

Being a Voice for the Silenced

58th Session Human Rights Council

Afghanistan – News Letter 27 February 2025 – 4 March 2025

Introduction:

Let's us break the silence and expose the grave human rights violations within Afghanistan's detention system. Discover the finding of a study conducted with former prisoners in Afghanistan, accompanied by testimonies by interviewees. We call on the UN Human rights Council to uphold justice, accountability, and to ensure the protection of detainees from torture and ill-treatment

From February 24 to April 4, 2025, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) convened its 58th regular session in Geneva, Switzerland. This session brought together representatives from Member States, international organizations, and civil society to address pressing human rights issues worldwide. Afghan human rights defenders, civil society organizations, and international allies gathered to shed light on the escalating repression, particularly the ongoing crackdown on women's rights, freedom of expression, and the targeting of activists.

Throughout the week, Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN), Human Rights Defenders Plus (HRD+), World Organization against Torture (OMCT), and Afghanistan Democracy and Development Organization (ADDO) brought together a dedicated group of Afghan human rights defenders to participate in the session, amplifying Afghan voices and advocating for justice. Alongside fellow Afghan activists and international allies, we engaged in crucial advocacy efforts, ensuring that Afghanistan remained a key focus of the HRC 58th session. This newsletter captures the key discussions, interventions, and outcomes related to Afghanistan, showcasing the unwavering commitment of Afghan civil society on the global stage.

Highlights on Afghanistan:

Afghanistan's Silenced Prisoners: Seeking Truth, Justice, and Accountability: Afghanistan's Silenced Prisoners: In Afghanistan, countless voices have been silenced—prisoners of injustice, oppression, and impunity. Their stories remain unheard, their suffering unseen, and their calls for justice unanswered. "Afghanistan's Silenced

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL (58TH SESSION)

SIDE EVENT:

Afghanistan's Silenced Prisoners: Seeking Truth, Justice & Accountability

Let us break the silence and expose the grave human rights violations within Afghanistan's detention system. Discover the findings of a study conducted with former prisoners in Afghanistan, accompanied by testimonies by interviewees. We call on the UN Human Rights Council to uphold justice, accountability, and to ensure the protection of detainees from torture and ill-treatment.

February 28, 2025 | 12:00 - 13:00 (CET)
UN, Palais des Nations, Room XXV, Geneva

SPEAKERS

- Richard Bennett
Director, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
- Ferehita Abbasi
Researcher, Asia Division of Human Rights Watch
- Dr. Malek Sitor
Chairperson, Working Committee of HRDs, Dept. of International Law, Human Rights, and International Relations
- Zarifa Yaqubi
Formerly Rights Activist
- Lal Bigum Sayedi
HRD from Afghanistan

MODERATOR

- Gerald Staberock
Executive Counsel of OMCT

Logos: UN, OMCT, ICF, ADDO

Prisoners: Seeking Truth, Justice, and Accountability" is a critical discussion aimed at breaking this silence.

The event, hosted by the Afghanistan Democracy and Development Organization (ADDO) Organized/Co-Sponsored by Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN), HRD+ World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), , Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), Human Rights Watch, International Service for Human Rights, International Commission of Jurists, Grand_Duchy_of_Luxembourg and Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations.



The event focused on presenting the findings of a recent study on the situation of prisons in Afghanistan, shedding light on the experiences of former detainees and the urgent need for reform. It featured three moving testimonies read by human rights defenders, a powerful presentation of the study's key findings, and a call to the UN Human Rights Council to uphold justice and accountability. The discussion also emphasized the urgent need to protect detainees from torture and ill-treatment. This gathering aimed to amplify the voices of victims and demand justice on their behalf. **SILENCE IS NOT AN OPTION!**



"For me, the most profound moment was reading a testimony for the first time. I'm used to speaking about what I have seen, heard, and experienced. But this time, I was speaking for someone else for those who have been silenced, imprisoned, or lost to injustice. Their words were not just sentences on a page, they were pain, resilience, and a desperate appeal for justice. And carrying that voice felt heavier than I expected" Said Elham Kohistani, Human Rights Defender

Key finding of the Report:

The Taliban's judicial system lacks legal consistency, transparency, and codified procedures, creating an arbitrary and oppressive legal environment. Courts operate without standardized frameworks, allowing rulings based on personal interpretations of Hanafi jurisprudence. The absence of defense lawyers following the dissolution of the Afghanistan Bar Association strips defendants of fair trial rights. With no appeals process, wrongful convictions are nearly impossible to challenge.

