

**TESTIMONY**  
of  
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Before  
**THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS**  
**THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS**  
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The Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan: Meeting the Needs of Afghan Women and Children

Honorable members of the Senate Foreign Relation Committee, thank you for giving me this opportunity to bring you the voices of the Afghan people, particularly the Afghan women and children. I want to especially thank Senator Dianne Feinstein and her office staff for making this possible.

Two decades of war have devastated and almost totally destroyed Afghanistan's economic structure, political structure, health care system, educational system and many other aspects of the Afghan socio-cultural life. In the cities, houses, roads, electricity systems, drainage systems, public roads, public transportation and so on have been destroyed. In the villages, houses, roads, irrigation systems, and arable land have been destroyed. The limited health care and educational infrastructure which existed in the pre-war era have been destroyed. Almost all clean water systems, sanitation systems have been destroyed. There is a total collapse of the country's communication, banking and public utility systems.

The Afghan traditional agricultural economy has been transformed to a drug economy where the main cash crop is opium. According to a recent United Nations reports Afghanistan has become the world's largest drug producing country. Afghanistan's traditional economy practically does not exist. Unemployment is predominant and inflation is soaring. Almost half of Afghanistan's housing stocks have been damaged or destroyed as has the economic infrastructure. The social, economic and huminatarian crisis in Afghanistan are worsening .

Throughout history, Afghanistan's strategic location at the heart of Asia, has enabled her to play a significant role in the regional and international trade and politics of East and West. In the 19th-century, Afghanistan served as a buffer zone during the Great Game that was being played between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire. During the Cold war between the former Soviets and the western world, it served as an important strategic point for both the West and the East.

In the 1990s, a new version of the Great Game is being played in the area. This time, the main players are the United States and Russia. It is now being played over the Central Asian countries' oil and gas resources, particularly that of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Other significant players include Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Taliban movements, Argentina, Iran and India to name a few. Other players in the new version of the Great Game are important multinational oil and gas companies such as United States UNOCAL, Saudi Arabia Delta, Argentina Bidas, and others (The Far East Economic Review1997).

The outside interference and proxy war in Afghanistan is related to the war for gas and oil pipelines between the regional countries, the United States , Russia and the multinational Gas and oil companies. The United Nations and some Afghan scholars have pointed out that the war in Afghanistan has been privatized by the foreign oil and gas companies. Added to this complex Afghan situation are the international drugs and arms trafficking, and other illegal activities including international terrorist training

In this setting in Afghanistan, there is no legitimate, effective and functioning central government. There is no functioning independent, impartial and unified judicial system. There does not exist any constitution, institution of civil society, or rule of law. There is no central monitoring system for human rights violations or a mechanism to provide redress to the victims. Local and tribal

customs seem to rule and the Taliban, who control most of the country, do not see themselves bound by the international standards of human rights (See UN Report 1997).

The suffering of the Afghan people, particularly the Afghan women, starts with the former Soviets invasion 1979. During ten years of war with the Soviets, the Afghan women were subjected to torture, rape and various other inhuman acts in order to obtain information from them on the activities of the Mujahidin. Since 1992, various Mujahidin groups have subjected the people of Afghanistan, especially women and children, to various forms of oppression, restriction and torture in the name of Islam. Afghan women and girls have been not only the victims of foreign invasions, interferences, and patriarchal war and politics, but also of ethnic, sectarian and factional wars and politics as well. The women have been used as important tools in warfare tactics. During the factional wars, many women and girls have been subjected to rape, torture, beatings and various other human rights violations ( See Amnesty International Reports 1995, 1996).

The warring groups have committed and are committing the most horrendous violations of human rights in Afghanistan. There are extra judicial executions, deliberate killings, imprisonments, unacknowledged detentions and disappearances. Prisoners are deprived of food for long periods of time, given electric shocks, exposed to extreme heat and cold, beaten and tortured in various inhuman and brutal ways. Innocent civilians are tortured in their own homes on the suspicion that they might have supported another faction.

The Taliban's treatment of the Afghan citizens is degrading, cruel and brutal. Alleged thieves are punished by mutilation of hands and feet. Alleged murderers are shot to death. Alleged adulterers are punished by stoning to death. There are no trials and the punishment is swift, brutal and final. Men are rounded up by the militia and forced to attend prayer at the mosques five times a day. Noncompliance is punished with the twenty or more lashes. There are strict curfews, anyone found in the street past the curfew is faced with one or another forms of harsh punishment.

