

Brief by Hassan Ali Faiz, Afghan Human Rights Defender to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Tuesday 28th September 2021, 12.30pm

Members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence
Representatives of civil society organisations
Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted and honoured to be here to inform you about human rights and the situation of human rights defenders in Afghanistan.

To begin, I would like to express my gratitude to Front Line Defenders unwavering support in safeguarding human rights defenders during the recent crisis in Afghanistan. Several human rights defenders were evacuated to safer locations, sparing their lives, which were in grave danger. Front Line Defenders once again proved to be practically on the frontlines, providing robust and timely protection to HRDs.

I'd also like to thank the Irish government for its kind commitment to granting visas to myself, my wife and our child, as well as all other Afghan human rights defenders, through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. I applaud the staff of the Irish Government's Department of Foreign Affairs for enabling the safe passage of human rights defenders through diplomacy as well as assisting some human rights defenders practically to ensure their smooth entry into Ireland.

Front Line Defenders' collaboration with the Irish Government yielded two notable results. Giving Front Line Defenders prominence among other human rights organisations in Europe. And for the Irish Government, despite its limited military and economic involvement in Afghanistan, for being a pioneer in harbouring human rights defenders and journalists.

Human rights defenders and journalists were the most abandoned groups. No one really cared for activists and journalists whose lives were in grave risk compared to those on the lists for evacuation of different countries.

Countries who supported human rights programmes in Afghanistan and exposed human rights defenders through their work left them behind, doing absolutely nothing to rescue their lives when they were in grave danger. Unfortunately, by withdrawing militarily, some of these countries also withdrew from their moral obligations. Leaving human rights activists at the mercy of terrorists cast doubt on the good intentions of those who supported human rights work in Afghanistan. It not only enraged Afghan human rights defenders and raised questions about the motivations behind human rights efforts, but it will also have ramifications for human rights programmes around the world. What would be the takeaway for human rights defenders in Eastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America who are fighting under repressive regimes? Will they have faith in the governments that support their human rights initiatives? Will they not fear being abandoned in their home countries if the political situation becomes tense?

What the Irish Government did in the current Afghan crisis to protect human rights defenders and journalists actually rekindled faith and belief in the great cause of human rights. And it revived hope in human rights defenders that they are not alone, and that there are still friends out there who will recognise their noble work when they feel helpless

and hopeless. Many HRDs I spoke with expressed regret that they had worked for human rights rather than for an embassy or international troops when Kabul was on the verge of collapse and no one cared about them. Civil society activists were bitterly disappointed.

Now as the Taliban tightens its grip on the country as a whole, horrifying allegations of human rights atrocities emerge on social media and I have heard of these atrocities from friends who are still there.

Millions of girls who used to go to school are no longer able to pursue their ambitions for the future. Girls' schools have been closed down. Women who demonstrated for their rights in several cities soon after the fall of the government, were brutally silenced. Journalists who covered the protests were detained and subjected to horrific torture. Despite the Taliban's pledge of general amnesty, there is adequate evidence for the crimes they have committed. The Taliban have just announced that the harsh sharia rule, which allows for the execution of individuals accused of theft and the amputation of their hands and feet, will be reinstated soon.

The group is forcibly displacing thousands of members of ethnic and religious groups like members of Hazara ethnic group from their ancestral territories, confiscating and redistributing their agricultural lands to fellow Pashtun Sunni Muslims. The Taliban are almost exclusively Pashtun ethnic and Sunni hardliners, whereas the Hazara ethnic minority is Shia Muslim.

Following the Taliban's capture of the Panjshir valley, there have been unsubstantiated reports of mass executions, forced displacement, and extortion. Until two weeks ago, the valley was the anti-Taliban movement's last stronghold. The Tajik ethnic group, the Taliban's arch-rival, led the movement. No humanitarian aid was permitted into the valley and no journalists were allowed to enter. Residents of the valley who dared to leave were beaten up, and their phones were searched to ensure that no information, photographs, or videos of their crimes in the valley were leaked.

The Taliban, which is made up of criminals, has no regard for human life and human dignity, which are the foundations of human rights. They have demonstrated it in practice. Extrajudicial killings, torture, persecution of minorities and political dissidents, humiliation of women, extortion, and expropriation of land and property will no longer be isolated incidents, but will become the norm.

Just three days ago, the Taliban killed four people in Herat province and hanged their bodies in the city squares. The Taliban claimed that those killed were kidnappers, but no one knows who they were or how they were killed because there are no checks and balances in place.

The civic space in Afghanistan has almost completely closed. Over one hundred fifty media outlets were shut down and over three hundred Non-Governmental Organisations (national and international) were closed since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Journalists were beaten up, arrested, detained and warned to discontinue their work.

Human rights defenders and media workers, particularly female activists, have been the Taliban's favourite targets. Those who demonstrated for their rights and freedoms were harshly repressed. Some protesters were detained and severely beaten, and there are unconfirmed reports of enforced disappearances in various cities across Afghanistan. Activists and journalists are frequently insulted and humiliated.

What aggravates the situation is the enabling environment for other terrorist groups such as ISIS and other criminals who have disguised themselves as Taliban, making life a living hell for activists and journalists. There have been unconfirmed reports of activists being arrested and detained on false charges of holding secular ideologies or spreading secularism. Non-Pashtun ethnic activists are even more vulnerable to targeted attacks by the Taliban, who are Pashtuns.

Women were categorically barred from civil, political, and economic activities. All of the women-owned businesses were shut down. Female employees of government and private businesses were told not to come to work. Some days ago, a Taliban official stated that women are not permitted to work in municipalities government and they are only permitted to clean women's toilets.

Human rights organisations have been closed down. Neither their male nor female employees go to work. The homes of some human rights defenders have been searched, and the Taliban group's intelligence is keeping a close eye on them. A growing number of human rights defenders are seeking protection and assistance from the Afghanistan Human Rights Defenders Committee. I am a current member of the Committee.

All offices of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the only national human rights institution established under the Paris Principles, were closed. Their assets, including vehicles, computers, and other property, were confiscated. Taliban soldiers have taken over their offices.

The international community claims that tens of thousands of people have been evacuated from Afghanistan, but the proportion of human rights defenders evacuated is negligible because hundreds of human rights defenders remain in Afghanistan. What complicates matters is that many human rights defenders do not have valid passports. Because the National Identity Card database and Passport Offices are now under Taliban control, renewing or applying for a new passport is difficult for human rights defenders. Most importantly, when hiring employees, NGOs must provide the Ministry of Economy in Afghanistan with their personal information because salary tax will be deducted from their pay. The Taliban have complete access to the Ministry of Economy's database, from which they will be able to obtain information on all NGO employees.

Last but not least, the rising level of unemployment as a result of many former government employees losing their jobs and many non-governmental organisations being forced to abandon their work in Afghanistan, combined with future uncertainty, has contributed to an increase in criminal cases across the country.

With the regime's international isolation, there is a growing fear of acute poverty in the near future. The difficult days under the Taliban are looming.

Thank you.