Severe human rights abuses are widespread. Former prisoners report arbitrary arrests, torture, and inhumane treatment, particularly targeting journalists, human rights defenders, women's rights activists, and ethnic and religious minorities, especially the Hazara and Shia. Detainees face electric shocks, beatings, suffocation, and forced confessions some women report coercion into marriage with Taliban members.

Prison conditions are overcrowded, unsanitary, and lack medical care. Prolonged solitary confinement and medical neglect are common. Forced confessions are used for propaganda, not justice. Law enforcement operates with impunity, often detaining individuals even after acquittal. Without complaint mechanisms or oversight, detainees remain vulnerable to unchecked abuse.

The Taliban's legal system functions not to deliver justice, but to maintain authoritarian control. Urgent international action is needed to prevent further state sanctioned violence and repression. The related report of the situation in prison will be published and launched during the Global Anti - Torture week, between 23.-27.6.2025 in an online event.-



ID on Afghanistan: Several UN officials and state representatives delivered strong statements condemning the Taliban's systematic oppression of women and minorities. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reaffirmed the need for international mechanisms to document abuses and ensure accountability. The first time, the SR on Afghanistan mentioned in his report, that an investigative, independent accountability mechanism would be needed. For more details and statements from the UN member civil society statements please follow the link: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1/k1915vgl0>



The UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan presented a grim report detailing increased restrictions on civic space and continued detentions of human rights defenders.

A/HRC/58/80 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan

The report, prepared pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 57/3, provides a general overview of the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, and mainly covers the period between 1 August and 31 December 2024. The report highlights three key areas: the situation of women and girls, especially access to healthcare; shrinking civic space; and ongoing violations and abuses against ethnic and religious minorities. The report also covers issues relating to children and youth, the administration of justice, and economic, social and cultural rights, including food insecurity.

A/HRC/58/74 Law on the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice - Study of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan

The report, prepared pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 57/3, provides an analysis of the so-called law on the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV law), which was announced by the Taliban in August 2021. This study provides an analysis of the PVPV law – its provisions, wide-ranging violations of human rights, and devastating impacts and consequences. It places the law within the broader context of Taliban policies, tracing a clear trajectory of escalating repression since the group retook power, as well as the parallels to the group's draconian rule from 1996-2001. The report further confirms the Special Rapporteur's conclusion that the Taliban's institutionalized system of discrimination and oppression amounts to crimes against humanity, including gender persecution.

OHCHR | 58th regular session of the Human Rights Council: Reports

Advocacy Meetings with UN Missions in Geneva:

Meeting with the European Union: A Closed- door meeting with Chatham House Rule hosted by the EU in Geneva where Afghan HRDs presented and requested accountability on the daily deteriorating human rights situation in Afghanistan.

Meetings with representatives from Pakistan, Colombia, and Ireland, discussing strategies to improve advocacy towards an accountability mechanism.

Pakistan: The main points discussed was the dire situation of Afghans in Pakistan facing the risk of deportation as their visa`s have expired. The joint call for action on this, which has been initiated by HRD+ and Window of Hope and supported by 12 Afghan led NGOs, has been shared with the representative of the Pakistan Mission.



The Mission offered support in looking into the list of people we have to look for actions, in case if that is welcomed from our side. They supported the idea to organize a side event or a closed-door meeting with Afghan HRDs on the topic of the accountability mechanism or other areas of possible intervention for Afghanistan.

Colombia: They supported in general the call for an accountability mechanism and are very much willing to share more information about the experiences in dealing with this mechanism in their country. They mentioned as well interest in supporting side events or other events on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.

