](#) and against the backdrop of escalating and widening violence across the country, the civic space within which they are able to operate has shrunk dramatically.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan guarantees key human rights. Article six of the constitution says that "the state shall be obligated to create a prosperous and progressive society based on social justice, preservation of human dignity, protection of human rights..." Articles 21 to 59, inclusive, guarantee human rights including, the right to equality before the law, the right to life, the right to liberty, the right to a fair trial, the prohibition against torture, the right to legal representation, the right to freedom of expression, the right to association, the right to peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of movement, the right to education, the right to work, and the prohibition on forced labour.

Afghanistan has also ratified several UN treaties on human rights, including the Convention Against Torture and its optional protocol, 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.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 16 May 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Group (they/them)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/2680/2020/en/>