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AFGHAN WOMEN DEMAND A HALT TO INTIMIDATION AND MURDER

June 20, 2007, Kabul, Afghanistan: Outraged by several recent acts of extreme violence, Afghan women advocates are demanding that the Afghan government and international community do more to protect women in their war-torn nation.

A statement issued by the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), the largest women's rights network in Afghanistan, describes the deteriorating security as a "step backwards for women."

Meanwhile, for the first time ever, hundreds of Afghan women organized a collective prayer for peace on June 14 at the sacred Shrine of the Prophet (Kherqa Sharif) in Kandahar - a mosque that is normally barred to women. According to the AWN, the mullah allowed the women to broadcast their prayers from the shrine loudspeaker.

The new AWN statement notes that two school girls and two prominent women journalists have been murdered within the last month. Also, death threats have been issued against six women members of parliament.

The AWN statement reads: "If security is not guaranteed for women who are public figures and girls walking home from school, all successes for women in Afghanistan will have been for naught." The statement goes on to warn that fear is beginning to "take its toll" among women, and that the impunity of the attacks raises serious doubts about the capacity of the government and the international community.

The attack against the schoolgirls took place on June 12. Armed assailants on motorcycles opened fire on girls walking home from school, killing two and wounding three.

Despite the pressure, Afghan women continue to exercise their rights, particularly in politics. Women currently hold 68 of the 248 seats in parliament. The Afghan Constitution ensures women 25 percent of the seats.

Even so, women parliamentarians face discrimination. On May 21, a women member was suspended for three years for criticizing the Parliament. The AWN statement states that men who engage in physical and verbal assaults are not punished.

The Advocacy Project has sent two Peace Fellows to work in Afghanistan this summer. Audrey Roberts is working with the Afghan Women's Network. Wilhelmina Tsang is working with the Afghan Institute of Learning.

- Read Audrey Roberts' blog: <http://advocacynet.org/author/audrey/>
- Visit AWN's website: http://awn-af.net/cms/contact_layout