Concerning the human rights violations by the Taliban and their policies towards women, the United Nations Special Rapporteur Dr. Choong-Hyun Paik sums them up as follows: "Very careful consideration should be given to the actions of a group that is willing to shoot its own compatriots if they try to leave the country's capital and whose policies amount to removing more than half of the country's population from the economic, social, cultural, civil and political map." (UN Department of Public Information (DPI) Nov. 10 1997).

#### CONDITION OF HEALTH IN AFGHANISTAN

WHO Director-General, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, in his speech at the opening ceremony of the pre-Summit meeting, March 1995, Copenhagen states, "There can be no social development or sustained economic growth without health.... Poverty remains the main obstacle to health development." This statement clearly describes the Afghan people's situation concerning poverty and health.

In Afghanistan most children are not immunized against many of the childhood diseases such as polio. More children die from polio than any other disease. There are few polio-endemic countries left in the world, and Afghanistan is one of them. In 1997 UNICEF conducted a study in Kabul in which mental health specialists interviewed more than 300 children, ages 8 to 18. The study showed that the children in Afghanistan are suffering from severe trauma. The findings also revealed that "72% of children experienced the death of a family member between 1992 and 1996 and that in 40% of the cases the child has lost a parent. Almost all of the children have witnessed acts of violence during the fighting, and about two-thirds of the children saw dead bodies or parts of bodies. Almost half the children have seen many people killed in rocket and artillery attacks. About 90 % of the children interviewed believed that they would die during the conflict ( UNICEF 1997).

The majority of the Afghan children interviewed suffer from nightmares, anxiety and concentration problems which also affect their appetites and their ability to play. The head of the study, Dr. Leila Gupta has said that " One of the most significant findings of the study is the chronic nature of the trauma being experienced." She explained that "the psychological impact is not short-lived" (UNICEF 1997).

Afghanistan has the third highest infant mortality rate in the world, that is, 185 per 1, 000 live births, following Niger and Angola. It has maternal mortality of 100 per 10, 000 live births. Most children die of childhood diseases including measles, diphtheria, tetanus, polio and others because of lack of immunization. Women and children have been the most hard hit victims of the war in Afghanistan. Thousands of Afghan women, children, and men are internally and externally displaced by factional wars (See UN report 1997).

The United Nations (1996) reported that Afghanistan is ranked by the Human Development Index as the third poorest country in the world. Only a very small percentage of the Afghan people have access to safe water, sanitation, health care and education. Safe drinking water is available to less than one family in eight in the major cities. Shallow water around is contaminated by accumulated waste and therefore, is a major source of health risks. About forty-two percent of all deaths of children under the age of five are due to diarrhea and dehydration that is caused by unsafe water and unsanitary condition.

In 1997, the Taliban regime allowed some women doctors to work in public hospitals and private clinics. The women physicians and nurses who are allowed to work in the Taliban controlled areas are exposed to brutal treatment on almost daily bases. They are beaten and are forced to witness beatings of their female colleagues by the Taliban guards. The guards are constantly present in the clinics and hospitals and are able to intervene whenever they want to as part of the Department of Commanding Good and Forbidding the Evil (Lancet 1997).

Male health workers are also targeted by the Taliban. Male doctors are not allowed to treat female patients, except female members of their own family. Male doctors are viewed by the Taliban with suspicion and hostility. They are ridiculed and humiliated and public. They are questioned routinely about their moral conducts in the hospitals. Treatment such as this, not only makes it horrible for the health professional on the personal level, it also makes it impossible for them to practice with any authority (Lancet 1997).

The female patients are also victims of the Taliban's inhuman acts. Women patients who try to seek medical help and venture out in the street are frequently attacked and beaten by the Taliban guards and are ordered not to appear in the street again. For Example, it has been reported by some refugees in Pakistan that a woman who lived in Farah tried to take her baby, who had severe diarrhea, to the doctor. The Taliban guards noticed her and ordered her to stop! She got afraid and begun to run away. The guard, armed with a kalashnikove, fired several rounds at her injuring her and her baby. Fortunately a doctor was able to treat this woman and her child without being discovered.

A pregnant woman delivered her baby in a street in Kabul, while her husband was being beaten by the guards for trying to take her to the hospital. In one hospital, the Taliban guards ordered 80 female patients to go home, because in the Taliban's view, their modesty could not be preserved in an overcrowded ward (Lancet 1997).

