

AFGHAN WOMEN CALL FOR IMPROVED SECURITY AS VIOLENCE SURGES

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As NATO arrives to take over international peacekeeping in Afghanistan, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) has launched a major campaign to protest against the growing tide of violence in the country and demand more resources for reconstruction. The campaign began with a sit-in for peace in Kabul on August 9 that attracted more than 1000 women and received international news coverage.

The AWN's concern has been heightened by a surge of violent attacks in Kabul and the provinces, and the growing threat to women. Over 50 people were killed in three separate incidents last Wednesday alone.

The campaign's goals are set out in a 12-point declaration that was read aloud in Dari, Pashto and English at the August 9 meeting. The declaration called for the expansion of international forces, and the deployment of national army and police units to all of Afghanistan. It also asserted the need to disarm all militia who are not under the control of the central government. "(We must avoid) another global catastrophe by remembering what has happened in Afghanistan. It is imperative that history not be repeated."

The AWN comprises 24 women's organizations and over 900 individuals, and lobbies for the rights of Afghan women on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. It has been receiving support since January from the Advocacy Project (AP) and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC) under a project funded by the Open Society Institute.

The turnout on August 9 and the extensive press coverage reflect the growing sophistication of the AWN's advocacy, and its ability to mobilize support for campaigns. The declaration on security, and an AWN press release, have both been posted on the AWN website, which is maintained and updated by the AWN's media unit.

Although the AWN's campaign seems to cast doubt on the Afghan government's ability to control security, it has received the backing of the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs. Nooria Haq Negar, a Ministry official, told the August 9 demonstrators that Afghan women are at special risk from the current insecurity. She cited the recent kidnapping, in separate incidents, of two schoolgirls in Mazar-e-Sharif, in the north of the country.

In spite of its concern for women, the AWN declaration does not confine itself to women's issues, or even insecurity, but deals with many of the principal obstacles to peace in Afghanistan. It also stresses the need for capacity-building initiatives in villages and remote areas of the country. Ms Afifa Azim, the Director of the AWN, said that

Afghan women are not just concerned for themselves, but “for their Afghan brothers too.”

The AWN is not alone in concluding that reconstruction has faltered. Many development experts share this view, and the Bush administration recently pledged to triple US aid to Afghanistan this year to \$1 billion dollars.

* To read the AWN press release on the August 9 event and the 12 point Declaration, visit the AWN website: <http://awn-af.net/>

* For the BBC report visit: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3138263.stm

* For the Reuters report visit:
<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/ISL92656.htm>

* For more on the Advocacy Project’s support for the Afghan Women’s Network, read the diaries of AP/WCRWC Consultant Mary Moore, who recently returned from working with the AWN: http://www.advocacynet.org/afghan_diary_1/

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