

The Cloak of Silence: Afghanistan's Human Rights Mappings

New York Times. 27/07/2012

By Ahmed Rashid

The unpublished report, prepared by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and researched by a team of Afghan and international human rights specialists, is called a 'Conflict Mapping in Afghanistan Since 1978'. On some 800 to 1,000 pages, it is known to painstakingly detail the numerous human rights abuses committed during the different phases of the Afghan civil and factional wars over the more than 30 past years. It was a project of the 'Action Plan for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation', that had to be imposed on President Karzai in 2005 by Western governments who, in turn, also only acted because of non-governmental pressure and their very few allies in the Afghan government, like - then - presidential advisor. The Action Plan never flew, apart from a few symbolic gestures and [expired without extension](#) in March 2009 into oblivion

The report starts with the period of the regimes under the leftist PDPA (in the late 1990s, renamed Watan Party), first under its Khalq faction (1978-79) and then, after the Soviet invasion at Christmas 1979, of the rival Parcham. It continues with the atrocities after the takeover of power by the mujahedin factions in 1992 and, subsequently, in 1996 by the Taleban, until their fall in late 2001. (The AIHRC also has reported human rights violations by coalition forces but the post-2001 period is not covered by this report.)

It is a particularly disturbing fact that [the New York Times article](#) (2) does not acknowledge this and other contributions of years of research by various players into HR abuses. This an attempt to list all the efforts and the individuals most involved who have helped map out the atrocities committed in Afghanistan since 1978 by all players from communists to Taleban.

In the spring of 2004 Louise Arbour who was then High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations brought together a group of experts in Geneva to put together what was later called a 'Mapping Report' of atrocities committed in Afghanistan since 1978. Asma Jehangir, the UN Special Rapporteur for extra judicial killings, Barnett Rubin of New York University, Nader Nadery of the AIHRC, Patti Gossman who later headed the Afghanistan Justice Project, myself and senior UN staff were there for two meetings. The Mapping Report, compiled by Barnett Rubin and Patti Gossman put together already published material but it clearly implicated Afghan communists, present day warlords still holding power in Afghanistan, Taleban and a host of others as being responsible for war crimes. But when the report was about to be published - Louise Arbour already had arrived in Kabul -, almost all major players - the Americans, the Afghan government, many Europeans, the UN mission for Afghanistan - all insisted that the Mapping Report be suppressed and not be made public.

They did not want to 'rock the boat' of the fragile Karzai government that had been cobbled to gather of unlikely partners - Karzai and his circle of Afghan returnees from exile who had started as reformer and most mujahedin leaders (except Hekmatyar, Khales and Nabi Muhammadi) who were dead against all reforms that would threaten their key positions in the institutions, the security forces and the (licit and illicit) economy. These 'Jihadi leaders' were about to see their names printed in the report and threatened all kind of action to avoid this happening

Meanwhile Human Rights Watch had already issued numerous reports on the deteriorating human rights situation under the US occupation in Afghanistan and the continuing role of warlords in suppressing dissent. John Sifton and Sam Zarifi along with Afghan colleagues and helped by Nadery's then fledgling AIHRC were the first to carry out extensive field research on atrocities even as the war was still going on in 2001. Their later reports (listed below) were a path breaking litany of abuses that were being carried out under the noses of US forces. These HRW reports put all the major players on their guard and mobilized Afghan and international support for a much fuller international commission that would bring perpetrators of atrocities to justice.

[Afghanistan's Bonn Agreement One Year Later: A Catalog of Missed Opportunities](#), Human Rights Watch briefing paper, 5 December 2002

[‘We Want to Live as Humans’: Repression of Women and Girls in Western Afghanistan](#), Human Rights Watch report, December 2002

[All Our Hopes Are Crushed: Violence and Repression in Western Afghanistan](#), Human Rights Watch report, November 2002

[‘Killing You Is a Very Easy Thing for Us’: Human Rights Abuses in Southeast Afghanistan](#), Human Rights Watch report, July 2003

I reviewed all of them in a long article for [New York Review of Books](#) which became the first magazine to give extensive coverage to these reports (‘The Mess in Afghanistan’, 12 February 2004).

The indefatigable Patti Gossman under the auspices of the Afghanistan Justice Project and using the original Mapping Project while undertaking her own field research went on to compile [a massive report on atrocities](#) which was made public but was suppressed as much as possible by all the players especially the Afghan government. Gossman began to receive threats to her life.

An even larger project was undertaken by Nadery and the AIHCR who carried out surveys of Afghan public opinion on transitional justice as well as undertaking hundreds of interviews with the survivors of atrocities that went back to 1978 - not an easy undertaking when the Taliban had already started their offensives and there were visible threats by warlords against the researchers. This report, [titled ‘A Call for Justice’](#), clearly showed that most Afghans (about three quarters) did not want to have a cloak of silence draped over the atrocities of the past.

Other important human rights reports were put out by the Physicians for Human Rights who did a [devastating account](#) of the atrocities committed by General Abdul Rashid Dostum in northern Afghanistan in 2001 and earlier. The Centre for Transitional Justice contributed enormously to all the reports. In 2011, with [‘First Step on a Long Journey: How People Define Violence and Justice in Afghanistan \(1958-2008\)’](#) by the Afghan Civil Society Forum, another courageous Afghan effort followed that even included periods of the monarchy and of President Daud’s short-lived Republic (1973-78), addressing criticism of ethnic minorities and democratic groups that had suffered under these, after all, generally less repressive regimes.

Finally Carlotta Gall of the New York Times almost single-handedly among the permanent Western press corps based in Kabul continued to expose atrocities, push the human rights agenda and fight the blanket of oblivion that had descended among the Americans, NATO, the Afghan government but not the millions of Afghans who had suffered at the hands of their fellow Afghan tormentors.

The New York Times, the paper of record, often has a terribly arrogant attitude to what it sees as its exclusive - missing out on the fact that there everything is exclusive if journalists are willing to overlook or ignore all that has gone on before which includes other journalists breaking news much earlier than the Times or as in this case, so many people who have put their lives at risk to document human rights abuses in Afghanistan only to be ignored by the Times in favour of its ‘exclusive.’ The Times’ editors need to be more honest of what has gone on before and the contribution others have made to highlight human rights.

(*) Our guest blogger Ahmed Rashid is a well-known journalist and author from Pakistan, of ‘Taliban’ (his 2000 bestseller’s) fame. His latest book is ‘Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan’. See him [on Jon Stewart’s Daily Show](#) here.