Chile: The representative of Chile was very supportive on the call for an accountability mechanism and was interested in joining hands in any way possible. The foreign feminist policy of Chile is supporting the strong call for pushing for the legalization of the gender apartheid concept.

Ireland: At the meeting with the Irish mission d HRD+`s appreciation for Ireland`s continuous cooperation. Topics included visa difficulties for Afghan activists, potential financial support for an HR-themed art exhibition, and Ireland`s commitment to amplifying our calls for accountability mechanisms.

A dinner meeting with the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, HRDs and key stakeholders, hosted by OMCT, focusing on an informal exchange on the different approaches and thoughts on the human rights situation took place at the Maison de Quartier Paquis, Geneva.

Meeting with the Norwegian Ambassador: we attended a diplomatic working dinner at the Norwegian Embassy in Geneva. The meeting included representatives from the UK Mission, The Norwegian Human Rights Fund, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders, OMCT, the office of the SR on Afghanistan and the Forum-Asia. We introduced HRD+ and discussed the ongoing challenges and opportunities for supporting Afghan civil society. The conversation reinforced that the most effective way to protect human rights in Afghanistan is through sustained support for local human rights defenders. A key takeaway was the importance of balancing modern and traditional civil society engagement while ensuring the safety of activists on the ground.

Meeting with Norwegian Human Rights Fund (NHRF): We met with Director of NHRF, and head of the Afghanistan section. NHRF reaffirmed its strong alignment with HRD+, highlighting Afghanistan as a strategic priority. Strengthening our partnership will be crucial for long-term advocacy and support.

From Dallas to Geneva: Alcuin Students for Afghan Girls Rights:

In February 2025, a group of Alcuin School students and faculty traveled to Geneva, Switzerland to attend sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council, deepening their yearlong advocacy focus on the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Throughout the visit, students observed high-level discussions on justice, accountability, and human rights protections. They engaged with diplomats, NGO representatives, and human rights defenders, gaining firsthand insight into how international advocacy and diplomacy operate on a global stage.



The experience was deeply impactful. It affirmed their commitment to justice, strengthened their global awareness, and reminded them that even without a microphone, being present and informed is a powerful form of advocacy. We are incredibly proud of their passion and poise and excited to see where their activism leads next. By Lindsay Johnston CAS Coordinator & JWAC Instructor, Alcuin School, Dallas

Acknowledgement:

HRD+, CSHRN and ADDO is thankful to individuals and organizations for their dedicated support. We specially thanks Dr. Malek Sitez, Elham Kohistani, Asghar Surush, Negina Yari, Sibylle Mani, Fereshta Abbasi, Hasina Sherzad for their in-person participation. We are more thankful to human rights defenders for their testimonies and supporting the mission.



Annexes

Oral Statement for the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

I Thank you Mr President and Delegates: ADDO, CSHRN, HRD+, and OMCT stand before this Council with deep concern over the escalating human rights crisis in Afghanistan. Civic space is disappearing—journalists, human rights defenders, and peaceful protesters face arbitrary arrests, threats, and violence for simply speaking out.

Women and girls bear the brunt of this repression. The systematic erasure of their rights—bans on education, work, and public life—amounts to gender apartheid. Their voices are silenced, their futures stolen. The reports of torture, inhumane treatment, and forced confessions from OMCT and HRD+ are deeply alarming. Political prisoners endure harsh conditions and unfair trials, with no hope for justice. Afghan refugees in neighboring countries face detention, insults and forced deportation.

This Council must act. We urge:

- Our neighboring countries, specifically Iran and Pakistan to respect the rights of Afghan citizens according to accepted international norms. Mass deportation is a serious concern about the lives of HRDs and other vulnerable groups.
- Immediate release of detained activists and journalists unjustly imprisoned for their work.
- An end to gender-based discrimination, ensuring women and girls can access education and employment
- We repeat our call on the council to create an independent accountability mechanism to monitor, document, preserve and follow-up on human rights violations and hold perpetrators accountable.

