

REBUILD AFGHANISTAN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH WOMEN AND CIVIL SOCIETY

A SOUTH ASIAN FEMINIST APPEAL

1. The UN and the international community has initiated a much needed peace process in war-torn Afghanistan. This has raised the hopes of the Afghan people and all those who aspire for peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region. We welcome the agreement on an interim government that will bring in political order and initiate the much needed civil society processes in Afghanistan. It is our firm belief that independent women's organizations and civil society groups should be part of this process that will rebuild and regenerate this society.

2. The oppression of Afghan women had become symbolic justification for repeated military intervention and regime change by the Jihadis, the Taliban and then by the US led international alliance. The media and television has repeatedly shown the need to liberate the most oppressed women in the world from the Taliban. This concern should now be turned to rebuilding and regenerating Afghanistan with civil society with the participation of women not just as victims but partners.

3. The UN peace process in Bonn called the Northern Alliance and three other groups for talks to plan a broad based and representative system for Afghanistan. UN negotiator, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, has said that all groups must include women and that these groups represent the wishes of the Afghan people. In reality these groups represent the factions involved in war and militarist policies for decades. If women and civil society actors are excluded in the peace talks and not given adequate roles in the interim governments, women's rights and their claims for justice may not find the due space. There is danger that women may be cast in the same roles that they were given during the earlier regime.

4. Women's groups like the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA), NEGAR Afghan support group, Afghan Women Educational Center, Afghan Women's Lawyers Association, Afghan Women's Network, Women's Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan and others have been working in Afghanistan under the most oppressive conditions. They worked from behind the veil, in secret at the cost of their own lives. These were times when women were banned from public, removed from their workplace, girls' schools were closed. Women could not be attended by male doctors, use taxis, and were whipped even if their ankles showed. Many of these women's groups intervened at critical junctures. They were in the forefront of the fight against the Taliban, were critical of the UN economic sanctions, but asked for sanctions against arms to the Taliban. They opposed the US bombing in Afghanistan. And now have appealed that they be partners in the regeneration of Afghanistan.

5. The desperate need to rebuild Afghanistan is clear. Besides the war and ravages of two decades, reports show that 97 per cent of the Afghan women contacted by doctors showed symptoms of major depression. Doctors have reported a high incidence of oesophageal burns, as women

swallowed battery acid or household cleaners in suicide bids. Afghanistan had a Human Development Index of 169, life expectancy of 43.7, adult literacy of 29.8. Only 12 per cent of its population had access to safe drinking water and its maternal mortality rate — 1,700 for 100,000 live births — was the second highest in the world. By 1997, Afghanistan had fallen off the data map and we hear no more about the welfare of its women and children. With the war these figures have only got worse.

6. A desperate nation with a major humanitarian crisis needs desperate attention. Women and civil society groups and NGOs have to be involved in this major task as equal partners. The security paradigm in Afghanistan has to be one that addresses health, food, environmental security along with the physical safety and rights of women, minorities and all individuals and groups. World over and in the region the innovative work and experiences of NGOs have established that grassroot changes and transformation can be brought through well thought and planned programmes with the full participation of women.

It is with these considerations that we as South Asian feminists urge that:

- Afghan women be included in the peace and all political processes that will shape the future of the Afghan nation, not as victims but as partners.
- Civil society groups be fully engaged in the peace and post-conflict efforts of rebuilding, and regenerating society.
- Women's rights, human rights, minority rights be safeguarded in the new nation.
- To ensure security and avoid the politics of vengeance and retribution, all Afghan factions engaged in the war and Afghan society be demilitarized.
- An international peacekeeping force from all nations be constituted under the UN that will ensure the transition to a secure, democratic and secular country.
- Innovative grassroots level programmes be started to provide secure and sustainable livelihoods, food security, health care, education etc.

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