MSF (1997) reported that a doctor in one of the largest hospitals in Kabul says that he was unable to help a female patient with 80% burns. He was prevented by a member of the Taliban from removing the patient's clothing. When he explained that she would die if he did not the Taliban said, 'Many Taliban die in the battlefield'. In September 1997, a highly contagious female TB patient was sent home before the end of her treatment thus putting her family at risk of infection. During the same period a 14-year-old female patient in a critical state was refused emergency care at the Central Polyclinic for lack of basic resources.

In early October 1997, a male doctor was called by his neighbor to attend a woman in a deep coma. He referred her to the emergency department of the nearest hospital which refused to admit her (MSF, 1997). On October 7, 1998, three women and their 3 children, all of whom were in stage 2 of malnutrition (i.e severely), were trying to get access to an intensive feeding center. They were accompanied by two other women who are health workers of a humanitarian organization. The vehicle in which they were traveling was stopped at a checkpoint, the driver was severely beaten by a member of the Taliban and 2 members of the religious police. He received 25 lashes with an electric cable on the hands and forearms, for having allowed one of the mothers to sit in the front passenger seat. The mothers and their children were forced to leave the vehicle and were unable to reach the feeding center (MSF, 1997)

Doctors routinely treat people who have been maimed by land mines, or injured by fighting between the warring factions, or shot for disobeying the Taliban militia. Health workers also treat patients who have been tortured by the Taliban Militia. These patients often have broken bones, bruises or fractured skulls from the violent beatings. Some patients have severe burns because the torturer has poured fuel on them and set them on fire. Most doctors are afraid of talking openly about these inhuman acts because they are afraid of violent punishment by the Taliban (Lancet 1997).

#### CONDITION OF EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The Taliban have denied the Afghan women the rights for an education which is given to them by Islam. The Islamic law dictates education for all Muslims, male and female. Banning education and work for women has had a strong negative effect on the education of boys as well. According to the UN report (02/20/97) about 70% of the teachers in Kabul were women. About 63 schools were closed in Kabul and more than 103, 000 girls, 148, 000 boys and 8, 000 teachers were affected. In February, 1996 the Taliban announced that they will reopen Kabul University for male students only. More than half of the student body at Kabul University used to be women. In the Southern and Central regions of Afghanistan all the girl schools remain closed as do schools in Herat and Kabul. There are shortages of teachers in Afghanistan and a reduction of male teachers as well (UN, 1997).

Banning education for women has had a serious negative effect on land mine-awareness programs, because many of the trainers were women. Afghanistan has been ranked as one of the top three most mine infested country in the world. Kabul is the world's most heavily mined city and most of the mines are in the residential areas of the city. In other parts of Afghanistan, the mines are mostly found in the residential areas, agricultural land, irrigation canals, grazing areas, access roads and tracks (UN, 1997).

Over 400, 000 people have been injured and thousands have been killed by the 10 million land mines that are scattered through out the country. There are about 8 million anti-personal and 2 million antitank mines in Afghanistan. The former Soviets dropped by helicopter a large number of Soviet made PFM-1 or butterfly mines in Afghanistan. When the children find them, they often consider them as toys. These type of mines are particularly deadly to children who herd animals and also to the livestock as well (UN, 1997).

One of the United Nations Demining Database surveys found that 13. 6 percent of families interviewed were involved in mine incidents. Another survey estimated that about 20-25 people are injured or killed by mines daily, leading to about 8, 000 deaths per year. About 85% of the land mine victims have been civilians, involved in nonmilitary activities such agricultural work, herding, traveling or they have been refugees who were returning home. (Refugee Policy Group 1996, Rubin 1996).

The Save the Children(1996) estimate shows that in the city of Kabul, about 50% of the land mine victims are children and that about 30% are victims of land mines in other areas of Afghanistan.

The children's natural curiosity leads them to pick up or touch unknown things such as mines. Some children are injured by mines while collecting firewood or metal scrap or while herding sheep. Others become victims while walking to school or playing in their neighborhoods.

#### CONDITION OF WORK IN AFGHANISTAN

The Taliban's gender-based discrimination has severely restricted the freedom of movement for women. The Afghan women are forbidden to leave their homes without being accompanied by a close male relative. They are made to wear veils, which cover them from head to toe, including the face except for a mesh opening over the eyes for them to see. Noncompliance is severely punished.

The Taliban's gender-apartheid policies have brought about the "Feminization of Poverty" in Afghanistan and have further deteriorated the already disintegrated Afghan economic system. At the present, the majority of the Afghan population, that is, over 60% to 75 %, is composed of women. There are hundreds of thousands of widows in Afghanistan, about 40, 000 to 50, 000 of whom live in the city of Kabul alone. According to the United Nations estimate about 150, 000 women in Kabul have been forbidden from work.