Afghanistan must not be forgotten! Thank you. Read by Mohammad Azghar Surush



Testimonies from Afghan Human Rights Defenders

A Call for Justice from the Prisons of Afghanistan:

Your Excellencies, Justice and Truth seekers,

Here I stand—wounded in body, tormented in soul, yet with a voice that remains unbroken. I do not speak out of anger, but from the depths of profound suffering. For years, I walked the path of freedom, equality, and human dignity, yet my reward was chains and prison walls. What was my crime? Defending rights, standing against oppression, and believing in a world where no human being is imprisoned for thinking and existing.

The days of captivity were not merely defined by high walls and narrow cells; each day was filled with the fear of physical torture, beatings, insults, and humiliation. Every night was a fresh nightmare of an uncertain tomorrow. The wounds on my body are but a fraction of the suffering imprinted on my soul. The screams of fellow prisoners, the footsteps of guards at midnight, and the terror of wondering when the next torture session would come—these left no room for peace.

But my pain was not confined to my cell. My wife, who had dedicated years of love and commitment to education, was left unemployed after eleven years of teaching. With a one-month-old infant in her arms, she wandered the corridors of courts and prosecution offices, trapped in endless uncertainty. Each day was filled with fear of an unknown future; each night, she fell asleep in silent tears. My daughters, who should have been searching for a bright future in their classrooms, were deprived of education. Throughout my imprisonment, they too were captives in an invisible yet far more agonizing prison—one of silence, threats, poverty, and insecurity. No child should bear such a burden, yet my daughters carried a silent fear in their eyes every day.

And now, after my release, I have once again experienced detention in early February. Though I have left the prison walls behind, I remain imprisoned in my own home. Every step outside is accompanied by fear; the shadow of threats still looms over me. This fear takes hold of me with every departure, even for a simple chore. A glance that lingers too long, the suspicious movement of a passerby, even the weird silence of the street at certain moments—all can signal an imminent danger. My heart races uncontrollably, my hands grow cold, and my mind calculates possible escape routes. This nightmare has no end.

Afghanistan today is an open-air prison. Those who speak the truth are silenced or imprisoned. Women who once thrived in education and the workforce now stand behind closed doors, living under the shadow of fear and humiliation. Writers, teachers, and journalists are either exiled in foreign lands or strangers in their own homeland, voiceless and abandoned.

Meanwhile, those whose ethnicity, language, faith, or identity do not align with the rulers' norms pay an even heavier price. The Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other oppressed ethnic groups are not only denied the right to life but the right to exist. Followers of different faiths have either fled their homes or live in the suffocating grip of fear. And those whose hearts beat for love beyond the imposed boundaries of power are forced into invisibility—living in secrecy, dying in fear.

Yet oppression, however brutal and enduring, is never eternal. No matter how dark the night, the dawn will come. History has shown time and again that truth cannot be chained, nor can freedom be buried in silence. We raise our voices from the depths of darkness because we know that the light of morning is on its way.

how beautifully Saadi said, encapsulating the essence of our struggle:

Human beings are members of a whole
In creation of one essence and soul

If one member is afflicted with pain
Other members uneasy will remain

Peace, freedom, and justice are not dreams; they are the inalienable rights of every human being. And we will stand firm until we embrace the light of dawn.

Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher of ethics and politics, wrote in his 1972 book *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*:

"To live in abundance while others suffer from hunger is morally indefensible."

Second Testimonies:

I am an Afghan woman and a human rights activist. My journey started during my university years, and after graduation, in 2017, I passed a competitive exam and became an investigator at the Appeal Prosecution Office in one of Afghanistan's provinces.

During my job, I investigated many cases, including murder, drug trafficking, armed robbery, and terrorist group affiliations. I prosecuted criminals who are now fully aware of my face. Alongside my official duties, I always fought for human rights and collaborated with the United Nations to promote justice and equality.

Because of my dedication to women's rights, I received appreciation certificates from the Department of Women's Affairs and other civil and human rights organizations. But when the Afghan government collapsed, the Taliban took over, shutting down all government offices and educational institutions for women. In response, I joined a group of brave women, and we took to the streets to protest for our stolen rights.

Unfortunately, our peaceful protest was met with brutal suppression.

