



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
16 June 2021

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

Forty-seventh session

21 June–9 July 2021

Agenda item 2

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the  
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

---

\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **The HRC must act to protect the lives of human rights defenders in Afghanistan at this critical time**

The targeted killings of civil society members, including journalists and other human rights defenders (HRDs), have increased dramatically since 2020 in Afghanistan. Those who are specifically targeted are women human rights defenders, peace activists and other HRDs, as well as journalists, intellectuals and professionals, local staff of embassies, and others who challenge the religious, cultural, gender norms and/or political views of groups such as the Taliban and organised crime. Recent killings are indicative of this, including the murders of Malala Maiwand, Nahid Kohestani, Yama Siawash, Yosuf Rashidi, Namatullah Rawan, Besmillah Aimaq, and many more, which remain un-investigated to this day.

In 2020 alone, 19 activists were killed, 18 of whom as a result of targeted attacks against them and in addition three family members of HRDs were killed.<sup>1</sup> This is a five-fold increase of killings of HRDs compared to 2019.<sup>2</sup> As impunity for such killings prevails and with the Afghan government failing to provide effective protection for HRDs and accountability and justice for these crimes, the cycle of violence is continuing in 2021.<sup>3</sup> This alarming pattern is forcing HRDs to self-censor, in some cases to leave the country and is creating a tangible climate of fear that silences civil society activists at a time where their voices are the most critical. This is unacceptable. A Joint Commission for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders was established by presidential decree in December 2020 to provide protection and safety for HRDs. However, it is still not operational. The closing of some embassies in Kabul and the lowering of staff presence in others due to security concerns in turn can hamper HRDs' access to the international support that is so much needed while the national protection mechanisms for HRDs remain wholly inadequate.

The dramatic increase in targeted attacks against HRDs coincided with the start of preliminary peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban in September 2020.<sup>4</sup> The violent attacks seek to undermine HRDs' tireless efforts to achieve peace and the respect of human rights in Afghanistan. Of additional concern and as noted by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), "responsibility of these killings is not claimed or acknowledged by any of the groups, exacerbating further a climate of fear, and constitutes an unprecedented trend."<sup>5</sup>

These concerns come against the backdrop of a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan with increased armed attacks by the Taliban against government forces, which have surged by 37 percent between January-March 2021 compared to last year at the same period, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's report to the US Congress of 30 April 2021.<sup>6</sup> Violence has escalated across many Afghan provinces after the US and NATO allies began withdrawing from the country their last remaining troops on 1 May 2021 with the Taliban threatening several provincial capitals and taking control of four districts.<sup>7</sup> Peace talks, which started in September 2020, were stalled and more recently the Taliban refused to attend a US-backed peace conference in Turkey leading to its indefinite postponement.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, many Afghans and analysts

---

<sup>1</sup> Safety and risk mitigation organisation, State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan, Year 2020, May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> UNAMA Special Report: Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers In Afghanistan 2018-2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>6</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2021, page 37

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/taliban-attack-threatens-afghan-provincial-capital>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/23/istanbul-meeting-calls-on-taliban-to-commit-to-afghan-peace-talks>

fear the risk of a protracted civil war because the failed negotiations between the warring parties.

While all Afghans have a stake in the peace negotiations, Afghan women and girls have reason for particular concern about the outcome of the negotiations given the egregious human rights abuses they faced under Taliban rule. Important gains have been made over the past 19 years, albeit with ongoing challenges. However, Afghan women and girls fear that should the Taliban enter a government, the fragile progress that has been made will be rapidly rolled back. While they may have paid lip service, the Taliban have showed no evidence that they will respect the human rights of women and girls. In addition, the bomb attack that targeted a girls' school in Kabul on 8 May 2021 in a Hazara-dominated neighborhood — for which the Taliban denied responsibility,<sup>9</sup> — is a devastating demonstration of how the rising violence is disproportionately harming women and girls.

## Recommendations

Afghanistan is at a critical point. WILPF urges the Human Rights Council to fulfil its prevention mandate and play its part now by:

- Establishing an appropriate and robust monitoring mechanism that can regularly report to the HRC on the situation. The escalating situation warrants the international community's focused attention. The current arrangement for an OHCHR report on Afghanistan presented once a year together with other reports and without even a focussed debate on it is simply not sufficient in light of the gravity of the situation.
- Calling on Afghanistan to ensure impartial, independent and timely investigations into the killings of HRDs, journalists, and other civil society activists clarifying the circumstances in which the defenders were killed and to expeditiously bring those responsible to justice. This is especially important in light of continued impunity for the killings of HRDs.
- Calling for an immediate and sustained ceasefire, which is critical for intra-Afghan peace talks to be meaningful.
- Monitoring the peace talks and any future peace agreement and calling for women's meaningful participation in the talks, as well as for human rights standards and the protection of HRDs and women and girls' rights to be articulated as key benchmarks for any peace process and subsequent peace agreement.

Moreover, WILPF urges:

- All States to offer HRDs immediate practical support on the ground at all levels, including through diplomatic and political channels. Access to short-term and long-term entry visas to various countries must be guaranteed. States should assess how COVID19-related restrictions and any changes in embassies' operations in Kabul may affect HRDs' practical access to visas and other support measures and should put in place mitigation measures to ensure that consular and other support can continue.
- States that had military presence in Afghanistan to ensure that the withdrawal of foreign armed forces is accompanied by the creation of alternative security and transitional measures towards peace.

WILPF urges the government of Afghanistan and other relevant international actors to:

- collaborate with HRDs and civil society organisations in the design and implementation of robust protection policies with a gender perspective and an intersectional approach.

<sup>9</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/09/asia/afghanistan-girls-school-attack-intl-hnk/index.html>

- ensure effective representation of HRDs, especially women, in any peace process and related conference. Participation must include guarantees of safety, and effective and equitable representation of views.

Finally, WILPF urges the Taliban and others targeting civilians and HRDs to immediately halt violence and prioritise intra-Afghan peace talks as a way to ensure sustainable peace.

---