On December 18, 2022, Taliban forces raided my house and arrested me. Without any explanation, they took me to the Intelligence Prison. Before even asking me a single question, they started beating me with sticks, rifle butts, punches, and kicks. After this brutal torture, they threw me into a dark solitary cell. For a whole week, I was given only a small amount of food and water once a day.

During this time, I had no idea why I was arrested or tortured.

In prison, I suffered not only physically but also mentally. I was constantly insulted, humiliated, and threatened. Since I was imprisoned in the same province where I worked, my life was in extreme danger. After a week, they released me temporarily with the guarantee of tribal elders, under the condition that I would not speak to the media about what happened.

But my so-called freedom was an illusion.

That same night, fearing for my life, I escaped under the cover of darkness to Kabul.

For some time, I kept moving from one place to another, living in fear. But the Taliban's intelligence service repeatedly contacted my guarantors, demanding my return. With increasing threats and no other way out, I had no choice but to flee my homeland. I illegally crossed into Pakistan, leaving everything behind. All evidence of my torture is registered with Mr. Richard Bennett's office.

Now, I have been living in Pakistan for two years—two years filled with anxiety, fear uncertainty, and fear of an unknown future. Every day, financial struggles grow worse, and the threat of deportation to Afghanistan looms over me. The Pakistani government has imposed strict policies on refugees, and at any moment, I could be forcibly sent back to a country where my only fate would be death at the hands of the Taliban.

I have reached out to human rights organizations and international institutions many times, but all I have received is silence and neglect. Every day, I wait for a response, a glimmer of hope for me and my family, but time passes, and my hopes fade.

I don't know what my future holds.

I don't know what will happen to my children.

Will we ever get a chance to live again?

Or will we be forgotten in the darkness of oppression and injustice?

For two years, I have been registered with the United Nations, hoping to be resettled in a safe country. But despite my repeated calls, I have received no positive response.

I beg all of you, please do not forget the thousands of Afghan women who, like me, are being tortured, abused, and imprisoned by the Taliban for no crime at all.

Please do not leave the helpless Afghan women alone.
Raise our voices.
Let the world hear our cries.

Side Events on Afghanistan:



Strengthening Access to Health for All Survivors of Sexual Violence in Afghanistan

Human Rights Council Side-Event

Monday, 03 March 2025 | 12:00-13:00 CET | Room XXII, Palais des Nations



Mr Ahmed Adam
UN Advocacy Programme
Manager, FORUM-ASIA



Ms Charu Lata Hogg
Executive Director, All
Survivors Project



Mr Richard Bennett
Special Rapporteur on
Afghanistan



Mr Zaman Sultani
Researcher, Amnesty
International



A panel discussion at the margins of the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND JUSTICE FOR AFGHANISTAN: ADDRESSING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS & CALL FOR LEGAL ACTION

This event aims to raise awareness, foster dialogue, and explore effective avenues for accountability in response to Afghanistan's ongoing human rights crisis. It will focus on international accountability measures, including legal actions before the ICJ and ICC, as well as the Taliban's restrictive policies, particularly against women. The event highlights violations, encourages global advocacy, and pushes for a gender-responsive investigative mechanism.

27 February 2025 | 13:00 - 14:00 Geneva time (CET)
Room XXII, Building E, Palais des Nations & Online via Webex

For in-person participation register through [Indico](#). For virtual participation, please register through this [link](#).

Panelists

 Richard Bennett Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan	 Asila Wardak Women's forum on Afghanistan and former diplomat	 Fereshta Abbasi Researcher, Human Rights Watch	Testimony by:  Fatima Amiri, Human Rights Activist
 Opening Remarks by: Amb. Nasir A. Andisha Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the UNOG	Moderator:  Dr. Homira May Rezai Human Rights Advocate & Board Member of Shahmama		

Organizers: 

Co-Sponsors: 

In addition to the inputs of the Special Rapporteur and other actors on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, the NGO All Survivors Approach emphasized the importance of not overlooking the "all survivors" perspective in the current discussion. This approach includes men as well as women, and boys as well as girls. For example, the number of boys in prison or subjected to ill-treatment in conflict settings is significantly higher than the number of affected girls.